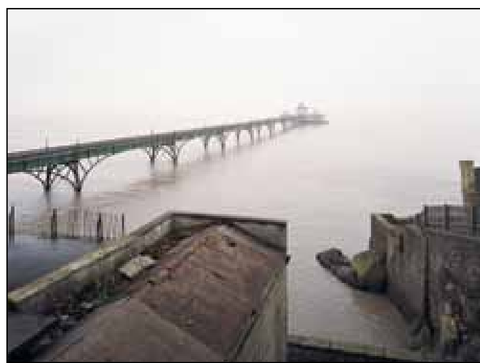
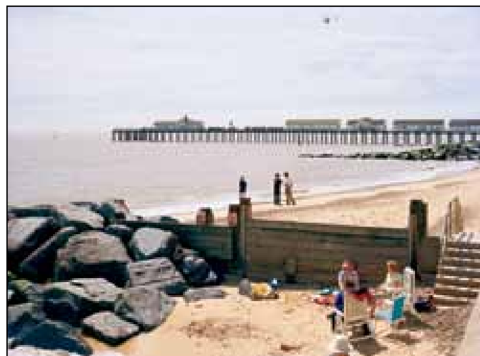

Clavendon, Severn Estuary (1869/253m)


Southwold, Sussex (1900/190m)

Great Yarmouth, Wellington (1853/212m)

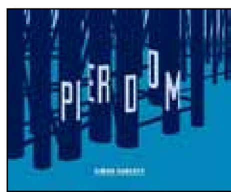
Worthing, English Channel (1862/300m)

HERITAGE

Pier pressures

Simon Roberts photographs show how the history of Britain's piers is interwoven with a history of class, says FRANCIS HODGSON

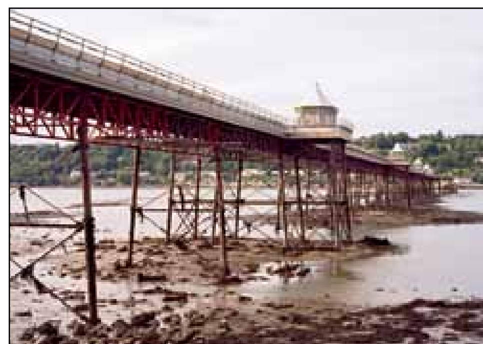
IT SEEMS that one reason piers spread so quickly in the 19th century is that the lengthwise shape allowed for the easy installation of turnstiles and pay kiosks at the landward end.



The pier could be — and usually was — reserved for those who could pay for the privilege. In the US, where pleasure piers are rarer, 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 onto the pier, a penny to sit down and sixpence to get into the dance hall at the end. In Blackpool, what has been known as the Central pier since the Victoria pier opened in 1893 was nicknamed the People's pier, and was notably less genteel than its neighbours.

Some commentators have seen in the success of the pier a descent from a much older recreation of the privileged, the sheltered gravel "walks" of the first resort towns, such as Bath, with their tiptoeing towards social mixing and their gradual replacement of the older gradations of society by gradations based to some extent on the individual's own assessment of his position.


Bangor Garth, north Wales (1896/458m)

There was always competition for new attractions but many of them, once proven to work in one location, spread quickly to many piers. A good example of this is the camera obscura, little dark rooms built onto a pier within which the view could be projected.

The one at Mumbles pier in Swansea at one time had a sign on its side which read "Camera Obscura, Everybody Pleased, Grand Coloured Scenery." Several survive today, including one recently restored on Eastbourne pier.

The list of attractions on piers would be very long but their contribution to light entertainment through theatre and music has been considerable. Funfair rides of various sorts were commonplace, and still are, and many piers still have railways that run along their length.

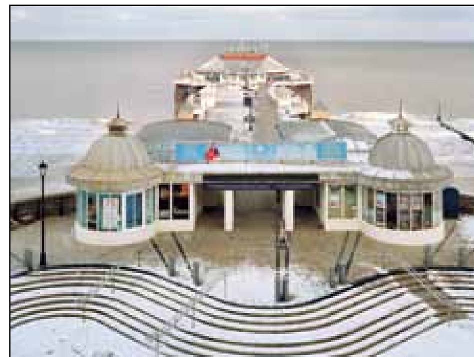
The piers acquired a common vocabulary of style quite recognisably their own. Gothic filigree lightness of ironwork is everywhere. A strong penchant for the Moorish is recognisable in a thousand details and its exoticism survives in the very word "kiosk," which derives through Turkish from Persian. St Anne's on Sea even has pavilions recognisably descended from Chinese models.

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.

Piers, like many other Victorian buildings, were largely made from prefabricated sections, brought to the site by the railways which would later bring the customers. At Morecambe, the components used to construct the pier had

Southport (1860/1,108m)


Cromer, North Sea (1901/153m)

originally been intended for the city of Valparaiso in Chile.

This combination of charm and engineering is central to the call of the restoration societies today. The patron saint of conservation, the Poet Laureate John Betjeman himself, was a considerable pier aficionado, and was involved in the creation of the still thriving National Piers Society.

A film clip preserved by the University of East Anglia follows a soft-hatted Betjeman taking a train from King's Lynn to Hunstanton and ends with him leaning on a sea wall with the pier behind him, inhaling a great gust of sea air, two seconds after having pronounced the obligatory "Bracing!"

As preservation movements go, the piers don't inspire quite the same zeal as others, such as the great volunteer-led revival of the canal system — one of the triumphs of the resistance movement against thoughtless development.

Some piers have been saved and others will be. Others are still likely to be condemned.

Along with various other forms of decline, a number of piers have been severed, usually by collisions with steamers, sometimes by storm. Clevedon pier, a lovely structure with longer spans than most, was severed during a no-doubt vigorous load-bearing test in 1970.

For a long time its seaward end stood as a miniature island kingdom of three or four graceful little buildings perched on stilts above the waves. Preservation groups did their magic on that one and it stands restored again.

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 — all worked up for Edwardian blazers, Birch and delicate cast-iron tracery — and the hard-nosed contemporary commercial operators of the piers, with their cheap lager, gaudy signage and strident plastic weatherproofing.

While it is easy to use words like vulgar when thinking of what the piers are now, vulgar means "of the people" and the piers were always built and operated to attract the people in large numbers.

The plain truth is that twee and brash are going to have to learn to get along with each other if the piers are to survive. A seaside attraction which attracts nobody doesn't really work.

■ *Pierdom by Simon Roberts is published by Dewi Lewis, price £35.*