

Yarmouth Seaside Holidays – Historical Introduction



Seaside holidays were, like fish and chips, a great British invention. Not only were we the first to indulge in them, but their distinctive ingredients were first developed here and were subsequently exported all over the world. Bathing in the sea, especially the cold and murky North Sea, is perhaps a slightly odd thing to wish to do. As an Edwardian journalist wrote in 1906, “The alleged reason for sea-bathing is that it makes you feel so well afterwards; but so does any unpleasant experience, merely by force of contrast.” Our earlier forbears would have agreed. Until the eighteenth century, the sea was regarded with apprehension by most people – vast, hostile and ugly. Even those forced by their

work to live close to the ocean resolutely turned their houses to face inland.

Yarmouth Beach, 1830, with windmills & bathing machines just visible in front of the jetty.

So what brought about the change? In part it was the influence of romantic poets and painters – Byron, Coleridge, Turner - for whom a prospect of the sea was therapeutic rather than threatening, an aid to reflection and self-discovery. But it was also the “discovery” – which may have owed more to commercial acumen than science – of the medicinal benefits of bathing in and drinking seawater. From the early eighteenth century onwards, “watering places” by the sea began to promote themselves as alternatives to the inland spas like Bath, Buxton and Harrogate. Here the aristocracy and gentry could “take the waters” in elegant surroundings and amongst genial company while effecting cures for a range of diseases from gout to gonorrhoea, or so it was claimed by one Dr Richard Russell in 1750. Scarborough was perhaps the first seaside resort, dating its claim back to an advertisement placed by a Mrs Tomyzin Farrer in 1623. A century later, towns all around the coast were cashing in on this new fashion. Yarmouth, only twenty miles down river from Norwich (still – just – England’s second city) saw its chance. In 1759 the Bath House (now the Bath Hotel) was built on the Denes and equipped with seawater baths and assembly rooms for tea parties and balls.

The Georgian seaside was, of course, highly socially selective. For most people, their few holidays were still just that – holy days, intended for religious observance, not merrymaking. Only the leisured landed and professional classes could afford the time and money to travel away from home and work. It is unlikely that they spent much time on the beach apart from their five-minute dip in the sea before breakfast, as recommended for adult males of strong constitution. Much of the day was spent on the social round. There were officers’ horse races on the Denes, tea and card parties and elegant evening dances.





In Yarmouth, visitors were also attracted to the fishing boats drawn up on the beach, the trading ships along the quayside – “the finest in all England”, as Defoe claimed - the narrow and picturesque rows, Mr Boulter’s museum of curiosities in the Market Place, and Absolon’s china shop in Market Row, where they could buy souvenir “trifles from Yarmouth” printed with pictures of the church, the jetty or the quay.

The highlight of the day was probably the afternoon walk along the promenade, when everyone came out in their finery to see and be seen. The main area for growth was on the undeveloped land facing the sea along the South Denes. Local traders began to fear that wealthy visitors might desert the town centre, and in 1810 they persuaded the Corporation to impose restrictions on all new building there – nothing above 20 feet in height, and absolutely no shops or public houses!

By the 1840s, this restrictive policy had lapsed, and new hotels were being erected to appeal to wealthy visitors from London, Norwich and the Midlands. The Victoria Hotel, which survives largely unaltered as the Royal, was one such. This is where Dickens stayed in 1848 while writing *David Copperfield*. Mr Mahomed of Brighton was even invited to build Indian Vapour Baths similar to those in his own town, though the project foundered for lack of backers. An elaborate scheme, only partly realised, was drawn up in 1841 for The Victoria Estate, a major residential development that would have rivalled the best of the regency south coast resorts.



Genteel Yarmouth, however, never really took off. Its development came just a few years too late and was in effect killed off by the railway companies. As in other resorts, the arrival of mass transport by rail was both a threat and an opportunity. The railway first came to Yarmouth in 1844 (there were eventually three stations), bringing with it an influx of clerks and labourers whose pooterish ways were calculated to

irritate and amuse – but also to swell the pockets of local business people. In the main, their arrival was welcomed, thus setting the seal on the future development of the town. Between May and September 1846, some 80,000 visitors arrived by train, and thousands more came by steam paddle ship from London. Beaches are by nature democratic places. Lord and labourer look much alike with their drawers down. Though this may have appealed to the lower orders, who could mingle incognito with their betters, some of their betters had other ideas. As Brighton spawned genteel Hove, and Clacton later bred salubrious Frinton, so Yarmouth’s gentry gradually transferred their custom south of the river to Gorleston.

The steam engine was behind the rapid growth of Yarmouth from the mid-19th century in more ways than one – steam train travel made the development of the holiday resort possible, just as steam drifters led to a rapid expansion of the herring fishery and curing industry. The race was on to provide more facilities for holidaymakers, especially after the passing of the Bank Holiday Act in 1871 started the growth of a new type of visitor, the “day tripper”. Wellington Pier – only the seventh in Britain – was built in 1853, and Britannia Pier in 1857. St. George’s Park was laid out in 1866. Aquariums were in vogue, and Yarmouth’s opened with 18 tanks in 1877, only to be rebuilt in 1883 with the addition of a 1,000 seat refreshment area and a theatre. Some of the aquarium tanks survive in what is now a cinema complex. An innovative attraction was the 150ft. high revolving tower, built in 1897, but demolished for scrap in 1941. Gardens were laid out along the sea front, and the first amusement arcades opened were opened in 1897 by

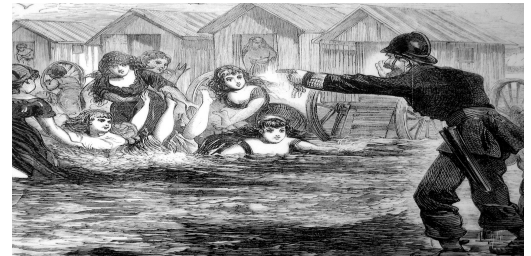


George Barron, a pioneer of coin-in-the-slot machines. A major coup was the purchase from Torquay, at a knock down price, of the Winter Gardens. This gigantic glass house was re-erected at the entrance to Wellington Pier in 1903 and is still there, though only plastic plants now sprout inside. Two notable “firsts” were the opening of the first seaside



holiday camp (by the Independent Labour Party) at Caister in 1906, and the building of the Gem Picture House, Britain’s first purpose-built cinema, in 1908. You can identify it by the windmill now added to the façade.

Bathing and beach life were, as always, at the heart of a Yarmouth holiday. But they, too, were not without controversy. What should one wear? Photographs of Victorian and Edwardian beach life suggest that most people dressed up rather than down, men shedding little more than their stiff collars and (for the daring) their ties. Women kept themselves covered, partly to avoid contact with the sun in order to maintain their fashionably pallid complexion. Bathing was a different matter. Until late Victorian times, males bathed naked. This custom called either for sexual segregation on the beach – an option not favoured in Yarmouth - or for men to bathe very early in the morning and ladies to avert their eyes! By the 1870s, women wore voluminous tent-like bathing gowns, while men commonly wore one-piece bathing drawers, “a detestable custom”, as Rev. Francis Kilvert pronounced. Bathing machines are depicted in paintings of Yarmouth beach from the early 1800s, and they were certainly numerous all along the sea front – and remained so until the 1940s. For a few pence, bathers (mainly ladies) could hire a machine complete with bathing costume and towel, change in it, wait for it to be dragged into the sea by a horse, then hop timorously into the sea while shielded from prying eyes by a canvas awning.



The First World War put an end to such gaiety and abandon. In 1915, Yarmouth was attacked in one of the first ever air raids. With a seaplane base on the Denes, it continued to attract enemy attention by aeroplane and zeppelin. With the end of the war, the rush to the seaside began afresh, but restrictive social attitudes were breaking down. After four years of regimentation and deprivation, working-class visitors demanded less structured recreations. The Corporation and local businesses responded – partly in a bid to counter high unemployment – by building a funfair and scenic railway, a swimming pool, a new racecourse, the Venetian Waterways boating lake and new tennis courts and bowling greens along Marine Parade, as the area between the two piers was now called. By the outbreak of World War 2 in 1939, the “Golden Mile” was effectively full. As the 1930s posters displayed in the museum show, railway companies vigorously promoted Yarmouth holidays, though the elegant image they portray may owe as much to advertisers’ hype as to reality.

From 1940 to 1945, Yarmouth was once again a town in the front line. The famous golden sands were lined with barbed wire in case of invasion. Bombing raids were heavy, especially in 1941 when some 167 enemy attacks targeted the port and destroyed much of the Rows and old town. Fortunately, the sea front escaped relatively unscathed, and the coming of peace ushered in another boom time for Yarmouth during the later 1940s and 50s. Boarding houses and hotels were now less popular as people, increasingly with their own transport, preferred the freedom (and economy) of a camp to the restrictions of a pernicky landlady. Of the 100,000 visitors who stayed in Yarmouth in 1970, almost two thirds were accommodated in chalets and caravan parks. The remaining boarding houses along the seafront were gradually converted into amusement arcades for the now almost universal “slot machines”.



By the late 1970s, the boom period for Great Yarmouth was definitely over. Paradoxically, it became the victim of the wider economic boom, as more and more people of relatively modest means were able to take holidays abroad, with guaranteed sunshine and cheap “booze”. Even those who holidayed at home were apparently less keen on the seaside, which accounted for only 47% of domestic holidays in 1978. The town fought back as best it could. The Marina Leisure Complex opened in 1979, there were new attractions such as *Treasure World*, the *Temple of Doom* and Ripley’s *Believe it or Not* and, in 1991, the Sea life Centre. More recently, the decline of the town, and the relative deprivation of many of its

inhabitants, has drawn European money into the area and attracted much-needed financial support for projects such as the new Time and Tide Museum. Perhaps another corner has been turned in the town’s long and fascinating history.