

# RYDE MAN OPENS UP THE WORLD

## Henry Knight and the Story of the Tin Opener

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The Isle of Wight Observer, the local Ryde newspaper of the day, printed on 10<sup>th</sup> August 1895 what was for them an unusually long obituary after the death of Henry Knight. It started with:-

*We have to record the death of Mr Henry Knight, of the Arcade, at the age of 75. As there are few men who have played such a prominent part in the history of our town as Mr Henry Knight has done, his death is worthy of something more than a passing reference.*



The photograph on the left is that of the “Royal Victoria Arcade’ in Ryde which Henry Knight for many years ran and owned. It is situated about half way down on the western side of Union Street. The Royal Victoria Arcade was built in 1835/6 in the attempt to ensure Ryde became established as the up-market shopping town of the Island and its builder, W. H. Banks, being a shrewd businessman requested, and was granted, royal permission for the name, The foundation stone was laid on the sixteenth birthday of the then Princess Victoria. As can

be seen it today still proudly bears the royal arms above the entrance. There were, when Knight owned it, some fourteen shops with living quarters attached as was common at that time. It never quite came up to its expectations and by 1890 only two shops were let with rents of £50 and £20 respectively. If all the premises were occupied the total rent was estimated at £300 which would have been a reasonable on the £3,000 Henry Knight had paid for it many years earlier. The building was restored to something of its intended splendour a few years before the turn of the century.

The obituary confirmed that Henry Knight came to Ryde in the mid-1850s when he then described himself as an importer of Italian sculptures. Some examples of what he was importing at that time still survive and can be seen around Ryde and in other parts of the Island. Pictured below are the four muses which Hughes and Mullins placed above the prestigious building housing their photographic studio just a few blocks down from the recently Royal Victoria Arcade from which Henry Knight worked.



But if he is remembered it is not for his sales of sculpture but because of his other interests. For he was perhaps the most controversial local politician and counsellor that the Island, certainly Ryde, has known and he was an inventor of some genius. But even one to his

patents was to be the source of dispute and resort to law. Brilliant as he was he seems to have been born to be one of the world's losers.

Henry Knight, when in his mid-30s, started to take a very interest in local affair. Using his unusual power of assimilating Acts of Parliament he soon became known as the 'Amateur lawyer'. To many of his supporters, however, he was 'The People's Henry' for he always professed to champion the cause of the ratepayer. A regular reformer and firebrand, his enthusiasm and energy knew no bounds, which made him to some just an unprincipled agitator whilst others saw him as an honest man, battling against corruption. He fought amongst other things the 'Ferry Company', prevented a viaduct being built over the Esplanade, and controlled the development where the public spaces on Ryde seafront are now. A 'Ratepayers Association' was founded and the town was for many years split into 'Knightites' and 'Anti-Knightites'. In 1871 he obtained a seat on the town council. Now having access to the minute books allowed accusations of illegal spending to be made; writs were issued upon the old members for sums as high as £700 and £800, huge sums for the times. The bulk of the denounced 'clique' resigned and the 'Knightites' ruled the town for a number of years until he himself faced accusations over the purchase of individual gas meters for the street lamps from a company he had an interest shares in. An unsigned anti-Knight election leaflet of 1881 opened with:

*"Mr Knight was elected a member of Council in 1871, and continued in office four years, during which time he succeeded in rousing such strife and ill feeling amongst all classes, in the borough as could not be paralleled in any town in the kingdom and from the effects of which Society has scarcely recovered....."*

It ended after a dozen or so further paragraphs detailing what he had supposedly done or opposed – elections are now tame by comparison:

*"Mr Knight again seeks re-election, but unless the Burgesses desire the return of the deplorable state of affairs formerly existing, they will decisively reject Mr Knight at the forthcoming election."*

His unlimited energy shown in pursuit of local politics was also fortunately directed towards his many inventions. Amongst other things he developed, built and patented an automatic weighing machine. But in 1888 the 'Automatic Weighing Machine Company', who provided for very many years penny weighing machines on railway platforms, considered that he had infringed their patent. After two day in Chancery Court it was decided he had not, but the cost were later to lead later to a bankruptcy hearing. As early as 1870 he had patented "*Improvements in Instruments or Apparatus for Clipping Horses and other Animals*". This also was challenged and cost him about £1,000 forcing him to sell the patent to clear his debt.

However, his most important patent is number 1984 of 1881 where he presented in his submission

*"Improvements in instruments used for cutting open tin cases of every description which contain preserves of any kinds, also tin or zinc cases used for packing or preserving articles of any description"*.

He attached to the patent application and specifications some 42 figures showing many variations of the flanges and cutting edges. Perhaps the best known is the one illustrated; with its wooden metal cutting blade.



One of the Knight patent tin-openers – now in Carisbrooke Castle Museum – sold as a holiday souvenir

Henry Knight never ever succeeded in exploiting his inventions yet alone making any money from them. A bankruptcy hearing in 1890 confirms that he had bought the Arcade lease some 30 years earlier for £3,000 and had paid £1000 of this off by the sale of sculptures, spent £100 on improvements and obtained rents of £300 per annum. He told the hearing that 10 years before that he had started with a capital of about £40. The court case over the weighing machine had cost about £1,000. Only Messrs Wood of Ryde made two of his weighing machines and the patent was sold on mortgage for £550 with no foreign bids. He also told the hearing that another patent for 'making paint from sand' had fallen void. The report states that he only made £100 from the tin opener patent and that Crosse and Blackwell who now owned it had exploited his invention and swamped the market.

The Ryde Observer obituary also reminded its readers of another reason why he had to retired from public life: his connection with the branch of the 'Children of God' a slit from the Shaker Movement, led by a Mrs Girling, that had returned from New England, USA and tried to established themselves near Hordle in the New Forest between 1872 -75.

*"Mrs Girling and a number of he "Shaker" disciples paid a visit to Ryde, and held a mission at the Victoria Rooms. Mr Knight was completely fascinated by the singular doctrines pronounced, and became a constant attendant. On one occasion, when the women were gyrating and dancing on the platform, to the astonishment of everyone, Mr Knight rose and declared his solemn belief and conviction that Mrs Girling was a re-incarnation of Christ; that the dancing girls were under the influence of the Holy Spirit; and that the end of all things was at hand!*

*From that time forth he championed the cause of the "Shakers" as vigorously as he had combated his opponents in local matters. He spent much of his substance in supporting the "Shaker" community, who had an encampment at Hordle. The members of that community suffered terrible hardships, but they were told they could none of them die unless they were guilty of sin. Some of them did die from the suffering and hardship they had to go through. It was not, however, until the prophetess herself passed away, that her disciples lost faith. It need hardly be said that Mr Knight's adherence to this movement lost him all his local influence. He has never been taken seriously since."*

The obituary in the Observer concluded:

There can be no question that in Mr Henry Knight we have lost one of the most remarkable men who ever came into Ryde, but it is also true that he was the means of sowing much ill-feeling and many dissensions which are only just beginning to subside.

Always short of money, Henry Knight sold the patent of one of the most useful inventions in the Victorian period – the tin opener - for just £100 to the Cross and Blackwell Company which has now become part of the international Nestlé Group.

*But for many years it can truly be said that Ryde has opened up the World*

It is sad, that because Henry Knight never became Mayor of Ryde, there is no portrait of him in the official records and so far it has not proved possible to identify him on any borough or other photographs. One suspects that he must have been on many and further efforts still continue to find out what this controversial character of Ryde who was none the less very concerned for the welfare of his fellow human beings really looked like.

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