

# BEYOND THE GRAVES

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## HISTORY IS ALL AROUND US

### FROM PILLAR TO POST

How often do we stroll around our local area without noticing the evidence of the past? We're not talking about historic buildings or landmarks or important monuments; instead we want to think about smaller details, like street furniture and half hidden glimpses of life in a previous time.



The Grade II listed electrical distribution kiosk, also known as a transformer kiosk, used to boost flagging voltage at the end of a long supply feed, was erected about 1900 for the Isle of Wight Light and Power Company to a design attributed to the Callender Iron Co, Falkirk. The ornate cast-iron design with lotus leaf capitals and cornice, volutes and fish-scale decoration, is illustrative of high quality industrial design of the early electricity industry and has its original door. The original street lighting fixture at the top has not survived. By 1904 the company supplied electric lights for Seaview Pier and provided the majority of the electrical supply on the Island until nationalisation in 1947. The kiosk on the left, a rare survivor of the early years of electricity supply, is located at Oak Hill Road, Seaview.



The old parish boundary stones showing St Helens to the left and Newchurch to the right can be seen on the Esplanade and in Simeon Street at the foot of gate pillars. Although worn and part buried under pavements the letters ST H & N can still read. Ryde became a parish in its own right in 1866.

Evidence of the old Ryde Harbour can be seen behind the wall of the rose garden on the Esplanade just beyond the bus station. Imagine the sea right up to this low wall. Take a look at the old iron rings used by the Carriers who would load their wagons with goods from boats tied up alongside.



Where have all the fish gone? The water has been drained and flowers now bloom in the fish fountain on the Eastern Esplanade.



## POST BOXES

Did you know?

The first pillar box in the United Kingdom was installed at Botchergate, Carlisle in 1853...Green was adopted as the original colour for early Victorian post boxes...Roadside wall boxes first appeared in 1857 as an alternative to pillar boxes, especially in rural districts...The first boxes to be painted red were in London in July 1874... Lamp boxes were introduced on an experimental basis in September 1896 (they were designed to be affixed to lamp posts)...

There are over 50 post boxes of all types around Ryde. Here are some examples with the different monarch's cyphers.



Photographs - Dover Street (VR), Strand (old Post Office GR), Park Road (ER), Pier Road, Seaview (ER), Swanmore Road (GR) © RSHG

"The postal authorities have provided the public with a commodious new office, at which they can obtain stamps, and send off telegrams, parcels, &c. It will be well-arranged and convenient to the general public in every aspect save one, - having obtained your stamps, and placed them on your letters, you will still have to go down the street to the letter-box at the old office to post them. Wm. Gurnell, Union Street, Ryde, IW."

*Isle of Wight Observer 7 October 1893*

Wall and lamp boxes



Photographs - Augusta Road, Binstead Road, Park Road, Albert Street, Oakhill Road, Upton Road. © RSHG

Trouble for the postmen!

"I know it's all the vogue to give your house a name instead of a number," Ryde's Head Postmaster was referring to a growing problem, which was giving a headache to the poor old postmen. It meant traipsing the full length of the street to find a name and then discovering it is at the other end. Quite a number of people altered the house name without telling the Post Office. A list of roads where most difficulty was experienced had been sent to Ryde Corporation.

*Isle of Wight Times 11 April 1963*

## DOORWAYS



The classical Georgian front doorway had a simple, flat frontage, with a six panelled door set back around 4 inches from the brick. Some displayed symmetrical pilasters. Lamps were often positioned above or to the side of the doorway.

Wealthier homes had grander entrances with pillars, pediments, hoods and small porches. Traditionally doors were painted black or dark green and original doorknobs were of cast iron painted black (brass appeared in late 18th and early 19th century).

The doorknob was positioned centrally at waist height. Large knockers were also positioned centrally but higher and the lionhead design was popular. Bell pulls came into use in the 1830s, positioned on the wall next to the door. The Victorians later changed these to bell pushes. Letter plates are Victorian, appearing after the invention of the penny post in the 1840s and many door knobs were moved at this time to make way for the plates.



Early Georgian doors had no glass which meant gloomy hallways so the fanlight was introduced, rectangular at first, often made by removing the top door panel and later the fan shape was incorporated. The Victorians started to use coloured glass and also continued to replace central door panels with glass to allow in more light. The Victorians were concerned with practicalities, like not getting wet whilst waiting at the door, so introduced larger porches. They also liked short, prettily tiled pathways leading to the doorway. Many of Ryde's Georgian areas have evidence of traditional doorways and it is easy to spot their modern Victorian adaptations.

## A SCRAPER AT THE DOOR KEEPS DIRT OFF THE FLOOR

Boot scrapers are part of urban history, born at the same time as footpaths, when walking in towns and cities became an essential part of everyday life. They gained popularity in Georgian times when it was fashionable for the wealthy to stroll the streets. Streets in the 18th and 19th centuries, even in posh areas, were generally filthy and when guests arrived at a front door, one wanted them to clean their feet before entering one's beautiful home!

Boot scrapers were therefore placed at the main entrances and had to be made of cast iron to survive all that scraping, pushing and kicking! Scrapers could be free standing or set in semi-circular wall niches. They could also be an integral part of railings and gateways. Many of Ryde's elegant Georgian and Victorian townhouses displayed the finest ornamental scrapers which remain to be seen today. Some are now naturally rather the worse for wear and generally redundant.



When doorstep milk deliveries were popular, scrapers were often used to secure the bottles. The wall-niche type also makes rather good flower holders! Anywhere you see Georgian architecture you are likely to notice a boot scraper or two!

## COAL HOLES AND CELLARS



The coal hole, typically about 12 to 14 inches in diameter, consists of a cast iron ring set into the pavement with a circular cover, usually made of cast iron but sometimes with concrete or glass panes or small ventilation holes. They were common from the early 19th century to the middle of the 20th century and allowed for the easy delivery of coal, often from horse-drawn carts, direct to the house's coal bunker or cellar. The location of the coal hole on the street was to minimise the distance the sacks had to be carried and meant that dusty sacks and delivery men did not have to enter the house.

*Isle of Wight Observer 25 June 1859*

Letter to the Editor – I venture to point out the great blot to your streets. I allude to the extraordinary number of trap-doors, gratings to admit light to the underground cellars, and the circular holes for the passage of coals, to be found in all your principal thoroughfares. Perhaps the inhabitants do not notice the inconvenience of these things. Your obedient servant...A Nervous Visitor.

There are many examples still in the pavements of Ryde, mostly the bunkers have been filled but the covers remain and often bear the name or trade mark of the ironmongers who made them. The example of the cover on the right was made by Pryke and Palmer of Upper Thames Street, London, a company known for a wide range of ironmongery, railings, domestic wares, stoves, ranges, baths, stable fittings, and sanitary goods in the 19th century. The example on the left shows a coal hole set into the wall of the property.

## STREET LIGHTS

Lighting the streets is not a new thing. We know that the Greeks and Romans used oil lamps and in the Middle Ages boys were employed to escort people round the dark alleys with lamps. In London in 1716, all housekeepers, whose houses faced a street, lane, or passage, had to put out at least one light on every dark night between 6 and 11pm, under penalty of a one shilling fine for failing to do so. The first public street lighting with gas was demonstrated in Pall Mall, London on January 28, 1807. 'Lamplighters' were a common sight in the 19th century lighting the lamps at dusk and extinguishing them at dawn. In the early 20th century gas gave way to electric lighting.



*Isle of Wight Observer 1 June 1861*

New Gas Lamps placed by the Ryde Gas and Coke Company around the districts of Swanmore, Dustans, and Spencer Road, were lighted for the first time during the past week. The pillars are higher than those in the town, much more ornamental, and are fitted with burners that throw out a larger flame.

Although Ryde still has many different types of street light columns, none of the early ones survive. How much longer will we see such variety? The lamps are currently being replaced with low-energy types.

## TELEPHONE BOXES AND WATER TROUGHS

There were many red telephone boxes around Ryde in the past but how many still survive? How many have been replaced or simply taken away altogether? Do you remember the three red boxes outside the Pier entrance, now replaced by one new? In this, the digital age, are all public telephone boxes destined to be a thing of the past?



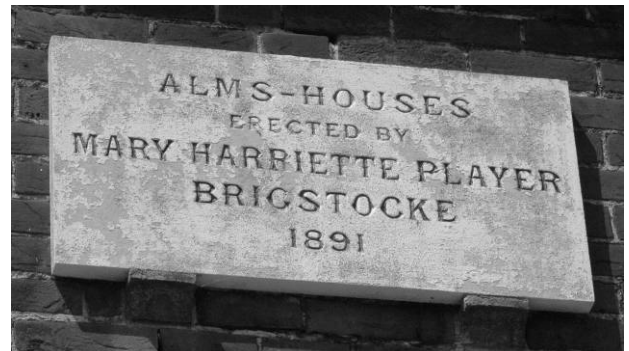
The first standard public telephone kiosk was produced in concrete in 1920 and was designated K1 (Kiosk No.1). The red telephone box was the result of a competition in 1924. The organisers invited entries from three respected architects and the design submitted by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott was chosen and became known as the K2. Many red telephone boxes have now been replaced by the modern KX100 type. The photographs on the left show 2 remaining red boxes in Lind Street and at Madeira Road, Seaview while the photographs on the right taken in August 1988 and December 2013 show the original red box and the replacement box outside the Pavilion on the Esplanade.

Miss Brigstocke was a great benefactor of the town, helping the poor and needy, and also the animals, but how much of her legacy remains?



"The kindly disposition of Miss Brigstocke was shown by many acts of generosity. Sympathising very much with animals she put up drinking fountains in St Thomas' Square, the Esplanade, the upper part of West Street, etc. which are such a boon to horses and cattle. She also built and endowed almshouses in Player Street for decayed natives of Ryde which have been much appreciated."

*Isle of Wight Observer 24 November 1904*



The elaborately decorated water trough in West Street presented by Miss Brigstocke is Grade II listed and is the last one remaining. The alms houses in Player Street have been modernised but a plaque on the wall gives a hint of the past.



## OTHER STREET FURNITURE

Street furniture is a collective term for the everyday objects and useful pieces of equipment installed on our streets. It includes the things already featured in this magazine but also bollards, benches, signs, parking machines, bus stops and shelters, litter bins etc...and anything else you'll find on the streets.

Like the post boxes, there are many different types and these are constantly being replaced with more modern or eco-friendly items. Take for an example litter bins - here are just a few different ones you'll see around Ryde today. How many more do you know of? How many more will disappear in 2014?



How many of these items do you notice as you walk around the town? How long have they been there?



## ENTRANCES AND FOLLIES

We are all familiar with the grand entrances to the big houses and mansions of Ryde such as Westfield, Corston House, Westmont and St John's House but have you noticed the entrances to the gardens in East Hill Road and the folly at the bottom of the grounds to St John's (a seven-sided mock Gothic folly designed by William Page, landscape gardener of Southampton, for John Peter Gassiot)?



*Isle of Wight Observer*  
17 January 1857

St John's Park – This great addition to the environs of Ryde is now assuming a very nice appearance; evergreens and flowering shrubs are thriving most luxuriously.

The gardens between East and West Hill roads were laid out for the benefit of the owners of the new desirable villas being erected. The photographs above show two of the entrance pillars and the folly (right) as they remain today.

The entrance pillar on the right clearly showing the house name Southfield is in Upton Road and was at the entrance drive to Southfield House. Most of the house has been demolished with only a small part remaining as flats. Southfield Gardens takes its name from what must have been extensive grounds of the house.



This magazine can only provide a small glimpse into the hidden treasures making up the history of our town. Take a look around you every time you go out to see what else you can find. It might be gone tomorrow!