

For Amusement Only

The quest for novelty and amusement did not always have a significant architectural impact at the seaside; indeed, young holidaymakers have always spent many hours constructing sandcastles, that most ephemeral of building types. Ball games on the beach, paddling, exploring rock pools and simply sitting in the sun are but a few of the holiday amusements which left no trace beyond the postcard. Seaside entrepreneurs, however, tried to divert their potential customers from the freedom of the beach by offering, at a price, different and enjoyable ways to look at the view, to socialise and generally to pass the time of day. Just a few of these ephemeral attractions still stand.

Once the social and sporting activity of swimming took over from medicinal sea bathing in the early 20th century, the sea itself seemed less inviting and swimming pools, safer, predictable and with more opportunities for socialising, rose in popularity. Sea water swimming baths were built at Tynemouth in 1909 and Southend in 1915, but the most architecturally important of the seaside baths were products of the 1920s and 1930s. If the beach or the pool began to pall, the visitor could take the lift to the clifftop to inspect the view. The first cliff railway was opened at Scarborough in 1875, though a hoist had been installed at Saltburn in 1870; this rickety arrangement was replaced by a railway in 1883-84. Folkestone, Hastings, Lynmouth and Douglas had one or more cliff railways by the early 20th century. Several of the upper and lower station buildings still ornament the coastline. An amusing failure at Clacton was the Reno Electric Stairway, opened 1902. An escalator carried passengers up the 40 ft high cliff for a penny a ride, but most people preferred to make the gentle ascent on foot and the Reno Company removed their machinery in 1908.

Once on the cliff or promenade, the visitor could stroll past ornate cast-iron bandstands and shelters, listening to 'nigger minstrels' or the ubiquitous German bands. The bandstand might have been ordered direct from the manufacturers' catalogue, as with an example at Hastings. The often equally decorative clock towers sported by some resorts were more likely to have been the subject of architectural competitions, as at Brighton in 1881 and Margate in 1887. The view from the promenade was free, but the provision of an observation tower could persuade visitors to part with their money in exchange for the thrill of looking down on the resort from on high.

Warwick's Revolving Towers Company was the prime purveyor of seaside views around the turn of the century, with observation towers in Great Yarmouth, Morecambe, Douglas, Scarborough and probably Margate, and another planned in Southend. The first of the revolving towers, wonderfully inelegant structures, was erected at Great Yarmouth in April 1897 by London engineer Thomas Warwick. His company was licensed to build and operate the towers by the Revolving Observation Tower Patent Syndicate, who owned the tower patent, registered in England in August 1894 by Morris Smith and Horace Pettit, one of whom was Warwick's brother-in-law. Smith and Pettit's patent was for a latticework tower,

hexagonal in plan, up and down which a base platform moved, powered by a steam engine and partly balanced by counterweights. The passenger platform rotated on tracks in the base platform as it was raised on its steel cable, the power being provided by electricity generated by the steam engine. The first Revolving Tower was built in Atlantic City, New Jersey. The Great Yarmouth Warwick Tower, sited almost on the beach just north of Britannia Pier, was gaily decked out with flags and rose from an Indian-style pavilion at its base. Its circular passenger platform was topped by a canopy.

The Morecambe Warwick Tower opened on 30 June 1898, and had the same design as the Great Yarmouth model. The Tower was 150 ft high and 200 people could sit on the revolving platform. The Scarborough Tower, sited on the North Cliff, also opened in 1898 and the Douglas Tower followed in 1899, but was burnt down on 28 August 1900. The Margate Tower appears to have been in place by mid-1902, when a design for its base pavilion was produced.

Although Warwick's Revolving Towers had been supported by shareholders throughout England, the Company was in trouble by late 1900 and wound up in 1902. The Morecambe Tower was taken down that year, while the Scarborough Tower lasted until 1907, when it was removed as an eyesore. The date of demolition of the Margate Tower is unknown. A company was formed by a Great Yarmouth consortium in 1902 to take over that resort's Tower, for which they paid £2,032, and Great Yarmouth Revolving Tower Limited ran the venture until the company was wound up in 1922. The Yarmouth Tower's revolving mechanism had been found to be faulty after the First World War, so the platform could only be raised and lowered, and there were also problems with subsidence, but the Tower continued to operate until 1939. With the onset of war, the Council refused to renew the Tower's lease, and the structure was demolished for scrap in 1941.

If the visitor was in search of more active and perhaps more sociable pastimes than watching the view go by, the entrepreneurs were happy to provide venues for skating and dancing, though these buildings have proved hardly less ephemeral than Towers. The first bout of rinkomania occurred in Britain between 1841 and 1844, when an ice substitute comprising hog's lard and a mixture of salts was used to provide year-round 'ice' skating. The craze had run its course by 1844, as rinkers tired of the smelly 'ice' in the Glaciarium, as the venue was often called, and it was not until the 1870s that skating caught on again. Experiments in refrigeration resulted in workable ice rinks by the mid-1870s, and these were popular as a seaside novelty; a rink opened at Southport on 10 January 1879. By coincidence, roller skating was at its peak at the same time. American inventor James Leonard Plimpton patented the first guidable wheeled skate in New York in 1863 and, after successfully opening rinks in New York and Cincinnati, sent his agent to England in January 1874 to promote skates and rinks. Plimpton was in search of the middle class market, which was keen to pursue any activity which combined healthy recreation with moral control and, for the young, a chance for informal socialising. The first rink opened at Brighton's Corn Exchange in

February 1874, and rinkomania was at its height by spring 1876, when Brighton had six rinks and London around 50. A skating rink opened at Clacton in 1876.

Twenty-nine skating rink companies were floated in 1876, but 21 collapsed as the boom deflated, and the physical evidence of the mania is sparse, since many rinks were conversions of halls, circuses and other suitable spaces. The *British Architect* despaired of skating rink design, preferring breweries or factories to the many miserably plain and inartistic rinks thrown together by clumsy hands; it felt that skating rinks would continue to be much like railway stations - mere roofs, more or less elegant in design, for the purpose of protecting rinkers from the rain. The middle classes began to look for other sociable sporting activities; bicycling, lawn tennis and golf all appeared suitable. The 'cycling' craze began 1868-70, and at first the machines were hired for social use in restricted areas; a bicycle rink existed at Laxey Glen Gardens in the Isle of Man from around 1880 until 1910. Lawn tennis was patented in 1874, and Mostyn Estate architect G. A. Humphreys produced a design for a tennis hall at Llandudno in 1892. The Royal North Devon Golf Club, founded at Westward Ho! in 1864, with its clubhouse in a tin hut, was the first of many English resort clubs. Again, few early golf buildings survive unaltered.

Ice skating slowly declined in popularity from the 1880s and, though roller skating enjoyed brief bursts of enthusiasm in the 1880s and 1890s, both sports were in the doldrums by the turn of the century. An improved American roller skate then ensured another period of rink building and company formation, particularly at the seaside, where the boom year was 1909, when 14 rink companies were incorporated. The American Roller Rink Company owned 23 of the 526 roller skating rinks in Britain in 1910. At South Shields in 1909, the Canadian Roller Skating Company hired local architect Joseph H. Morton to produce a design for the Olympia Roller Skating Rink, to be sited on the sea front. The rink was no more than a large shed, but the entrance was decked out with a dome and much Indo-Baroque imagery; the transatlantic novelty of roller skating still needed traditional decoration.

For working class Victorian visitors, effectively barred from seaside skating rinks by the usual 6d (7 ½ p) charge, dancing was the most easily available and popular active recreation. Lacking encouragement from the Royal court, ballroom dance had declined in popularity among the upper classes in the late 19th century, but had been slowly democratised and had become a mass leisure pursuit. Blackpool's Tower Ballroom (1898-99) must be the prime example, but many smaller late Victorian seaside multi-purpose halls also based their success on provision for dancing. The Hall by the Sea, which had existed on Margate sea front since 1867, was reconstructed as a ballroom and reopened February 1874; although many other attractions were built at Dreamland, as it eventually became known, dancing was a prime attraction until 1940. Open-air dancing was introduced on Blackpool Central Pier in 1870 and became so popular it was advertised as the People's Pier. The arrival of the barn dance from America around 1888, followed by the Boston

Waltz, the Tango and the Turkey Trot around 1911, ensured that the novelty factor essential for commercial prosperity at the seaside was ever present.

Special seaside sporting events like the Talbot Cup for crown green bowls, begun at Blackpool in 1873, attracted working class crowds, but their architectural impact was small. Part of the fun at such events lay in betting, and entrepreneurs were keen to provide venues for a holiday flutter. Pier pavilions were often furnished with amusement machines from the 1890s, but one of the first land-based seaside amusement arcades was the Paradium, opened on Great Yarmouth's Marine Parade in 1902 by George Barron. Barron was an amusement machine manufacturer who had married into a family of Norfolk showpeople; he owned the Inter-changeable Automatic Machine Company of Islington and ran several arcades in London by 1897. The Paradium replaced Barron's Jubilee Exhibition of 1897, which was an arcade containing a rifle range, mechanical models, living exhibits and an early type of moving picture show; it was destroyed by fire in 1901. The Paradium was designed by local architect A. S. Hewitt, the forerunner of many fun houses, few of which had any architectural pretensions, though their colour, lights, noise and the glamour of almost illicit activity contributed a great deal to the complex atmosphere of the English seaside.

Arcades were sideshows at the permanent sea front funfairs which the larger resorts could support. Blackpool Pleasure Beach originated in 1891 with the arrival of a switchback railway on the sands of the South Shore, while the scenic railway of Great Yarmouth's Pleasure Beach Amusement Park opened in 1909. The early rides were devoid of ornament, but the Edwardian years saw brilliantly coloured designs appear on the amazing variety of attractions. The amusement machines themselves were ornate architectural miniatures.

Gambling could be commercialised and thus made profitable at the seaside, where it was part of traditional working class holiday entertainment, as were alcohol and sexual licence. Architectural monuments to the latter are negligible, unless the piers under which many young couples were reputed to have spent the night at Blackpool between wars are included. Many large turn of the century seaside pubs still stand, reminding today's visitors that drinking was always one of the intrinsic pleasures of the working class seaside holiday. Yates Brothers acquired the freehold of their Blackpool Wine Lodge in 1896, and it became famed for its draught champagne at 10d a glass; queues would form around the corner site before opening time. It was probably the largest of the Company's Wine Lodges.

Eating was a more architecturally ephemeral activity than drinking. Fish and chips have come to be associated with the seaside, not simply because of the availability of fish, but initially perhaps a result of its popularity in the textile areas of Yorkshire and Lancashire in the last quarter of the 19th century. The fish and chip shop appeared at Blackpool at the same time, doubtless supplying those very customers during their holidays, but the shops were generally small converted premises of which no trace remains. Fish and chips, like other ephemeral but essential ingredients of the seaside holiday, left nothing but the memory.

