

## A Palace at the End of the Pier

Most of the Victorian and Edwardian pier pavilions are long gone, leaving little but postcards to remind us of marine palaces like the Taj Mahal (Morecambe Central Pier, 1897) or the Indian Pavilion (Blackpool North Pier, 1874), sumptuous halls splendidly sited above the sea. Eugenius Birch, engineer and designer of 14 piers from Margate in 1853-6 to Plymouth in 1884, was the creator of Blackpool's Indian Pavilion. Its Oriental styling is at once typical of the image of the seaside and atypical of the reality of the giant pier pavilions, which as designs were both theatres and theatrical, uniquely visible attractions in their own right.

Apart from the ubiquitous shelters and kiosks, at least 74 sizeable pavilions were added to existing piers or constructed as integral parts of new piers between 1867 and 1916, 44 of them large theatres or multi-purpose halls. Of the large pavilions, only eight remain in any recognisable state; redevelopment, storms, fire and decay have seen off all but the last traces of the pleasure domes. The most decorative, if increasingly decayed, of the survivors are on Brighton West Pier, the seaward or head end Pavilion (1893/1903) and the centrally sited Theatre (1916). The Brighton Palace Pier shore end Concert Hall (1910) also survives, but in an altered state. Also altered but extant are Eastbourne Pier's 1901 Theatre and the Bognor Regis Pier Cinema (1911). Aberystwyth Pier Pavilion, opened 1896, remains, although with unattractive cladding. The least altered of the ornate pavilions is also the oldest survivor, the head end Llandudno Pier Pavilion of 1883. Great Yarmouth's Wellington Pier Pavilion of 1903 is the eighth and most peculiar survivor, its clean lines a cross between Art Nouveau and continental exhibition architecture. Externally it is the least altered, if neither the most typical nor the most popular, of all the remaining pavilions.

Severely functional sheds have taken the place of many of the marine palaces, giving shelter to amusements but adding no aesthetic value and obliterating the memory of some astounding buildings created by a largely unknown group of provincial architects. Some architectural purists, fond of the clean and elegant ironwork curves of unadorned piers, feel no regret at the passing of the bulbously domed and exotically decorated pavilions, as they broke the smooth line of the pier. But this almost complete loss of unaltered examples has encouraged the growth of a myth that all pier buildings were designed in variations of an Oriental style, a style which began its life at the seaside with Brighton's Royal Pavilion and has now come to encompass all seaside building. The true story is more complex, the product of changes in pier and pavilion styling introduced by architects and engineers, in their search for appropriate forms for pleasure buildings.

The pleasure pier is a descendant of the docks and jetties of the early 18th century, the working piers of the industrial revolution. The first seaside piers were designed as working piers, to cater for passenger vessels bringing visitors to the infant resorts but, for the visitor, pleasure and stimulation, either from the view or from the sense of walking above water, were often

intrinsic elements of the business of the pier. The superstructure of these early piers was equipped, though sparsely, with buildings: shelters, a tollhouse and perhaps a piermaster's house. The first pier designers were not immediately faced with the problem of finding a new form for their pier buildings, since neither the pier itself nor the idea of charging for entry were recent innovations. They could look for inspiration to toll roads with their tollhouses and dock or canal-side buildings.

The first resort passenger pier, at Ryde, Isle of Wight, built 1813-14, made a formal public statement in architectural terms, its 1,250 ft length being dotted with a series of tiny shelters and its entrance marked by a sturdy gate with an adjoining, classically styled tollhouse. Thus the pleasure pier began its architectural life in classical style in the early 19th century.

But already the public perception of the sea had undergone a change; where once seaside buildings had turned their faces from the shore, from around 1800 new crescents looked towards the sea, now an object of picturesque interest if not yet beauty. From the pier, the sea and shore might be viewed with little real danger, and even the most stark and functional resort pier could be used for pleasurable purposes.

Pier building progressed slowly, and initially with few facilities for promenaders. Brighton Chain Pier (1823), a suspension pier with towers in Egyptian style, was followed in the 1830s by four piers in the south of England which were little more than landing stages with shelters. Also in the 1830s the Chain Pier, built as a basic landing stage, became a pleasure pier with the addition of refreshment rooms and small shops installed in the bases of the pier towers. A small pavilion was erected at Ryde Pier head in 1842, and the piers of the 1850s made more concessions to the profits to be gained from promenaders, by looking beyond classical formality to the architecture of pleasure.

Margate Pier (1853-6) was just another landing stage but, instead of a classical tollhouse, Eugenius Birch equipped it with a tiny octagonal pavilion decorated in perfunctory fashion with a cupola. Birch had borrowed the picturesque style of the garden pavilion, a building intended to provide pleasure both in aspect and prospect; it was an ideal choice. Piers continued to be built with classical trappings, even Southport Pier (1859-60), often accorded the title of first pleasure pier. Its Georgian tollhouse was in keeping with the adjacent Victoria Baths and the Promenade Lodge at the south end of the Promenade, and the severe style proved no barrier to the crowds. The tollhouse design might have been better suited to a railway, the speciality of the pier's designer, James Brunlees.

Blackpool North Pier, built 1862-3, is significant for the introduction by its designer - Birch again - of numerous pavilions of Italianate form at intervals along the pier sides. Birch used a similar arrangement at Brighton West Pier (1863-6) which crucially took up the Oriental theme popular in Brighton since the erection of the Royal Pavilion. The Pavilion, designed c1815 by John Nash for George IV when Prince Regent, represented a fantasy palace for a perfect monarch. Its architecture brought together elements of Chinese

and Indian design in an exotic mix which transformed the original forms into a picturesque vision of built pleasure.

Oriental styles had periodically held a fascination for English designers and architects since the 17th century. First Chinese, then Indian, then Japanese, then some vaguely Oriental combination would be briefly fashionable, particularly in the decorative arts and in pleasure buildings, notably garden buildings. The richness of decoration and colour contrasted with classical severity, and also acted as a mechanism for the display of wealth. Chinese taste made its first impact in the 17th century, then again in the mid-18th century, with Indian architectural motifs popular around the end of the 18th and the early 19th century. Pattern books of Oriental design were available from c1839, and Oriental 'objets' were a passion in artistic circles in the 1860s, when Japanese style was a strong influence. By the 1880s there was a mania for Japanese styled furniture and decoration, but architecturally, a generalised Oriental style was seen as appropriate for pleasure buildings and little else. It was perceived as ephemeral, not a serious style, and thus it rarely progressed beyond the garden or seaside; it was, however, a hugely successful style for transmuting pleasure into profit.

The Indian style had previously been used in Brighton when William Porden rebuilt the Royal Stables for the Prince of Wales, later George IV, in 1803-8. The choice of style was the Prince's but, for his rebuilding of the Brighton Pavilion, he initially chose the Chinese style, asking Porden to produce a design in 1805. This would have complemented the Pavilion's existing Chinese interior, but the Prince found Porden's design unsatisfactory and changed not only the architect but the style. First Humphry Repton and then Nash suggested designs in the Indian style, the Nash design being built and completed with a new Chinese interior by 1821. The fantastic Gothic Hindoo motifs of the Pavilion remained popular in Brighton long after they became unfashionable elsewhere, so Birch's vaguely Oriental West Pier appears an entirely logical addition to the resort.

The superstructure of the West Pier was not wholly Oriental, as the two pavilions nearest the shore were of a Second Empire style, and this formal approach was repeated by Birch at Deal (1863-4) with its small number of Italianate pavilions. Neither the Oriental style nor the erection of pier pavilions were popular in the late 1860s, with 11 of the 15 piers begun in 1864-9 being plain landing stages with the minimum of functional buildings; even the Birch piers at Aberystwyth (1864-5) and Eastbourne (1866-72) conform to this pattern.

There was just a hint of a more pleasure-centred approach to pier buildings towards the end of the 1860s. At Scarborough (1866-9) Birch introduced a tented style pavilion at the pier entrance, with a classical concert shelter at the head, while Brunlees' Rhyl Pier (1867) was equipped with shops, a restaurant and a bandstand. The most important pier of this era was at New Brighton (1866-7) where Birch designed a central saloon with an observation tower, shelters and restaurants. It was the first to place more emphasis on pier entertainment than the pier as landing stage; increased capital was required

for this type of venture, but the financial returns from promenaders spending more time and money on the pier would be enhanced. The style remained obstinately classical, as if Oriental mannerisms were still thought fashionable only in Brighton. The New Brighton Pier Pavilion was the forerunner of the marine palaces, albeit on a small scale; it had a domed tower, but its overall decorative style was a combination of Regency and Second Empire.

The seminal pier, inevitably by Birch, was not Brighton West but Hastings, which was begun in 1869. It was the final pier of the 1860s but the first in many ways: first to sport a grand pavilion, first to have it included as an integral part of the design, and opened on the first statutory Bank Holiday, 5 August 1872. Moreover, both the Pavilion, with accommodation for 2,000 people, and the two tollhouses, were in the Oriental style, the Pavilion being a jumble of onion domes and tall finials; the elegant tollhouses were tiny domed octagonal boxes. Back on the south coast, Birch had perhaps reasoned that the Oriental style would be acceptable, indeed expected, for the first of the marine palaces.

Although Hastings Pier was immediately successful, it was to be 16 years before a similarly large pavilion was built as part of a new pier, on Folkestone Victoria Pier in 1888. The seaside held many potentially better investment opportunities in the 1870s and the depressed 1880s than the difficult business of building pier head theatres; only seven pier pavilions were built in the 1870s and 13 in the 1880s. It was only from the 1890s that investors were keen to back pier pavilions, when visitor numbers had been massively increased by a combination of longer holidays and extra spending power. Then the marine palaces became an opulent but efficient means of turning the people's pleasure into profit. The peak of pavilion building came in the 1890s, when 23 were erected, but the boom continued into the 1900s with another 20 in the first decade of the new century, including giants such as Great Yarmouth Wellington Pier Pavilion and Southport Pier Pavilion.

The piers of the 1870s and early 1880s were largely landing stage piers, their ornamental ironwork often picking up the Oriental theme, although their shelters and entrance buildings still displayed a wide range of styles. Pier shelters tended towards the Italianate or classical, tollhouses and entrance kiosks mimicked garden pavilions with octagonal forms and ogee caps, while the few larger pavilions combined Gothic with classical and the occasional touch of the Orient. Twenty-six piers were begun in the 1870s and early 1880s, and of these only seven were provided with pavilions, none of them large. These included the Birch designed Hornsea Pier (1879) and his Bournemouth Pier (1878-80), where the Pavilion was a two storey Indo-Gothic entrance building topped by a clock tower. G. S. Bridgman's Paignton Pier (1878-9) had a Grand Pavilion and Ramsgate Pier (1879-81) a Pavilion with a camera obscura at the pier head. The Ramsgate Pier shelters were classical, although the entrance kiosks were octagonal pavilions. Skegness Pier (1880-81) had a curious combination of Oriental pier head Pavilion with a large central dome, Italianate shelters and a substantial entrance building with Gothic and Second Empire elements.

It was in the 1870s that pier pavilions began to be added to existing piers, the first and one of the greatest being the Blackpool North Pier Indian Pavilion (Birch, 1874). Given Birch's preference for non-Oriental styles away from the south coast, it comes as no surprise to find that his original suggestion for the pavilion design was in keeping with the Italianate shelters. He was overruled by the North Pier Company's Chairman, H. C. McCrea, who wanted an Oriental style, perhaps partly in response to the vogue for eastern decoration (although this is a remarkably early use of the style in a theatre) and partly to give Blackpool its own fashionable 'Pavilion', to bring the grace and novelty of the southern seaside to the North Pier. Certainly it was an attempt to keep the interest of the upper end of the tourist market, by providing a high class attraction; the Central Pier, opened 1868, catered for the excursionists. Birch and McCrea visited the India Office in London, and together chose the Temple of Binderabund as the model for the new Pavilion. It turned out to be Birch's best building, but was no more immediately influential than his Brighton West Pier or Hastings Pier Pavilion.

Margate Pier was the next to acquire a Pavilion in 1875-8, a small structure with an observation tower; then in 1882-4 Southsea, Llandudno, Herne Bay and Weston-super-Mare all acquired large, shore-based pier Pavilions, a rather inelegant collection, ranging in style from Arts and Crafts vernacular through Second Empire to the iron and glass winter garden of Llandudno. Clearly, even by the mid-1880s, architects had not hit upon a set form or style for pier buildings beyond the small classical shelter; Birch's Oriental work had not provided an influential enough model, probably because the Oriental style was regarded even by Birch more as a function of its South Coast situation than a response to the need for a style suitable for all seaside pleasure buildings. The Blackpool North Pier Indian Pavilion marked the beginning of a change in attitude towards the Oriental style which, by the 1880s, was perhaps more popular among visitors to the resorts than their architects.

The Folkestone Victoria Pier Pavilion, opened 1888, and Southend Pier Pavilion (1889) were the first of the next generation of theatres built along with new piers, and were far from Oriental. The Southend Pavilion was an arcaded hall with a small central dome and corner domes, while the Folkestone Pavilion was a more robust version of the same pattern, its main feature a large domed space with four corner towers. A canopy ran round the Pavilion above the ground floor, and the building would not have looked out of place as a High Street theatre. Worthing Pier's 1889 Pavilion was in solid Second Empire style, while the Lowestoft South Pier Pavilion (1891) was an Arts and Crafts cottage. The next pier to sport an Oriental pavilion was again in Sussex, this time at St Leonard's (1888-91), where F. H. Humphreys produced a daintily elegant shore end structure in a basic Second Empire form, but with distinctly Oriental arcades and ironwork.

Eugenius Birch died in 1884 without provoking any response from his architectural peers to Blackpool's Indian Pavilion; his final pier was the plain Plymouth landing stage of 1884. His use of the Oriental style, starting with

Brighton West Pier in 1863-6 and culminating in the Indian Pavilion eight years later, finally bore fruit in the 1890s, the decade of the marine palace. Eastern styles as interior decoration for inland theatres were by then outmoded, but capital was available for seaside entertainment buildings and no other styles had the correct overtones of pleasure, luxury and novelty. It was in Sussex and Lancashire, where Oriental buildings were equated with the more discerning visitor, that the Oriental style came to dominate the giant pier theatres. There, the form of a typical pier pavilion grew to be a rectangular, five-domed structure, with a large central dome marking the main hall and smaller domes at the four corners, all dressed with a varying amount of Oriental decoration. This seems little enough to ensure the place of the Oriental style as the most appropriate architectural form for the seaside, but the marine palaces were mirrored by all manner of smaller structures in similar style, from kiosks to bandstands to railings, completing the Orientalisation of the image of the English sea front. Many seaside buildings remained resolutely classical in form, or were simply more decorative versions of their inland equivalents. The difference between seaside and inland architecture thus became the decorative pleasure building, an Anglicised interpretation of Oriental embellishment.

Blackpool South Pier (1892-3), then known as the Victoria Pier, was the first of the decade's pleasure piers, with 36 shops, shelters and a bandstand. Its Pavilion was designed by J. D. Harker and opened soon after completion of the pier. It was a cross between a four-storey winter garden and the five-domed pavilion model, the onion motifs of the corner domes giving it an Oriental air. The Brighton West Pier Pavilion opened in 1893 and in the same year Murdoch and Cameron built the unusual Clacton Pier Pavilion. It was a two-storey, polygonal, iron structure with curved ends and a first floor balcony. Morecambe West End Pier Pavilion (1893-6) was a classic five-domed model with arcades, built at the same time as the pier. Two Pavilions were added to Morecambe Central Pier in 1897, one of which was fine stylistic competition for Blackpool's Indian Pavilion. It was known as the Taj Mahal of the North, and was an intricate array of domes, towers, arcades and balconies on four levels, designed by Mangnall & Littlewoods of Manchester. It was the most spectacular of the 1890s palaces, outdoing its new neighbours at Blackpool, the North Pier Theatre (1897) and the Central Pier Pavilion (1897), both by R. Knill Freeman.

On Colwyn Bay Victoria Pier was built the last pavilion of the century in 1899-1900, a fivedomed model by experienced seaside architects, Mangnall & Littlewoods and, although the 1900s saw pier building drop dramatically (Fleetwood was the last of the era in 1910), pavilions continued to be erected apace, often on the five domed plan. Brighton Palace Pier Theatre (1901) and Southport Pier Pavilion (1902) were both Anglicised Oriental in areas where this was the expected style but Great Yarmouth, with no particular Oriental tradition, followed the fivedomed model for the first Britannia Pier Pavilion (1902). Its plan was adapted and enlarged to include a continuous first floor balcony and ground floor arcade. The whole was highly decorative but the

style was more Second Empire than Oriental, and the building was provided by Boulton & Paul of Norwich, the specialist conservatory manufacturers.

Similarities between this and the Weston-super-Mare Grand Pier Pavilion (1903-4) suggest the same firm was responsible. The Brighton West Pier Pavilion was converted to a theatre in 1903; the design was lightly Oriental with five open, domed towers (chatri).

In general, the marine palaces were little affected by the Edwardian architectural style wars, which saw buildings designed in Arts and Crafts, Art Nouveau, Classical and Free styles, the latter an effort to find a new British style for large buildings. A few pier pavilions were produced without Oriental trappings or the five-domed plan, notably the Great Yarmouth Wellington Pier Pavilion (1903) by the Borough Surveyor, J. W. 'Concrete' Cockrill. This Art Nouveau design was influenced by European exhibition buildings and, though it includes towers, domes and finials, its sculptured lines are far from Oriental; it certainly has the novelty value useful for seaside attractions, since its design is unique for a pier pavilion.

Style wars were fought elsewhere, over more important structures than mere pleasure buildings; the architect of the St Anne's-on-the-Sea Pier Pavilion of 1904, oblivious to wider concerns, produced an excellent Moorish design in true Lancashire Oriental tradition. It is likely that several of the 24 pavilions added to older piers between 1900 and 1916 were prefabricated structures, obtained direct from factories. Even if not prefabricated they were severely functional; those at Cleethorpes and Cromer Piers, both built 1905, were basically barrel-vaulted halls with little decoration. They were typical of the small Edwardian pier pavilion, often a domed or barrel-vaulted hall and a sheltered external arcade, with no Oriental touches and little in the way of decoration. The larger Bognor Regis Pier Cinema and Theatre (1911-12) took this tendency to the extreme, with a building which resembled a block of brickbuilt flats at the shore end of the pier.

The seaside resorts which were still expanding did add more decorative pavilions, as at Southsea South Parade Pier in 1907, when local entrepreneur and architect, G. E. Smith, replaced the previous burnt-out pavilion with a spacious building containing a theatre and dance hall. The Great Yarmouth Britannia Pier Pavilion was replaced twice because of fire, the new buildings opening in 1910 and 1914; both were on the same large scale as the original, the 1910 model having a towered Baroque facade which hid a large barrel-vaulted hall. The 1914 version was decorated with what appeared to be half-timbering; it burnt down in 1954. Baroque and other Classical decorative elements did make their appearance on the piers, adding light formality to the polygonal Brighton West Pier Concert Hall (1916) and giving a formal facade to the Brighton Palace Pier Concert Hall (1910), built in the winter garden style.

Edwardian pavilion design was eclectic, drawing from the wide range of historical styles available to architects, but lacking in the 19th century sense of a search for a suitable form for pleasure buildings. The Oriental image, so strong in the south and north-west, began to fade as new pavilions paraded

different decorative motifs and old pavilions were altered, burnt out or blown down. Less capital was available for investment at the seaside, and other attractions were becoming more important than spending time on the pier.

Few marine palaces have survived to display the delights of Victorian and Edwardian creativity. Gone are all the larger works of Eugenius Birch, and all of the Oriental palaces in the north-west, where the style found its home; the Moorish Pavilion at St Anne's survived as late as 1974 before being burnt out. Nothing but the image lingers, of flamboyant ironwork, towers and shining domes, and it remains strangely influential. The Oriental style made a strong impact not on seaside architecture, which in reality it affected quite slightly over only two decades, but on the mind of the visitor. If resorts now choose to rebuild their sea fronts in traditional style, it is possible that the result may be an even greater degree of Anglicised Orientalism in twenty-first century guise.