

# HASTINGS PIER CHARITY

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## Historical Overview of Hastings



Hastings Pier, reopened in 2016, HPC014.034



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[www.hastingspier.org.uk](http://www.hastingspier.org.uk)

## Historical Overview of Hastings by Decade

### Pre-Victorian/1872

Hastings was already a popular seaside resort in the late 18th century, and King George III's physician, Dr Baillie, recommended it to his patients. The Pigot & Co Directory for 1840 commented that Hastings had "the most excellent accommodations for sea bathing and that the recreations were in every respect worthy of this fashionable town".

### Victorian Era

"Hastings & St Leonards Pier. This noble structure, which extends 900 feet from the parade, was opened on the 5<sup>th</sup> August, 1872, with great ceremony by Earl Granville, K.G., Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports. The Pier is 40 feet wide. At the head or southern end, stands the pavilion, capable of seating nearly 1500 persons. A fine band plays three times daily. During the summer months, vocal and instrumental concerts are given daily, and in the winter months' variety entertainments every evening. It was built by Messrs. Laidlaw & Sons, under the Superintendence of the Engineer, Mr. Birch. Secretary, Mr. S. T. Weston, 3, Havelock Road, Hastings. Pier Master Mr. W.C. Lenton."

*From the Hastings & St Leonards Advertiser 1887*

Starting in the 1840s, the new railway system enabled thousands of ordinary people to reach the seaside easily. Newly accessible resort towns sprang up along Britain's coastline. In 1820, it took six hours to travel from London to the coast, but by 1862 only two hours. Factory workers and clerks escaped smokey cities to enjoy the fresh sea air.

During the 19th century, industry made the air in cities very polluted. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries only the affluent could afford to visit the seaside, but the coming of the railways made the coast far more accessible to all, and many people visited the sea for health reasons.



Bathing machines on Hastings beach around 1890 (HPC041.059)

## Edwardian

By the end of the Edwardian era holidaymakers were beginning to want more than promenading and theatrical entertainments, and the popularity of the Pier was beginning to flag. New attractions were added: in 1910 a bowling alley, a shooting gallery and amusements, and in 1911 the Joy Wheel at the entrance to the Pier.

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## WWI

During WWI regulations greatly restricted the amount of street lighting allowed on the seafront. Concert organisers arranged to have electric torches placed under the seats in the pavilion so that people could find their way off the Pier at the end of the entertainment. In the winter the interior of the Pier pavilion was transformed into a drawing room, with curtains, flowers, settees, easy chairs and small tables. The quality and variety of the programme had to be top class in order to attract people down to the end of the Pier on cold winter nights.



Hastings & St Leonards Observer, Saturday 16 January 1915  
“On Wednesday evening another popular concert was given. Mr. Ernest J Roberts conducting. All the items were of a popular character. A member of the 25<sup>th</sup> London Territorials, stationed at Bexhill, Cyclist Bob Butler, a well-known London comedian, sang ‘Sister Susie Sewing Shirts for Soldiers’ and “Water Scenes”, both of which were vociferously encored. A charming mezz-soprano, Miss Katie Lidbetter, sang “Your King and Country Want You” and “The Women Who Stay At Home”, being encored for both.

## 1920s

Sidney Little, appointed Borough Engineer in 1926, described Hastings as a "beauty-queen in decrepitude" and saw that to remain a popular seaside resort it needed modernising. In 1927, the town opened White Rock Gardens, and in 1928 slums were cleared in the Old Town. In 1929, a scheme was approved to join up Carlisle Parade (which ended at Queens Hotel) with Marine Parade to the east and to build the worlds first underground car park.

In the 1920s, fashion reflected the profound social changes that followed the Great War. The silhouette of women changed from the restrictive hourglass of corsetry to the freedom of short, waistless dresses. The children of the rich embraced flapper culture and embarked on a drug-and-alcohol-fuelled hedonistic rebellion, but for the poor life remained hard, and in 1923 hunger marchers arrived in Hastings.



A group of bathers in front of the Pier, 1928 (HPC004.029)

## 1930s

In the 1930s the Pier reached the height of its popularity and was brilliantly lit at night, with dancing, concerts, speedboat trips and mass swimming events, particularly night bathing, when the sea was floodlit from the Pier.

In the 1930s the pier reached the height of its popularity, with dancing every night, daytime concerts, speedboat trips and mass swimming events, particularly bathing at night. Bands were hired for the season and gave twice-daily concerts and dances in the evening. Each band member added their own flourish to the performance, whether virtuosity with a variety of instruments, a comic turn, or singing songs.



1930s Hastings a vibrant seaside resort. (HPC067.023)

“The Hastings and Palace Piers afford various amusements to suit all weathers. The Palace Pier has been largely reconstructed and modernised. It is brilliantly illuminated from end to end. It has a spacious pavilion and specialises in catering for parties up to one thousand. The Hastings Pier Pavilion is used nightly for dancing in the summer. The floor can accommodate over 500 couples. The cosy and charming theatre on the Hastings Pier is now the home of Repertory. A clever and versatile company, viz., the Court Players, is in permanent residence (except during the “high” season”), and throughout nine months of the year present the most successful plays. One of the most famous dance orchestras in the country performs daily in the deck bandstand during the summer.” (c. 1935)

In 1932 Hastings pier boasted 60,000 visitors for the summer bank holiday and three-quarter of a million visitors in the year. Harry Green’s dance band attracted up to 100 dancers nightly on the maple sprung floor, and the repertory theatre played to capacity audiences even in the depth of winter. Other attractions included amusement arcades, bars, shops, kiosks, dodgems, skittles and shooting ranges. The Pier had become the town’s entertainment centre.  
(Chris Cornish The Times 28/4/1990)

In the 1930s, Borough Engineer Sidney Little's improvements gave a major facelift to Hastings seafront. In 1931, the seafront was extended to join Marine Parade and White Rock, with an underground car park underneath. In 1934 Bottle Alley was opened, and in 1936 more underground car parks were opened and the foundation stone was laid for Marine Court.

In the years after the First World War music hall declined and Pierrot troupes and ‘concert parties’ became popular seaside entertainments. In the late 1920s and 1930s the Hastings and St Leonard's seafront was revamped, and the town entered its golden era. A souvenir programme from the early 1930s for the band Alan Green with his Boys has a list of music that patrons could request, including foxtrots, waltzes, tangos and rumbas. Hastings Pier had a bookshop, automatic games and amusements and a shooting range, and offered Scientific Palmistry by Palmo, angling, dancing, concert parties, and a repertoire of plays by Harry Hanson’s Court Players, who were a regular feature on the Pier from 1932.

## **WWII**

In 1940 Hastings was included in the defence area on alert against Nazi invasion. No one could enter except on business, and foreigners were forced to move inland at least twenty miles from the coast. The St Clements caves were used as an air raid shelter, hospital and school. Barbed wire, gun emplacements and tank traps appeared along the seafront, as well as oil pipes for a flame defence system. Access to the beach was forbidden except to fishermen who had special permits to use a guarded gateway at Rock-a-Nore. In June twelve Hastings boats were called to Dover to assist in evacuation of the British troops from Dunkirk.

During WWII Hastings seafront became a military zone, and in 1943 25 yards were removed from the centre of the Pier in case of an enemy landing. When the Pier finally re-opened in 1947 wartime austerity was still in effect.

## **Post-WWII (1945-1949)**

After the Second World War, Hastings Pier reopened in frugal times. Even so, the Hastings & St Leonard's 'What's On' guide for July 1947 lists Hector Davies & his broadcasting band giving concerts in the pavilion in the mornings and afternoons, and in the evening, there was dancing to the band.

## **1950s**

In the 1950s, Hastings Council promoted the town as a seaside resort, making a promotional film in bright Technicolor and producing colourful leaflets, all aimed at convincing potential holidaymakers that the town offered a glamorous alternative to what were still straitened post-war circumstances.

1950s style was influenced by Hollywood glamour, mass-production and the introduction of easy-care fabrics. For women, the New Look continued to dominate. Dresses had pencil or full skirts in plain fabrics or floral prints. Women wore fashions made famous by Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell, Brigitte Bardot and Audrey Hepburn. Men's fashion still revolved around the suit but was becoming less rigid. Teenagers began to appear as a separate group, with fashions influenced by Elvis Presley and American stars, who wore leather jackets and jeans. Teddy boys in



tight trousers, long jackets with velvet trim and thick-soled 'brothel creepers' also appeared.

In the 1950s there were regular fashion competitions on Hastings Pier. Some costumes still reflected the fashions of the previous decade, while others, with full skirts, were influenced by Dior's New Look, which replaced post-war austerity.

### **1950s/1960s**

In the 1950s and 1960s Hastings Pier was still a popular going concern. The Pier adapted to the times by reinventing itself as an important venue for rock concerts by bands such as The Who and Jimi Hendrix.



The Triodome on the Pier 1966 (HPC007.001)

### **1960s**

From the early 1960s the Pier ballroom enjoyed a resurgence as a musical venue for young people, where famous bands such as the Rolling Stones, The Who, Tom Jones and Jimi Hendrix performed. The ballroom may have lacked atmosphere but it did have a capacity of 1,500, and it is widely alleged that 2,000 or more-people attended some of the events. The fact that the ballroom was at the far end of the pier meant that noisy, boisterous teenagers would not bother anyone.

Growing affluence in the 1960s meant that foreign holidays became more affordable, and many British seaside resorts went into decline. St Leonard's Bathing Pool had closed in the late 1950s, but Hastings Pier reinvented itself as an important music venue, attracting major bands like The Who and Jimi Hendrix.



## **1970s**

In the 1970s the Pier remained an important and profitable venue for rock concerts. It also still offered a theatre, concert hall, bingo, amusement arcades, angling facilities, bars, a speedboat, steamer trips, kiosks, refreshment rooms and even a zoo. This closed in late 1974, and a charity bought some of the animals, including ten hens and 20 rats. In 1976, the Department of the Environment listed the Pier as a Grade II building of special historic and architectural interest.

At the beginning of the 1970s, fashion for women was a continuation of the 1960s' hippie look, with a distinct ethnic flavour and extremely bright colours. Popular early-1970s' fashions for women included tie-dyed shirts, Mexican peasant blouses, ponchos, capes, military surplus clothing, bell-bottoms, frayed jeans, midi skirts, and ankle-length maxi dresses. Boots were the height of fashion. As the 1970s progressed, the hippie look gave way to trends such as glam rock, disco and punk, counterbalanced for some by the nostalgic style of Laura Ashley. By the late 1970s sports clothing as everyday wear had arrived.

Fashion for men in the 1970s was more flamboyant than for decades previously. In the early 1970s, platform shoes and bell bottom trousers were staples, and wide-collar shirts in loud, patterned materials worn with three-piece disco suits like John Travolta in 'Saturday Night Fever'. Leisure suits and track suits also featured, although the release of the film Quadrophenia in 1978 sparked a bit of a Mod revival.

## **1980s**

In the 1980s the Pier was no longer making money and its 100-year-old structure was in need of serious repair. In 1983 the Pier Company, who had owned it since 1872, sold it to Hamberglow Ltd, a company formed by two of the Pier's largest concessionaires. The new owners discontinued the yearly inspections of the Pier's substructure as they struggled to make the Pier a going concern. The Pier was damaged in the 1987 hurricane, and in 1989 the owners announced that they had been in the red for the two previous years.

## 1990s

The Pier Preservation Society was started in 1990 with the aim of restoring the art deco façade, but failed to raise any public money because the Pier was privately owned. In 1993 storms caused £100,000 damage and in 1996 the Pier was put up for sale. After a storm in October 1999 the Pier was no longer safe for the public and closed suddenly when the owners went into voluntary liquidation, with debts of £160,000. The closure highlighted the poor state of the Pier's below-deck structure, which Hastings Council officers estimated would cost upwards of £6 million to restore.



Hastings Pier in the 1990s. (HPC089.009)

## 2000s

In 2000, the Pier was sold to Ian Stuart, a wealthy speculator who immediately set about making changes to the listed structure without permission. The Pier re-opened in 2001 but despite major investment nothing was done to the decaying substructure. In 2005 the Council received an engineer's report showing that the Pier needed repair work of up to £1.2 million. The following year the Pier was found to be so unsafe that the Council imposed a closure order on the Pier beyond the apron. As the Council continued to try to negotiate with Ravenclaw the people of Hastings began to fear that the Pier would be left to rot.

At a public meeting in 2007 a campaigning group called Friends of Hastings Pier was set up. After various legal proceedings against Ravenclaw, where they failed to turn up, the pier was effectively abandoned.



Work begins on the regeneration of Hasting Pier 2015. (HPC100.019)

## **2010s**

The Hastings Pier & White Rock Trust submitted an application for £8.75m to the Heritage Lottery at the end of November 2010 to restore the substructure of the Pier and renovate the remaining building. In May 2011, the Heritage Lottery awarded £8.75m grant, to be released in stages contingent on a business plan, developing a heritage learning and activities programme, and raising £1m in matching funds. Meanwhile Hastings Borough Council was to proceed with the Compulsory Purchase Order.

In August 2013, a Compulsory Purchase Order was enacted and the pier was returned to local ownership, which enabled the £14m renovation project to go forward. Work was completed in late 2016 and the Pier re-opened in May 2016.

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