

Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

MORECAMBE'S PIERS

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The pier, though not uniquely British, has been a distinctive feature of many seaside resorts since the mid-nineteenth century. By 'pier' we mean a jetty built out to sea that is used principally for leisure purposes and probably was constructed specifically for them. A pier may also be used for leisure boating. This distinguishes a pier from a jetty used for goods traffic at a harbour.

The National Pier Society suggests that there are around 60 piers still on the British coastline and around 40 former piers that have been lost. The pier at Ryde (Isle of Wight) was the first in 1814 and Southend pier (then and now the longest) was the second in 1830.

The first in North-West England was Southport pier, which opened in 1860. The 1860s was a major period of pier building – 22 in Great Britain – with Blackpool North in 1863, Lytham in 1865, New Brighton in 1867 and Blackpool Central in 1868. The General Pier and Harbour Act of 1861 helped the developers of piers.

Morecambe's first pier was mooted in 1867, building began in 1868 and it opened on 25 March 1869. Until 1914 steamers could tie up at the seaward end. 'The Pier' became 'Central Pier' when the 'West End Pier' opened in 1896.

With the railways delivering ever-increasing numbers of summer visitors – often packed into the different Wakes Weeks of the northern mill towns – the race was on to provide the visitors with more entertainment in the resort. The prime sites with the largest footfall along the sea front were already in use, therefore building a pier out to sea with entertainment venues built on top of it was an attractive commercial prospect.

The shallower the sea out from the shore, the cheaper to build and the longer the pier could be, with more space for revenue-generating venues. Moreover, if rival resorts were building piers your resort had to keep up, and so Morecambe followed the lead of Southport, Blackpool and Lytham.



Central Pier Pavilion., early 1900s (Source: Red Rose Collection, Lancashire County Council, gratefully acknowledged)



West End Pier, early 1900s (Source: Red Rose Collection, Lancashire County Council, gratefully acknowledged)



West End Pier, early 1900s (Source: Red Rose Collection, Lancashire County Council, gratefully acknowledged)

The commercial imperative of a pier rested on two features – minimising construction costs and maximising the income from visitors. Very many Victorian piers were built similarly – cast-iron legs and wrought-iron bracing topped by a wooden deck with a broader area, often at the seaward end, for a major entertainment building (a 'pavilion').

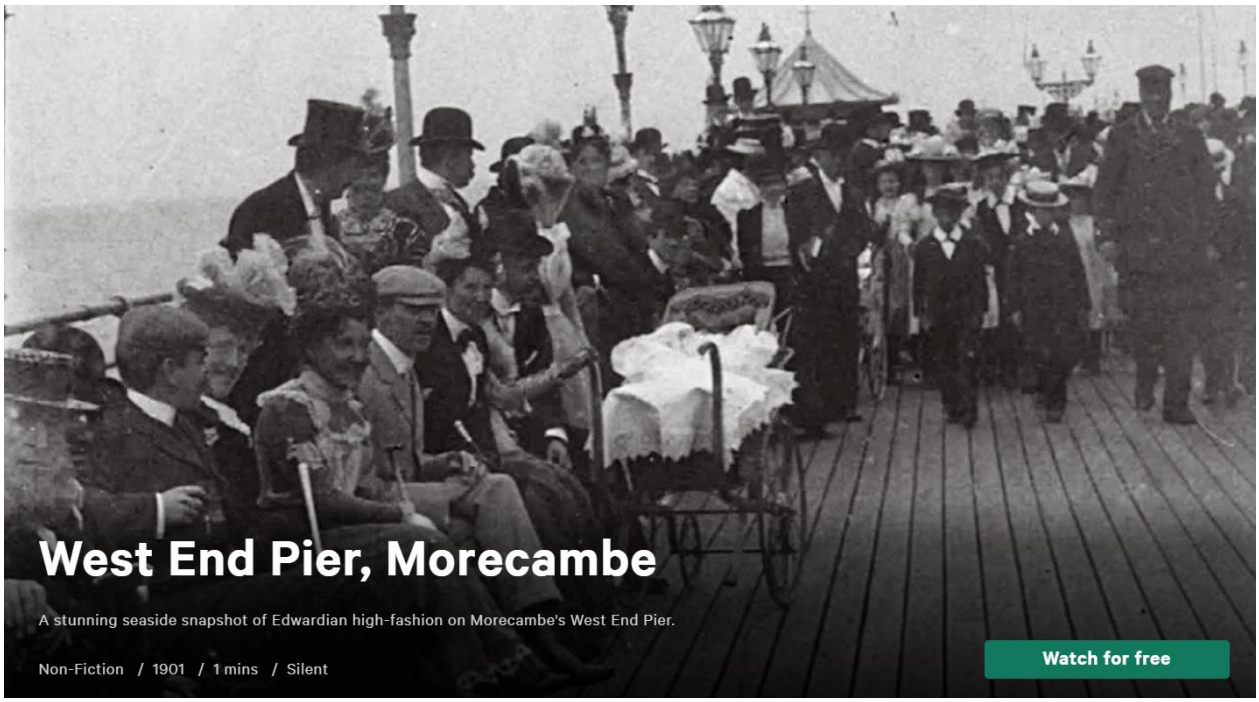
Central Pier was actually bought second-hand after having lain in Liverpool Docks for two years because it had been rejected by its original purchaser in Valparaiso, Chile. It was a good deal for the pier company, reducing their costs greatly.

Maximising revenue, in competition with the land-side theatres and halls, meant getting as many paying customers onto the pier for as long as possible and as often as possible. The entry fee to the pier – to generate income and keep out the unruly – admitted you to a world of lavish, even exotic decoration (it was nicknamed the 'Taj Mahal' on Central Pier), stalls and shops, and places to eat and drink run by the pier owner or leased to others.

The entertainment venue had to cater for tastes throughout the day and evening – shows for the children; the comics, acrobats, singers and magicians of the musical hall; the theatre- and concert-goers; and above all those who wanted to dance.

Central Pier had capacity for 2000 dancers in the 1930s and facilities for roller skating. The piers provided whatever was popular at the time, which evolved. You could attract more visitors if you booked bigger-name entertainers than rival resorts, for the whole summer season or for a shorter run.

The piers were so commercially successful that they were extended – Central Pier in 1871 and 1898, West End Pier in 1898. A short silent film by Mitchell and Kenyon shows West End Pier in 1901 and it is available here:



Mitchell & Kenyon 1901 film - Morecambe's West End Pier is a hive of high fashion

[Watch West End Pier, Morecambe online - BFI Player]

Looked at sceptically, a pier was a fragile risky structure, exposed to winter storms and liable to accidental or deliberate fires given its many wooden elements.

Morecambe's piers had a chequered history. West End Pier was breached in two places by a storm in 1903, damaged again in 1907, and the Pavilion was severely fire-damaged in 1917.

More damage was caused by a storm in 1927. Each time it was worth rebuilding and repairing the pier. Central Pier suffered a major fire at the seaward end in 1933. Again, a major rebuild was commercially justified, allowing more space for dancing and roller skating.



The fire on Central Pier in 1933 (Source: Red Rose Collection, Lancashire County Council, gratefully acknowledged)

Morecambe's declining tourist trade after the late 1950s could no longer support the piers or justify their rebuilding when damaged. West End Pier suffered its final storm damage in 1977 and it was demolished in 1978. Decking on Central Pier collapsed in 1986 and it closed for good. Following fires in 1987 and 1991, it was demolished in 1992.

All that remains of the two piers is the tell-tale widening of the Promenade from where the piers projected into Morecambe Bay – near the Clock Tower for Central Pier and at the junction of the Promenade and Regent Road for West End Pier.

Details about the Stone Jetty can be found in Guide 13 in this series.

Reading

Bingham R K 1990 *Lost Resort? The Flow and Ebb of Morecambe.* Milnthorpe: Cicerone Press

Videos of Central Pier

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