

HASTINGS PIER CHARITY

HASTINGS PIER

A Pier for Hastings



An early image of Hastings Pier (HPC041.007)



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A Pier for Hastings

The first opened in 1814 at Ryde on the Isle of Wight. It was mainly intended as a combined promenade and jetty. It proved to be the first of about a hundred constructed over the next century. Early piers were usually of wood construction, but by the 1850s, when the great boom in pier building was just beginning, iron became the preferred material.

Innovative Victorian seaside entrepreneurs quickly realised they could add 'entertainments' and charge people for their 'flanner' in the bracing seaside air. Entertainments became diverse, ranging from traditional theatres and music to racy peep shows and pinball mechanisms. Steamer pleasure trips were also a popular use for many piers. Piers were simply a major part of the seaside pleasure experience.

One of the great Victorian pier designers was Eugenius Birch (1818-1884). Early in his career he was involved in building the Calcutta to Delhi of the East Indian Railway in India that clearly inspired the oriental designs that he often incorporated into his seaside structures. (Hastings Pier Pavilion, pre-1917). The pier at Margate in 1853 was the first of fourteen that Birch built in England and Wales: Aberystwyth, Blackpool (North), Bournemouth, Brighton West, Deal, Eastbourne, Hastings, Hornsea, Lytham, Margate, New Brighton, Plymouth, Scarborough and Weston-Super-Mare (Birnbeck)

From the late 1870s, itinerants equipped with tintype cameras descended on seaside towns and with the advent of dry plates and 'instantaneous' photography in the 1880s professional photographers could leave their studios and come down to the beach to find customers. Piers were initially landing stages but became somewhere for middle class pleasure seekers to "promenade" which was very popular at the time. Many piers began to appear around the country.

Steve Peak, author of A Pier Without a Peer, The History of Hastings Pier and Peerless Piers and his website <http://hastingschronicle.net>

Overview of the Early stages of Hastings Pier



A painting of Hastings by W. H. Burrows (HPC041.119)

1860

Two groups of speculators emerged wanting to build a small harbour off the Old Town. The local group, The Hastings Floating Harbour Association and the non-local group, led by Britain's most prolific and famous Pier builder Eugenius Birch and was The Pier and Harbour Company.

1861

A General Pier and Harbour Act was passed to “encourage and facilitate the formation, management and maintenance of Piers and harbours” – it gave groups of investors the power to obtain loans from the National Debt Commissioners.

The Pier and Harbour Company used the 1861 Act to obtain legal powers necessary to build a structure. For most of the 1860s there was a bitter fight between local interests and the non-local company over who would win the prize of building a Pier. Various construction plans emerged, including one to locate the Pier at the White Rock, this site had been chosen as it had “the best foundations could be found there” – no rock and a thick bed of clay.

Many local people believed a harbour would reduce the town's growing character as a fashionable resort plus councillors and traders wanted the profits to be made by their venture.

1867

Hastings Pier Act came into being, however, the newly renamed Pier Company (formally the Harbour and Pier Company) backed by Birch had the legal rights but lacked local support. While local interested parties had the all-important support, but were barred from the site.

1869

A compromise was reached Birch outlined his design, including how Hastings Pier would break new ground with the addition of an impressive saloon built at the end of the Pier. He also highlighted the ways in which the Pier would finance itself, including entrance fees, refreshments and shops. Richard Laidlaw & Son, of Glasgow were awarded the building contract at £23,250, they had experience in Pier building with Birch.

1872

The Pier instantly became Hastings leading tourist attraction but the path to its construction was considerably difficult with many false starts, principally caused by rivalries between conflicting plans and parties.

Building Work on Hastings Pier Commended



Hastings Pier from the East Hill (HPC041.001)

3am Saturday 18th December 1869, the first iron pile screwed into the sea bed. Eugenius Birch used this method of fitted screw blades to his iron piles, to create a deeper and far more resilient base support, as opposed to the then accepted wooden pile hammering to create the Pier. He had pioneered this method in the construction of his first Pier in Margate, a technique based on Alexander Mitchell's patent, involved screwing the cast-iron columns into the sea-bed, sometimes by means of a winch mounted on a barge. Birch was also a great believer in the corrosion-resistant qualities of cast-iron columns, and this confidence was fully vindicated by time.

Hastings Pier was designed to be 910ft long, held up by more than 200 columns, increasing to 350 in the 1920s. Each column was 12 inches in diameter. With a series of wrought iron trusses connecting the columns and finally timber joists with decking on top.

During construction, a submerged ancient forest was discovered, the Hastings News reported at the time “the huge trunks remaining embedded formed a great impediment in carrying on work”. One tree trunk weighted two tons and measured 24ft long and 3ft wide. Delays occurred during the build due to the unpredictability and treacherous nature of the elements, tides and coast line.

The Design of Hastings Pier



The original Pier with pavilion (HPC006.016)

Hastings Pier was the first British Pier to have a grand pavilion and the first to have it included as an integral part of the design. This would allow for highly profitable concerts, musicals and plays to be performed in the comfort of a purpose-built pavilion.

The shore end of the Pier was 130ft wide and narrowed to 45ft wide and carried on for 500ft, forming the main 'promenade deck'. At the shore end, there were two separate 'toll houses', both had onion shaped roofs and were octagonal shaped. The Pier had continuous seating on both sides. Towards the end of the Pier its size expanded to 195ft to accommodate the ornate pavilion built in an oriental style.

The pavilion could hold 2000 people and was the biggest room in the borough. It was 150ft long, 100ft wide and 30ft high. There was also a landing stage at the seaward end which would later be enlarged for big steamers to use.

Steve Peak, author of *A Pier Without a Peer*, *The History of Hastings Pier and Peerless Piers* and his website <http://hastingschronicle.net>



The toll booth of the original Victorian Pier (HPC068.028)

An In-Depth History of the Beginning of Hastings Pier by Steve Peak

The first seeds of the pier were sown in late 1860, when a group of local speculators, including several councillors, set up the Hastings Floating Harbour Association. This initially aimed to build a small harbour, consisting of a single floating arm chained to the seabed, off the Old Town. But in 1861 the local entrepreneurs turned this proposal into a much bigger plan: a two-arm 57acre harbour in front of the Old Town, which included using the harbour arms as public 'promenade piers', then becoming fashionable. At the same time, another company, the Pier and Harbour Company, came onto the scene from out of town, with similar plans for a harbour and pier.

This sudden surge of interest in building piers followed the passing of the 1861 General Pier and Harbour Act, which sought to "encourage and facilitate the formation, management and maintenance of piers and harbours" all-round the coast of Great Britain. Among other things, it gave the promoters the power to obtain loans from the National Debt Commissioners.

Until the construction of the railways throughout Britain in the 1840s, '50s and '60s, piers were primarily landing stages for boats bringing health-seeking visitors to the seaside towns. But the railways conveyed many middle-class pleasure seekers to the seaside who liked 'promenading' not only along seafronts, but also on piers, above the waves. From the late 1850s the new pleasure piers began appearing around the coast – simple structures carrying no buildings but making an excellent promenade.

For most of the 1860s there was a bitter fight between the Hastings establishment and the non-local company over which would win the prize of building a pier and/or a harbour. The winner on points was to be the out-of-town Pier and Harbour Company, led by Britain's most prolific and famous pier builder, Eugenius Birch. Born 1818, Birch was a doyen of pier engineers, and had been involved in railway and bridge works in his early life. His first pier was Margate, built 1853-6. By the time of his death in 1884 he had been the engineer of another 13 piers, including Brighton West, Eastbourne and Hastings.

Despite lack of support from Hastings Council, the Pier and Harbour Company obtained the legal powers necessary to build any such structure using the 1861 Act. But the project never came to fruition because of the default of the contractor, plus steadily growing local opposition. Many local people believed a harbour would reduce the town's growing character as a fashionable resort, plus councillors and traders wanted the profits to be made by their venture, not by a company run by people unconnected with the town.

Another problem for the Pier and Harbour Company was the requirement under the 1861 Act that the harbour should be built before the pier, and this all required massive funding.

In 1865 Birch and his company produced a new proposal: to separate their two projects, with the pier being at White Rock and the harbour remaining at the Old Town. They also drew up plans for a pier at Warrior Square, to be called the Alexandra Pier, but this was soon dropped.

The secretary of the Pier and Harbour Company was Mr WH Simpson, a solicitor who was involved in several other piers, including Brighton West, of which he said he was the sole promoter. He had lived in the Hastings area since 1839 and said he wanted to benefit the town, but he was seen by the local establishment as an outsider, acting for London business interests. By 1865 he was up against fierce opposition, and he said “there was a great hostility to the plan amongst some members of the Council, because these gentlemen [councillors] wished to carry out a plan of their own”.

The most vociferous of these councillors was leading local builder John Howell, an influential Liberal. In 1866 Howell was given a £25,000 contract by his fellow councillors to build major drainage facilities across the town, and he had his eyes on a similar sum for a pier. But he had no guarantee of laying his hands on that contract if the pier company was not controlled by his fellow local freemasons – and the Pier and Harbour Company was not. In addition, the 1861 Act gave Simpson’s company certain exclusive legal rights for building a pier in Hastings, putting serious constraints on any other scheme, including any backed by Hastings Council.

But the Hastings terms of the 1861 Act were due to expire in July 1867, so in December 1866, with the Pier and Harbour Company dormant, Simpson held a public meeting to promote his own new parliamentary bill. He was now proposing just a ‘pleasure pier’, without a harbour. He offered the setting up and running of the scheme to the people of the town, on condition he was employed as adviser. But Howell again condemned Simpson, talking of “promises made and broken” by him in previous years. Simpson, however, warned that only the old company and Hastings Council together could stop his bill becoming an act. In January 1867 Simpson asked a Hastings Council meeting to approve his new Birch-backed plan, with the pier being sited at White Rock.

The Council did not do so, and instead supported an alternative project for a White Rock pier put forward by another newly-formed local company. But this came to nothing, and as the Council had not opposed Simpson, his bill became the 1867 Hastings Pier Act. This brought the battle of Hastings Pier to a standstill. Both sides were well dug in, but neither had the weapons to defeat the other side. Simpson’s new company, called just the ‘Pier Company’, was backed by

Birch, and with national figures as directors had legal preference over the pier site, yet had little local support. Howell had lots of backing, but was legally barred from the site.

After two years' stalemate and a tight money market, a compromise was reached in the summer of 1869, whereby Simpson effectively abandoned his plans, agreeing to hand over his Pier Company to Howell and friends, on condition they kept Birch as engineer and paid all the costs of creating the act and the company.

Howell called a meeting of about 40 leading business people in the Castle Hotel, Wellington Square, on Friday 28 May 1869 to discuss the proposed deal with Simpson.

Howell first explained the background to the meeting and then Birch outlined his design ideas. Birch said he had chosen the White Rock site because "the best foundation could be found there" – no rocks, and a thick bed of clay. The working expenses of existing piers – eg, Blackpool, Scarborough and Brighton West – were met by income from refreshment stalls and toy shops on the piers. But Hastings would break new ground by having a large and handsome saloon built at the sea-end of its pier, with entrance by an extra fee. Birch thought investors could expect a dividend of eight to ten per cent. In a general discussion, the meeting made it clear that there had previously been considerable hostility to the out-of-town pier promoters. The meeting then passed a resolution adopting the project and a local committee was appointed. On 27 September 1869, the shareholders appointed a board of directors made up of local people: John Howell, William Scrivens the Mayor (as chairman), Thomas Brassey MP, George Clement and MC Gausden. Thomas Hide was secretary.

In June 1869 tenders were invited, and these were submitted to a special meeting of shareholders. Unfortunately for John Howell, the contract was awarded to Richard Laidlaw & Son, of Glasgow, one of the top three British firms specialising in piers. Birch had already employed them, including on Brighton West Pier. The contract price was £23,250, and it was sealed on 9 December 1869.

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