

The History of Brighton's Tourism

Although tourism did not exist in Brighton before the 18th century, it is known that in 1313 Edward II granted Brighthelmston a town charter allowing a market to be held each Thursday and a fair lasting three days at the feast of St Bartholomew on 24 August. Undoubtedly, this would have been an invitation for residents in the vicinity to travel into the town. Indeed the promise of good shopping and fun continues to attract people from near and far to what was originally a small fishing village but which has developed into one of the top tourism locations in the UK.

The medieval street plan of The Lanes dates back to the 13th and 14th centuries. The original buildings, however, were destroyed in a raid by the French in 1514 so most of the buildings in this area now date from the 18th and 19th centuries. The Lanes or 'The Old Town' is an area of alleys and passageways, known locally as 'twittens' and 'catcreeps'. Based on the original street plan of medieval Brighton, The Lanes offer a fascinating glimpse of a vanished age. During the Middle Ages this area was a bustling thoroughfare of a thriving fishing industry but is now known for its shops, art galleries, open-air cafés and cosy pubs.

Visitors to Brighton needed somewhere to sleep and the oldest inn, The Old Ship, dates back to 1559. Nicholas Tattersell, who in 1651 had carried Charles II to France in his boat the 'Surprise' for a fee of £200, purchased the inn in 1671. When Charles II returned to England at the Restoration in 1660, Tattersell, having renamed his boat the 'Royal Escape', was granted the rank of captain in the navy. 'The Royal Escape' yacht race takes place every May from Brighton to Fecamp with a re-enactment of the king's flight for his life.

The first known use of the name Brighton was in the late 1600's, but didn't come into general use until the 18th century. It was only officially used from 1810.

18th Century Brighton

Serious tourism really began in 1750 with Dr Richard Russell and his claims of the healing benefits of his seawater cure – both by immersion and as a drink. Britain's aristocracy flocked to the seaside to take the water at Brighton, so beginning the influx of visitors to this fashionable town.

Before 1750, pre-Dr Russell, the idea of immersing the body in water as a form of washing or a pastime was looked upon with distaste, even horror, but by the 1800's bathing in the sea had become an established practice as well as a highly organised business. In the interests of modesty, bathing machines were used. Resembling small sheds on wheels and acting as dressing rooms on the beach, the bathing machines were pulled out into the sea by horses and attended by people known as 'dippers' (for the ladies) and 'bathers' (for the gentlemen). The most famous of these 'dippers' was Martha Gunn, whose job it was to take her client in her arms as she descended from the bathing machine and 'dip' her vigorously into the sea water and push her through the waves.

It was, however, the visit to Brighton in 1783 by the Prince of Wales (later to be Prince Regent and then George IV) that was to be the turning point in the fortunes of Brighton. Having established himself in a small, rented farmhouse, he eventually bought the property and on this site built the first Royal Pavilion, a modest, classical building designed by Henry Holland. The Royal Pavilion as we know it today was designed by John Nash and built over and around the original building. The presence of the Prince in Brighton attracted the fashionable jet-set and Brighton, already prosperous, grew rapidly in importance.

19th Century Brighton

As tourism developed, the Theatre Royal was built in 1806 opposite the Royal Pavilion. It opened in 1807 with a performance of Hamlet on 27 June 1807 starring Charles Kemble, the famous actor of Drury Lane. It was rebuilt in 1866 and much altered again in 1927.

The 1800's were certainly a time for building hotels, with most of the major seafront hotels opening during this time. The King's Hotel was built in 1820, the Jarvis Norfolk Hotel (now the Ramada) was built in 1824, the Bedford Hotel (now the Holiday Inn) in 1829, The Grand (De Vere Grand) in 1862-64, the Belgrave Hotel (now Umi Brighton) in 1882 and the Metropole (now Hilton Metropole) in 1890.

Although Brighton is best known these days for its two piers (Brighton Pier and the West Pier) there were in fact three piers. The first purpose-built pleasure pier in the British Isles was built in Brighton. This was the Royal Suspension Chain Pier which opened in 1823, but was destroyed by a gale in 1896. The pier provided a terminus for a cross-channel Steam-packet service and it was also a pleasure promenade.

The first major development towards the modern Hove took place in 1824 with the building of Brunswick Square and Brunswick Terrace. It was designed by Amon Wilds and Charles Busby and is among the finest examples of civic design in the country. By the 1860's, the western end of Brighton, with its newly developed Brunswick area, had become a self-contained town and considered to be far more 'select' than the old town. It was therefore proposed that the west end of Brighton should have its own pier. This was the West Pier. Opened in 1866, it attracted more than 600,000 people through its turnstiles in 1875.

The Railway reached Brighton in 1841 and with the railway came the day-trippers. By 1860 Brighton was welcoming 250,000 visitors a year by train. The Railway also brought heavy industry and the locomotive works provided employment in the town for a great many years.

Magnus Volk, a famous local inventor with a great interest in electricity, opened the Volk's Railway in August 1883. The car took 12 passengers and was built with mahogany sides and blue velvet curtains. It ran for about 300 yards along a 2-foot track which was laid on the beach opposite the main entrance to the Aquarium (now the Brighton Sea Life Centre) to the Chain Pier. The car had a maximum speed of 6 miles per hour and was immediately a great success. The line was a novelty in an era when most people knew little about electricity and most transport was horse-drawn. In 1884 the line was extended to Banjo groyne. A new car was built in 1885 to carry 30 passengers and the speed increased to 10 miles.

In 1896 Magnus Volk built the 'Pioneer', a bizarre, multi-wheeled car that ran on long legs on an ultra-wide track rooted in the chalk seabed, about halfway between high and low water marks. It carried 160 passengers on an open-air deck 45ft long and 22ft wide supported on four braced tubular legs – each 23ft long. It was nicknamed 'Daddy Long Legs' and advertised as 'A Sea Voyage on Wheels – Fare 6d each way'. The journey between Brighton and Rottingdean took 35 minutes.

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It was destroyed a few days after opening by the storm which swept away the Chain Pier but was repaired. Even though the Prince of Wales, later Edward VII took two pleasure trips on it in one day, it was doomed: the sea was making such inroads that Brighton Corporation was forced to remove some of the railway to allow new groynes to be built.

The Palace Pier (renamed Brighton Pier) was built to replace the old Chain Pier and was finally opened on 20 May 1899. Perfectly situated at the end of the Old Steine, the Palace Pier attracted the crowds of incoming holidaymakers like a magnet, drawing as many as two million visitors a year. Its popularity was further enhanced by the addition of a theatre in 1901, later a bandstand and also a winter garden.

Edwardian Brighton is preserved at Preston Manor, home to the Stanford family from 1894 to 1932. The family owned and developed a lot of land in and around Brighton. Preston Manor is today used not only as a museum but as an educational instrument for local schools teaching the history of the city.

20th Century Brighton

At the start of the 20th Century the Daily Mail claimed that the town was an "unenterprising, unattractive and outdated holiday resort". In fact, the Royal York Hotel on the south side of the Steine was almost derelict when it was taken over by Sir Harry Preston in 1901. Following the hotel's refurbishment, he wined and dined London newspaper editors to promote visitors, particularly motorists, to the town encouraging them to stay at his hotel. He was spectacularly successful and in 1913 he bought the nearby Royal Albion Hotel, which had been closed since 1900, for £13,500.

Although the UK entered the Great War (World War I 1914-1918) in August 1914, the summer season at Brighton continued in full swing and it was not until the first casualties of war arrived in the town in September 1914 that the reality of the conflict hit the inhabitants. The Royal Pavilion estate and several schools were taken over for use as hospitals and many Londoners fled the capital to avoid possible zeppelin raids. Women played a major role in running the city while the men were at the front. Brighton was largely unaffected and the holiday season continued relatively normally.

During the twenties and early thirties the Royal Albion Hotel became the town's leading hotel where authors, actors, film stars, sportsmen and even the Prince of Wales were entertained by Sir Harry Preston, who had a wonderful feel for publicity. Like many Edwardian gentlemen, he was a sportsman in the widest sense, embracing yachting (he owned the first motor yacht (the 'My Lady Ada') on this stretch of coast, motor racing and flying, as well as his first love, boxing.

The Second World War (1939-1945) had a much greater effect on Brighton than World War I. Air-raid precautions began before war was declared and a general blackout was enforced over the south of England in August 1939. Brighton's art and museum treasures were removed to the safety of the countryside. Initially all entertainments were stopped but were allowed to continue after a couple of weeks. Anti-aircraft guns and searchlights were set up along the seafront. In July 1940 the beaches were closed and mined. The two piers had sections demolished to prevent the use of their landing stages. The town was declared to be no longer a 'safe area' and 30,000 evacuees in the town were re-evacuated to other areas, together with local children.

On 26 March 1941 the south coast was declared a 'defence zone' and no visitors were allowed in the area, but by 1943 the ban on visitors was lifted. During the Second World War the beaches

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were closed by the Government. Volk's Railway was shut down and both termini demolished. After the war the railway was restored and new stations built.

During the 1930's and 1940's Brighton suffered an unsavoury reputation, defined unflatteringly by Graham Greene's famous novel 'Brighton Rock', published in 1938. Although he described Brighton in terms of a place with London gangs and violence, this was not the whole picture, since Brighton was still a very popular holiday destination. Art Deco landmarks such as Saltdean Lido and Shoreham airport were opened and the Brighton Dome was redesigned in the art deco style. It was also the era of the giant cinema, most of which have now disappeared.

It was in the 1950's and 1960's that the famous Promettes appeared on the Brighton promenade. Each year 6 women were selected for the job of selling Brighton to the world. They appeared in newsreels all over the globe, from Australia to Brazil and became a symbol of the town. Their job was to answer holidaymakers' questions and hand out tourist information. In 1956 the local newspaper described them as 'walking information bureaux with sex appeal'. The Promettes were the brainchild of Brighton's publicity director, ex-Fleet Street newspaperman Sidney Butterworth. Originally they were selected from a local modelling school, where they were taught how to walk, stand and even take their coats off properly.

Over the weekend of 17-18 May 1964 two rival youth cultures, the mods and the rockers, clashed on the seafront. During this weekend 3000 youths converged on Brighton. The mods outnumbered the rockers. The cult film, Quadrophenia depicts the clash and much of it was filmed on location in the city.

From the mid-fifties, Brighton typified the British seaside with its fish and chips, candyfloss and clairvoyants and by the eighties had become fairly run down as a leisure destination. However, the opening of the Brighton Centre in 1977 put the city on the map as an international conference destination. The Centre was one of the first conference centres on the south coast able to attract large party political conferences.

Hove retained its identity as a genteel, wealthy town that attracted a quieter kind of holiday maker. Hove Lawns and a variety of seafront hotels, the King Alfred sports centre and Hove bandstand were just some of the attractions.

21st Century Brighton

As the new millennium approached, Brighton & Hove underwent a renaissance that is continuing into the new century.

In 2000 the Queen granted Brighton & Hove city status.

The new seafront development turned a run down area into an attractive, trendy magnet for visitors. The newly created artists' quarter, clubs, bars and restaurants revitalised the area and turned it into one of the most fashionable beachfronts in Britain.

In June 2007 the Theatre Royal celebrated its 200th Anniversary. Today it is highly regarded by artists and theatre-goers alike and has premiered many famous West End London productions. Its assortment of classical theatre, dance, concerts, musicals and circus spectacle continue to make way each year for the annual Christmas pantomime. The theatre also continues to present matinées as well as morning performances for children's shows.

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Brighton Festival is the largest event of its kind in England. Now in its fifth decade, it has become one of the major milestones in the cultural calendar, bringing an international mix of exclusive events, world and UK premieres, special one-off commissions and endless hours of entertainment to the city by the sea. Over a three week period in May, The Festival takes over venues, parks and unusual spaces across the city.

The Brighton Festival Fringe has been active since the Brighton Festival's creation in 1967. Over the years this has grown significantly and been presented in a number of different ways. In 1967 it was called Fringe, the name was changed to 'Umbrella' until 2000, in 2002 it became 'The Open' and then finally it was named 'The Brighton Festival Fringe'. Between 1985 and 1995 its activities increased ten-fold and it continues to grow. The Brighton Festival Fringe is the third largest Fringe in the world after Edinburgh and Adelaide.

With its laid back, bohemian atmosphere and reputation for cheeky, free thinking, the Brighton gay scene has long been considered the UK's gay capital. In fact in 2008 it was voted Best UK Destination by the Pink Paper. A unique, cosmopolitan atmosphere where boundaries between gay and straight merge, the city offers a friendly, welcoming atmosphere for lesbian and gay visitors.

Brighton Pride has become the largest and most successful gay and lesbian festival in Europe. Gay, lesbian and transgender people flock to the city each year to relax and have fun on the Brighton gay scene. And with a summer and a winter Pride, Brighton really is the place to be. Or for those wanting to tie the knot, Brighton is one of the top 2 UK destinations for civil partnership ceremonies.

Brighton Pier, now 1722 ft in length and a Grade 2* listed building, welcomes over 3 million visitors each year. There are many relics to be found on the pier, including some of the original kiosks, a signal cannon from the old Chain Pier as well as filigree ironwork arches from the original structure.

Unfortunately, a strong storm in 1970 badly damaged the West Pier and it was closed in 1975, but plans are now in place to build the i360, an observation mast on the site of the Pier.

Volk's Railway is still a popular tourist attraction today and runs each year from Easter to the end of September as well as on the day of the Veteran Car Run in November.

Brighton has been named in the Top 10 UK destinations for overseas visitors and the Top 5 most popular UK cities (lastminute.com).

Brighton's reputation as the 'city by the sea' or 'London by the sea' continues to grow. It most certainly is the place where you will find culture, good food, good shopping and a selection of traditional, contemporary and speciality hotels. Only 1 hour from London and 30 minutes from Gatwick Airport with over 8 million tourists visiting the city every year, new hotels have sprung up around the city to accommodate both leisure visitors and conference delegates. With an estimated tourist spend in the region of £408 million annually, Brighton certainly lives up to its reputation as 'the place to be'.

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