

# PIERS OF THE REALM

Britain's seaside piers occupy a special place in the national consciousness, yet almost half of them have disappeared, and those that remain have life stories full of drama.

The photographer **Simon Roberts** travelled the coastline to celebrate these monuments to Victorian engineering and eccentricity. By **Dominic Bradbury**

The Grand Pier at Weston-super-Mare, which reopened in 2010 after it was damaged by fire in 2008





**T**here is something irresistible about the great British pleasure piers. They combine a wonderful jumble of national passions: our fascination with the coast and the sea, with Victorian engineering and with the beautiful, eccentric folly that architecture provides every now and then. Add to that the idea of pleasure itself – from slot machines to concerts, as well as the simple charm of a walk out towards the ocean,

or a stolen kiss at the end of the promenade. Often, as a family, we go to Southwold on the Suffolk coast and walk along the beach until the mouth of the River Blyth stops us from going any further. On the walk back towards the town Southwold pier is a constant presence, making that extraordinary leap from land to sea, yet going nowhere. Like some strange grounded ship, it seems to serve no obvious purpose other than to

draw us towards it, so that we can follow it out across the water. Always, whether we plan it or not, we end up standing at the end of the pier, looking out across the soupy mass of grey-brown water.

Many of our piers began life in the 19th century as little more than landing docks for pleasure steamers. The seaside offered an escape from work and city smog; they were a respite cure, with the promise of sea air and an invigorating dip. As the

expanding rail network made journeys to the coast easier, seaside towns grew to cater for the day-trippers – and the pleasure piers grew with them.

The engineers began to incorporate bandstands and cafes, perhaps a music hall or tramway. Some piers, such as Clacton-on-Sea's, which opened in 1871, embraced the notion of pleasure-seeking. During its heyday in the 1920s and 30s the pier added a dance hall, the Ocean Theatre, the Crystal

**Left** the graceful arches of Clevedon pier in Somerset.

**Right, from top** Southwold pier on the Suffolk coast; Bournemouth pier, designed by the Victorian engineer Eugenius Birch; Hastings pier, damaged by fire last year but recently awarded Lottery funding to rebuild

**Pleasure piers combine a wonderful jumble of national passions: our fascination with the coast and the sea, with Victorian engineering**





**Left, from top** Blackpool South Pier; Saltburn pier in North Yorkshire; Cromer pier in Norfolk. **Right** Llandudno pier, north Wales, one of the best surviving examples of cast-iron piers

**Llandudno pier is delightful, with its kiosks like miniature pagodas**



Casino and a swimming-pool. Its attractions today (the Boardwalk Bar & Grill, the Seaquarium) are less sophisticated, but it still draws the crowds.

The end-of-the-pier show became an institution in many resorts, such as Cromer in north Norfolk, where the 510-seater Pavilion Theatre still hosts concerts and 'Seaside Specials'. In the 1960s and 70s, Hastings pier hosted the Who, Pink Floyd and the Rolling Stones. Hastings also had the benefit of

being designed by one of the most famous Victorian pier designers, Eugenius Birch. Birch was an engineer and naval architect who designed more than a dozen piers, including Bournemouth and Brighton's West Pier. He had spent time in India and brought exoticism to the design of the pavilions, yet as an engineer he was also an innovator, coming up with the idea of screw-piling to create a super-strong support system thrust into the sands below.

Different approaches to design helped give each pier its character. Some, such as Saltburn pier in North Yorkshire or Clevedon pier in Somerset, have a sense of lightness and grace. Clevedon, designed by Grover & Ward in the 1860s, needed to be tall and light to cope with the strong currents below. Llandudno pier in north Wales, designed by Charles Henry Driver and opened in 1878, is one of the best preserved of Britain's surviving

cast-iron piers, with its long promenade, T-shaped steamer landing stage and sequence of small kiosks like miniature pagodas. Now a Grade II listed building, Llandudno pier is one of the lucky ones.

There used to be about a hundred piers around Britain's coastline, but nearly half have been lost and others are now under threat. Most of the survivors have life stories full of drama and narrow escapes, usually involving fierce weather, boat



strikes, fires and the practice of 'sectioning' in the Second World War, when many piers on the east and south coasts were partly dismantled to prevent them being used as landing stages by the Germans. Blackpool North Pier was badly beaten in 1897 when HMS Foudroyant, Nelson's old flagship, which was moored close to the pier, was wrecked by a storm. In May 1924 a ship called Ovenbeg took a big chunk out of Saltburn pier, and in 1993 Cromer pier was severed by a runaway barge.

Any damage or loss is felt acutely. The slow death of Birch's West Pier in Brighton has been a local and national tragedy (despite much talk of a replacement). Last year's fire at Hastings pier was another keenly felt disaster, though it has recently secured Heritage Lottery funding to rebuild. Some people have talked of the death of the pier, others of their rebirth – witness the £39 million restoration of Weston-super-Mare's Grand Pier, which opened last October. The truth lies somewhere in between, and Britain's piers fight on, still drawing us in. Only the hardest heart could resist. ■

**Above** Walton pier, Essex.

**Right** Worthing pier, West Sussex

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