

Southend-on-Sea

Southend on Sea is one of our county's most famous destinations, known far and wide for its golden sandy beaches and glitzy amusements, but there is more to Southend's story than the seaside.



Southend-on-Sea is a bit of a misnomer, as technically it's "**Southend-on-Thames**", as the town is situated at the mouth of the Thames Estuary, with a view of the Kent coast.

It lies on the north side of the Thames Estuary, 40 miles (64km) east of central London. It is bordered to the north by Rochford and to the west by Castle Point.

When the Saxons discovered our county's coastline, they preferred not to settle right beside it. They gathered at Prittlewell, on modern Southend's inland edge, and it's thought that this was the hub of a thriving village that was founded in the 6th or 7th centuries (St Mary's Church, mentioned in the Domesday book, still has a Saxon arch). It went on to become a busy market town in the Middle Ages, growing even more prosperous in the 15th and 16th centuries.

What we now know as Southend was in those days just a motley collection of farms and fishermen's huts on Prittlewell's south side.

It wasn't until the late 1700s that the first buildings sprang up in the area that was to become Southend, and a further hundred years after before the Edwardians began to fall in love with the town, less for the seaside than for the shopping.

The earliest concerted attempt to develop Southend as a seaside resort is seen in Royal Terrace. 1-15 Royal Terrace and the Royal Hotel were built in the 1790s as the first phase of the 'New Town'. New South End was designed as a fashionable seaside resort to rival Margate, Brighton and Weymouth. A grand ball marked the opening of the Royal Hotel in 1793.

Princess Caroline of Brunswick is credited with making a seaside resort of Southend. The wife of the Prince Regent (the future King George IV), she visited The Terrace in the recently built 'New South End' in 1803 and set the trend for fashionable Georgians to enjoy

a day trip from London on the new train line. The Terrace was named "Royal" following her visits and for a short time attracted fashionable society. But difficult access from London by road and river discouraged further development until the construction of the railway in 1856. Royal Terrace is the only surviving Georgian terrace in Southend.

The London-Tilbury-Southend railway was completed in 1856 and provided the stimulus for larger scale housing development in Southend. The railway developer leased land from Daniel Scratton, the Lord of the Manor of Prittlewell, for housing development between the new railway and the cliff top to be known as Cliff Town. This area extended from Royal Terrace westwards to Wilson Road. It also included the adjacent cliffs and beach for recreational open space.

Scratton imposed strict design controls on the first phase of development which resulted in a unique example of mid-Victorian estate planning. Designed by Banks and Barry and built between 1859-1861, the estate provided five classes of terraced housing and shops, all with unified designs and materials.

In 1870-72, John Marius Wilson's *Imperial Gazetteer of England and Wales* described **Southend on Sea** like this:

***SOUTHEND**, a small town and a chapelry in Prittle-well parish, Essex. The town stands on the Thames estuary, at the terminus of the London, Tilbury, and Southend railway, 3½ miles WNW of Shoeburyness and 3½ S by E of Rochford; dates from a period not earlier than 1800; attracted notice, as a suitable watering-place, from a visit of Queen Caroline and Princess Charlotte in 1804; consists of good streets, with many commodious residences; includes Cliff-Town, which has been separately noticed; carries on a considerable coasting trade; communicates much with London, both by railway and by steamers; communicates also, by steamers, with Gravesend, Rochester, and Sheerness; and has a head post-office, and a railway station with telegraph, excellent hotels, good sea-bathing appliances, assembly-rooms, baths, a literary institution and library, a pier 1¼ mile long, a church, an Independent chapel of 1865, a Wesleyan chapel, and a national school. The pier has a railway on it, for passengers to and from the steamers; was constructed at a cost of about £42,000; and was sold to the Eastern Counties railway company for £17,000. —The chapelry was constituted in 1842. Pop. in 1861, 1,716. Houses, 293. The living is a p. curacy in the diocese of Rochester. Value, £50. Patrons, Three Trustees.*

The Pier

The most famous landmark, Southend Pier, opened in 1830 to make it easier for visitors arriving by boat.

The local mudflats make the waters too shallow to moor close to Southend's sandy beaches, so the first waterborne would-be tourists were likely to sail past to the bright lights of Margate.

Southend Pier is a major landmark in **Southend-on-Sea**. Extending 1.33 miles (2.14km) into the **Thames Estuary**, it is the longest pleasure pier in the world. The Bill to build the new pier, to replace a previous timber **jetty**, received Royal Assent in May 1829 with construction starting in July 1829. The timber pier was replaced by an iron pier that opened to the public in August 1889. The Southend Pier Railway, opened in the early 1890s, was the first pier railway in the country.

The pier, a Grade II listed building, played a role through both of the world wars, such as during WWI when ships housing German prisoners of war were moored off the pierhead. In the Second

World War, the pier was taken over by the Royal Navy and was renamed HMS *Leigh*, closing to the public in September 1939. The pier has experienced several fires, notably in 1959, 1976, 1995 and 2005, with the latter causing significant damage to the old pierhead and surrounding structures.



Two views of the pier, as it is today from the air, and as it was in the late 19C, taken from the landward end.

During the summer of 1999, the former pirate radio station, Radio Caroline, moored their radio ship *Ross Revenge* at the pierhead for about a month and conducted a 28-day legal broadcast under a Restricted Service Licence to the Southend-on-Sea and South-East Essex area. Whilst moored, a power-cut left the pier without power for two days. Radio Caroline helped generate electricity for the pier via a spare generator aboard their ship, enabling shops and attractions to function until the mains supply could be restored. A subsequent lightning strike disabled their rear tower and took out the transmitter.

21st Century history

In June 2002 the RNLI Lifeboat Station and Gift shop was officially opened and was funded by the RNLI.

In 2003, a new pier entrance was completed in the Summer costing £1.9 million.



On 15 September **2009** Southend Borough Council announced the winner of a design contest for a new pierhead – a Sweden-based architecture firm, White Arkitekter, with London-based structural engineers Price & Myers. The company's winning entry was a design called *Sculpted by Wind and Wave* and was chosen from 73 international and local entries.

The unique £3m Cultural Centre designed by White Arkitekter working in partnership with London-based architects Sprunt, was constructed off-site at Tilbury Docks. From there it was lowered onto a barge and transported along the Thames. On 17th May **2012**, the new Cultural Centre - a 170-tonne structure - was then hoisted onto the pier head at high tide using a 400-tonne marine sheer leg crane

and opened to the public on 21 July. Recycled timber from the pier was used in the construction of beach huts on Shoebury's East Beach in 2013.



It's used as a theatre and for art exhibitions. On 17th July 2013, His Royal Highness the Duke of Kent ceremonially re-named the iconic Southend Pier Cultural Centre 'The Royal Pavilion'. The Duke unveiled the plaque bearing the building's new name after officially opening the new RNLI lifeboat house on Southend seafront.

Southend Pier has held a number of Royal visitors including the Duke's father, HRH Prince George, who officially opened the Prince George extension in 1929.

The pier railway runs the length of Southend Pier, providing public passenger transport from the shore to the pierhead. It operates every day on which the pier is open, providing a quarter or half-hourly service.



The original wooden pier built in 1830 employed a horse tramway to convey goods and visitors to the pierhead. In 1890, with the construction of the iron pier, Cromptons installed an electric tramway. By 1891 the line ran the then full length of the pier and carriages were in use. The system expanded, until eventually, by 1930, four trains, each made up of seven carriages, were running on a double track. In 1949 the rolling stock was replaced with four new trains.

In 1978 the electric railway closed, due to deterioration and the cost of repairs. It was reopened on 2 May 1986 using two new diesel trains on a simplified single track with a passing loop.

Lifeboat station



One of the Southend-on-Sea lifeboat station's two boathouses is located at the pierhead of Southend Pier. It houses an Atlantic 75 class lifeboat as well as a smaller D class boat, both of which are launched by davit into the deep water adjoining the pier. The boathouse is a modern structure which incorporates crew accommodation and offices, an RNLI shop, and a viewing gallery from which visitors can view the lifeboats. It is topped by a sun deck to which the public has access. Lifeboat crews use an electric buggy, complete with sirens and blue flashing lights, to access this boathouse along the pier from the shore.

A lifeboat has been stationed on the pier since 1879. Initially lifeboats were launched using davits, much as they are today. However, in 1935 a new lifeboat house was erected at the pierhead that provided a slipway for launching the lifeboat. This lasted until 1986, when the collision of the *MV Kingsabbey* with the pier destroyed the boathouse. A temporary boathouse was used until 2002, when the current boathouse opened.

Seven Miles of Sandy Beaches- Southend on Sea sits on the northern side of the Thames Estuary, on the Essex Coast. There are 7 miles of pebbly and sandy beaches which attract over six million tourists every single year! There is a total of nine beaches; Leigh Bell Wharf, Chalkwell Beach, Westcliff Bay, Three Shells Beach & Lagoon, Southend Jubilee Beach, City Beach, Thorpe Bay, Shoebury Common and Shoebury East beaches.

Amusement Park. Southend was also the site of the first amusement park in the world. The Kursaal. It opened in 1901 with an early appearance by the world's first lady lion tamer. The once huge park included sideshows, roundabouts, rollercoasters, a water chute and the ballroom where Vera Lyn started her career.

The Kursaal site was opened in 1894 by father and son Alfred and Bernard Wiltshire Tollhurst on four acres of land purchased the previous year, as the 'Marine Park and Gardens'. In July 1901 they opened a grand entrance pavilion, the Kursaal Palace, designed by George Sherrin and John Clarke, containing a circus, ballroom, arcade, dining hall and billiard room. The word *Kursaal* is German, meaning a "Cure Hall" or spa, and it seems to have been adapted to mean a place of healthy amusement. Southend's Kursaal became the largest fairground in the south of England.

Over the years it had various owners and uses, for sporting events including the home of Southend United Football team, greyhound racing, trade exhibitions and a zoo, plus musical events.

The Kursaal as a whole had been in gradual decline since the early 1970s, with the outdoor amusements closing in 1973. At the end of 1977 the decision was made to close the ballroom, with the main building finally succumbing in 1986. The outdoor amusement area was later redeveloped for housing.



In 1998 the main Kursaal building was reopened after a multimillion-pound redevelopment by the Rowallan Group containing a bowling alley, a casino and other amusements. The building originally contained a McDonald's, but the fast-food chain left in 2008. The bowling alley closed permanently in 2019, and the casino closed permanently in 2020. This currently leaves only a Tesco Express store occupying part of this historic building.

Funicular railway, constructed in 1912, links the seafront to the High Street level of the town. At 130ft in length, and with a rise of 57ft, it is quite short. The line runs on the site of a pioneering moving walkway, a forerunner of today's escalator. This was constructed in 1901 by the American engineer Jesse W Reno, but soon proved noisy and unreliable due its exposed location. Since opening in 1912 the Funicular t has been modernised three times, in 1930, 1959 and 1990. Each modernisation has resulted in the replacement of the car. In 2003 the line was closed due to technical problems, and refurbishment was undertaken on the stations. The line finally re-opened on 25 May 2010, after a restoration costing a total of £3 million, £650,000 on the car alone.



From the 1960s onwards, the town declined as a holiday destination, Southend redeveloped itself as the home of the Access Credit Card, due to it having one of the UK's first electronic telephone exchanges. After the 1960s, much of the town centre was developed for commerce and retail, and many original structures were lost to redevelopment. An annual seafront air show, started in 1986 when it featured a flypast by Concorde, used to take place each May until 2012.

My father's family lived in Witham in Essex and I remember spending a summer holiday with my family in a rented house on the seafront in the summer of 1970. We loved going down to the

amusement arcades and the beach – it seemed to be very sunny that summer. I remember it as a mixture of brash and proper. I really should go again.

Vanessa Cummings

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