



PIERS OF THE REALM

Simon Roberts has photographed every British pleasure pier there is – and several that there aren't. Overleaf, *Francis Hodgson* celebrates this devotion to imperilled treasures

There are 58 surviving pleasure piers in Britain and Simon Roberts has photographed them all. He has also photographed some of the vanished ones, as you can see from his picture of Shanklin Pier on the Isle of Wight (on page 21), destroyed in the great storm which did so much damage in southern England on October 16, 1987.

Roberts is a human geographer by training, and his study of piers is a natural development of his previous major work, *We English*, which looked at the changing patterns of leisure in a country in which a rising population and decreasing mass employment mean that more of us have more time upon our hands than ever before.

We tend to forget that holidays are a relatively new phenomenon, but it was only after the Bank Holiday Act of 1871 that paid leave gradually became the norm, and cheap, easily reachable leisure resorts a necessity. Resorts were commercial propositions, and the pier was often a major investment to draw crowds. Consortia of local businessmen would get together to provide the finance and appoint agents to get the thing done: a complex chicane of lobbying for private legislation, engineering, and marketing. Around the same time, a number of Acts made it possible to limit liability for shareholders in speculative companies. So the development of the piers is closely parallel to the development of other UK infrastructure, such as the canals and railways.

Structurally, the piers were remarkable. Wooden piling was soon found to be susceptible to rot and the teredo worm and was replaced by that favourite Victorian material, cast iron. Eugenius Birch, the most prolific of the great pier engineers (and certainly the best-named), was the first to use screw piling, in which an ingenious profile of the lower ends of the piles allowed them to be twisted down into the sand as they were installed.

Gradually, piers acquired a common vocabulary of style quite recognisably their own. Gothic filigree lightness of ironwork is everywhere. A strong penchant for the Moorish is recognisable in a thousand details; its exoticism survives in the very word "kiosk", which derives through Turkish from Persian. St Annes-on-Sea even has pavilions recognisably descended from Chinese models. Like many other Victorian buildings, piers were largely made from prefabricated sections, brought to the site by the same railways which would later bring the customers. At Morecambe, the components used to construct the pier had originally been intended for the city of Valparaiso in Chile.

Like so much in Britain, the history of piers is woven in with a history of class. The large cluster around the northwest speaks of the industrial crowds of Lancashire and the West Riding and the western Midlands, all within easy reach by train. With the commercialisation of leisure, the sea became a commodity. It seems that one reason piers spread so quickly is that their lengthwise shape allowed for the easy installation of turnstiles and pay kiosks at the landward end: the pier could be – and usually was – reserved for those who could pay for the privilege. In the ►

◀ EASTBOURNE

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SPANS English Channel
DESIGN Eugenius Birch
CONSTRUCTION Raked and vertical cast iron screw piles supporting lattice girders; iron and wood frame
YEAR OPENED 1870 (completed 1872)
ORIGINAL LENGTH 305m
PRESENT LENGTH 305m
FIRE None
STORM DAMAGE 1877
RESTORATION 1878, 1888, 1899–1901, 1912, 1925, 1951, 1971, 1985, 1990/1

A 400-seat theatre, built at the seaward end of the pier in 1888, was replaced by a 1,000-seat theatre, bar, camera obscura and office complex in 1899–1901. The pier has undergone numerous redesigns and restorations since.

BLACKPOOL CENTRAL

SPANS Irish Sea
DESIGN John Isaac Mawson
CONSTRUCTION Cast iron columns, wrought iron girders; cast iron trestles under a wooden deck
YEAR OPENED 1868
ORIGINAL LENGTH 463m
PRESENT LENGTH 341m
FIRE 1973
STORM DAMAGE 1964
RESTORATION 1877, 1903, 1966/7, 1973/4, 1978, 1986, 1990

The Blackpool South Jetty Co was formed in 1864 and work began in 1867. Opened as the South Pier, the name was changed when the Victoria (now South) Pier opened. It was renowned for entertainments such as open-air dancing, which was very popular before the second world war.



CLEVEDON

SPANS Estuary of the River Severn
DESIGN Richard J Ward, John William Grover
CONSTRUCTION Wrought iron girders on wrought iron columns and screw piles
YEAR OPENED 1869
ORIGINAL LENGTH 257m
PRESENT LENGTH 257m
FIRE 1903
STORM DAMAGE 1891, 1910
RESTORATION 1888, 1905, 1968, 1983-85, 1989-92

Sir John Betjeman described it as "delicate as a Japanese print in the mist, and like an insect in the sunlight". The pier's construction was difficult due to the 47ft tidal range (the second highest in the world) and it was built unusually high at 68ft.



BRIGHTON WEST (LOST PIER)

SPANS English Channel
DESIGN Eugenius Birch
CONSTRUCTION Cast iron and wrought iron columns on screw piles, wrought iron bracing
YEAR OPENED 1866
ORIGINAL LENGTH 340m
PRESENT LENGTH n/a
FIRE 2003
STORM DAMAGE 1896, 1987, 1988, 2002, 2003, 2004
RESTORATION 1893, 1901, 1916, 1932, 1996

Brighton's second pier was known as the "Pier of the Realm", but it has been closed since 1975, awaiting renovation – though after two fires and several storms, little is left. It is one of only two Grade I listed piers in the UK, the other being Clevedon.



DUNOON

SPANS Firth of Clyde
DESIGN Unknown
CONSTRUCTION Timber piles braced in pairs by diagonal timbers; outer piles angled to resist force of berthing ships
YEAR OPENED (i) 1835; (ii) 1895
ORIGINAL LENGTH 122m
PRESENT LENGTH 122m
STORM DAMAGE 1845, 1848, 1849, 1867, 1888, 1896-8, 1991, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2002, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2012
RESTORATION 1937, 1980s

Fleets of steamers brought holidaymakers from Glasgow to Dunoon right up to the late 1960s and the pier is still visited by the last seagoing paddle steamer in the world, the PS Waverley.



PENARTH

SPANS Bristol Channel
DESIGN H F Edwards
CONSTRUCTION Cast iron piles, steel crossbracing, wooden deck, concrete landing stage
YEAR OPENED 1895
ORIGINAL LENGTH 200m
PRESENT LENGTH 200m
FIRE 1931
STORM DAMAGE None
RESTORATION 1994, 1996-8, 2007/8

One of the last Victorian piers in Wales, it originally acted as a jetty for the steamship trade across the Bristol Channel. Cruises on the White Funnel fleet, owned by the Bristol-based P & A Campbell Ltd, ceased in 1981. The trade dwindled, and the commercial shipping companies have now all disappeared.



WESTON-SUPER-MARE GRAND

SPANS Bristol Channel
DESIGN Eugenius Birch
CONSTRUCTION Cast iron columns, steel crossbracing, wooden deck (by P Munroe)
YEAR OPENED 1904
ORIGINAL LENGTH (i) 329m; (ii) 787m, 1906
PRESENT LENGTH 366m
FIRE 1930, 2008
STORM DAMAGE None
RESTORATION 1932/3, 1970, 1992/3, 2009

The Grand Pier has been damaged by fire twice, in 1930 and 2008. After the 2008 fire, which completely destroyed the pavilion, the pier was rebuilt to a design by architects Angus Meek at a cost of £39m. It was formally reopened by Princess Anne on July 25 2011.



SHANKLIN

SPANS English Channel
DESIGN F C Dixon & M N Ridley
CONSTRUCTION Wood and cast iron screw piles
YEAR OPENED 1890
ORIGINAL LENGTH 305m
PRESENT LENGTH n/a
FIRE 1918
STORM DAMAGE 1987
RESTORATION 1980s

Shanklin Pier was built in the late 1880s but was unsuccessful and was put up for sale in 1892. It was completely destroyed in the huge storm of 1987, with winds up to 108mph. Wreckage was strewn around the Isle of Wight's coast as far as Sandown, and people gathered in numbers to scavenge for whisky bottles and bits of amusement machines.



SALTBURN

SPANS North Sea
DESIGN John Anderson
CONSTRUCTION Cast iron trestles under a wooden deck
YEAR OPENED 1868
ORIGINAL LENGTH 458m
PRESENT LENGTH 206m
FIRE None
STORM DAMAGE 1874, 1875, 1900, 1953, 1961, 1971, 1973, 1974
RESTORATION 1877, 1930, 1952, 1978, 2000

On the Yorkshire coast, England's most northerly pier has withstood the North Sea for 145 years, despite frequent storm damage. The steep walk to the pier was thought to deter visitors, so it is served by one of the world's oldest water-powered funiculars, the Saltburn Cliff Lift.



FLEETWOOD VICTORIA

SPANS Irish Sea
DESIGN G T Lumb
CONSTRUCTION Iron columns, steel bracing and timber; concrete pier head
YEAR OPENED 1910
ORIGINAL LENGTH 150m
PRESENT LENGTH n/a
FIRE 1952
STORM DAMAGE None
RESTORATION 1930, 1938, 1946, 1953, 1972, 2003

Fleetwood Pier in Lancashire (also known as the Victoria Pier) was one of the shortest in the country, at 150m. It was built in 1910, at the end of the golden age of pier-building. Apart from the latecomer opened at Deal in 1957, this was the last pier to be built in Britain. It was destroyed by fire and demolished in 2008.





SWANAGE

SPANS Swanage Bay/
English Channel

DESIGN (i) Richard
St George Moore;

(ii) James Walton

CONSTRUCTION (i) Timber;
(ii) timber, reinforced
concrete

YEAR OPENED (i) 1859;

(ii) 1897

ORIGINAL LENGTH (i) 229m;
(ii) 196m

PRESENT LENGTH 196m

FIRE None

STORM DAMAGE 2013

RESTORATION 1928, 1997/8

The first wooden pier was built in 1859 and was used as a diving platform until the 1950s. The first pile for the new pier was driven in 1895. It was voted the National Piers Society "Pier of the Year" in 2012.

◀ United States, the normal arrangement was the boardwalk, arranged parallel to the shore, and accessible to all. The British model certainly allowed for gradations, too: a halfpenny to get on to the pier, a penny to sit down, sixpence to get into the dancehall at the end and so on. In Blackpool, the Central Pier (as it has been known since the Victoria Pier opened in 1893) was nicknamed the People's Pier, and was notably less genteel than its neighbours.

Margate can lay a claim to being the first: an existing pier was rebuilt in 1808 with a gallery where a band played, and a promenade, access to which was by a charge. The boom that piers enjoyed in the mid-19th century lasted well into the 20th. More than five million people visited Southend Pier in its 1949/50 season. Since then, their history has largely been one of gradual decay or sudden catastrophe, and the long (and very British) struggles of restoration societies and planning applications.

You could say that the old class divisions of the piers survive even in their decline. For there is an undeniable contrast between the genteel, even twee enthusiasm of the preservationists and the hard-nosed pier operators, with their cheap lager, gaudy signage and strident plastic weatherproofing. It is easy to use words like vulgar when thinking of what piers are now. But vulgar means of the people, and piers were built and operated to attract people in large numbers. The truth is that twee and brash are going to have to learn to get along with each other if the piers are to survive.

There are plenty of romanticised views of the whole genus of piers, but Simon Roberts is emphatically not adding to that catalogue. It is obvious from these pictures that Roberts has an affection for the piers and for the complex tidal pulls of history and economics upon which they perch. One critic wrote about *We English* that Roberts was a descendant of the great Victorian photographer Sir Benjamin Stone, and that's partly right. Stone liked to show old things being adapted into the context of contemporary society. He liked to photograph change and the reactions to change, and he liked to tell the truth in his own particular way. Simon Roberts has all of that.

These pictures may encompass some of the seaside things we know best through such photographers as Tom Wood or Martin Parr, but they put those scenes in a broad context where people live in a landscape and a country, not just a car park. They also derive something from that quite different tradition, of the wild skies and unquenchable nature that we find in Turner. These are cool careful pictures, alluding to a large number of variables and seeing what balances can be struck between them. At the same time, they're the warm record of a large number of trips to that many-sided and unfathomable place, the British seaside. **FT**

"Pierdom" by Simon Roberts is published in September (Dewi Lewis, £35). An exhibition of the photographs runs at Flowers, 82 Kingsland Road, London E2 from September 10 to October 12

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