

STOP 11 – THE ESPLANADE

Rest on the stone wall near the sandy play area and look across the road towards the houses. At the foot of one of the gate pillars you will see the old parish boundary stone showing St Helens to the left and Newchurch to the right; Ryde became a parish in its own right in 1866. As you observe the buildings try to imagine the area before it was developed.

It was a wasteland called ‘the Dover’ with a low shoreline of sand and shingle, dunes and grassy hillocks: famous for the rare plants to be found here and also for a tragic event... In 1782, HMS Royal George, a first rate ship of the fleet, sank at Spithead. Many people drowned, hundreds of bodies washed ashore here and were buried in the Dover.

The area was described by Theodore Elbert 50 years later. *““In walking along the shore today, close to the sands I saw a patch of grass with many mounds where victims of the Royal George are buried. There was a little pool left by the tide where children were sailing small boats.”*

There is a commemorative plaque to the victims of the tragedy in Ashley Gardens which you will see on your way to the next stop. Alternatively, to learn more about the disaster you can walk back on the opposite side of the road to the Royal George memorial garden, shown on the map.

After years of contentious debate the esplanade was finally built along the sea shore. In June 1855 the Isle of Wight Observer reported: *“This great improvement is nearly complete. The footway next to the sea is formed, the pavement laid down, the carriageway gravelled and the stone coping rapidly proceeded with.”*

For 15 years the tram company wanted to convey passengers from the pier to the railway station at St John’s, but many objected to the proposal. Eventually, permission was granted but the tram was not allowed to use Cornwall Street, the small road opposite and to the left. A stream runs under the road and it could not take the extra weight. So the company purchased the building next to Cornwall Street, and made a tunnel through the ground floor of Holywell House. Passengers had to remain seated while the tram passed through the house!