

## Seaside Resorts

Joe Saunders

Sea-bathing became popular in eighteenth century England. It was first taken up by the aristocracy and the gentry but the fashion was soon adopted by the middle classes. Resorts evolved to cater for the demand in seaside accommodation, as this pastime came to rival visits to spa centres. Such resorts can be found around the world, though they long remained a British, and especially an English, phenomenon.

The first resorts to be developed were Scarborough, Margate and Brighton in the 1730s. These initially attracted spa-goers as sea-bathing was thought to be both medically beneficial as well as enjoyable. Horse-drawn bathing machines carried visitors out to the sea where they could privately disrobe. The bathing of George III's court at Weymouth in the late eighteenth century and the attachment of the Prince of Wales to Brighton in the same period made these resorts popular. Londoners travelled by steam, sail and stage-coach to resorts across the south of England. Some resorts, such as Eastbourne, laid out by the 7<sup>th</sup> Duke of Devonshire, catered for the upper end of the market. Most resorts attracted a broad range of holidaymakers and day trippers, especially with the coming of the railways which made travel cheap and quick. Skegness for example was transformed by the railways from the 1870s when the Earl of Scarbrough developed it to attract the working classes of the east midlands. Blackpool, perhaps the most famous British seaside resort, was similarly reliant on the railways bringing workers from the textile towns of Lancashire and the West Riding. In 1879 nearly half a million visitors came to Blackpool by train. By the eve of the First World War this had risen to four million.



Lewis Clarke, *Blackpool: Promenade* ([CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

Up to the 1870s, and in many places beyond this, the growing interest of the middle classes accounted for the rise in visitors to seaside resorts. The emphasis changed from a visit to the seaside having health reasons to being about pleasure. The 'golden years' for the British seaside resort were the decades around 1900. Many of our surviving structures in these places dates back to this era. As well as hotels and boarding houses resorts featured theatres, promenades, and bandstands as forms of entertainment. There also developed particular seaside entertainments such as donkey rides on the beach, popularised in eighteenth-century Margate, the Tower and Big Dipper at Blackpool and piers, which became the mainstay of many resorts, jutting out into the sea and often featuring shows and attractions.



N Chadwick, *Southend Pier* ([CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

Seaside resorts can be researched through many commonly used historical sources. Resort populations can be measured from the population figures in census returns, though as these were taken in the spring, they underestimated the summer season numbers. The delay in taking the 1921 Census back from April to June caused many people to be on holiday especially to seaside resorts. Guide books to seaside resorts, regularly updated, are a prime historical source for us to chart developments.

#### **Further References and Resources:**

Information for this post was taken from the excellent David Hey (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History* (1996), 412-3.

[Historic England's Research into Seaside Resorts](#)

John K. Walton, *English Seaside Resorts: A Social History, 1750-1914* (1983)

John K. Walton, *The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the Twentieth Century* (2000)

John Wyman, *Kentish Seaside Resorts Before 1900* (1970)

John F. Travis, *Rise of The Devon Seaside Resorts, 1750-1900* (1994)

John Heywood, *Beside the Seaside: A History of Yorkshire's Seaside Resorts* (2020)

Alastair J. Durie, 'The Development of the Scottish Coastal Resorts in the Central Lowlands, c.1770-1880', *The Local Historian* 24:4 (1994)