

# SIMON ROBERTS

## Pierdom: A Kingdom by the Sea

by Francis Hodgson, 2013

Margate, Kent, 51°23'.40N 01°22'.75E. ...Beware ruins of old pier, known as the Iron Jetty, Fl(3) R 10s, extending 2½ ca N of from root of Stone Pier.

It is just about possible to find pleasure piers in the nautical almanac, but not many, and always reduced to the clipped essentials. Some are hazards, some are landmarks, most are merely supports for navigation lights. (The one above, if you'd like a translation, has a red light which flashes a triplet every ten seconds, and is perched on ruins which extend 250 fathoms or 1500 feet). And even then – as the almanac has it when referring to Torquay – “all its may be difficult to see against town its.” From out at sea, the great British pleasure piers are hard to see and best avoided. From onshore they are often, as they were meant to be, the very central feature of their stretch of shore.

There is no wholly satisfactory definition of a pleasure pier. The nearest would encompass some thought of it holding buildings rather than merely planking, and its principal functions being non-marine.

The piers, you see, were specifically not a nautical phenomenon. Their original purpose, it's true, was to be alighting points for the steamers bringing town people for their blast of fresh air. The whole point of the piers was to keep you from the muddy, gritty beach, to keep you dry shod. They kept you fully clad, too. There was no swimming from piers and the good quality resorts equipped their beaches with bathing machines (designed to be hauled into the water to preserve modesty from fully dressed to fully dressed again.) The piers allowed a stroll over the waves with no physical risk, nor even the risk of impropriety. The English are by necessity a seafaring nation, but the piers were not designed for seafaring. Piers are situated where ships don't want to go. With a

few exceptions, piers are sited where the beaches are, where the land shelves gently over long distances, and where the tide, in rising a few feet vertically, covers many hundreds of yards horizontally. Shipping prefers steep-to coastlines with deep inlets. Harbours have breakwaters and jetties, although – confusingly – these sometimes go by the name of piers.

The pleasure piers are often sited – it is no coincidence – where the long parallel lines of groynes bristle away from the shore. In more than one place, there has been a serious risk of the beach in one resort being scraped by the tides onto the frontage of the next. These are the dangerous places for ships. Many piers are sited in villages that hardly existed before they were built: Southend, most notably. They are on the sea, but not of the sea. Until the seaside itself became a destination, a sandy beach (and the bars and banks beyond with their dangerous shifting channels and the constant risk of breaking waves pounding upon them) was a place to be shunned.

If you look at the map, the distribution of the piers is striking. A large cluster around the North West speaks of the industrial crowds of Lancashire and the West Riding and the Western Midlands, all within easy reach by train. The commercialization of leisure for industrial workers is one of the big themes of the later nineteenth century. The Premier League of British football is still to this day heavily weighted towards Lancashire clubs.

The sea became a commodity (just as the mountains would do later with the development of skiing). The piers had been designed to measure out a little frisson of that hostile sea in a manageable dose. When Turner painted the great chain pier at Brighthelmston, it was in the same spirit that he painted the modern, high-technology tug pulling home the Fighting Temeraire for the final time. The piers were early enough that they still whisper of the great eighteenth century contest between orderly and progressive Man against the turbulent natural Sublime. They represented something glorious, the march of Progress, another step in the taming of nature.

Several were built in the early part of the nineteenth century. Margate can lay a claim to being the first, when an existing pier was rebuilt in 1808 with a gallery where a band played, and a promenade, access to which was by a charge. There was a boom of sorts in the middle years of that century. Many piers then had a period of high frequentation that lasted until the middle years of the twentieth. More than five million people went on Southend Pier in the 1949-50 season, an incredible number. Since then, their history has largely

been one of gradual decay or sudden catastrophe, and the long (and very British) struggles of restoration societies and planning applications.

The piers are intimately connected with landmen's holidays, and we rather forget that holidays are a relatively new phenomenon. A Southport guide-book at the outset of the twentieth century made the case for "being upon the deck of a ship at anchor in smooth water...You have the breeze and the sea, without the sickness or rolling and pitching of a vessel...It is there the girls get the bloom on their cheeks again, and the pale faces of the town a tinge of the sun." A number of policy changes after the Bank Holiday Act of 1871 meant that paid leave gradually became the norm, and when it did, cheap easily reachable resorts were a necessity. But resorts were commercial propositions, and the pier was often a major investment to draw crowds. Consortia of local businessmen would get together to provide investment and appoint agents to get the thing done: a complex chicanery of lobbying for private legislation, engineering, and marketing. At the same sort of time, a number of Acts made it possible to limit liability for shareholders in speculative companies. So the development of the piers is closely parallel to the development of other UK infrastructure. Canals and then railways were typically brought into being through the same means.

Like so much in Britain, the history of the piers is woven in with a history of class. It seems that one reason piers spread so quickly is that the lengthwise shape allowed for the easy installation of turnstiles and pay kiosks at the landward end: the pier could be – and usually was – reserved for those who could pay for the privilege. In the United States, where pleasure piers are rarer, the normal arrangement was the boardwalk, arranged parallel to the shore, and accessible to all. The British model certainly allowed for gradations, too: a halfpenny to get onto the pier, a penny to sit down, sixpence to get into the dancehall at the end, and so on. In Blackpool, what has been known as the Central Pier since the Victoria Pier opened in 1893 was nicknamed the People's Pier, and was notably less genteel than its neighbours. Some commentators have seen in the success of the pier a descent from a much older recreation of the privileged, the sheltered gravel 'walks' of the first resort towns, such as Bath, with their tiptoeing towards social mixing, and their gradual replacement of the older gradations of society by gradations based to some extent on the individual's own assessment of his position.

There was always competition for new attractions, but many of them once proven to work in one location, spread quickly to many piers. A good example of this is the camera obscura, of which there were at one time many: little dark

rooms built onto a pier within which the view could be projected. The one at Mumbles Pier in Swansea at one time had a sign on its side which read "Camera Obscura, Everybody Pleased, Grand Coloured Scenery." (Postcards show that it wasn't actually on the pier so much as stationed just by its junction with the shore). Several survive today, including one recently restored on Eastbourne pier. The list of attractions on piers would be very long, but their contribution to light entertainment through theatre and music has been considerable. Funfair rides of various sorts were commonplace and still are, and many piers still have railways that run along their length.

The piers acquired a common vocabulary of style quite recognizably their own. Gothic filigree lightness of ironwork is everywhere. A strong penchant for the Moorish is recognizable in a thousand details; its exoticism survives in the very word 'kiosk', which derives through Turkish from Persian. St. Anne's on Sea even has pavilions recognisably descended from Chinese models.

Structurally, the piers were remarkable. Wooden piling was soon found to be susceptible to rot and the teredo worm and was replaced by that favourite Victorian material, cast-iron. Eugenius Birch, the most prolific of the great pier engineers (and certainly the best named), was the first to use screw piling, in which an ingenious profile of the lower ends of the piles allowed them to be twisted down into the sand as they were installed. Piers, like many other Victorian buildings, were largely made from prefabricated sections, brought to the site by the railways which would later bring the customers. At Morecambe, the components used to construct the pier had originally been intended for the city of Valparaiso in Chile.

This combination of charm and engineering is central to the call of the restoration societies today. The patron saint of conservation, the Poet Laureate John Betjeman himself, was a considerable pier aficionado, and was involved in the creation of the (still thriving) National Piers Society. A film clip preserved by the University of East Anglia follows a softhearted Betjeman taking a train from King's Lynn to Hunstanton, and ends with him leaning on a sea wall with the pier behind him, inhaling a great gust of sea-air, two seconds after having pronounced the obligatory word "Bracing!" As preservation movements go, the piers don't inspire quite the same zeal as others: the great volunteer-led revival of the canal system, for example, is one of the triumphs of the resistance movement against thoughtless development.

Some piers have been saved, and others will be. Others are still likely to be condemned. Along with various other forms of decline, a number of piers

have been severed, usually by collisions with steamers, sometimes by storm. Clevedon pier, a lovely structure with longer spans than most, was severed during a (no-doubt vigorous) load-bearing test in 1970. For a long time its seaward end stood as a miniature island kingdom of three or four graceful little buildings perched on stilts above the waves. Preservation groups did their magic on that one, and it stands restored again.

You could say that the old class divisions of the piers survive even in their decline. For there is an undeniable contrast between the genteel, even twee, enthusiasm of the preservationists, all worked up for Edwardian blazers and Eugenius Birch and delicate cast iron tracery, and the hard-nosed contemporary commercial operators of the piers, with their cheap lager and gaudy signage and strident plastic weatherproofing. It is easy to use words like vulgar when thinking of what the piers are now. But vulgar means of the people, and the piers were always built and operated to attract the people in large numbers. The plain truth is that twee and brash are going to have to learn to get along with each other if the piers are to survive. A seaside attraction which attracts nobody doesn't really work.

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It is into this pleasant and complex tangle that Simon Roberts takes his 4x5 plate camera, a Victorian invention like the piers.

There are 58 surviving piers (definitions notwithstanding) and Roberts has photographed them all. He has also photographed some of the vanished ones, as you can see from his wonderful picture of Shanklin Pier, destroyed in the great storm which did so much damage in southern England on 16 October 1987

It is important to know that Roberts is a human geographer by training, and that this study of the piers is a natural development of his last major work, *We English*, which was a careful look at the changing patterns of leisure in a country in which overpopulation and decreasing mass-employment mean that more of us have more time upon our hands than ever before. Small wonder that it is now called the leisure industry, and small wonder, at the seaside that tensions exist between the different interests with a stake in the sea.

The strong British affection for 'tradition' makes the piers seem older than they are. They have become deeply buried in the British (specifically English, mainly) psyche as an integral part of a myth called the seaside. At its crassest,

that myth revolves around Kiss Me Quick hats and donkey rides along the sands. At a more elevated level, it involves letting the National Trust run hundreds of miles of foreshore as a kind of linear park for townspeople. The spices in the recipe are numerous and their combinations very complex.

Old scenic post-cards of the seaside have been reproduced a great deal lately: they demand both nostalgia and a touch of irony to be appreciated. Would middle-class English people have quite the affection they do for saucy postcards if George Orwell hadn't written his famous essay on Donald McGill?

Cheap travel by air brought tough competition to the piers. Then you could jump on a plane and get the sea at a temperature more conducive to bathing, and sunbathing became fashionable in a way it had never been in the heyday of the piers. While that allowed a few to the Maldives and the Seychelles, it also led to recreations of English seaside towns in unlikely places: Magaluf and Ayia Nappa. But air travel is getting more unpleasant and more expensive, and everybody knows that it is utterly unjustifiable in ecological terms. It might be declining at last, and the English seaside is having a bit of a revival.

The piers were commercial developments for gain and date largely from our most gung-ho and laissez faire century, when profit was good and devil take the consequences. Many of the piers failed early, and many have failed since. Some have been a blazing success, and some have just blazed down to the water line. Sometimes they have succeeded in ways quite other than those intended by the town fathers when they gave permission for them to open – the restored 1901 theatre on the seaward end of the great Eastbourne Pier had a heady period after 1970 as a nightclub. Some few will be preserved in strictly private hands, rather as a number of Methodist chapels, primary schools and former post-offices have been preserved as country homes. An artist used to use Totland Bay pier-end building as a studio, and there are certainly others. And no doubt, this evening, someone will drink far too much beer in a 'palace on the waves' and disturb a householder in an expensive house on the promenade.

The economics of the seaside are still complex. There are new planning battles over marinas and windfarms and roll-on/roll-off terminals. The great nuclear power stations are still mostly by the shore, and present a catalogue of problems of their own. Tourism is desperately needed where the other industries of the shore are in decline, but tourism is destructive of the very thing which the tourists pay to enjoy. Whole new sub-industries have arisen –

surfing, for example – with their own destructive corollaries. Look at the giant passenger ship nosing into Harwich, so out of scale with its surroundings, yet so crammed with spending customers.

There are plenty of romanticized views of a pier or the whole genus of piers, but Simon Roberts is emphatically not adding to that catalogue. It is obvious from these pages that Roberts has an affection for the piers, and an affection for the complex tidal pulls of history and economics upon which they perch. One critic wrote about *We English* that Roberts was a descendant of the great Victorian photographer Sir Benjamin Stone, and that's partly right. Stone liked to show old things being adapted into the context of contemporary society. He liked to photograph change and the reactions to change, and he liked to tell the truth in his own particular way. Simon Roberts has all of that.

These pictures may encompass some of the seaside things we know best through such photographers as Tom Wood or Martin Parr, but they put those scenes in a broad context where people live in a landscape and a country, not just a car park. They also derive something from that quite different tradition, of the wild skies and unquenchable nature that we find in Turner. These are cool careful pictures, alluding to a large number of variables and seeing what balances can be struck between them. At the same time, they're the warm record of a large number of trips to that many-sided and unfathomable place, the British seaside