

STOP 2 – ST THOMAS SQUARE

You should now be sitting in St Thomas Square, facing down the hill towards the sea.

Today you are in the centre of Ryde, a small, busy country town, but try to imagine this place in the early 1700s... *You are in open countryside surrounded by fields and trees with a clear view across the Solent. You can see many merchant and navy ships, fishing boats and ferries, and the busy town of Portsmouth across the water.*

A flock of sheep, brought from the mainland and landed at Lower Ryde, is being herded up the track to the left to graze in the fields of the farming hamlet of Upper Ryde up the hill behind you.

Through the gate in front of you and down the path is St Thomas Chapel. It was built in the field called Pickett Close by Thomas Player, lord of the Manor, in 1719. It is the first church in Ryde, and means that locals no longer have to travel six miles to the Parish Church in Newchurch.

In 1827, the Chapel was replaced by St Thomas Church. You can learn more about the church at the end of the tour in Stop 17.

To your left, where the bank stands today, a Theatre was built in 1813 and reported in the local paper at the time. *“The New Theatre opened to a very elegant audience, and every part of the performance deserved and received plaudits of general approbation. It is tribute to the taste and spirit of Mr Thornton, the manager, to say neatness and elegance are most completely and happily blended throughout every part.”*

The great actress Miss Ellen Terry made her first ever stage appearance here in 1856 playing ‘Puck’ in ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream’.

A grander ‘Theatre Royal’ was built on the same spot in 1871. It was a popular theatre for many years and later became a cinema. The building was destroyed by fire in the 1960s and a modern bank built in its place.

The Crown Hotel, behind you, was established in the 1830s as one of the first posting Inns in Ryde – it is still a popular pub today.

Now cross over towards the church then right to the top of Union Street and walk down the left side, stop opposite Gibbs & Gurnell.