

Dreamland on Sea

If the imaginary resort of Dreamland on Sea was to include all the unbuilt schemes of the seaside builders, the pleasure palaces of its promenade would have outstripped even the delights of Blackpool at its peak. The stylistic variety and unbounded ambition of the many unbuilt designs and proposed schemes for seaside pleasure buildings matches that of the built structures which changed the face of English resorts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The 1891 flotation of a company intending to build an 'Eiffel Tower' and winter garden at Brighton is a large scale but not atypical example of a scheme which never came to fruition; in size, these ranged from complete pleasure palaces to small sideshows.

Dreamland on Sea would not lack piers. The number of piers constructed at English resorts might easily have doubled if all the suggested schemes had been realised. At Whitley Bay, a pier and pavilion scheme promoted by the Whitley Bay Promenade Pier Company in 1908 failed as it was felt the cast-iron pier structure would be unable to resist storms; also, the fashion for pier building was waning and perhaps the necessary finance was not forthcoming. Architect of the pavilion was George Walesby Davis of Darlington; his ornate five-domed Oriental design, enclosing a 1,500 seat concert hall, would have lent much-needed decorative frivolity to the resort's harsh and unattractive sea front.

Blackpool might have had five piers rather than three if two 1898 schemes had come to fruition. The Sea Water Company wanted to build a promenade pier in a select area of the town, in conjunction with their plans for pumping sea water ashore for use by baths and hotels. Opposition was fierce to this possible lowering of the social tone, and the scheme was defeated. The much grander Palatine Promenade Pier was to have winter gardens, concert and refreshment rooms, sideshows and a photographic studio, all topped by a 90 ft high dome. Rival entertainment interests took the lead in blocking this plan. The most exciting and architecturally interesting unbuilt pier design was for an extension of Brighton's Chain Pier by Eugenius Birch. He planned a massive but elegant two-storey winter garden, the Marine Kursaal, to be sited across the head of the existing Chain Pier. The scheme was pursued as far as an Act of Parliament in 1883 before being abandoned, when it was discovered that the structure of the Pier was too weak to take the additions.

Onshore in the Isle of Man, the foundation stone of the Douglas Tower was laid on 24 October 1890, but this abortive product of the Standard Contract and Debenture Corporation's attempt to profit from bridging Douglas Harbour rose no further. The design, by the Corporation's engineer, Thomas Floyd, was a lumpish effort comprising a support for the Douglas Head Suspension Bridge and entertainment facilities intended to make the Bridge a paying proposition. The Tower was to be 375 ft tall, and its rectangular base was to contain four large halls, suitable for concerts, circus performances or roller skating.

The small Suffolk resort of Felixstowe, developed mainly in the Edwardian era, lacked any major entertainment facilities in 1897, when the Felixstowe Spa and Winter Garden Company promoted a competition for the design of a pavilion and the laying out of associated grounds on the cliffs. It was won by Brightwen Binyon of Ipswich, with a two-storey multi-domed pavilion containing a top-lit concert hall over refreshment rooms and other offices. The domed, glass roof of the concert hall dominated the design of the pavilion, which was intended to act as the entrance building for a subsequent pier, and its smaller domes were mirrored in the promenade design. Stylistically the pavilion was a mix of Classical, Art Nouveau and Arts and Crafts motifs, but appeared surprisingly graceful. Sadly, nothing was built, but Binyon, a frequent architectural competitor, may have anticipated this. Binyon (1845/6-1905), close friend and pupil of Alfred Waterhouse, was the architect of Sunderland Town Hall (1890), also won in competition.

Not only were lesser known architects victims of rapidly changing financial plans, especially in relation to theatre building. W. G. R. Sprague's 1901 design for a theatre in Albert Road, Southsea was never built; it would have been his only resort theatre. William Hope, the Newcastle upon Tyne-based theatre architect, produced a design for a theatre at South Shields in 1896 for northern impresario Weldon Watts, but this, too, remained unbuilt. Also at South Shields, local architect Joseph H. Morton (1850-1923) designed the Hippodrome in Edwardian Baroque for a corner site in the resort, but nothing came of it.

These examples are but a few of the unbuilt seaside schemes. The people's palaces and the unbuilt fantasies were generated by the late Victorian and Edwardian holidaymakers' appetite, and ability to pay, for novelty and entertainment. The search for amusement is unceasing, and modern equivalents of the people's palaces now abound both inland and at the resorts. Although many early seaside entertainment buildings are still fulfilling their original functions, some of the best have disappeared, taking with them the last traces of an era of communal mass leisure, when alternatives to the seaside holiday were harder to find.

Although architectural merit is largely a matter of personal taste, the ten pleasure palaces listed below must rate among the greatest losses seen at the English and Welsh seaside in the wake of the pleasure building boom. They represent the best of the lost seaside buildings in terms of variety and quality of design and decoration. The architect's name is followed by the opening date of the building and the date of its demolition or other means of destruction.

Hastings Pier Pavilion, Eugenius Birch, 1872-1917
Southport Winter Gardens, Maxwell & Tuke, 1874-1933
Bournemouth Winter Garden, Fletcher Lowndes, 1876-1935
Scarborough Aquarium, Eugenius Birch, 1877-c1968
Morecambe Winter Garden, Alfred Bedborough(?), 1878-1982
Morecambe Central Pier Pavilion, Mangnall & Littlewoods, 1897-1933

New Brighton Tower, Maxwell & Tuke 1898-1969
Blackpool Alhambra, Wylson & Long, 1899-1961
Rhyl Queen's Palace, unknown, 1902-1907
Blackpool Casino, unknown, 1913-1937

Saddest loss of all is the Rhyl Queen's Palace, the consummate pleasure dome, extant -for only five years before being destroyed by fire. The destruction of Birch's Scarborough Aquarium, as recently as the late 1960s, was a particularly unfortunate act of seaside vandalism, carried out at a time when appreciation of Victorian architecture was growing. The loss of these ten buildings, and of the many others of almost equal merit which met the same fate, has resulted in a significant diminution of the stock of late Victorian and Edwardian resort buildings. The history of the financing, design and construction of seaside pleasure buildings forms an important part of British architectural history, not merely a seaside sideline.

Despite the losses, and the reduction of some resorts, for example Morecambe and Southport, to shadows of their Edwardian glory, many excellent pleasure buildings have survived, and are enjoying a new lease of life as seaside holidays regain some of their former popularity. To put forward a list of the ten best surviving seaside pleasure buildings simply invites the compilation of a competing list, but ten good contenders which might feature in any selection, with high quality of design and internal decoration as the criteria, are given below, followed by architects and opening dates.

Blackpool Winter Gardens, Thomas Mitchell, 1878
Tynemouth Winter Garden, John Norton & Philip E. Masey, 1878 (now lost: burnt to the ground in February 1996)
Great Yarmouth Winter Garden, John Watson & William Harvey, 1881
Blackpool Tower Buildings, Maxwell & Tuke, 1894
Morecambe Victoria Pavilion, Mangnall & Littlewoods, 1897
Brighton West Pier Pavilion, unknown, 1903
Great Yarmouth Wellington Pier Pavilion, John W. Cockrill, 1903
Great Yarmouth Hippodrome, Ralph Scott Cockrill, 1903
Great Yarmouth Gem Cinema, Arthur S. Hewitt, 1908
Brighton West Pier Concert Hall, unknown, 1916

Frank Matcham's Blackpool Grand Theatre (1894), H. A. Garrett's Torquay Pavilion (1911) and Arthur S. Hewitt's Great Yarmouth Empire Cinema (1911) are also of particularly high quality, but Blackpool Tower Buildings, combining circus, ballroom, tower and other amusements with great decorative splendour, is the best single surviving building.

With five of England's best turn of the century pleasure buildings still intact, Great Yarmouth undoubtedly has the finest promenade architecture of any English resort. The major buildings aside, it has also retained many of the smaller structures, the arcades, shelters and sideshows, which give the

promenade depth and interest. In a resort which relies to some degree on novelty to attract visitors, new developments have of course taken place, but their designs are generally in, keeping with the brash, colourful and exciting nature of the existing architecture. The worst building on Yarmouth sea front is the Britannia Pier Pavilion (1958), the Pier's fourth such structure, a giant shed which must be the ugliest pier pavilion in England. Viewed from the Britannia Pier, however, Great Yarmouth promenade presents a unique statement of the essence of English seaside architecture.

The hallmark of the English pleasure resorts is their idiosyncratic architecture, the Classicism overlain with exotic, often Oriental motifs, the odd and delightful buildings developed by local architects with grandiose ideas. Seaside architecture is the architecture of pleasure, of novelty, excitement and stimulation. Such was the success of the turn of the century seaside architects that, even though the number of their buildings has diminished, we are still able to expect the unexpected at the seaside.