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Victorian Holidays, and Beach Etiquette



Mother & Son on Hastings Beach, c.1910
Photograph by A. M. Breach (HPC041.099a)



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Sea bathing for the health was already fashionable in the 18th century, when King George III's physician, Dr Baillie, recommended it to his patients. King George IV famously built his summer palace by the sea in Brighton. St Leonards was developed in the 1820s as an upper class seaside resort by James Burton, a Regency and Georgian property developer who built much of Bloomsbury and the Nash Terraces in Regents Park, and his son Decimus, an architect. However, it was the Victorians who invented the seaside holiday.

In 1833 the Factory Act gave workers eight half-day holidays a year, and a decade later the new railways meant that thousands of ordinary people could reach the seaside. In 1820 it took six hours to travel from London to Brighton, but by 1862 only two. Newly accessible resort towns sprang up along Britain's coastline. At Southport, Llandudno, Margate, Weymouth, Torquay, Dover, and Ilfracombe, factory workers and clerks escaped smoky cities to cavort by the sea. Not everybody welcomed the new influx of visitors. Suddenly Cockney accents and the cries of street sellers could be heard among more 'refined' tones at formerly exclusive resorts. Comics and cartoonists lampooned the working-class daytrippers.

Seaside towns were transformed by the influx of visitors. In 1812 Morecambe was just a tiny hamlet with a smattering of houses, but by 1880 the population had rocketed to 16,859. In newly fashionable coastal towns pleasure palaces sprang up to entertain the masses, and new entertainments such as music halls, winter gardens, exhibitions, variety shows, zoos, opera houses, theatres, aquariums, and even lagoons with Venetian gondolas. Street musicians, Punch and Judy shows, acrobats, ice cream carts, travelling photographers, and pedlars all touted for business along the sands.

The bathing machine was invented in the early 18th century to protect ladies' modesty and enable them to get into the water without being seen. By the 19th century the machines were used by both men and women, in segregated areas. They were pulled down to the tideline by horses, and patrons emerged at the sea end, clad in voluminous bathing costumes. A Hastings bylaw of 1855 banned undressing on the beach, except within the confines of a bathing machine.

Women preserved their lily-white complexions by keeping every inch of pale flesh under wraps and sheltering beneath parasols. In the early Victorian period women wore flannel sack-like costumes for bathing, but by the 1860s 'Bloomer suits', thigh-length jackets worn over blouses, were in fashion. Until well into the 1900s, ladies would not be seen paddling or walking on the beach in their bathing costumes.

Queen Victoria was an enthusiastic paddler and promenade-stroller when on holiday in the Isle of Wight. In her diary on the 30th July 1847 she wrote: "Drove down to the beach with my maid and I went into the bathing machine, where I undressed and bathed in the sea (for the first time in my life). I thought it delightful until I put my head under water."



Victorian Bathing machines on Hastings beach (HPC041.059)

Until the 1860s, men were allowed to bathe nude. A letter in the Scarborough Gazette in 1866 protested that "hundreds of men and women may be seen in the water – the men stark naked and the women so loosely and insufficiently clad that for all purposes of decency they might as well have been naked too." Reverend Francis Kilvert, Rector of Langley Burrell, was outraged when taking his holiday on the Isle of

Wight when he discovered his favourite past-time, nude paddling, had been banned. His reverence grumbled to his diary in August 1874: "At Shanklin one has to adopt the detestable custom of bathing in drawers. If ladies don't like to see men naked why don't they keep away from the sight?" In Hastings there was a strict dress code for the main beach but different rules elsewhere. There was an area at Rock-a-Nore where the practice of men bathing naked had become established. A letter to the Hastings Mail in 1904 complained that brazen-faced women were lolling about the beach and disrupting the men's privacy.

For Victorian men the seaside offered an escape from decorum and respectability and offered prurient delights. Single men, safely out of sight of their families, could spend their days at beach-front telescopes ogling women slipping into the sea from bathing machines, and their nights visiting ladies of easy virtue, with no acquaintances to spot them and spread gossip.



Early 20th century seaside postcard (HPC041.165)

Until 1901, male and female bathers had to keep 100 yards apart. Then mixed bathing was finally allowed, and bathing machines soon fell out of use. By 1915 bathing tents were used for changing, but there were not

enough for the large numbers of people who wanted to swim, so in 1916 a Hastings bylaw initiated what became known as 'mackintosh bathing'. People were not allowed to change in the open on the beach, or to be on the promenade in a bathing costume, but they were allowed to change in their hotel rooms or lodgings and go to the beach and back wearing a mackintosh over their costume. The rule applied between 8am and 8pm to the area of beach from the Fishermen's Church at Rock-a-Nore to the outfall of the Coombe Haven at Bulverhythe. The term 'mackintosh bathers' was still in use in the 1950, when swimmers were charged a fee of 4d to bathe from one of the supervised bathing stations along the beach.

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

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