

# HASTINGS PIER CHARITY

HASTINGS  
PIER

Opening Day, 5<sup>th</sup> August 1872



Opening day on Hastings Pier (HPC068.039)



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The opening of Hastings Pier was an important development in the history of Hastings as a coastal resort, turning the town into a major attraction for Londoners wanting a good day out beside the sea. It took place on August Bank Holiday Monday in 1872. The weather on the day was dreadful, and was particularly disappointing as the preceding weeks had been full of warm sunny days. It started raining at 10am and developed into a downpour, which continued for the rest of the day. All the carefully planned proceedings of the day were dampened as a result.

The Pier was officially opened by Earl Granville, in his capacity as Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports. He was a distinguished Liberal politician, a great friend of Gladstone, and Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. Granville and his wife travelled down from London in a special excursion train, and were met at the station by Thomas Brassey, MP for Hastings and member of the Pier Board of Directors, the Mayor, and officials of the Corporation. The local coastguard provided a guard of honour, and a carriage procession led by the band of the Royal Marine Artillery made its way through streets thronged with crowds to the Queens Hotel, where Earl Granville was received by the Directors of the Pier Company, and then on to the Pier, where local military volunteers and the fire brigade provided a guard of honour. At this point the weather was so bad that Lady Granville, Lady Bennett, and Mrs. Brassey were conveyed down to the Pavilion in bath chairs, "while along the way gentlemen anxiously crowded and competed for the honor of protecting them from the rain by holding umbrellas over their heads." At the end of the Pier a twenty-one-gun salute was fired as Earl Granville officially declared it open, answered by another from Thomas Brassey's yacht, which was anchored nearby.

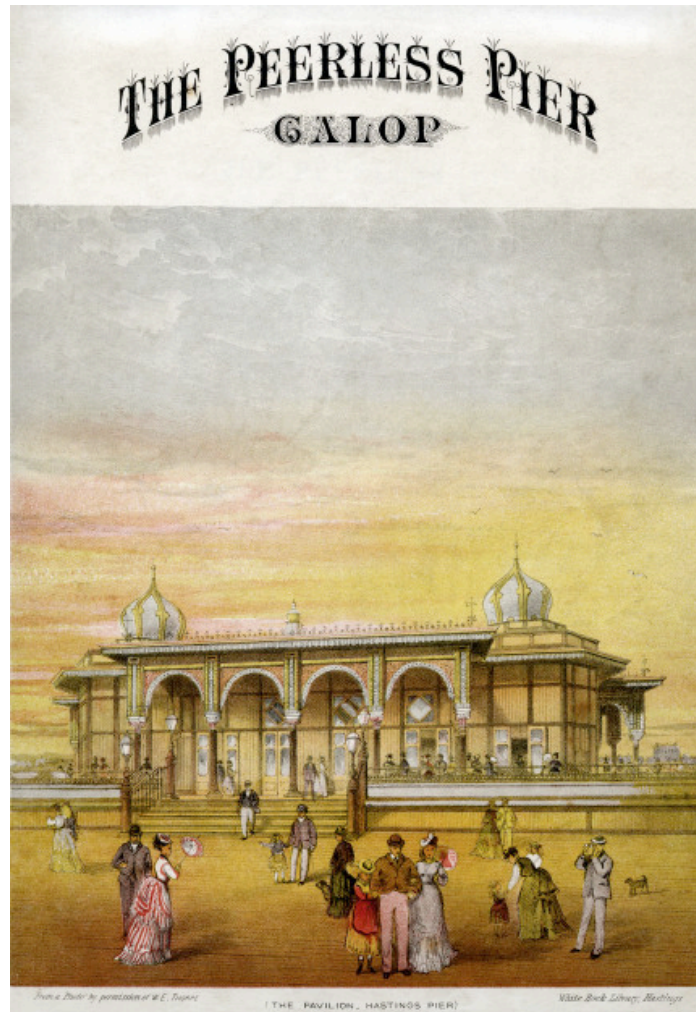
At 2pm a breakfast was served in the Pavilion to 800 local worthies, who had each paid four shillings for the privilege. "The saloon was charmingly adapted to the occasion – light, spacious, cheerful, and airy – the tables neatly laid out, the ladies in their charming garbs of many colors, softened and toned down by the simpler attire of the gentlemen, presented altogether as pretty a picture as one could desire to see, and certainly such as had never before been witnessed in Hastings." The menu included lamb, roast fowl, lobster, Leeds pudding, and blancmange. Among the distinguished persons at the top table were the Sheriff of London, the Mayors of Rye, New Romney, and Dover, Prince

Hassan (Tallefoo), General Prince Yussuf, and Hagee Ibrahim Khan. After the dinner Earl Granville gave a speech in which he famously declared, “I have said that I have not seen many piers, but of those that I have seen this appears to me to be a peerless pier – a pier without a peer, except perhaps the unfortunate peer who is now addressing you.” He went on to praise the Pavilion, which he referred to as a ‘Palace on the Sea’.

Thomas Brassey proposed a toast to “The Engineer and Contractors of the Company”. Eugenius Birch, the Pier engineer, responded by praising the way in which Messrs. Laidlaw had carried out the contract. “What with the rise in the price of iron, etc., if the Pier had to be done now the price would not be £23,000, but £50,000. Mr Birch sought also to show that the delay in the completion of the work was owing to difficulties which he said they had met with in erecting the structure in the submarine forest.”

Earl Granville left Hastings on the 5pm train. In the evening the Pier Pavilion hosted a concert for 1,500 guests. The only known photograph of the opening shows the guard of honour lined up along a rain-soaked Pier deck to welcome the distinguished guests.

The Bank Holiday Act of 1871 established four Bank Holidays, and these national 'days-off' brought many more working-class people to the seaside between Easter and August, seeking fun, not health, and escaping from the stifling confines of Victorian urban life. The Pier was an immediate success, attracting 482,000 people in its first year and 584,000 in the second, much bigger numbers than expected. Entry to the pier cost 2d, bringing in £4,000 in income – a sixth of the capital cost – in just 12 months. The band that played every day was especially popular.



Hastings Pier was very fashionable when it opened in 1872. C H R Marriott, a composer of dance tunes, wrote this galop, a fast-paced forerunner of the polka. (HPC033.001a)

**From a newspaper report of the opening of the Pier, South Eastern Advertiser, Saturday, August 10th 1872** (HPC014.215)

By this time the fact that Hastings has a Pier, and that the magnificent structure was formally opened by Lord Granville on Monday last, has been read by hundreds of thousands of people throughout the United Kingdom. The daily press has been good enough to proclaim the important fact for us from one end of the kingdom to the other, and by and bye [sic] the mails will carry to all parts – even to the bright and sunny land from which came the copper-coloured princes who graced the proceedings on Monday – the news, to make the pun which seems

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to be running riot from the mouths of us all, from Lord Granville to the smallest urchin in our streets, that Hastings is no longer a pierless watering place.

This is not the place in which to attempt to cast the horoscope of the new Pier, and indeed, if it were, one would scarcely be disposed to take the position of the stars, or, in other words, the unfavourable character of the elements, at the time of what we may call its birth on Monday last, as an omen of the future. But omen or no omen, there seems no room whatever to doubt that, dismal as were the circumstances in which the opening was inaugurated, the future of this structure will be a bright one for the shareholders' pockets, and that the town at large must reap a large and fresh accession of strength and prosperity, from the increased attractions which Hastings now extends to its visitors. If we had been but fortunate in getting a fine day, Monday would stand out as the brightest red-letter day in our annals – a day which could fairly rank in importance with that on which the fact that we were one of the best drained towns in the kingdom trumpeted forth to the world.

But in the matter of the weather we were miserably disappointed. For days and weeks before the sun shone out with a brilliancy and cheering warmth, and the sky looked as beautifully blue as if we had exchanged our fickle English weather for an Italian summer. Rain and clouds seemed to be only ugly dreams of the past, and up to Sunday we had no misgivings as to the morrow. Sunday itself was a fine bright day; but the knowing ones shook their heads and told us were "in for it", while the boatmen became suddenly depressed with the apprehension that the gains on which they had reckoned so surely from the thousands of people who were expected to flock into the town, and the thousands of others who would leave business and care at home for one day and join in the general gaiety, would be snatched from them, and the whole proceedings must be grievously marred.

And the weather-wise proved, unfortunately, to be anything but false prophets. When men arose in the morning and glanced at the sky their visages ruefully fell; but many of us cheered ourselves up with the notion that we should have only a few passing showers. We could scarcely credit that all those elaborate preparations for rejoicing would be lost, that the bunting which floated so gaily from windows and from line across the thoroughfares, that the two hundred flags which were so



tastefully arranged around the structure which was to be the great scene of action to-day, that the decorations which met one's eye here, there and everywhere, that all would positively only add to the general depression instead of lending an inspiring air to the scene.

Before 9 o'clock people in their holiday attire began to flock into the streets, and the town, even at that early hour, presented the appearance of having accepted in its fullest sense the requisition of his Worship to suspend trade in all cases where it was possible and devote the day to right-down enjoyment. There was little or no sign of business, unless it was the business of pleasure. But at about ten o'clock the threatening rain came at last. The sullen, wretched clouds, that had been lowering gloomily over us all the morning opened upon us, and down came the rain like a miniature deluge.

The streets were now filling with people, train after train began to arrive at the station and discharge its freight of excursionists, and though the rain kept on in a steady downpour, damp but courageous pedestrians held on to their original determination to see the "sight", and from the Railway Station to the Pier there was a moving crowd of people defying the "elements" with their expanded umbrellas.

At about half-past eleven the crowd began to thicken and take up a stationary position from the Memorial to the Station. It rained on fast and faster still, but ladies in light muslins and thin boots were equally as plucky in their determination to "see it all out" as their male acquaintances with ponderous gingham, mackintoshes, and overcoats.

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