

# HASTINGS PIER CHARITY

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PIER

## Other UK Piers



Brighton Pier (HPC60.0010)



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## PIERS ACROSS THE UK

The seaside pier is a British invention. Indeed, it is almost exclusively an English invention. Six piers were built on the English coast before the first Welsh pier (at Beaumaris) opened. The few Scottish piers that exist came rather later. The idea subsequently spread to both France and the USA.

The pier-building era can be roughly divided into three phases. The first grew out of the idea, which became popular around the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that sea air and sea bathing were good for you. Gradually the seaside resort began to rival the fashionable inland spas such as Harrogate, Tunbridge Wells and Bath.

The problem was getting to the seaside towns. Travelling by stage coach was both uncomfortable and expensive. Travelling by sea was a much better option, especially after the introduction of passenger steamers around 1815. But many towns lacked proper harbours, so that getting ashore involved transferring with your luggage to a smaller boat or even riding on the back of a burly porter.

The answer was a pier which stretched far enough out to sea to enable a steamer to moor beside it. The first was built in 1814 at Ryde on the Isle of Wight to accommodate the ferries from Portsmouth. The famous Chain Pier at Brighton followed in 1822/3, along with a long wooden landing stage called Jarvis's Jetty in Margate in 1824 (replaced in 1855). Then came piers at Southend, Walton-on-the-Naze and Herne Bay in the early 1830s. All the piers were built predominantly as landing stages for steamers.

By the 1840s and 1850s, the spread of railways began to undermine the role of the steamer as a means of transport (though they were to remain popular for pleasure trips). This led to the second phase of pier building – the emergence of the pleasure pier. This was based on the idea that promenading on a pier over the waves was both pleasurable and fashionable. The new pier at Margate and the Wellington Pier at Great Yarmouth (1853/4) both included some pleasure elements but their main purpose was still to serve as a landing stage. It's generally agreed that the first true pleasure pier was opened in Southport in 1860. It was an immediate success and it was quickly copied.

Through the 1860s, another 20 pleasure piers were built around the country, including such landmarks as Brighton's West Pier, Blackpool North pier and Eastbourne pier. Then another change took place which ushered in the third phase of pier building.

This change was symbolized by the 1871 Bank Holiday Act, which guaranteed all workers certain days off. It reflected the growing leisure time (and money) being enjoyed by working people. And it introduced the idea of the day trip to the seaside.

These working people were not going to the seaside for the good of their health. They were going to have fun. They wanted entertainment. In 1872 Hastings opened the first purpose-built entertainment pier. As well as a lengthy promenade, it featured at the seaward end an elegant pavilion which could seat 2000 people. Instead of a windy bandstand exposed to the elements, visitors could enjoy concerts, music hall and plays in comfort.

The idea quickly caught on. Blackpool North added a pavilion in 1874, followed over the next few years by Worthing, Eastbourne, Brighton West and many of the numerous new pleasure piers that popped up all around the country (everywhere, indeed, except for Scotland).

For the last three decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup>, the country appeared to be gripped by pier mania. By 1910, there were over 100 piers dotted around the country. One wag remarked that Britain now looked like a porcupine, with piers sticking out in all directions instead of sticks.

Then, in 1910, the pier building era came to an abrupt halt. Only one completely new pier has been constructed since then – a reinforced concrete affair at Deal in Kent built in 1957 to replace a pier demolished during World War II.

The reason was probably quite simple. The market was saturated. Every town that wanted a pier probably had one by this time. Also, many pier owners were finding it difficult to get a return on their investment. Maintenance costs were high and income often unpredictable – a familiar picture to this day.



## **EUGENIUS BIRCH: A one-off?**

Eugenius Birch (1818-84), the man who built Hastings Pier, was the undisputed doyen of pier engineers. In the course of his career he designed no less than 14. He began with the new pier at Margate in 1853. This was followed by two of the most famous piers ever built, Blackpool North and Brighton West. Over the next 20 years he built Deal, Aberystwyth, Lytham, Eastbourne, Scarborough, New Brighton, Weston-Super-Mare, Bournemouth, Hornsea and, in the year of his death, Plymouth.



Brighton Pier (*Images from Richard T Riding Collection*) HPC60.10

Just as the name Brunel was synonymous with bridges and Locke with railways, Birch was forever associated with piers. This was despite the fact that he built many other things. They included the West Surrey waterworks, the Devon and Somerset Railway, Exmouth Docks, Ilfracombe Harbour and aquariums in both Scarborough and Brighton.

There were other well-known pier engineers. Joseph William Wilson designed four, including Bognor and Hunstanton. James Brunlees built the first pleasure pier at Southport, then over time followed this with Rhyl, Llandudnow and Southend. Later in the pier-building era John James Webster designed piers at Dover, Bangor and Minehead. There were many others, but none could rival the achievements of Eugenius Birch.



## A PIER AESTHETIC?



The Victorian Pier pavilion HPC006.036

Most of the early landing stage piers were completely flat structures with no buildings on them, apart from occasionally a toll booth. And exception was the famous Brighton Chain Pier, built in 1822/3. It was one of only two suspension piers ever built.

The Pier's deck hung from chains suspended between four cast iron towers built on piles driven into the sea. These towers dominated the pier's appearance. They were built in Egyptian style, said to reflect the pylon gateways of Karnak. It set a fashion for orientally influenced pier design which was to last the rest of the century.

The first pier to have substantial buildings on it was Brighton West, which was built between 1863 and 1866. It was designed by none other than Eugenius Birch. As he was in Brighton, he turned for inspiration to the town's most striking monument, the Brighton Pavilion.

The Pavilion was built for George, Prince of Wales, who subsequently became Prince Regent and later George IV. It was built in the Indo-Saracenic or Indo-Muslim style popular in India throughout the nineteenth century. Birch's design included bench seating on both sides along the length of the pier, with standard lamps placed at intervals. Both

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the seats and the lamps have features which are almost direct copies of elements in the Pavilion.

Birch placed two rectangular kiosks at the shore end of the pier, two octagonal ones a third of the way along and four further octagonal cabins at the sea end. All of them had miniature minarets on top which reflect the roof of the Royal Pavilion.

Brighton's West Pier, which opened in October 1866, was hugely influential. Almost all new piers built during the heyday of "Pier mania" reflected its oriental style. Certainly, Birch's design for the pioneering pavilion on Hastings Pier echoed its oriental style.

There were occasional exceptions. Skegness Pier, opened in 1881, adopted a rather curious Gothic style which some have described as more suitable for a graveyard than a pier. But in the main, Birch's oriental look, inspired by Brighton Pavilion, established the archetypal pier aesthetic.

## Margate Pier



Margate Pier opened in 1855, the first designed by Eugenius Birch. It was built as a landing pier, but from the start incorporated some leisure elements. It was extended in 1875/8, to include the pavilion in the picture. It was destroyed in a storm in 1978. (*Images from Richard T Riding Collection*) HPC060.001

## Great Yarmouth Pier



The original Great Yarmouth Pier, the Wellington, was opened in 1854 as a landing stage, but it always included leisure amusements. It was substantially reconstructed in 1900-3, when the distinctive art deco pavilion in the picture was built. (*Images from Richard T Riding Collection*) HPC060.002



## Southport Pier



Southport Pier is widely recognized as the first true leisure pier. It opened in 1860 and from the start people happily paid money to stroll above the waves. This picture is from around 1880 and shows the pavilion which had appeared by then on the land beside the pier entrance. (*Richard T Riding Collection*) HPC060.004

## Ryde Pier

Ryde was the UK's first seaside pier, built in 1814 to provide a landing stage for ferries from Portsmouth. By 1833, it stretched 622m (2,250 ft) out into the sea. All piers built before 1860 were designed primarily as landing stages.

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