**Kent Piers**

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With its long coastline and comparatively mild climate, it was no surprise that the county of Kent was at the forefront of the growth of the British [seaside resort](/19c/19c-seaside). Margate was one of the earliest of the country’s watering places and was advertising sea bathing as early as 1736. Then just a small fishing village, the town grew rapidly following Richard Russell of Brighton’s dissertation in 1750 on the benefits of drinking, and the bathing in, of seawater and visitors began flocking to the coast for their health ‘cure-all’. Margate was helped in this respect by its comparative closeness to London, which was just 72 miles distant, although its small harbour was unsuitable as a landing place except at high tide. The majority of people travelled to the resorts by [hoys](/18c/18c-all-aboard-the-hoy) and, later, steamers before the railways began to spread out nationwide from the 1830s. However for those towns without good harbours, there was a problem getting passengers ashore. A leaky rowing boat or the back of some sturdy local fishermen originally had to suffice, but in 1813-4 Ryde on the Isle of Wight erected a landing stage for the safe handling of boat passengers and the idea of a pier was born. The famous Chain Pier at Brighton was erected in 1822-3 and within a short time had acquired the status as the most fashionable promenade in town. [Margate]( /19c/19c-margate) tried to provide a landing stage available at most states of the tide by erecting the Jarvis Landing Stage in 1824.

From the 1830s, other Kent [resorts](/19c/19c-seaside) began to build piers, principally for use as landing stages, although, as at Brighton, they soon became popular marine promenades. Herne Bay was a purposely created resort of the early steamboat era and erected a long pier in 1832 to feed off the thriving London - [Margate](/19c/19c-margate) traffic. [Gravesend](/19c/19c-gravesend), whose [Rosherville Gardens](/19c/19c-rosherville) were a great day trip attraction for Londoners, erected the Town Pier in 1834 and the Royal Terrace Pier the following year. Other Thameside resorts close to London, including Erith and Greenhithe, building landing piers and pleasure gardens, to attract visitors. Sheerness (1835) and Deal (1838) also erected early landing piers, although the towns with good harbours, such as [Ramsgate](/19c/19c-ramsgate), [Dover](/19c/19c-dover) and [Folkestone](/19c/19c-folkestone), did without piers, for now.

[Folkestone](/19c/19c-folkestone) was Kent’s premier example of a seaside resort whose rapid growth could be attributed to the coming of the railway. Following its arrival in 1843, the local landowner the Earl of Radnor laid out the elegant West End of the town with its grand crescents, squares and avenues fronting onto the famous cliff-top Leas Promenade. The intended clientele was to be strictly upper-class and Lord Radnor’s policeman ensured that the ‘undesirables’ did not soil the exclusivity of the Leas. [Margate](/19c/19c-margate) was connected to the South Eastern Railway in 1846 and its fierce rival the London, Chatham & Dover Railway in 1863. The resort’s initial aspiration to be a select watering place was swamped by the crowds of working-class trippers arriving on the steamers and trains, although it managed to a maintain a ‘posh end’ at Cliftonville. [Ramsgate](/19c/19c-ramsgate), once the favoured retreat of Coleridge, also became popular with the masses and it was left to neighbouring [Broadstairs](/dickens/broadstairs-19th-century) to carve itself out a niche as the more select end of Thanet. Kent’s middle-ranking resorts included Herne Bay, [Deal](/seascape/deal), Sheerness, Whitstable (and its satellite Tankerton), [Dover](/19c/19c-dover), [Sandgate](/placesqz/sandgate-overview), Hythe and Westgate-on-Sea; the latter trying to outdo even [Folkestone](/19c/19c-folkestone) for exclusivity. One of Kent’s earliest resorts, [Gravesend](/19c/19c-gravesend), had virtually ceased to be a watering place by 1900 due to the pollution of the Thames and the decline of [Rosherville Gardens](/19c/19c-rosherville).

The county’s early piers had largely proved to be failures. The wooden piers at Herne Bay and [Deal](/seascape/deal) had quickly succumbed to the twin horrors of storm damage and marine worms, while the Jarvis Landing Stage at [Margate](/19c/19c-margate), which often trapped its customers on the pier head at high tide, was wrecked by a storm in 1851. In contrast, the cast iron piers at [Gravesend](/19c/19c-gravesend) (admittedly situated in more sheltered water) had proved more durable and [Margate](/19c/19c-margate)’s replacement structure was to be constructed of cast iron. Although known as the ‘Jetty’ (to distinguish it from the stone harbour pier) this was a fully-fledged seaside pier, and in 1864 [Deal](/seascape/deal) followed suit with a handsome iron structure. It was found that people actually enjoyed just walking up and down a pier and relished a stroll over the waves without the discomfort of feeling seasick; and what’s more they would pay a toll for the privilege.

From the 1860s a ‘mania’ developed amongst resorts to erect a showpiece pleasure pier. In Kent, following on from [Margate](/19c/19c-margate) (1855) and [Deal](/seascape/deal) (1864), Herne Bay erected an iron pier in 1873 (greatly extended between 1896-9), followed by Ramsgate](/19c/19c-ramsgate) (1881), [Folkestone](/19c/19c-folkestone) (1888) and [Dover](/19c/19c-dover) (1893). Even little [Pegwell Bay](/19c/19c-dyce-biography) (1879) and Tankerton (1894) managed to have small piers for a time, yet proposed piers in resorts such as Birchington, Westgate-on-Sea, Broadstairs, Hythe and Littlestone never saw the light of day. However by 1910, when the pier-building era came to an end, almost one hundred pleasure piers had sprouted around the coast of Britain. To cater for ever-increasing forms of entertainment, piers were adapted to house ornate wooden pavilions, floral halls, theatres and amusements such as roller skating, divers, camera obscura and mutoscopes.

In addition to its pleasure piers, Kent also had plenty of other piled pier structures of interest, including the railway piers at Port Victoria, Queenborough, Dover Prince of Wales and Dover Admiralty, and the steamer piers of the River Medway at Upnor, Strood, Rochester and Chatham. There were also piers built for industry along the banks of the Thames and Medway estuaries, including the extraordinary long Bee Ness Jetty, which can still be seen in a derelict condition. The solid concrete/stone harbour and landing piers at [Margate](/19c/19c-margate) , [Ramsgate](/19c/19c-ramsgate), [Dover](/19c/19c-dover) and [Folkestone](/19c/19c-folkestone) were also used for a stroll, as was the charming wooden harbour pier at Broadstairs.

Sadly, the majority of Kent’s seaside pleasure piers now only a distant memory. The financially unsuccessful promenade piers at [Dover](/19c/19c-dover) and [Ramsgate]() were early casualties, being removed in 1927 and 1930 respectively, and [Folkestone](/19c/19c-folkestone)’s Victoria Pier was a victim of the Second World War. Sheerness Pier was demolished in 1971, and [Margate](/19c/19c-margate) Jetty and the majority of Herne Bay Pier were swept away by a storm on 11 January 1978. Yet, [Deal](/seascape/deal)’s post-war concrete pier (replacing its iron pier wrecked by a vessel in 1940) remains popular as a promenade and for fishing and dining, and the stub of Herne Bay Pier has a concert stage, eateries, and craft shops housed in beach huts. [Gravesend](/19c/19c-gravesend)’s Town and Royal Terrace piers survive as the oldest cast iron piers in the world and some of the River Medway piers are also still extant. In recent years, the harbour piers at Folkestone and [Margate](/21c/21c-margate) have adapted to became pleasure piers of sorts with their restaurants, bars and entertainment. It is good to know that the ‘Garden of England’ remains somewhere that both residents and visitors can enjoy a stroll across the sea.