

STOP 9 – THE SOLENT

You should be in the pagoda shelter by the Canoe Lake looking out to sea. The Solent - Imagine the scene in days past: Fleet Reviews and the rendezvous for British ships before going to battle. Flotillas of yachts and galleys, sails billowing in the breeze. Wherries and ferries, barges and boats, with goods to trade and passengers to land; fishermen, boatmen, ferrymen and Customs men too! Tide rippling over sand banks, white waves breaking, flags waving... the scene was described by James Clarke in 1822. *"The ships are a constantly pleasant sight. With every change of tide we see them in new positions, in every hour tinged with different hues."*

Look further out into the distance to the right. Built in the 1860s to defend the Solent and known as "Palmerston's Follies", the stone forts stand firm like giants in the wash. The largest is 200 feet in diameter and fully armour plated. It had a complement of 30 men, but the threat of invasion passed and they never fired a shot in anger.

The 1897 Fleet Review for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee was claimed to be the largest number of warships ever gathered together in the greatest display of sea power the world had ever seen. One-hundred-and-seventy British naval ships lined up in the Solent. Most were less than ten years old and all ablaze with brass and bunting. Crews stood in wide straw hats and spotless white uniforms in the stunning spectacle. As recently as June 2005, a special Fleet Review took place, as reported by The Times: *"A vast armada of ships from around the world lined up at Spithead to mark the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar and death of Britain's greatest naval hero, Admiral Lord Nelson. One-hundred-and-sixty-seven ships from the Royal Navy and thirty-five other nations were inspected by the Queen. It was the largest peace time international review in history."*

Stand up. Behind you is the Canoe Lake. *"As to the ornamental lake it would be nothing more than a 'duck's puddle' and the sea would always be preferred by canoeists..."* This was the view of the IW Observer in 1876 on the proposed lake... however in 1877 the Observer printed a favourable impression painted by local artist W H Gray: *"A gentle slope, crowned with seats leads down to the lake, crowded with people watching children wading in the water and sailing their miniature boats. Out on the lake other lads race in canoes or narrow galleys."* The Lake opened in 1880. It is filled with seawater, about 1 metre deep, and since 1882 has been home to Ryde Model Yacht Club.

Now continue along the promenade to the far end of the lake you will get another chance to see the Lake on your way back to the town.