

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Heritage: Find out more where Ramsey's Queen's Pier and the short-lived Iron Pier in Douglas fit into the wider picture

The great age of the Victorian iron pier across the British Isles

Last month saw the Isle of Man Government at last allowing the Queen's Pier Restoration Trust to sign a five-year lease enabling them - funds permitting - to begin restoration work on the historic structure. Here Simon Artymiuk takes a look at the pier's story, as well as the development of Victorian pleasure piers around Britain and a short-lived example which once stood at Douglas.

The development of steamships in the early 19th century saw many seaside resorts building wooden or stone jetties where vessels could moor without grounding on their beaches.

These became popular walkways and the idea of the pleasure pier was born.

The first British pier to be specifically designed for promenading on was Ryde Pier in the Isle of Wight in 1814.

Originally built of wood, it was later joined to parallel tramway and railway piers and, in rebuilt form, survives today.

The industrial revolution saw innovations in iron and steel production and a realisation of how decorative metalwork could be employed in structures like bridges.

The advent of the railway age from the 1830s saw larger bridges being built, as well as the invention of the Victorian railway excursion, bringing mass tourism to many seaside resorts.

The Great Exhibition of 1854, masterminded by Queen Victoria's consort Prince Albert, became the destination for thousands of railway excursionists - and illustrated how fabulous pavilions could be made out of iron and glass.

It wasn't long before the idea of making seaside pleasure piers from ironwork was invented, with the first one being designed by Euryenius Birch at Margate in Kent in 1855.

So the great age of the Victorian iron pier was born.

Great Yarmouth in Suffolk was next, with its 700ft wooden Britannia Pier being replaced by a steel one holding up a 2,000-seat concert pavilion in 1858.

Two years later Southport in Lancashire had a monster pier built which at its greatest extent reached 4,380ft long.

From 1865 it had a cable-operated tramway running along it. Blackpool's North Pier opened in 1863.

The 1860s saw a boom in Douglas's fortunes as a seaside resort and it soon had a



A hand-coloured postcard of the August 25, 1902, landing of King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra on the Queen's Pier at Ramsey, which drew large crowds to witness the unexpected royal visit

pier built opposite the foot of Broadway in 1869 at a cost of £6,500.

The Iron Pier was designed by the London-based engineer John Dixon. The foundation stone was laid in January and the 1,000ft-long pier was opened by Elizabeth Loch, the Governor's wife, just seven months later on August 19.

As well as being a popular attraction the structure was neatly positioned to separate the male and female bathing beaches in those days of tight corsets, bathing machines and high-church morality.

In 1873 the local poet JM Sutherland was moved to 10 verses of (slightly excruciating) poetry by the pier: The Douglas Iron Pier

I
'Here stands in lovely Douglas Bay

An Iron Pier, so grand for walking,
Where hundreds promenade every day,
So gaily dressed and lively talking

II
'But chief, at eve, at eight about,
After the arrival of the steamers,
The Pier looks best, for then come out
The ladies decked with flowers and streamers

III
'And sweet it is these belles to see
Of Mona's Isle and other places,
All promenading in their glee,
With beaming eyes, and oh! what faces!...

VIII
'On summer eves musicians play,
The people here all love romancing,
Which makes then animated, gay,
Tho' here is not permitted dancing.

Those belles with beaming eyes would have paid a penny to walk along the pier, but if they were local residents or staying in town for some weeks they could buy a pass for 1s 6d a month or even five shillings per annum.

When the horse tramway first opened in 1876 the end of the Iron Pier was the line's southern terminus.

By the time it was extended to the steamer piers in 1891, the Iron Pier had closed, having been purchased by

Douglas Corporation, which wanted to do away with it so it could widen the seafront roadway at the foot of Broadway.

Until recently, many believed a claim made in a 1952 book that the Iron Pier was dismantled and then re-erected in Rhos-on-Sea, North Wales.

However, a recent book by Martin Easden and Darlah Thomas, entitled Piers of Wales, has shown this claim to be false.

Douglas Corporation did indeed put the closed pier on the market, for an asking price of £1,300, and some Welsh resorts, including Penarth in South Wales and Abergele in North Wales, did send representatives to look into buying it, but in the end it was sold to a Manchester scrap metal merchant, who demolished it

in 1894.

By that time the Isle of Man had become home to a far longer iron pier at Douglas's emerging main rival as a resort town, Ramsey.

The 2,244ft Queen's Pier had been designed on the instructions of the Isle of Man Harbour Board by the leading engineer Sir John Coode (who was also responsible for the Battery and Victoria steamer piers in Douglas, harbour improvements at Peel and Port St Mary and the ill-fated Port Erin breakwater).

The Queen's Pier was constructed from 1882-86 by the firm Head Wrightson & Co of Stockton-on-Tees at a cost of £45,000 and opened on July 22, 1886.

The 1880s was a decade of growing confidence for Ramsey, following on from the



A hand-coloured Edwardian postcard showing the view from Ramsey pier back towards the town



A Victorian view of Douglas seafront and part of the 1869-built Iron Pier, subsequently dismantled and scrapped in 1894. Picture courtesy of Manx National Heritage iMuseum



A 1950s view of the Wickham trolley taking passengers along the 3ft gauge pier railway at Ramsey



A view of now-demolished Rhos-on-Sea pier near Colwyn Bay on the North Wales coast - which was until recently erroneously believed to have been Douglas's Iron Pier re-erected in a new location

incorporation of a board of commissioners in 1865, the building of the Manx Northern Railway from St John's to Ramsey in 1879 and harbour improvements made to aid the export of Foxdale lead and importation of Cumbrian coal, boosting the town's prosperity.

By the 1880s tourists were flocking to the town on the railway and the area of swamp north of the Sulby River known as the Mooragh was reclaimed and developed into a promenade of hotels in imitation of Douglas.

It was backed by an elegant park with large boating lake, tennis courts and pavilions.

In 1889 the iron swing bridge improved access to that area.

Soon Ramsey was being hailed as 'Queen of the North' due to its 'salubrious climate, fine sea bathing, magnificent bay with a long shore of firm sands, and scenic surroundings of mountains, glens and the rolling northern plain'.

The Queen's Pier meant that not only could visitors take a stroll to enjoy the sea air and views, they could also land from steamers directly at Ramsey at all states of the tide.

It became normal for sailings from Ardrossan in Scot-

land and from the north of Ireland to call at Ramsey pier on their way to and from Douglas, and the arrival of the Manx Electric Railway in Ramsey in 1898 provided another boost.

In the years before 1914, 36,000 people a year were landing at Queen's Pier.

A 3ft gauge railway had been laid along the pier to transport materials during its construction and this was soon pressed into service for conveying passengers' luggage to and from the steamers.

Initially open, hand-propelled trolleys were used but when a new landing stage was built in 1899, an enclosed passenger van was brought into use, still using manpower to propel it.

ROYAL VISIT

Possibly the proudest moment in the Queen's Pier's history occurred 115 years ago this month, when the Royal Yacht unexpectedly appeared in Manx waters carrying the newly-crowned King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra.

The King had been ordered on a voyage of sea air and convalescence by his doctors after the coronation was delayed for him to be operated on for an appendicitis. The yacht Victoria and Albert, with its

Royal Navy escorts, made an unscheduled call at the Isle of Man on the evening of Sunday, August 24. With Douglas Bay crammed with small boats, the flotilla headed to Ramsey instead.

On the morning of Monday, August 25, the King and Queen landed at Queen's Pier to be greeted first by Acting-Governor James Gell, Bishop Stratton and Speaker of the House of Keys A W Moore. Large crowds gathered to cheer the surprise visitors.

An impromptu tour in open carriages was arranged, taking in Bishopscourt, Peel Castle, Greeba Castle (home of Hall Caine, whose novels the Queen admired) and Cronkbourne, home of A W Moore's mother, before heading through the packed streets of Douglas to reach the MER's Derby Castle terminus for the tram trip north.

Afterwards the MER advertised itself as 'Their Majesties' Route to Ramsey... A continuous panorama of mountain, glen, and marine scenery'.

There was another royal landing at Queen's Pier in 1920, this time for a visit of King George V and Queen Mary.

In 1937, a small petrol-powered engine was purchased

for the pier railway, followed in 1950 by a small Wickham railcar.

Many families enjoyed travelling on the little red-painted train to the end of the pier in one direction, enjoying an ice cream in the small pavilion and then walking back above the waves to the pier entrance.

In 1955-56 the pier railway layout extended, taking the line slightly out into the road beyond the pier entrance, which was rebuilt in concrete.

The railway was now 2,080ft long and could claim that it was as long as Snaefell was high!

However, soon a decline set in. In 1969 only 3,054 steamer passengers disembarked on the Queen's Pier and in 1970 the boats stopped calling, though it remained open to holidaymakers and anglers.

The pier railway became summer only in 1979 and then closed for good in 1981.

In 1990 the Department of Highways, Ports and Properties (DHPP) carried out repairs to allow the pier to re-open for the summer season.

VANDALISM

Sadly, problems of vandalism led to closure again in 1991. The Government was faced

with either repair costs of £2.5m or demolition costs estimated at £1m.

However, in 1994 the group the Friends of Ramsey Queen's Pier was formed, enabling a section of the pier to be reopened to the public for National Piers Day in 1996.

In 1999 a report commissioned by the Friends group found that the pier was in much better condition than many others around Britain - a view echoed in a much more recent surveyor's report.

The 1999 survey estimated the full cost of refurbishment at £1.273m - but for the next decade only periodic repairs were carried out.

In 2009 a Council of Ministers working party decided that the Queen's Pier was of national heritage significance and should be refurbished.

But after consulting engineers were called in the conclusion reached was that, yes, the pier should be saved from demolition, but that it would have to remain closed to the public due to lack of funds for restoration.

Two years later a report stated that restoration was possible, and the structure could be progressively opened to the public in seven stages at a cost of £1.2m-£1.7m per

stage. However, the island's director of harbours, Mike Brew, responded that it would be at least five years before Tynwald approval for such a phased scheme could be sought.

RESTORATION

So we come to the most recent developments, with the Queen's Pier Restoration Trust (QPRT) winning, government agreement for them to take over the task of carrying out a phased restoration of the pier.

As highlighted in last week's Examiner, however, nothing can happen without public donations and promises of support being honoured.

Surely this structure, designed by an engineering genius of the Victorian age, and which played such an important part in the development of the island's northern capital, deserves being restored for the enjoyment of future generations.

It would be a crying shame if it were to be denied a chance of becoming what QPRT chairman Tom Durrant believes could be 'this island's best attraction' - and a magnet drawing visitors in greater numbers to Ramsey's shops and businesses.