

Heritage: We take a look at UK-wide pier restoration projects to see what lessons Queen's Pier restorers can learn from them

Pier pressure: breathing new life into a Victorian landmark

Following on from last week's *Buildings at Risk* article looking at the history of Ramsey's Queen's Pier, Simon Artymiuk looks at what the pier's restorers can learn from efforts to maintain and restore some similar Victorian piers in Wales and England

When looking for inspiration for what a restored Ramsey Queen's Pier could become, we need only look to the south across the Irish Sea, where a cluster of North Wales coastal resorts each have their own Victorian piers.

The crowning glory of that area is Llandudno, which was developed as a resort by the Mostyn family in the 1840s and which has a long North Shore promenade in some ways reminiscent of Douglas seafront.

What is more, its four-mile Marine Drive, completed in 1878 around the towering Great Orme headland (and which continues to operate as a one-way toll road for drivers to admire the coastal vistas) was the inspiration for the Isle of Man's own Marine Drive between Douglas and Port Soderick.

Llandudno still has an operating 1902-built cable tramway to the top of the Great Orme, similar to the one which ran until 1926 from Victoria Street to Upper Douglas via Prospect Hill, and from the summit views of the Isle of Man and southern Lake District Mountains can be enjoyed on a clear day. Sadly, though, a semi-rural electric tramway along the lines of the MER which used to link the town to Rhos-on-Sea and Colwyn Bay closed in 1956.

A prominent feature of the North Shore seafront is Llan-



Clevedon Pier near Bristol, once described by John Betjeman as 'the most beautiful pier in England', has been painstakingly restored by a heritage trust

Picture: Saffron Blaze

dudno's surviving Victorian pier, which at 2,295ft is the longest in Wales and close in length to Ramsey's Queen's Pier. Llandudno Pier opened in 1878 and was extended in 1886.

Thanks to a landing stage built at the pier head in 1891, it had a longstanding connection with the Isle of Man as a destination for Steam Packet sailings - and in 1969, soon after Trust House Forte had taken over ownership of the pier, the landing stage was up-

graded to make it suitable for the latest IOMSPCo vessels of the time. Sadly those sailings ended completely in the early 2000s.

Recently the local authority, Conwy Council, developed a strategy to make Llandudno more of a year-round resort - it continues to attract large numbers of coach tours and many of the Victorian hotels continue to operate as such.

Part of the strategy was refurbishment of the landing stage with a view to attracting

cruise liners, pleasure steamers heading to Liverpool and around Anglesey - and sailings by classic vessels like the *Waverley* and *Balmoral* to the Isle of Man.

Some £200,000 of the £330,000 cost of the landing stage's refurbishment came out of funds given to Llandudno by the builders of an offshore wind farm which is visible from the seafront.

Sadly attempts this summer to run sailings by the *Balmoral* from Llandudno Pier

to Port St Mary were marred in June by stormy weather, and in July by the Maritime and Coastguards Agency suddenly deciding that a trip to the Isle of Man constituted an international sailing and was therefore banned for a vessel like *Balmoral*!

It has to be wondered if the Isle of Man Government raised any objections - certainly *Balmoral*'s operator, White Funnel, placed an indignant statement on their website.

Nevertheless, Llandudno Pier - a Grade II listed structure under the UK heritage buildings system - continues to be popular with the public thanks to the views which can be enjoyed from it and the attractions to be found along it.

They include an amusement arcade and fairground style attractions at the landward end, attractive kiosks at points along the pier where small business owners and ice cream companies sell their wares, and a larger pavilion at



Lady of Mann on one of the last Isle of Man Steam Packet Co sailings from Llandudno Pier



A hand-coloured c1900 view of Colwyn Bay's Victoria Pier in North Wales, with its huge 'Moorish Revival' pavilion



An 1895 hand-coloured view of Somerset's Birnbeck Pier at Weston-super-Mare, now sadly regarded as a UK 'Building at Risk' and the only British pier linking an island to the mainland

the seaward end where take-away and cafe style food and drink can be enjoyed.

Anglers are also allowed access to the landing stage and groups of people can usually be seen fishing there at all times of the day.

In 2015 the pier was sold by Crown Entertainment Ltd to North Wales leisure attraction operator Alan Williams for £4.5m. Last year the kiosks along the pier's deck were temporarily taken away and given a £100,000 revamp before being returned, and the result has left the pier looking very smart.

While Ramsey's Pier lacked pavilions along its length in the past, perhaps the restoration group should consider providing some in the future to increase the pier's potential to attract visitors and to earn revenue for the pier's future maintenance?

Attractive kiosks are also found along the Grade II listed Garth Pier at Bangor, 20 miles

to the west of Llandudno.

This 1,500ft pier projects from the shore into the Menai Straits separating mainland Wales from the Isle of Anglesey.

At first sight it may seem a sheltered location for a pier but the straits, through having the waters of the Irish Sea rushing into their long and narrow channel from both ends at high tide, can be notoriously turbulent.

This pier opened in 1896 and also originally served as a calling point for steamers to Douglas, Liverpool and even Blackpool. Like Ramsey's pier, it also originally had a 3ft gauge luggage railway running along it, something which Llandudno Pier never had.

However, the Bangor pier's line was removed in 1914 by the Royal Engineers after a cargo steamer collided with the pier, with the metal no doubt going to the war effort.

The pier closed in 1971 and came close to being de-

molished by the local district council in 1974 - but then Bangor City Council stepped in to save it.

With help from the National Memorial Heritage Fund, the Welsh Office and the Manpower Services Commission, restoration began in 1982 and the pier was reopened by the Marquess of Anglesey in 1988.

Nevertheless, restoration of an iron pier is never the end of the story and in 2011 it was announced that £2m was needed for essential maintenance. There was much local squabbling about whose fault that was and the council revealed that though it had a pot of funds for the task, this was short by £1m.

There was little progress until 2014, when consultants recommended a bid for Heritage Lottery funding to help make the pier a major waterfront attraction. Businesses were encouraged to support the bid but in 2015 the bid was turned down, so the future remains uncertain.

Nevertheless, on the plus side the tiny Whistlestop Cafe - a kiosk on the pier with room for just two tables - was named the best place to eat in the city of Bangor after receiving 53 five-star reviews on the Trip Advisor website.

If that doesn't show what is possible with a bit of effort, nothing will.

A more cautionary tale comes from Colwyn Bay, a resort to the east of Llandudno which from 1900 boasted the 750ft Victoria Pier, supporting a gigantic 2,100-seat pavilion in 'Moorish Revival' style. Once a very popular seaside resort, Colwyn Bay's fortunes have declined and so did the pier's, with the once grand pa-

vilion giving way to a non-descript, less fancy building by the close of the 20th century.

The pier finally closed in 2008, after the owner went bankrupt.

Nevertheless, the pier carried a grade II listing under the UK system, and once again various groups had plans to restore it, but these became mired in controversy and bickering with the local authority.

Early this year some of the seaward spans of the pier suddenly collapsed into the sea and the local council has now embarked on a programme of demolition with a view to constructing a shortened version of the pier, a policy agreed upon after talks with a local charitable trust.

After that tale of woe, more encouragement can be found in Somerset, where another cluster of piers projects into the Bristol Channel - a stretch of water with one of the highest tidal ranges in the world due to its funnel-like shape.

Clevedon Pier was named by John Betjeman as the 'most beautiful pier in England' and, like Douglas's Iron Pier, was built in 1869. It was once a calling point for steamers heading across to South Wales or down the coast to the North Devon port of Ilfracombe. When two of its spans collapsed during testing in 1970, it too came close to being demolished. However, determined local fundraising by a heritage trust saw it being restored and reopened in 1989. In 1999 it received the Pier of the Year Award from the National Pier Society and a Civic Award and from 2001 it has been Grade I listed under the UK system.

It is once again a departure

point in the summer for classic steamer trips. It is also a big draw for anglers - and for film-makers, with band One Direction recently having a promotional video shot on it and scenes from the 2010 Keira Knightley film *Never Let Me Go* also featuring the pier. In 2012 it won £720,000 in Heritage Lottery funding to improve its visitor centre.

While Clevedon Pier retains its Victorian atmosphere, not far to the south is Weston-super-Mare, where the privately-owned Grand Pier, dating from 1904, has emerged as a pier 'reinvented for the 21st century' after its large pavilion caught fire soon after multi-million-pound restoration work had been carried out by new owners in 2008.

The pier was rebuilt with a brand new modern pavilion at a cost of £39m and reopened in 2010 and is now again a major tourist attraction.

However, the nearby Grade II* listed Birnbeck Pier, dating from 1867 and Britain's only pier linking the mainland to an island, is now on the UK Buildings at Risk register. Again once a calling point for steamers, like Ramsey's Queen's Pier it once had a tramway along it to carry passengers' luggage. It also had small pavilions housing amusements, though various small fires saw these being rebuilt at various points in the pier's history.

In the 1970s regular steamer services from the pier ceased, apart from occasional pleasure trips, and storm damage led to the pier's closure in 1994. Sadly, repeated attempts to restore and reopen the structure and adapt

the buildings on the island to new uses have, so to speak, run aground and, despite the island housing a lifeboat station, the pier remains in a sad state. This underlines the message that pier restorations need both a clear strategy and funding in place to progress.

It is to be hoped that if the restoration of Ramsey's Queen's Pier is successful, the revival of its little railway may be part of that, as an attraction for visitors, particularly children.

One pier that retains a small operational railway along it is the 2,100ft long Hythe Pier in Hampshire, which has a ferry across Southampton Water to the city operating from its pier-head.

The oldest continuously operating public pier railway in the world, the little railway, which like Ramsey's was originally for luggage and at first hand-operated, has been an electric railway taking its power from a third rail since 1922. It runs on 2ft gauge track (the same gauge as the Groulle Glen Railway) and connects with the ferries. There is also a walkway and cycleway alongside the track.

The pier, railway and ferry were reported as being under threat last year but their recent purchase by the operator of the Blue Funnel ferry service since then seems to have secured the operation's future.

Wouldn't it be great if Ramsey's pier train could one day be brought out of retirement to run again on a relaid track to the head of a restored Queen's Pier? Only public support can help to make such a dream a possibility, so time will tell.



A 1930s LMS railway poster showing a steamer leaving Llandudno Pier