

STOP 5 – LOWER UNION STREET



You should be standing outside No 15, the Orrery & Donald McGill Museum, with its grand entrance of Corinthian columns. This was a prosperous Wine Merchants in Victorian times.

Look back at the impressive building topped with large statues of the Four Seasons. This is Regina House, built in 1865, and once home and business of Jabez Hughes, Royal Photographer. Many members of the European Royal families were photographed here. Later, Gustav Mullins became a business partner. Look up and you will see the names 'Hughes and Mullins' on a sign near the top of the gable wall.

Walk a short distance downhill and then stop to look across at the Royal Squadron. This was formerly known as the Kent Hotel, reputedly where Queen Victoria and Prince Albert lodged when house hunting and viewing Osborne. Many Royal visitors subsequently stayed here. However we need to remember that Union Street was not always a scene of aristocratic shoppers and carnival celebrations. In the summer of 1837, the Ryde Riots took place at this very spot.

An election had just returned the Tory, Mr Holmes, but in Ryde, a large majority were supporters of the Reformist, Mr Pelham. A mob of around 200 attacked the Kent, smashing windows. Mr Holmes's celebratory band was playing outside. Bandsmen were attacked, instruments broken, someone snatched a French horn and ran off with it! Much street fighting took place continuing into the early hours of the following morning.

Evidence from the court case about the Ryde Riots stated:

"The Band defended themselves, one band member struck Mr. Cluitt on the back of his head with an instrument."

"The mob rushed at Mr. Peddar, knocked him down, gave him a black eye, tore his shirt, waistcoat, braces and hat and kicked him down the street."

"About two hundred people gathered, some armed with knives, sticks and bludgeons. There was a great deal of swearing and shouting"

"A man turned to the mob and shouted "The first man who touches Mr. Stephens I'll cleave his skull.""

"It was not safe for anyone to be on the street"

Continue walking downhill and stop at the next small junction. Now try to imagine another scene that happened here.

“A scene of rare occurrence, which greatly shocked the feelings of our demure inhabitants as they were flocking to their respective places of worship.” The Observer report on that Sunday evening in June 1885 continues: *“...a party of military gentlemen hired each a Bath Chair. Seated in which instead of being dragged, each became a steersman, propelled by a chairman behind. They raced up Union-street and High-street, to the Star Inn, making a series of gyrations and evolutions, and occasionally collisions, on the way, highly gratifying to a large assemblage of boys in the rear.”*



Continue to the bottom of the hill and on reaching the Esplanade, cross at the lights towards the Pier entrance. Turn left, and walk over to the sea wall for a better view of the pier.

Image of No 15 Union Street courtesy of Tony Gale

Image of bath chair: www.gutenberg.org/files/11491/11491-h/11491-h.htm