

# HASTINGS PIER CHARITY

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## A History of Pleasure Cruises from Hastings Pier



The Waverley docking at Hastings Pier in the 1980s (HPC043.016).  
Photograph by Michael Hoad.



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## **Pleasure Cruises from Hastings Pier**

### **Steamships through the first 40 Years of the Pier**

Hastings Pier was built in 1872 as a place to promenade, with a Moorish Pavilion for musical entertainment and theatre. But the Pier was also built with a landing stage at the seaward end, which, at 200 feet long by eight feet wide, was suitable for small pleasure steamers and local craft such as rowboats and yachts. On the opening day of the Pier, the Rapid, a small steamer based at Eastbourne, was to have used the landing stage to take passengers on trips, but was prevented by bad weather. The Rapid first brought passengers to Hastings on Tuesday 8 July 1873, the first known occasion when such steamers used Hastings Pier. Later that day 80 people were taken on a return trip to Eastbourne and over the following summer weeks the Rapid ran a daily service between Eastbourne and Hastings.

Over the following years it became increasingly popular and fashionable for piers all round the British coast to provide pleasure cruises using large paddle steamers. Unlike the diminutive Rapid, these craft could carry hundreds of people in comfortable conditions and offered full food and drink services. They were especially suited to operate from piers because they were driven by rotating paddlewheels on either side of the hull and therefore needed a shallower draught than screw-propelled vessels, and could come closer inshore. However, to accommodate them the piers had to have big, strong and, ideally, separate landing stages, capable of bearing up to heavy buffeting by the vessels in rough weather. Many piers, including Hastings, were built before their potential usage by these substantial craft was envisaged, so the original stages had to be improved or replaced.

In September 1884, two local men, Richard Collard and Cllr William Paine, tested the potential demand for a Hastings-based large passenger steamer. They chartered a well-known Ramsgate steamboat, the Queen of Thanet, for three weeks, and a new era began on the 2nd September when the 142 feet long, 159 tonne steamer became the first large passenger vessel to work regularly from Hastings Pier. The Queen of Thanet's inaugural trip on that day should have been to Boulogne and back, but bad weather confined the boat to excursions along the English coast. The Queen finally made it to Boulogne on Saturday 6 September,

taking just five hours, but more gales prevented it from returning to Hastings before the following Tuesday.

After more trips along the coast, plus another to Boulogne, the Queen of Thanet's charter ended on 21 September 1884. The test had been a great success, attracting much public interest and 2,938 passengers, despite the poor weather and the unfavourable condition of the pier's landing stage. A few weeks later, Paine and Collard met with the Mayor of Hastings, Cllr. Edwin Bradnam, to discuss setting up a steamboat service. The trio, led by Paine, recruited other local businessmen and in early February 1885 established the Hastings and St Leonards Passenger Steamship Co. Ltd. They quickly sold sufficient £10 shares to buy the 192 feet long iron paddle steamer Carrick Castle for £7,350. The Carrick Castle was built in 1870 and was licensed to carry up to 360 passengers. She began regular trips from Hastings Pier on Monday 18 May 1885.

In one year, between September 1888 and August 1889, 732,000 people passed through the tollgates of Hastings Pier. Steamboat excursions grew ever more popular, resulting in more boats using a landing stage built for just one vessel. Therefore, in early 1889 the Pier Company decided to extend the landing stage to provide enough mooring space for four vessels. Substantial separate staging was built to form a cap at the seaward end of the pier which connected to the eastern stage and extended it by 285 feet. This £4,800 project took ten months and was completed in April 1890.

The Hastings and St Leonards Passenger Steamship Company owned and chartered many steamers, among them the *Carrick Castle* from 1885–1887, the 160 foot *Lady Brassey* from 1888–1889 (built for Hastings, it was propeller-driven, and proved to be impractical), the 121 foot *Seagull* from 1891–1895, the 208 foot *Alexandra* from 1895–1904, the 200 feet *Britannia* from 1897–1904, and the 153 feet *Cynthia* from 1905–1907. In September 1896 the skipper of another steamer, the *Bonnie Princess*, was fined for taking 901 passengers on a trip to Dungeness when he was not allowed to carry more than 754.



The Lady Brassey (HPC006.128)

### **The Last Decades of the Steamships**

In the Edwardian years, P&A Campbell came to dominate the steamer trade. The company was named for the brothers Peter and Alexander Campbell, whose father had started a successful steamer business on the Clyde. In 1889 the brothers moved their base to the Bristol Channel area because of increasing competition, and soon became the major pleasure steamer operator in the South West. They then turned their attention to the South Coast, and in 1902 took over the steamers of the Brighton, Worthing and South Coast Steamboat Company. Within a few years they were dominating the South Coast trade, at the expense of local companies. They bought the Hastings and St Leonards Steamship Company's big steamer, *Britannia*, which became P&A Campbell's flagship.





P. S. Devonian in the 1920s (HPC061.010).

The Edwardian years were good for the paddle steamer business. However, the boom ended abruptly with the outbreak of the First World War, when the Admiralty requisitioned most pleasure steamers, including the 13 Campbell vessels, principally for minesweeping. After the war, P&A Campbell resumed its peacetime services, and many of its vessels paid regular calls to Hastings Pier in the 1920s and 1930s, including the *Brighton Belle*, *Brighton Queen*, *Bristol Queen*, *Devonia*, and *Westward Ho!*

Although the pleasure steamer business was in slow decline, in the week before the outbreak of war on 3 September 1939, P&A Campbell ran daily trips from its office on the Pier to Boulogne, Dungeness, Brighton, Eastbourne, and Shanklin. With the start of the Second World War the Admiralty immediately requisitioned the entire Campbell fleet of 11 vessels, and only four of those paddle steamers survived to sail again after 1945. However, with the delivery of three new steamers, the company enjoyed a number of profitable seasons during the early post-war years.

On Whit Saturday, 24 May 1947, the main part of the Pier re-opened. It had taken two years since the end of the war to replace the two sections of the pier that had been cut away to stop the Germans using it as a landing stage. The first steamer to visit Hastings Pier after the war was the P&A Campbell paddle steamer *Glen Gower*, on a trip from Brighton.

In the summers of 1947 and 1948 there were regular trips from Hastings Pier on the 270ft screw steamer *Empress Queen*, built 1940, and in 1948 on the 230ft paddle steamer *Britannia*, built 1896. But this Indian summer soon ended, and in the early 1950s P&A Campbell began its long journey to the graveyard, due to changing public interest, rising costs, management failures, a series of bad summers, and the increasing trend towards private motoring. Piers in the eastern English Channel, such as Hastings, were also badly hit by new post-war landing regulations, which made trips to France very difficult.

P&A Campbell did not run any Sussex services in 1951, but the steamers were so badly missed that the Hastings Pier Company managed to negotiate a return in 1952. The 240ft 1947-built paddle steamer *Cardiff Queen* ran a regular service through the height of the 1952 summer season, its last trip being to Shanklin on the Isle of Wight on 16 September.

In 1956 P&A Campbell managed to set up cross-Channel 'no passport' trips from Brighton via Hastings to Boulogne, using checking facilities set up on the pier. The *Glen Gower's* first trip was on 20 May and the service ran through the summer season, but the weather was very bad, causing many cancellations, and it was not repeated in 1957.

In the 1957 summer season the 144ft motor vessel *Crested Eagle* was tried along the South Coast, making short trips from Hastings Pier. However, it was unsuccessful, and from then on P&A Campbell effectively withdrew from the South Coast until 1969.

Various other entrepreneurs ran some occasional pleasure vessel trips from Hastings Pier in the 1960s. These included the small (153ft) 1927-built paddle steamer *Sussex Queen* in August 1960, but this was an unsuccessful one-year venture and she was scrapped in 1962.

In August 1960 and the summer of 1961 a Hastings fishing boat, the 29ft *Our Lady* RX59, gave hour-long trips from Hastings Pier for ten shillings. The owner and skipper, Mr Manning Whiley, gave a demonstration of how to catch fish in a trawl, but these trips were not financially viable in the long term as Mr Whiley had to pay the wages of two crewmen, and the boat could not take many passengers. The boat, built in Whitstable in 1957, was re-registered as RX16, and is now laid-up on the fishermen's beach next to the harbour.

In 1962, Torbay Steamers ran the 195ft, 388-ton paddle steamer *Princess Elizabeth* for one season. The following year, 1963, England's oldest paddle steamer, the 175ft, 257-ton *Consul*, built in 1896, ran some services from 26 July.

P&A Campbell made a brief attempted return to Hastings in 1969, using the motor vessel *Queen of the Isles* on a series of excursions, including fortnightly day-trips to Boulogne from June to September. As a prelude to this Campbell comeback, the Pier Company repaired the landing stage in the winter of 1967–1968. The 143ft, 214-ton *Queen of the Isles* was Dutch-built, with high bows and a crew of 15. Her excursion on 11 September 1969 was the last Cross-Channel trip from Hastings Pier by any passenger-carrying vessel.

P&A Campbell disposed of its last paddle steamer in 1968 and managed to survive as a company until 1980. For several years it ran cross-Channel trips that involved travelling by coach from Hastings Pier to a ferry port.

The very last local excursions from Hastings Pier were made by the famous paddle steamer *Waverley*. The 240ft, 693 ton *Waverley* was built in 1946, and today is the last sea-going passenger-carrying paddle steamer in the world. Since 1972 she has been owned and run by the Paddle Steamer Preservation Society.

The *Waverley* made successful trips from Hastings Pier in April and May 1978 and in May 1980, but an attempt to have a three-day series of excursions from 26–28 April 1981 was ruined by bad weather. Strong winds and high seas forced the scheme to be abandoned, despite several brave but unsuccessful attempts by the *Waverley* to come alongside the landing stage. It was then that it became clear that the

landing stages were in a dangerous state because of lack of maintenance.



The Waverley off Hastings Pier (HPC043.033)  
Photograph by Michael Hoad.

In February 1993, Captain Neil of the *Waverley* visited the pier and said he thought that enough of the landing stage could be repaired to make it possible for him to make three or four annual trips from the Pier. However, the company directors believed the cost of the repairs would be more than the income from those trips, so the offer was turned down.

## HOVERCRAFT

Townsend Car Ferries, in association with P&A Campbell Ltd., were quick to seize the opportunity to use hovercrafts on cross-Channel operations from Dover. However, they only lasted three months due to bad weather and technical difficulties. Thereafter, operations were limited to two summer seasons of joy rides from beaches along the



South Coast. For a brief moment in the 1960s a futuristic hovercraft took people on joy rides from Hastings beach.



A hovercraft on Hastings beach in 1967 (HPC014.008).

**Sources:**

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

Hastings Museum and Art Gallery <http://www.hmag.org.uk>

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