

The Origins of the Seaside Pier

In 1914 Britain had more than 100 piers, jetties and landing stages where tourists could walk out to sea. These ranged from long, largely unadorned promenades to pleasure piers bristling with theatres, music halls, entertainers, kiosks and shops, all designed to separate visitors from their hard-earned wages. Many also boasted landing stages for steamers to transport visitors to and from the resort and to provide excursions out to sea. Photographs and early films such as those in the Mitchell and Kenyon Collection show how popular they were with visitors, despite many charging a fee for admission.

A century earlier, in 1814, Britain had been at war with France for a decade, but this had not deterred people from enjoying holidays around the coast. On 26 July 1814 the pier at Ryde on the Isle of Wight opened to boats landing passengers, initially with difficulty at low tide until it was lengthened, but it also catered for promenading holidaymakers.¹ It consisted of a simple wooden deck carried on brick arches at the shore end and driven wooden piles further out to sea and was thus very different from the fully developed, iron pleasure pier that would later in the 19th century entertain millions of visitors each year. This transformation was a reflection of how holidays were being transformed, but it also illustrates the profound changes in technology that had occurred.

Although Ryde may have been the first structure erected specifically for people to walk out to sea, it was a recognition of a practice that had perhaps been taking place probably since the first visitors came to the seaside during the first half of the 18th century. Early tourists drawn to small coastal settlements were forced at some places to share the seafront with the working life of these towns, leading to famous conflicts between fishermen and aristocratic visitors to Brighton on the seafront and on the Steyne; there is still tension between the beach-launched fleet and the demands of culture and entertainment on the seafront at Hastings. However, at other early resorts the harbour became a destination and a place to walk. At Scarborough the

¹ See page 000

harbour was improved and enlarged in the 1730s, the decade in which the first documented influx of people for sea bathing was taking place. In the late 18th century a stone pier at Weymouth separated the mouth of the harbour from the beach; it is shown in a 1774 map as a short, narrow structure, but a 1789 drawing suggests that it had been extended and was a place for well-dressed visitors to promenade.² **Fig 1** The town's main bathhouse was located on the harbour quayside near the pier's shoreward end and by c 1800 the King's floating bathhouse was located alongside it.³ The Cobb at Lyme Regis, which was rebuilt during the late 18th and early 19th century, offered shelter for working boats, but it also served as a walk for visitors, including Jane Austen who spent a holiday there in 1804.⁴ As well as substantial stone structures, some resorts had timber jetties that were used for promenading. At Great Yarmouth the harbour was on the River Yare while on the beach there was a wooden jetty that small boats could moor alongside. However, it was also used by visitors:

'The Jetty, close to the Bath-House, is 110 yards in length, and 8 in breadth, at the outward extremity; it is a lively and interesting scene, and was it under proper regulations, no place would be better calculated to afford a relaxation from the severe application of the mind; and the heat of summer softened by the refreshing breezes from the sea.'⁵

These varied structures were commercial in origin and were adopted by fashionable holidaymakers as a promenade, but at Margate the new harbour pier was constructed between 1810 and 1815 with visitors in mind. The town's prosperity prior to the coming of visitors during the 18th century depended on its harbour as the base for a fishing fleet and as an outlet for agricultural produce from the Isle of Thanet. When John Leland visited in the 1530s the pier was 'now sore decayed' and in 1662 'this Pier and Harbour was much

² Hutchins 1774, 2, opp. 62

³ Brodie 2008, 12, 15

⁴ 'We afterwards walked together for an hour on the Cobb;' 14 September 1804, <http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/auslet22.html#letter121> [accessed 7 January 2014].

RCHME 1952, 149-50.

⁵ Anon 1806, 22

ruinated and decayed'.⁶ A map published in 1736 depicted it as a long, timber structure with a reversed-L plan, with a lamp and crane at the seaward end and warehouses at the landward end.⁷ From the 1730s sea bathing took place beside the harbour, which was at the heart of the social life of the resort. George Keate, describing Margate in the 1760s, recounted how: 'The *plain fisherman* leaning over the rails of the *Pier*, attends to, and contemplates, the jargon of all the pretty men and women who pass and repass him, without envying the first, or feeling a wish excited for the latter.'⁸ The timber pier may have been reclad in stone by the early 19th century, but even this reinforcement did not allow it to survive the devastating storm of 1808. The new stone pier, constructed by the engineers John Rennie (1761-1821) and Josias Jessop (1781-1826), was completed in time for steamers to begin to ply the route along the Thames in 1815.⁹ It is roughly half octagonal in plan with a raised promenade along its seaward side, and is approximately 900ft long (270m), but it still could not cope with steamers at low tide. **Fig 2** Visitors could walk along this if they paid a 1d toll, though the introduction of the toll in 1812 sparked a near riot.¹⁰ 'A Cockney' described walking along the pier in 1823: 'sallied out for a walk on the Pier – beauteous dames, and gentlemen with reputable calves to their legs'.¹¹

The new stone pier, despite incorporating a raised promenade for visitors and having facilities for landing passengers from steamers, still proved insufficient and therefore a timber jetty, similar in form to the pier at Ryde, was erected. Jarvis' Jetty, also known as Jarvis' Landing Stage, was named after Dr Daniel Jarvis, Chairman of the Pier and Harbour Company and it was constructed in 1824 at a cost of £8,000.¹² It was over 1,000ft long (305m) and was built for steamers to land their passengers, though at low tide it was still too short and therefore sometimes people had to land, as before, by rowing boat. In August 1826 William Fry visited Margate and described a walk on the new jetty: 'After

⁶ Toulmin Smith 1964, 4, 61; Cates and Chamberlain, 45.

⁷ Lewis 1736, pl 16, opp. 123

⁸ Keate 1779, 1, 106.

⁹ Kidd 1831, 46

¹⁰ Fischer and Walton 1987, 12

¹¹ A Cockney 1823, 373

¹² Lewis 1840, 226; Clarke 1975, 25; Easdown 2007, 60.

breakfast I took a walk on the jetty, over the Entrance is Jarvis's Landing Place – this Jetty is 1,062 feet long, projecting into the Sea, the floor is full of loop holes thus to prevent its bursting by the force of the Waves, this floor is supported by strong beams of timber driven into the shore'.¹³ He also describes how at low tide 'it is quite a favorite promenade, but at high water the Sea washes all over it', and therefore steamers still used the earlier stone pier.¹⁴ As well as being a promenade the jetty offered its customers some entertainment and Fry included an amusing sketch in his diary of the 'Margate-Orpheus':

'When the Company are walking on the Jetty, the Margate-Orpheus serenades them with Tunes on a Violin of his own manufacture, & he plays very well indeed, his infirmity of body renders him incapable of getting a laborious living but his agility of arm, and contentedness of mind have strong claims upon those who have an ear for music & a heart for pity.'

Like the pier at Ryde, Jarvis' Jetty was a simple structure consisting of a wooden deck with wooden piles that had been driven into the seabed. However, an alternative, more ambitious approach to pier design was pioneered by the civil engineer and naval officer Captain Samuel Brown (1776–1852).¹⁵ In 1816 he had installed the first machine of its type in his own workshops for testing chain cables and the cables for the steamship *Great Eastern* were manufactured at his works in Pontypridd. As a result of his expertise he became involved with the construction of suspension bridges, including the Union Bridge across the Tweed near Berwick, completed in 1820, and in the following year he erected the Chain Pier at Granton near Edinburgh.¹⁶ In 1823 he constructed another pier with a suspension structure at Brighton and this remained a central feature of the resort until its destruction in 1896. **Fig 3** Although the chains and the upright elements of the superstructure of Brighton's Chain Pier were made of iron, the pier was still constructed on wooden piles. Although this design was closely associated

¹³ Fry 1826-9, 34

¹⁴ Fry 1826-9, 34-5

¹⁵ ODNB

¹⁶ http://www.grantonhistory.org/buildings/chain_pier.htm [accessed 7 January 2014]

with Samuel Brown, two other examples were erected at Greenhithe on the Thames in the 1840s (demolished in 1875) and at Seaview on the Isle of Wight in 1880.¹⁷ This pier survived into the 1950s, but the Chain Piers at Leith and Brighton were destroyed by storms in 1898 and 1896 respectively. The apparent sophistication of the superstructure of the Chain Pier at Brighton should not disguise the fact that it was constructed using driven wooden piles, the mainstay of pier construction until the 1850s.

As Margate demonstrates, as well as providing promenades, piers were critical for resorts wanting to attract visitors arriving by steamer in the years before railways would open up resorts to a wider public. In 1821 passengers wishing to disembark from steamers at Southend-on-Sea by boat at low tide had to use 'two gravelled causeways, the one begun, and the other finished' to reach the shore.¹⁸ Therefore, in 1829 the construction of a wooden pier was begun and the 600ft long (183m) pier opened in June 1830.¹⁹ It proved to be too short for steamers and was lengthened to 1,500ft (457m) in 1833 and to a mile and a quarter in 1846.

Herne Bay remained a small settlement in the 1830s, unable to compete with Margate because it had no pier at which steamers could land visitors: 'For several years this place has been rising in public estimation, as a *select* sea retreat; but the want of a landing place has hitherto prevented its acquiring greater notoriety, and has been the only drawback to its becoming one of the most frequented and fashionable places of resort of the day.'²⁰ By 1830 a plan for the development of the new town of St Augustine at Herne Bay had been prepared and the key to its success was to build a pier. Investors in the Herne Bay Pier Company hoped to transform the small settlement into a thriving town. Therefore, in 1831 an Act of Parliament was obtained and the first timber pile of the pier was driven on 4 July 1831.²¹ Thomas Telford was

¹⁷ Easdown 2007, 11, 13. A company was formed by a Mr Birch in 1842 to build Greenhithe pier. Adamson 1977, 28

¹⁸ Evans 1821, 251

¹⁹ Fischer and Walton 1987, 35.

²⁰ Kidd 1832, 6

²¹ Anon 1835, 5

invited to design it but passed the job to his assistant Thomas Rhodes.²² In 1835 30,402 people disembarked at Herne Bay and by 1842 this had risen to 52,205.²³ Although these numbers seem large, they remained smaller than nearby Margate where 108,625 people landed in 1835-6 and 102,647 in 1842-3, but with the arrival of railways during the 1840s steamers became of less significance.²⁴

Wood remained the main material employed in the structure of piers into the 1850s, including at the first Wellington Pier at Great Yarmouth in 1853, but the first examples of iron piles were already appearing in the Thames soon after Herne Bay had been completed. The shift to iron was a response to the need to overcome the problems of using wood, a material prone to decay and to damage by small, wood-boring, marine creatures. Both the new piers at Southend-on-Sea and Herne Bay had required significant repairs within a few years of their construction. The Town Pier at Gravesend, designed by the engineer William Tierney Clark (1783-1852), was completed in July 1834 and consisted of three graceful arches carried on twenty-six iron columns. The use of the arch exploited the material's inherent properties and anticipated the design of Clevedon Pier three decades later.²⁵ A year later the other pier at Gravesend, the Royal Terrace Pier, was constructed in wood, but it was replaced in iron in 1842 and an iron pier opened at Sheerness in 1835.²⁶

Despite these early examples, the definitive shift to using iron piles only took place in the 1850s with the construction of the new jetty at Margate. During 1851 the timber Jarvis' Jetty was breached twice, and therefore the decision was taken to employ the distinguished civil engineer Eugenius Birch (1818-84) to build a new jetty.²⁷ This was the first pier that he had been asked to design and eventually he would be responsible for fourteen, a career that helped to define the essential characteristics of a pleasure pier. His first contribution to pier engineering was to select the screw pile, patented by

²² Easdown 2007, 42

²³ Whitehead 1971, 14

²⁴ Whyman 1985, 24

²⁵ Easdown 2007, 14; Foote Wood 2008, 69

²⁶ Easdown 2007, 19, 35

²⁷ Fischer and Walton 1987, 49; *ODNB*

Alexander Mitchell (1780-1868) in 1833, as the means of creating the structure, a technique using a screw on the end of an iron rod to fix the pile into the sea bed.²⁸ Mitchell had used it in a number of lighthouses before creating his first jetty at Courtown harbour on the coast of County Wexford in 1847.²⁹

The first pile of Margate's new jetty was driven in May 1853 and it opened in April 1855, although the 1,240ft long (378m) structure was not completed until July 1856. **Fig 4** Originally a very simple promenade pier capable of landing passengers from steamers, the construction in 1875-7 of the polygonal extension at its seaward end increased its number of landing stages and provided space for a bandstand, kiosks and shelters.³⁰

Birch's Margate Jetty placed the use of iron and the screw pile at the heart of thinking about pier construction, though other engineers introduced alternative techniques, sometimes to overcome particular local problems. For the construction of Southport Pier in 1859-60 the civil engineer Sir James Brunlees (1816-92) employed a jetting technique, in which water was pumped down the centre of the hollow pile to clear the sand, allowing the pile to sink deep into the sand, which then held it in place.³¹ Each pile took around half an hour to sink in 20ft (6m), meaning that all 237 piles were in place in six weeks. An alternative technique developed by John Dixon involved driving piles using wood and rubber to reduce the shock to the brittle metal.³²

Margate's Jetty led the way in the use of iron, but like other piers being built during the 1850 and 1860s it had a fairly plain superstructure to maximise the area for promenaders and passengers disembarking from steamships. This sparseness can still be experienced today in a walk along the piers at Saltburn-by-the-Sea and Clevedon, both of which opened in 1869. However, before their construction, changes were underway in the presentation of the

²⁸ *ODNB*

²⁹ Adamson 1974, 47

³⁰ Easdown 2007, 60-73

³¹ Easdown 2009, 67-8

³² Adamson 1974, 47

seaside pier. At Blackpool Eugenius Birch erected the town's first pier, which opened in 1863, and he included a series of kiosks on its deck. Three years later Birch completed Brighton's West Pier using a similar formula, but he included the first hint of exotic detailing inspired by the nearby Royal Pavilion. This vocabulary would come to dominate the detailing of piers for several decades and culminate in the extravagance of Eastbourne and Brighton's Palace Pier.

During the 1860s more than 20 piers were begun and a similar number were constructed during the 1870s. This boom was based on the belief that there was money to be made from piers. In 1875 Brighton's West Pier entertained 600,000 visitors and by 1890 Blackpool's Central Pier had around a million visitors annually, figures that guaranteed profits for investors.³³

To attract visitors, piers increasingly offered more than simply a place for promenading. By the 1840s the Chain Pier at Brighton provided its customers with refreshment rooms, shops, a reading room and a camera obscura. Southport pier, which had opened in 1860, was so long that its managing company responded to the needs of its customers by adding a waiting room and refreshment room.³⁴ By the 1870s some piers included large pavilions in their plan; Hastings pier opened in August 1872 on the first ever August bank Holiday and incorporated a pavilion capable of seating 2000 people.³⁵ As well as creating new piers with large entertainment venues, existing piers were expanded and extended; in 1874-7 the Indian Pavilion was constructed at the seaward end of Blackpool's northern pier, an extravagant structure apparently inspired by an Indian temple.³⁶

Some piers also began to include fairground rides and today some are largely dedicated to them, not just small rides for children but terrifying ones for brave adults. As early as 1876 Birnbeck pier at Weston-super-Mare offered its customers swings and by the early 20th century it had a switchback, a water

³³ Fischer and Walton 1987, 16, 18

³⁴ Easdown 2009, 68

³⁵ Foote Wood 2008, 76

³⁶ Easdown 2009,103

chute, a helter skelter and a short-lived flying machine, facilities made possible as the pier incorporated an island in its structure.³⁷ **Fig 5**

At the outbreak of World War I Britain had a pier for every taste, ranging from the quiet, plain promenade pier to the fully developed pleasure pier with pavilions, rides and amusements. New piers were created or rebuilt during the 20th century, with steel and concrete replacing wood and iron as the main structural materials. There was also a shift from exuberant Edwardian detailing, drawing ultimately on the exoticism of Brighton's Royal Pavilion, to the *Art Deco* detailing of the rebuilt Worthing Pier or the pavilion on the Grand Pier at Weston-super-Mare before the disastrous fire in 2008. Despite some additions and replacements, the 20th century was a century dominated by loss, through fire, the power of the sea and neglect.

In the early 21st century millions of visitors to Britain's seaside are still fortunate to be able to experience many of the promenade piers and pleasure piers of the 19th century and they can see how these have been updated and refreshed to cater for modern tastes. Piers today face the twin challenges of the sea and finding ways to maintain and renew their fabric and facilities. To secure their future they must remain popular and despite all the modern, exciting attractions of today's seaside, holidaymakers have not tired of the thrill of walking on water, breathing in the sea air and looking out to sea.

³⁷ Fischer and Walton 1987, 18

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Figures

- 1 A drawing of the bay and pier at Weymouth by J. Crane 1789.
[AA050895]
- 2 A photograph of the pier at Margate with the jetty to the left from the Aerofilms collection. [EPW000162]
- 3 The Chain Pier at Brighton. [Scanned image on order – BB85/01743B or BB85/02120B]
- 4 Margate's Jetty before its extension in 1875-7. [BB88/04260]
- 5 Birnbeck Pier with the water splash to the left and the switchback to the right, from the Aerofilms collection. [EPW001050]