

Chapter Nine

Walking on Water

By the early nineteenth century, as ways of consuming the seaside matured and diversified, there was a growing appreciation of the joys and benefits to be gained by not just being beside the sea but going out over it. Over the previous half a century, visitors had learnt how to understand, admire and enjoy the seaside and a new architecture for coastal leisure eventually developed in response. Piers were one of its chief products and part of a process of 'attuning space with desire' characterizing the later stages of the Romantic consumption of the seaside.¹ Although with none of the disadvantages and dangers associated with boats, whether seasickness or the possibility of capsizing or even drowning, piers enabled visitors to leave the landward side of the sea and venture out to the water itself.

Walking on to a pier was to be transported ever closer to raw, untamed nature, heightening both the sense of admiration of nature and the accomplishment of the individual making the visit. Moreover, sea air was surely more beneficial over the sea than when breathed on the land. And there was the camaraderie to be enjoyed by being with likeminded people. There were new panoramas of the coast to view, storms and sunsets to marvel at and horizons to contemplate. The pier, as a platform from which to view the horizon, allowed people to reflect on themselves, other places and other times. Although it was of course an illusion, the pier was remarkable in seeming to enable people to journey a little closer to the unobtainable.

From Promenade to Pleasure Pier

Walking over the sea for pleasure at first used structures designed for functional maritime purposes. At Whitby, Scarborough, Ramsgate and other older coastal towns being transformed into resorts, stone breakwaters and piers - often very old structures - protecting or forming a harbour were explicitly adapted for parading by fashionable visitors. In *Persuasion*, written in 1815 and 1816, Jane Austen describes the 'old wonders and new improvements'² of the Cobb at Lyme Regis, an ancient stone pier sheltering Lyme harbour, although by the early nineteenth century also a genteel promenade and one of the chief 'charms' to be enjoyed by visitors to the town. Austen makes use of the Cobb for a critical turning point in the story, the first of a rich literary tradition using piers as sites of leisure and happiness but also unforeseen danger or denouement. One of the novel's characters, Louisa Musgrove, jumping down 'from the high part of the new Cobb', misses the safe hands of Captain Wentworth, to fall and be 'taken up lifeless'.³

As Austen was penning her fiction, the pier at Margate, another stone harbour arm, was being rebuilt after earlier storm damage. Re-opening in 1815, the pier included a new parade for visitors. An early instance of promenading over the sea involving a monetary transaction, on payment of an entrance toll visitors to Margate pier had access to a privatized, exclusive and separate space that included a gallery for a band to play.

In contrast to the necessarily strong, stone, harbour walls and breakwaters designed to rebuff the sea and provide sheltered water, the principal function of landing stages and jetties was to get people and goods between ship and shore safely and easily. Usually constructed of wood and built relatively cheaply and speedily, the design challenge was to provide a bridge into deeper water where vessels could moor. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, landing stage piers were built to facilitate seaborne access to resorts. The promoters of such ventures increasingly saw promenading as a useful subsidiary income-generating function.

The earliest example of these new dual-purpose piers was the 1814 pier at Ryde on the Isle of Wight.⁴ In 1824 Jarvis's Landing Place was built close to the stone Margate pier. In this case the name indicates the low-lying wooden jetty's primary purpose, to allow passengers 'to reach the shore when the water is too low for vessels to enter the harbour'. Despite the intent, an 1831 guide

described how it 'is deservedly considered one of the most inviting marine walks which fancy can imagine, or experience realize'.⁵ The promenade, though, only functioned between low and mid-tide as the structure was submerged at high water, often stranding visitors on the slightly higher pier head and leading to either alarm from those above the sea or hilarity from those observing the scene from dry land.

The most iconic of these transitional structures, part landing stage and part select promenade, was Brighton's Chain Pier, opened in 1823. Apart from being Britain's greatest seaside resort, the town was also one end of an important cross Channel route to continental Europe. The Chain Pier's enabling Act of Parliament emphasized the landing and shipping of people and goods function of the pier, but also recognized the 'Purpose of walking for Exercise [and] Pleasure'.⁶ Indeed, the promoters of the enterprise anticipated the revenue from promenaders would exceed that from passengers traveling to or from France.

The Chain Pier's chief attraction for promenaders was to be able to walk over the sea. It was here, as Corbin argues, that aristocratic visitors to Brighton 'encountered the desire to see, feel, and experience the sea'.⁷ *The Times* report on the pier's opening believed that 'to the man of pleasure and the valetudinarian, it offers a marine promenade unequalled'. Critically, however, this was a communal rather than solitary activity. The seekers after health, for example, were 'dragged to the farthest extremity of the chain pier, to inhale to the greatest advantage the invigorating sea breezes, and concentrated upon a single spot, they give a decided colour to the place, rendering it an open hospital'.⁸

Apart from the pier itself, early on the only artificial attractions, mostly to do with consuming nature in one way or another, were a 'floating bath' at the pier head, a camera obscura, sundial, two small cannon, some green benches and mineral water booths.⁹ At the root end of the pier a reading room and saloon was opened to offer traditional resort facilities, including a library, telescopes to view the coast and pier, musical entertainments and 'Meteorological results and prognostications were also posted daily for inspection'.¹⁰ Over time, however, the simple and natural attractions of the elite marine promenade were supplemented with a range of other facilities and entertainments. In

the process the Chain Pier was transformed into a part promenade and part pleasure pier, becoming a major attraction in its own right, and in embryonic form pointing the way to what was become a pleasure pier mania in the second half of the century.

In both architectural and engineering terms, too, the Chain Pier was an innovative and iconic structure. The designer, Captain Samuel Brown, drew on rapidly developing metal technologies and his own previous engineering inventions involving chain cables and suspension bridges. The deck of the pier was 1,154 feet long and 13 feet wide, hanging from cast iron chains suspended from four pairs of cast iron towers, themselves designed in a then fashionable Egyptian style and 'modelled on the pylon gateways of Karnak in Egypt'¹¹ and resting on four clumps of wooden piles driven into the seabed. The chains were anchored into the cliff face, while the broader pier head landing stage was paved with Purbeck stone. As a radical departure from what had gone before, the architecture of the pier responded to the demands of aristocratic promenaders for a grand, imposing structure. *The Times* review of the opening of the pier emphasized the national achievement it represented, commenting on the perfection of the English iron that formed the 'material part' of the structure and noting that 'whether viewed as a national monument or as a novel invention, it is a gratifying evidence of the resources and intellect of our country'.¹²

Within a few years of its opening both Turner and Constable were to feature the pier in their marine landscapes of seaside Brighton, and over the following seven decades views of the pier were endlessly painted, drawn, engraved and photographed: there were over 150 different prints of the structure.¹³ For a third of a century at least, the pier was the most important and popular attraction on the seafront and in the mid-1850s Thackeray wrote admiringly of the structure running 'intrepidly into the sea' and how 'for the sum of twopence you can go out to sea and pace this vast deck without the need of a steward with a basin.'¹⁴ Despite Brown's innovative solution to building in the sea, however, his ideas were not widely adopted. Brighton had 'a uniquely numerous and opulent visiting public'¹⁵ seemingly willing to support the venture although in reality it was never a great commercial success.

Other resorts were necessarily content with more ordinary wooden landing stage piers with subsidiary promenading functions: one was erected at Southend in 1830.¹⁶ By 1850 there were just a dozen piers in British resorts, most serving both as landing stages and promenades. And yet by 1900 Britain's seafront architecture had been transformed: by that date there were eighty piers, with some resorts having two or even three of the structures. The first wave, in the 1850s and '60s, in this deluge of pier building was of promenade piers proper, structures the harbour authorities described as 'not made for trade'.¹⁷ These piers became fashionable and select extensions to seafront parades and drives. The inevitable band apart, promenade piers had little in the way of artificial entertainment and as Walton suggests, they were an 'established recreational institution with pretensions to gentility and even "rationality"'.¹⁸ In reality the middle of the century pier builders underestimated the continuing radical transformation of many resorts and the business of being beside the sea. From the early 1870s a second wave, this time a tidal wave, of new fully-fledged pleasure piers engulfed the coastal resorts.

One 1890s commentator remarked that if the speed of pier development continued 'it will be necessary to alter the map of England, and represent it as a huge creature of the porcupine type, with gigantic piers instead of quills'.¹⁹ Looking back from the vantage point of the early 1950s to the pier building obsession of the last part of the previous century, the economic historian John Clapham thought Victorian piers 'were as symbolic of what archaeologists call a culture as are axe-heads and beakers ... There they stood. No visitor to the island could miss them. From them the least seafaring of the islanders could watch his ships go by with the joy of vicarious ownership.'²⁰

The new middle class and, increasingly, working class seaside visitors generated a demand for new architectural forms. During the last half of the century not only did the number of British piers multiply seven-fold, but their structure and purpose also changed. Although the ubiquitous enjoyment of a stroll over the sea was still available, in most resorts gone was the traditional landing stage function for anything other than pleasure trips on the sea and, by the end of the period, gone too, from the largest and most popular resorts, was the open-deck promenade pier.

The pleasure piers – either newly constructed or transformed from earlier promenade structures - were sites of artificial entertainments and amusements, many of these echoing and developing what was to be found in inland cities, including theatre, orchestral music, music hall and variety shows, dancing and roller-skating. Pleasure piers burgeoned with pavilions and theatres, concert halls and winter gardens, refreshment rooms and shops. But there were still ways in which the seaside location was used to provide a unique experience, most pleasure piers hosting a plethora of maritime entertainments ranging from steamer excursions – providing for the majority of voyagers otherwise unobtainable views and panoramas and a real sense of the sea - though aquatic entertainers and performing divers, to water fetes and bathing facilities. It was the combination of maritime pleasures and indoor entertainments over the sea that made piers such an important feature of the British seaside experience from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century.

Piers proved to be a flexible and evolving architectural form. Decking and structural elements were continually renewed because of the hostile coastal environment. Fire or storm damage, a repeated threat, would be seized as an opportunity to rebuild in a contemporary style. In the commercially most successful resorts, piers were repeatedly extended and enlarged and as the composition and demands of seaside visitors changed so existing pier buildings were put to new uses. What was originally designed as a winter garden for musical entertainments might become a rifle range or roller skating rink, and then be transformed into an amusement arcade, each transition perhaps also involving an architectural and interior design make over. Ornate Victorian decoration might be hidden away behind a 1930s modernist facade. If existing buildings could not be adapted or were deemed as too old fashioned, they would be swept away and replaced with new structures designed for modern amusements.

Pleasure piers were also remarkably different from the early nineteenth century structures in how they were made. The challenge of pleasure pier building was to combine civil engineering for the extreme and inhospitable coastal margin with architecture designed to attract and entertain visitors. New technologies, some borrowed from the railway and ship building industries, revolutionized pier construction and helped meet this challenge. Cast and wrought iron was critical

in the construction of pier substructures. Problems inherent in securing a pier to the seabed were increasingly overcome, particularly through the use of innovative jetting techniques where the seabed was soft and screw piling, originally patented in the 1830s by Alexander Mitchell as part of a floating dry dock invention, into more solid strata.²¹ Such methods and the prefabrication of materials, including cast iron columns, perhaps made hundreds of miles away from the construction site, freed designers from earlier constraints and allowed the rapid construction of tall and wide load-bearing structures carrying wide promenades and large buildings on their decks.

The new piers were represented as modern and community ventures in which a resort and its inhabitants had an important stake. As piers were speculative private enterprises, the shareholders often included both local and regional businessmen and other people of very modest means owning just a few shares.²² The pleasure piers depended on luring toll-paying visitors through their turnstiles, and then maximizing the revenue extracted from people once they were on the pier. Exterior architecture and interior design was an important part of the process, and pier buildings were designed to attract and entice, using various leisure motifs and symbols. By 1900 Oriental architectural styles, although not universal, became a classic decoration of pleasure piers. The most successful pleasure piers became architectural spectacles in their own right while also offering spectacular entertainments.

But the pier development process was not always plain sailing. Sometimes pier proposals were abandoned because resorts were too small, finance inadequate or local political opposition too great. The class character of a resort also had consequences for pier enterprises. In 1874 Portsmouth's antagonistic class and political relations resulted in riots over the control of land by the entrance to Southsea Pier. The pier company wished to enclose the land, thereby excluding the undesirable local working people and turning it into an exclusive space reserved for respectable pier visitors. The several nights of protest included the burning of newly erected fences, attacks on the pier – the angry crowd pelted the promenaders and pier buildings with stones – and the quelling of the unrest by police, volunteer assistants and troops.²³

The working classes already lived in Portsmouth and Southsea in large numbers. Elsewhere, some select and late-developing resorts eschewed piers because of the fear that such developments 'would drive away affluent visitors who wanted to avoid both noisy, flashy amusements and the working-class excursionists they attracted'.²⁴ There was no such concern in high-class and exclusive Eastbourne, a resort under the patronage and control of the Duke of Devonshire: in the 'Empress of Watering Places', 'the pier, with its bands and its theatre, only offered the highest class of entertainment'.²⁵

Brighton's West Pier

Each pier developed its own particular life history, responding to and reflecting local and regional circumstances and events, as well as broader national changes in seaside holidaymaking and architecture. Looking at one resort – Brighton – and one pier – the West Pier of 1866 – illustrates in microcosm many of the processes at work. In the later stages of its history, however, Brighton's West Pier was to assume an iconic and national status.²⁶

A speculative private enterprise, the West Pier Company's object was 'to erect a handsome, commodious, and substantial Iron Promenade Pier ... in the centre of that portion of the Esplanade which, at all seasons of the year, is the most thronged by residents and visitors'.²⁷ Reflecting 1860s Brighton's status as the leading British resort but also the transitional state of pier technology, style and function, which was still being attempted, tested and searched for rather than taken for granted and assumed, the new pier was at once ambitious, innovative and uncertain on matters of engineering, architecture and purpose.

The West Pier's opening on Saturday 6 October 1866 was celebrated with military music, processions the length of the pier and a 21-gun salute of the Royal Standard.²⁸ That evening the dignitaries attending an inauguration dinner in the Banqueting Room of the Royal Pavilion heard

speeches in praise of what was represented as a wonderful, modern and mould-breaking piece of engineering and architecture. One poetic speaker described the pier as 'a kind of butterfly upon the ocean to carry visitors upon its wings and waft them amongst the zephyrs and balmy breezes of Brighton'. The Mayor of Brighton looked to the future, trusting 'that the Pier would ever remain a benefit to the town, that the elements above and below it would be propitious; and that the healthy and sick, the rich and the humble, might alike enjoy the health-inspiring breezes to be obtained upon it; and that the weak might be restored to robust health. He hoped that the Pier might remain to future ages to prove what speculation had done'. The press agreed with such sentiments, *The Brighton Examiner*, for instance, arguing 'we now look upon the structure as artistic and elegant, outrivalling everything of the kind in this country, and perhaps the world ...'.

The component parts for the pier were prefabricated in a Glasgow ironworks to the instructions of Eugenius Birch, the pier's designer. The doyen of Victorian pier engineers, Birch was responsible for 14 seaside piers from Margate Jetty in 1853 to Plymouth Pier in 1884, as well as innovative aquaria in Brighton and Scarborough. It was Birch who made popular the innovative 'worm' or screw piling technique, so radically different from how the Chain Pier had been made.

Although much the same length, at its narrowest point the West Pier was four times wider than the older Chain Pier. Commentators admired the design strengths of the overall structure with its columns and piles 'braced and tied in such a manner as to ensure the greatest amount of stiffness to the Pier, and least amount of resistance to the sea',²⁹ and marveled at the expanse of the open deck, providing 'altogether over 100,000 superficial feet of promenade'. Simulating a promenade on land, the deck of the pier was of close planking covered by 'gravel laid upon bitumen'.

The unwanted were kept off the pier by money, architecture and social convention. Turnstiles, ornamental iron gates and two imposing identical square tollhouses in Italianate style guarded the entrance and marked it out as a separate place. Standards of behaviour were carefully regulated. There was strict dress code for promenaders (although other orthodoxies applied to male bathers from the pier head, who could enjoy the sea unencumbered by costumes). The tollhouses were the most contentious feature of the new pier, nearby residents arguing they were so large 'the whole

vista of the sea was cut asunder,³⁰ and one press critic agreeing that 'no beauty of structure can compensate for the loss of sea view'.³¹

The pier had other innovative and distinctive architectural features designed to capitalize on the nature of promenading and the mid-Victorian seaside holiday. There was 'ample and continuous seat-accommodation', including curved cast iron pier bench seating along the edge of the pier, 'for 2,000 to 3,000 persons',³² facing inwards rather than outwards over the sea, allowing visitors to the pier to rest, talk and look. There were untrammelled panoramic views out to sea and along the coast and visitors could also enjoy the sight of crowded beaches and people using bathing machines at the water's edge. Addressing the Victorian anxiety with health and the conviction that the most beneficial aspects of the seaside came from breathing sea air, Birch provided innovative ornamental weather screens on the pier head around a small open platform for band performances. The distinctive architecture of the screens represented design for health, comfort and social mixing:

On a sunny winter's day invalids can enjoy the mild temperature and life-prolonging air with perfect freedom from chilling blasts ... In summer the screens will shade the visitors from the sun without putting up an awning, which gives closeness and an air of confinement. It might be thought that with all this shelter the head of the pier would be confined in appearance. Nothing, however, could well be more open. The manner in which Mr Birch has obtained the maximum of accommodation and weather protection with the minimum of air-stoppage and light-obstruction, is a charming specimen of engineering skill ... As a sanatorium, this part of the Pier must be productive of the most beneficial effects to invalids and persons of delicate constitution.³³

Another feature of the pier's architecture also proved to have a lasting reflection in pier design elsewhere. There were six 'ornamental houses' integral to the deck of the pier, used when individuals wanted to leave the promenade crowd, and perhaps the first instance of substantial buildings on the body of a pier and an embryonic form of the larger pavilions subsequently characteristic of fully-fledged pleasure piers. A small minaret surrounded by ornate railings topped the roof of each kiosk.

Inside was 'a spiral staircase leading to the roof, whence a magnificent panoramic view of the town, east and west, is obtained'. Together with the cast iron gas lamp standards entwined by serpents that ringed the edge of the pier, the kiosks gave a distinctive Oriental feel to the structure.

The West Pier, then, was architecture and engineering designed to use, consume, relegate and dominate nature, allowing society access to a separate, distinctive world above the sea. The new pier quickly became an important part of seaside Brighton. But it was not a complete success.

The one potentially ruinous flaw in the early years, despite the claims made on the pier's opening, was the instability of the structure. In early August 1868, for example, panic broke out among the crowd on the pier head who feared the structure would collapse. One letter writer to *The Times* explained there were:

Several thousand present at the head of the pier, many seated round, while others were standing and promenading during the performance of a band. There was a sudden commotion among the company, who endeavoured *en masse* to make for the shore end of the pier, ladies fainting and children screaming, some trodden upon, many of whom, I fear, must have been seriously injured. The cry having been raised that the pier was giving way was the cause of what might have proved a great calamity.³⁴

In illustrating the weaknesses of devising a new architecture and built form using cutting edge technology, the incident threatened to undermine public confidence in the pier as a place of pleasure and business. Repeated remedial work to rectify the problem occurred over the following two decades.

For some critics the pier promenade experience was staid and tedious. In the early 1880s, Richard Jefferies, commented on how: 'Most people who go on the West Pier at Brighton walk at once straight to the farthest part. This is the order and custom of pier promenading; you are to stalk along the deck until you reach the end, and there you go round and round the band in a circle like a horse tethered to an iron pin, or else sit down and admire those who do go round and round.'³⁵

Jefferies himself was more interested in using the pier as a voyeurs' platform, looking down to the breaking waves where young female bathers, 'brave womanhood', were rolled and tossed about in the sea.

Aware of the need to make the pier more attractive, the company sought to enliven the visitor experience by providing spectacles using the sea. The pier became a place for visitors to marvel at human ingenuity in conquering the watery elements, most typically through watching spectacles involving swimming and diving in the sea. Both were presented to and seen by visitors as unique and exceptional activities that defied the accepted existing boundaries between society and the nature.

Soon after the pier's opening, Brighton Swimming Club with a membership of local people provided 'aquatic entertainment' for the West Pier Company. The theatrical performances on 3 August 1868 included 'Captain Camp, the one-legged Swimmer [who] will prepare and partake of breakfast on the water', and a member of the swimming Club who 'will perform *Airs upon the Concertina*, and read the Daily Paper whilst lying on the water'. By 1875 the Swimming Club's West Pier swimming matches 'attracted a large crowd of spectators ... Swimming in Brighton is comparatively a new thing, for it dates from 1860 when the Swimming Club was established. Since then, the healthy, useful, and delightful exercise has flourished well'.

Human ingenuity in and under the water was also brought on to the pier itself. In 1889 visitors could pay to witness 'the model undine', Miss Louie Webb, in 'her unique, scientific, and graceful under-water performance in the glass tank' in one of the pier kiosks. While submerged in three feet of water Miss Webb performed a variety of feats including eating sponge cake, drinking milk from a bottle, 'opening and closing the eyes', 'attitude of prayer' and sewing and writing.

The high point of the pier's visitor numbers of 845,000 in 1880 fell to 591,000 eight years later. Even this figure was threatened by the prospect of a new purpose-built pier to be constructed a short distance to the east by the Brighton Marine Palace and Pier Company, the ordering of the words indicating the company's intent on building not so much a pier but a people's palace above the sea. The West Pier could not survive as a promenade with a few added attractions. Radical action was

needed and over the quarter of century from 1890 the passive and sedate promenade pier was transformed into a spectacle and performance based pleasure pier through the addition of large new entertainment buildings. A pier head Pavilion, with an exterior echoing the Oriental design of the earlier kiosks, was completed in 1893, in sight of the emerging Palace Pier. Once the Palace Pier opened in 1901 the two piers entered a period when they raced neck and neck for the position as Brighton's premier seaside attraction.

As Brighton, its visitors and its seafront architecture changed, so the Chain Pier became increasingly antiquated and redundant. By the mid-1860s it was sometimes 'given up to a boisterous crowd of unwashed or overwashed excursionists', something never intended for the genteel structure.³⁶ On the approach to the Chain Pier by the mid-1870s the new Brighton Aquarium was not just a place to look at marine life but provided a plethora of modern entertainments. The old pier could not compete, was closed as unsafe in October 1896 and destroyed in a storm in early December. In its death throes the Chain Pier seemed eager to take its younger competitor with it, the wreckage destroying a 100 feet section of the West Pier above the beach, stranding a clerk and waitresses. Even a century after its destruction publications and an exhibition in Brighton celebrated the significance of the pier.³⁷

Although the West Pier's new Pavilion was praised in the local press as being 'like another Aphrodite emerging from the sea'³⁸ the plans were contested by Brighton Corporation which objected to the proposal for an imposing Oriental dome, echoing those on the Royal Pavilion. Instead the pier owners 'were compelled to adopt the "flattened, dish-cover roof"'.³⁹ The Pavilion was designed as a flexible space for entertainment with an emphasis on music and reportedly seating up to 1700 people. *The Daily Telegraph* acclaimed the building as providing 'Brighton with an establishment which surpasses all its rivals, and may be made to correspond in every desirable detail with the attractive casinos of continental resorts'.⁴⁰ The varied musical entertainments were supplemented with other acts including, for example, a female impersonator and a 'wonderful talking and calculating horse', and attractions including a dog show and a temporary art gallery. In 1903 the Pavilion was converted into a theatre and hosted a vast array of different theatrical plays

and stage entertainments from Shakespeare and 'Russian Ballet', through romances, comedies and thrillers, to opera, musicals and the occasional concert party.

New landing stages running out from the pier head also allowed further exploitation of the sea through the development of public swimming using new bathing facilities, displays of professional diving and aquatic entertainments, and the extension of the paddle steamer excursion business. The steamers provided pleasure trips to nearby resorts or ventured on longer voyages to the Isle of Wight or across the Channel to Boulogne, Dieppe and Trouville. With the new landing stage bathing station the company decided that 'in right appreciation of public feeling' bathing costumes should be worn after nine o'clock.

A new breed of professional marine entertainers also used the new pier head. Professional diving and associated aquatic entertainment was a spectacle that, like swimming, combined demonstrations of physical prowess and skill pitted against nature with elements of theatre. Two noted early West Pier divers were Professor Reddish and Professor Cyril, the latter making the ultimate spectacular sacrifice during his 'sensational bicycle dive' in May 1912. He was killed when, attempting his frequently accomplished exploit, he 'had a side-slip and was thrown heavily on to the deck of the pier, fracturing his skull'.⁴¹ Other West Pier divers used diving boards, some towering 80 feet into the sky. Walter Tong's special feats included his famous 'Moleberg' and fifty feet dives while Zoe Brigden was renowned for her 'wooden soldier' dive involving plunging head first into the sea with arms at her sides.

The success of the Theatre, and the opening of the Palace Pier's central winter gardens in 1910, led the pier company to build a low eight-sided oval Concert Hall, opening in 1916, for musical performances and other events. The exterior decoration included 'Brighton dolphins on shields, set off with heavy festoons. At due intervals on the parapet of the roof arise graceful urns ... [which] ... suggest champagne rather than ashes.' The interior of the building was unbroken by pillars or balconies, the sweep of the iron roof trusses praised for resembling 'the delicate fan lines of a Late Gothic roof'. Commentators, though, were unsure just what to make of the building, describing its 'certain individuality of design' and 'architecture in a holiday mood'.⁴² The opening concert both

evidenced the war being fought across the Channel and celebrated the pleasurable purpose of the structure, with the romantic and patriotic musical programme provided by the King's Royal Rifles silver band of 'wounded soldiers or men invalided out of the Army'.

Its transformation into a pleasure pier complete, in 1919-20 the pier achieved its highest recorded figure of 2,074,000 paying visitors. Seemingly well attuned to holiday fashions and tastes, the West Pier became a major symbol of seaside Brighton entwined with the image and sense of the resort. It was a perpetual subject for visual artists⁴³ and, more significantly, it featured on endless postcards and, particularly during the inter-war years, on guidebook covers and posters promoting images of seaside modernity, fashion and high status.⁴⁴ But it was a chimera to believe that a successful place promotion strategy could use the pier as a symbol of the resort. From the early 1920s the pier began a relatively rapid although bumpy descent, in less than twenty years the annual number of visitors falling by almost two-thirds. Part of the problem was the changing nature of holidaymaking and the increasing enchantment with the pleasures of the sun and sea and, ideally, sand. Brighton as a resort, thrown into intense competition from newer rivals, was also changing and, despite the image being promoted, moved down market. For the West Pier there was increased local competition, not only from the Palace Pier but also from the resort's new seaside attractions.

As the pleasure pier enterprise began to fail the pier company turned to funfair attractions and new mechanical games and amusements to entice back the lost visitors. From April 1927 part of the broad root end of the pier was given over to an 'auto-motor track', described disparagingly by one commentator as a 'toy motor track, which is anything but an ornament to the pier'.⁴⁵ New sun terraces and sunshine shelters opened in 1935, a radical change from what the original Victorian promenaders had wanted and expected of the pier. But these new facilities were poorly patronized, holidaymakers preferring the beach or lured to the delights of the resort's new open-air swimming pools and lido.

The Palace Pier took to the funfair business more readily than the West Pier, and the newer structure was a critical location in Graham Greene's 1938 novel *Brighton Rock*.⁴⁶ Treating the pier and its visitors with remoteness and distaste, Greene's portrayal of Brighton caused consternation in

Brighton Corporation not least because it undermined the official promotion of the town as an elite quality resort. The early postwar film version of the novel returned to the Palace Pier, using the ghost train for the murder of Fred Hale and the landing stages for the death of Pinkie: this was the seaside and its architecture revealed as a fearful and murderous site, unseen and unsuspected by the jolly holidaymaking crowd.

In the late 1940s the West Pier's evolution into a funfair pier was completed. Remnants of the nautical entertainments from the past survived, at least for a while, and aquatic entertainers continuing to perform from the pier head: as late as 1970 The Great Omani, hooded and locked in chains, successfully repeated Houdini's famous 'death dive' from the end of the pier.⁴⁷ Otherwise, however, and although it looked much the same on the outside, a different pier experience was offered to postwar visitors. The former theatre was divided into two, the ground floor becoming the Games Pavilion, later renamed as 'Laughterland', housing an indoor funfair. Upstairs, the relics of Victorian and Edwardian decoration disappeared and the space was given a plain 'Festival of Britain' makeover, becoming the Ocean Restaurant advertised with the slogan 'lunch and tea over the sea'. The Concert Hall was converted to a café with small-scale musical entertainments, while the root end of the pier was transformed into a funfair with helter-skelter, dodgems, a ghost train and amusement arcades.

The changes were not enough to secure a prosperous future. By 1950 more than twice as many people visited the rival Palace Pier, by then proclaimed as 'the brightest jewel in Brighton's crown' and, as before the war, 'the finest pier in the world'. At the same time the novelist Patrick Hamilton was penning one of the most alluring of alternative representations of the West Pier, describing it as 'resembling in the sea a sort of amiable, crouching, weird battleship – a sex-battleship', the object and arena for young people to 'get off' with each other.⁴⁸

By 1956, and drawing on the success of holiday camps, the West Pier was presented as 'a completely self-contained holiday unit on which the visitor to Brighton can spend a first-class holiday without stepping ashore ... except to sleep'. Despite the upbeat presentation of the pier's attractions, the West Pier spiraled into a decline of failing attractions, falling visitor numbers,

declining income and under investment. A similar story could be told for other English piers during this period and by the 1970s even the Palace Pier was increasingly unkempt. The resort's official guidebook was unsurprisingly blind to the problems, in 1968 representing the pier as an exotic cruise liner: 'The West Pier is as brilliant by day as it is by night. To laze in the sun on its many sun decks is like a luxury cruise in the tropics.'⁴⁹ But at the same time Richard Attenborough, making the film *Oh! What a Lovely War*, used the pier as another form of transportation, this time to the horror and tragedy of the First World War.⁵⁰

From the late-1960s, amid threats to close and demolish the pier, its architectural and heritage value suddenly came to the fore. A vocal and popular 'We Want the West Pier' campaign sought to save the structure, it was listed by the Government as a building of historic and architectural interest, and in 1974 a Brighton Council report emphasized 'its immeasurable architectural and historical importance', arguing it was second only to the Royal Pavilion among internationally famous buildings in Brighton and Sussex. This acclaim was in great contrast to the contemptuous comments less than a decade before from the doyen of architectural historians Nikolaus Pevsner, who in 30 closely packed pages on the architecture of Brighton dismissed the West Pier in just two lines.⁵¹

The pier closed at the end of the 1975 summer season. In 1978 the charitable West Pier Trust became the owner, with the objective of saving the pier and returning it to use. Four years later the pier was architecturally listed as Grade I, the only English pier then to have received this highest classification of architectural importance.

With closure, dereliction and ruination, the pier increasingly engaged the public imagination and, in turn, was featured in a vast array of imaginative and factual representations. For the English Tourist board in 1983, for instance, it was a 'monument of dereliction';⁵² a year later the architect, artist and writer Hugh Casson described 'the magnificent West Pier' as 'a tragic site, still just about exists';⁵³ in 1991 Helen Zahavi used the 'gaunt and gutted' structure for the denouement in her novel *Dirty Weekend*;⁵⁴ and it was the location for the murderous endgame in Lynda La Plante's 1998 TV series *Killer Net*. The West Pier, as with many other piers, was again represented as a place of narrow escape or no return; in this case, however, the combination of elements – danger, violence and death,

a fear of nature and the derelict pier, eerie and ghostly architecture where the present confronts the past, the remoteness from safety and society – provided a particularly compelling atmosphere.

The derelict island pier could conjure powerful and sometimes conflicting responses in individuals. For some people it was romantic and picturesque, perhaps invoking wistful memories of holiday pleasures long ago; for others the pier was decrepit and ruined, an emphatic symbol of the decline of Brighton, the English seaside resort and perhaps Britain more generally; for still more others, it was a national architectural jewel to be saved and restored. There could be astonishment at the impact of nature on the pier combined with outrage that it had been allowed to happen, or the structure could be anthropomorphized into a defiant old lady in desperate need of help.

The pier also generated complex emotional feelings, more difficult to comprehend than openly expressed responses, but to do with the relationships between society and nature, the past and present. Although writing almost a century ago, Georg Simmel's interpretation was that in 'the ruin' – and the West Pier had become a seaside ruin par excellence – 'with its extreme intensification and fulfillment of the present form of the past, such profound and comprehensive energies of our soul are brought into play that there is no longer any sharp division between perception and thought'.⁵⁵ By the start of the twenty-first century, the structure originally designed to consume and dominate nature had largely been remade into a natural site and sight. The pier began to fulfill the requirements of an ideal type natural attraction, 'unmarked' and not 'tampered with for touristic purposes'.⁵⁶ With the exception of the lifejacket and hardhat clad intrepid explorers joining the West Pier tour parties, the pier was an unobtainable natural spectacle, available only to view from a distance.

Caught up in Britain's burgeoning heritage industry and visited and acclaimed by government ministers and members of the British royal family, the pier was increasingly represented as national heritage with popular appeal and significance. For the town council, the restored pier was also an important element in the regeneration of Brighton's seafront. The advent of the National Lottery Heritage Fund appeared at last to solve the funding problem, particularly when the organization sought more popular recipients in response to the widespread criticism of the elitist character of its

first awards.⁵⁷ In 1998 the lottery fund agreed 'in principle' to grant the West Pier Trust £14.5 million for the restoration. Into the new century, however, society and nature continued to frustrate the realization of the restoration plans. Proposals for new buildings at either side of the root end, required to match the lottery funding, proved controversial with some groups of local people, while the owners of the Palace Pier were virulently opposed to the proposed lottery fund award to the old rival.

The restoration scheme was dragged into a quagmire of bureaucratic dithering, private sector self-interest, legal challenges, political lobbying, planning inquiries and public protest.⁵⁸ Ten thousand seafront visitors signed a petition against the actions of the Palace Pier. Designs were put forward for new twenty-first century piers. Then, in an 18-month period ending in June 2004, the pier's Pavilion and Concert Hall were spectacularly destroyed in two violent storms and two carefully planned arson attacks by untraced perpetrators. The visually dramatic images received international media coverage, while locally each event drew hundreds of spectators to gaze, record and scavenge for remnants of the structure.⁵⁹

The two most significant national bodies for the historic environment then locked horns to contest the future of the pier. English Heritage, responsible for protecting the historic environment, remained fully supportive of the restoration arguing: 'The West Pier was the most important pleasure pier ever built in terms of its climactic and seminal engineering design, its architectural ambition and as an enduring social symbol of Brighton as the acme of seaside resorts.'⁶⁰ The Heritage Lottery Fund, though, took the alternative view, perhaps demonstrating its inability to be weaned from an elitist high culture perspective on the arts and heritage. It withdrew its financial support, saying that in the context of the intense competition for its funds the project was too risky and uncertain.⁶¹ Further storm damage and six months later, English Heritage abruptly withdrew from the contest, saying the restoration project no longer possessed 'historic credibility'.⁶² A scathing *Daily Telegraph* editorial on the 'tragedy' saw the fate of the West Pier as 'a parable for everything that is wrong with Britain'.⁶³

Away from Brighton, many other British piers have experienced similar traumatic upheavals.⁶⁴ Nationally the number of piers has halved since the peak a century ago, the structures destroyed through fire and storm or demolished following stagnation and decline. Of those that survive, some are closed with uncertain fates, some have been repackaged as heritage piers and restored as part of the process, while in other resorts piers continue as commercial ventures, nowadays most often centred on the seaside amusement business. Individual piers have both reflected the more general character and purpose of the British seaside while also absorbing the qualities and circumstances of a specific resort. Conversely though, if the nineteenth century proponents are to be believed, a pier had a seminal influence on the character and standing of a resort. Today however, amid debates about the social and economic regeneration of older seaside resorts, there is ambivalence about whether British piers are part of the problem to be addressed or whether their rehabilitation can contribute to the solution to a more general seaside regeneration problem.⁶⁵

In one perspective, in the twenty-first century British piers are a redundant and archaic architectural form. The decline of piers, Urry argued, is symptomatic of the transformation of British resorts from once extraordinary places to very ordinary ones upon which a decreasing number of tourists wish to gaze.⁶⁶ Parris, certainly, found nothing enchanting about them, asserting 'piers are not beautiful, novel or architecturally interesting' and rather than having public money spent on them should be 'allowed to slip beneath the waves'.⁶⁷ More sympathetically, Walton has suggested the pier 'symbolizes the demise of a cohesive culture and its replacement by storm-ridden diversity ... Its past has vitality and social resonance: its future, sadly, may belong in the world of the museum, the preservation society and the professional purveyor of nostalgia.'⁶⁸

And yet in full view of the skeletal West Pier, by 2004 the Palace Pier was remarkably different from the stagnating structure of two decades before. Rebranded and renamed as 'the world famous Brighton Pier', it had been transformed into Britain's commercially most successful pier, high in the national rankings for the most popular free tourist attractions with 3.5 million visits a year, and a curious English seaside version of Disneyland dominated by amusement arcades - 'family entertainment centres' - and modern funfair rides.⁶⁹ In the process, the original exotic pier head

theatre had been removed and replaced with a plain prefabricated 'Pleasuredome' for an amusement arcade, the pier head enlarged and strengthened to take the funfair, and the remaining older pier buildings restored but re-clad in plastic. An illustration of the symbiotic relationship between pier and resort and a warning against reading the decline of either as inevitable, the brash modern Brighton Pier was part of a larger rejuvenation of the Brighton seafront over the last two decades, both in turn bound up in the reinvention of Brighton into a fashionable twenty-first century seaside city.⁷⁰

Contrasts and Comparisons

Although initially a British architectural response to the seaside, other Western countries also took to the business of building for pleasure not simply beside but in the sea. In the United States from the late-nineteenth century, many established resorts developed distinctive amusement piers. Although perhaps also used as landing stages and promenades, the primary purpose of amusement piers was simply that of entertaining visitors to the seaside while ensuring they paid for the pleasure.

Especially in resorts with more than one pier or with land-based amusement parks, the competition to attract and keep visitors led to spectacular architectural responses and equally spectacular and distinctive entertainments. As places of spectacle, piers vied to provide the most extreme, impressive, unique and innovative attractions. Size – of a ride, a dance hall or theatre – and fame – of the entertainers or entertainments – mattered, and piers often represented modernity, technology, excess and pleasure at the seaside.

Atlantic City, at the beginning of the twentieth century the east coast's most successful resort, took amusement pier building to an extreme not seen elsewhere: Applegate's Pier opened in 1884, followed by the Iron Pier, the Ocean Pier (the Applegate transformed) the Steel Pier, the Million Dollar Pier and the Steeplechase Pier of 1908. The largest and most successful of the piers proclaimed

a diverse range of attractions including rides, amusement arcades and live performances from nationally popular entertainers. As if to show what modernity could do with nature, many of the piers featured extreme entertainments over the sea: one of the most outlandish and long lasting was the Steel Pier's High Diving Horse, involving a horse and rider jumping from a 60 feet high platform into a 10 feet deep pool. At night the piers were marked out by the use of electric lights and large advertising signs. Atlantic City's market was varied and huge enough for piers to specialize. In 1898 the Iron Pier was remade in the Heinz Pier as a marketing device for the food company, although including a museum exhibiting the Heinz art collection, and an early sun parlour. The Garden Pier of 1913 was intended for the resort's most respectable visitors, its Spanish renaissance architecture and landscaped gardens including a theatre and ballroom, although four decades later it was purchased by the city and subsequently used as an art gallery and museum.⁷¹

The fate of the other Atlantic City piers followed the fate of the resort: prolonged success followed by deep decline and then from the 1970s, and the transformation of Atlantic City into a casino town,⁷² a remaking of the resort and the surviving piers. By the early twenty-first century the reconstructed Steel Pier alone carried traditional seaside rides and arcades while the Central Pier focused on electronic arcade games. Ocean One pier, a 1983 structure on the site of the Million Dollar Pier, took the form of an ocean liner although it housed a mundane shopping mall, and in 2004 was again being remade into 'The Pier at Caesars', a 'luxurious' retail-dining-entertainment complex linked to one of Atlantic City's largest casinos and drawing on design and retailing ideas from Las Vegas.

If the Atlantic City contemporary pier experience is dislocated from the resort's amusement piers of a century ago, south along the New Jersey coastline at Wildwood is the most sustained twenty-first century version of the American amusement pier, proclaimed as the 'largest seaside amusement center in the Western Hemisphere.' A group of what in origin were early twentieth century piers has, since the 1970s, been continually redeveloped and remodeled into a modern amusement park complex.⁷³ Morey's Piers, with 90 rides and two pier-based waterparks, aims to

provide 'a spectacular family recreation experience in an exceptionally safe, clean, friendly and unique environment'. Wildwood is 'safe danger' using a seaside location to rival inland theme parks.

On the west coast of the United States the postwar theme park challenge had contrasting, devastating, consequences for California's amusement piers. As Santa Monica Bay emerged as the seaside playground for the ever-growing Los Angeles, there was a concentrated period of pier building during the early years of the twentieth century. At one point there were five amusement piers were within sight of each other on Santa Monica and Venice Beach and each dominated by funfairs, theatres and dance halls.

Copying freely from its Italian namesake, Venice Beach was planned and developed at the turn of the last century as 'the Coney Island of the Pacific'. To the canals, a lagoon, replica St Mark's Square and gondolas were added two un-Venetian amusement piers, Venice Pier and Ocean Park Pier. The architecture of individual attractions was often fantastic, copying styles from across the centuries and often inventing new ones. Separated by just a short stretch of beach, there was intense competition between the two piers. The newest and most innovative rides were quickly erected. In their 1920s heyday, both piers had Giant Dipper roller coasters; Venice Pier featured a Some Kick roller coaster and Flying Circus, Dragon Slide and Coal Mine rides; and Ocean Park Pier countered with the Hi-Boy roller coaster, Lighthouse slide, the Whip and The Chutes.⁷⁴

Like so many piers elsewhere, both the Venice amusement piers, and others in Santa Monica Bay, were ravaged by storm and fire. Venice Pier burnt down in 1920, Ocean Park Pier in 1924. Both, though, were quickly rebuilt. Despite postwar optimism that the pier business would prosper, the Los Angeles seaside was rapidly changing and the municipal authorities were antagonist. The City of Los Angeles' decision to reconstruct the Venice seafront led to the closure of Venice Pier and its demolition in 1947. More important still, the remaining Bay amusement piers were to face the challenge of Disneyland, opening at nearby Anaheim in 1955, and other inland theme parks seemingly better able to capture the public's imagination in the second half of the century. The first theme park was initially belittled as no more than an amusement park in new clothes. And yet the creation of Disneyland with its focus on the contemporary family as consumer and participant,

and the development of an 'architecture of reassurance' built around the meticulous theming of a confusion of real and imagined worlds, was to relegate the amusement piers into relict entertainments of an earlier age.⁷⁵ In response to the Disney offensive, in 1957 Ocean Park Pier was remodeled into a 28-acre nautical theme park and renamed as Pacific Ocean Park. Among its attractions were the Sea Serpent roller coaster, Neptune's Kingdom, Mystery Island and the Super Sea Circus. The attempt to emulate Disney failed and the pier closed in 1967, the rides auctioned off, and the empty and derelict pier finally demolished in 1973.⁷⁶

A similar fate overtook the Bay's other amusement piers, with the one exception of Santa Monica Pier. In early twentieth century origin a long municipal pier, partly designed to carry a sewage outfall pipe, and joined with a shorter, squarer amusement pier, between the wars Santa Monica Pier was famous for the Whirlwind Dipper and the La Monica Ballroom, a dance palace advertised as the largest in the world.⁷⁷ Following major storm damage and reconstruction, the pier's Pacific Park amusement park opened in 1996.⁷⁸ By then the public appetite for entertainment over the sea had at least in part returned. Ironically, within a few years Disney launched its new California Adventure at Anaheim featuring Paradise Pier as a 'land' providing traditional Californian beach and amusement pier entertainments. It was as though Disney, having destroyed its coastal competition, then set about claiming for its own the essence of the Californian seaside of the past.

But a new Californian pleasure pier form emerged in the last decades of the twentieth century. Echoing the early nineteenth century use of breakwaters and harbour arms as promenades, former commercial shipping or fishing wharves - essentially maritime commercial structures from the past - were rejuvenated and transformed into major tourist destinations, often advertised as heritage sites, but in practice dominated by retail outlets, eating places and visitor attractions.

Santa Barbara's wooden Stearns Wharf, the oldest surviving wooden wharf in California, was built in 1872 to unload timber used to build the expanding town. In the period before the arrival of the railroad, the wharf quickly became important as the only practical way to move goods, agricultural produce and visitors in and out of the area. Redundant as a shipping wharf, since the early 1980s the structure has been transformed into Santa Barbara's major tourist attraction with

shops, restaurants, a marine life centre and fishing from the pier head. Further north along the Californian coast, Monterey has been remade from the sardine town captured in John Steinbeck's 1945 novel, *Cannery Row*, into a major tourist destination built around the seaside heritage industry. Along with a spectacular aquarium and cannery buildings converted into shopping centres, Monterey's Fisherman's Wharf, a wooden pier originally constructed for fishing vessels, nowadays carries craft and gift shops, seafood restaurants and kiosks selling boat trips. San Francisco has another even more touristy Fisherman's Wharf, in the heart of what was the city's great harbour and waterfront industrial area. A key feature of the transformed wharf area is Pier 39, partly built from timbers salvaged from demolished piers, and advertised as San Francisco's 'Number One Attraction'. Pier 39 is based around the recreation of a supposed street scene from a century ago. It also includes an Underwater World, Cinemax Theatre showing 'The Great San Francisco Adventure', restaurants, 110 shops and 'postcard views' of Alcatraz Island with its infamous federal prison.

At first sight San Francisco's Pier 39 has little in common with seaside pleasure piers elsewhere, and yet the essence, a seaside attraction built into the sea and designed to make money out of holidaymakers, is the same. And yet the pier as a form of seaside architecture in the United States has evolved in other ways. Some carry a single restaurant, hotel or home. Across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco, the small resort of Sausalito has a clutch of tiny piers, each supporting just a single building over San Francisco Bay. At the northern edge of Santa Monica Bay, Malibu Pier has a more European look with buildings at the root end and pier head, linked by the narrow neck of the pier. Originally built in 1903 as a wealthy family's yacht mooring, the checkered history of the pier included continual battering by storms and long periods of closure, although by 2004 it was partially reopened and represented as an iconic symbol of a famously exclusive and stylish enclave of Los Angeles.

On mainland Europe a late nineteenth century bout of pier building reflected the British pier influence. In the French resort of Trouville, on the Channel coast due south of Brighton, the 1892 pier was designed by a British engineer, prefabricated in Britain, and initially owned by a London-based company and controlled by an English businessman. The innovative arched cast iron structure was

part landing stage bringing visitors to the resort, particularly from the otherwise inaccessible Le Havre on the other side of the Seine estuary, part a promenade extension to the slightly earlier seafront esplanade, and part pleasure pier with a concert hall and a café restaurant on the pier head.⁷⁹

On the French Riviera coast, the 1880s Nice pier jutted out from the Promenade des Anglais, appropriately enough given the pier was designed James Brunlees, a prolific Victorian engineer, and erected by a British company. The pier's primary purpose was as a casino and the broad pier head just a short distance from the shore carried one of the earliest and largest pier buildings in an elaborate ornamental design. A fire destroyed the building a few days before its inauguration. The replacement Casino de la Jetée⁸⁰, opened in 1891, was both taller and more explicitly Oriental in design, with minarets and a large dome topped by a trident-carrying siren plated in gold. This much disputed pier – unwanted by the municipal authorities, criticized by some local people for obstructing the view of the bay, and abhorred by some architectural commentators – was one of the most extreme of the resort's Belle Epoque buildings. By the inter-war period it was an established feature of the Nice seafront, much painted by Raoul Dufy and a symbol of the resort continually represented on postcards and posters. The German occupying forces destroyed both Trouville and Nice piers in the later stages of the Second World War.

There was also a spate of late-nineteenth century pier building on the German Baltic coast islands of Rügen and Usedom following the emergence of a unified German state in the 1870s and the rapid development of mostly small-scale and respectable seaside resorts. As the name seebrücke (seabridge) suggests, many German piers functioned primarily as promenades and as landing stages for pleasure steamers and were open-deck structures. A few carried substantial buildings including the 1891 pier at Heringsdorf that featured a large and elaborate root end building of ornate woodwork and tall, slender, tiled spires. At Sellin, the pier included restaurants, dance halls, shops, a casino and a 'Kursaal', originally a word used to describe a spa building but transformed into a term for a seaside leisure building and particularly popular in English resorts before the First World War. These Baltic piers were mostly wooden structures, resting on pointed timbers driven into the seabed. While the engineering challenge was reduced because of the minimal tidal rise and fall of the

land-locked sea, the Baltic provided an alternative natural hazard in the form of sea ice threatening to crush a pier to destruction.⁸¹

By the early years of the last century piers had become an essential attraction of most Baltic resorts, along with tree-lined promenades, band-shelters and open-air dance arenas, casinos and spas. Most piers endured at least to the early part of the Nazi era. With the Second World War and the subsequent communist regime, however, the existing piers declined and eventually vanished from the seaside landscape. Sometimes the immediate reasons were traumatic events such as fire or adverse weather, but the political and economic complexion of what by then was East Germany had no place for piers, a seaside architectural form from a rejected past.

And yet in the last decade of the century they were to miraculously reappear. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification a remarkable pier building mania occurred with 17 new piers constructed between 1989 and 2000. It was as though the wheel has turned full circle back to the original enthusiasm for pier building of a century before. Part of the wholesale rejuvenation of the Baltic seaside resorts, the new piers were used as the focal point of the seafront and key resort attractions and given an economic and political significance and even symbolic value. New piers and their renewed resorts were an act of faith that, after two wars and two totalitarian states, the seaside should be an integral part of a modern democratic society.

The new piers depended substantial regional and federal state funding public. Although decked in wood, to withstand the Baltic winter ice they were constructed with huge steel tubes thumped into the seabed and filled with concrete. On or close to the sites of the first generation of piers, most are open decked with no significant buildings. The exceptions include the piers at Sellin and Ahlbeck, both with a pastiche of the original pier buildings, while at Heringsdorf the new structure, the longest in continental Europe and built just metres from the skeleton remains of the earlier pier, has a substantial root end building drawing on the style of the first pier and a modern circular pier head restaurant.

In contrast to the use of piers on the Baltic coast as an explicit vehicle of regeneration and reunification, in contemporary Britain there is ambivalence and dithering towards piers and, indeed,

the seaside more generally. But in both countries, and in the United States with the burgeoning conversion of redundant wharfs and landing stages into heritage piers, the recurring theme represents piers as an architecture of the past. In Germany the seaside reconstruction project looks to the past to make the future, in the United States the maritime industrial past is reused and reinvented for modern amusement purposes, while in Britain the best that can be done with the remains of the seaside past is to reinterpret it as heritage.

Against this dominant motif, however, there are inklings that an original twenty-first century architecture for pleasure building in the sea may materialize. In Britain, for example, imaginative new buildings have been added to some existing piers and innovative although unrealized designs have been proposed for new piers in Brighton and other resorts. But the present-day jostling of conflicting representations and interpretations of piers as the past, as nostalgia, as heritage or as the future, has marginalized and ignored in public debate the abiding pier pleasures. These include the excitement, first learnt in the nineteenth century and equally accessible to the contemporary seaside visitor, of walking on water or peering through the gaps in the deck to the surging and perhaps still mysterious sea below.

Chapter Nine Walking on Water

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