CLEVEDON PIER a note in its Centenary year

by Bryan JH Brown

The Victorian Pier is still a feature of many sea fronts, and is symbolic of its age. The best piers were built of iron, the material of the Industrial Revolution, and they reached out over the ocean in ways imitative of Victoria's Empire. In fact after the success of the Brighton Chain Pier, built in 1822, in attracting promenading visitors rather than the cross-channel ferry passengers for which it was intended, piers spread rapidly over the English seaside scene.

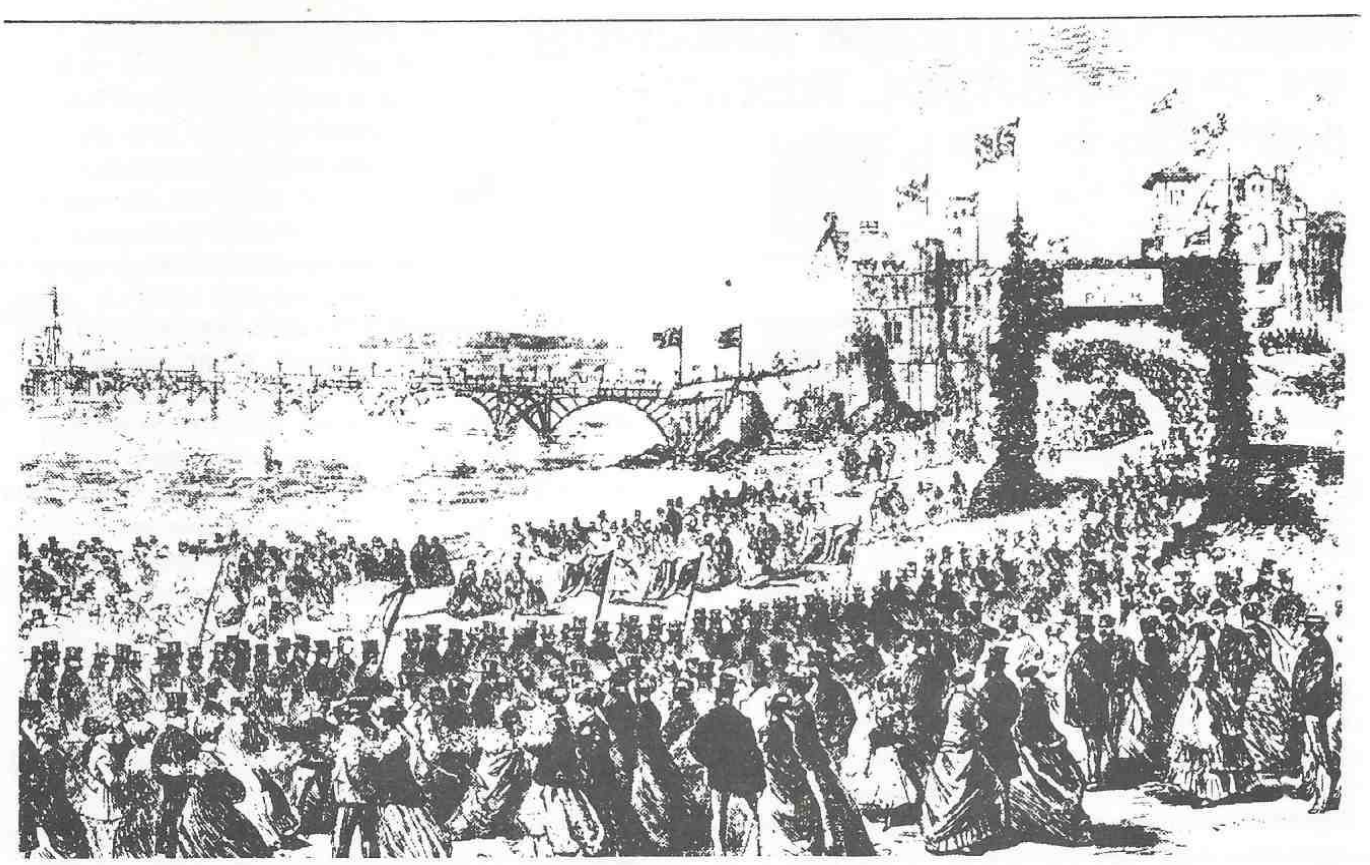
Of all the resorts on the Somerset coast only to Portishead was the possession of a landing place for passengers a vital necessity, and although both Clevedon and Weston-super-Mare had landing slips very early in the century, it was not until the resorts had grown to some considerable size that the building of pleasure piers became a practical financial possibility. Clevedon, with its restrictions of site and comparative isolation at the end of a branch railway, was the last of the four North Somerset resorts to acquire its pier, although those at Portishead and Burnham were of course associated with railway developments.

The first intimations of pier building at Clevedon were however as early as 1829, only a year after the first hotel had opened. John Rutter, in his 'Clevedon Guide' (Shaftsbury, 1829) mentioned the possibility of a pier designed by Wallis and Miles being constructed "in the very near future." Nothing more was heard of this project though, and it was not until 1861 that really positive moves were made. Even then it was only in 1867, the year the Birnbeck Pier at Weston opened, that sufficient capital could be assured for a start to be made. Piers themselves could be profitable enterprises, but perhaps more important was that a pier enabled large numbers of trippers to visit the resort, spending their hard-earned savings on amusements, refreshments and trinkets. A well designed pier could also add to the attractiveness of the resort for long stay visitors, both from the increased range of facilities it offered and from sheer visual attraction. It is therefore not surprising that the successful Pier Company committee included such men as Sir A.H.Elton, who as Lord of the Manor had a firm hand on much of Clevedon's development, and Samuel Ransford, the proprietor of the Public Library and Reading Room. Despite the difficulty of fund-raising among the rather under-capitalized commercial interests of Clevedon, almost all the total cost of £11,300 was raised locally.

Work on the pier abutment began on 22nd July 1867, and the contractor for the masonry, A.Oliver from Hitcham in Buckinghamshire, had completed this before the ironwork was commenced three months later. Unlike its neighbouring resorts there were no alternative site suggestions for the pier, although before construction began its design length was reduced from 1200 ft. to 800 ft. with a 42 ft. pier-head. As completed to the plans of J.W.Grover and R.Ward, the pier was 16 ft. 6 in. wide, with the pier-head rising 60 ft. above low water level when there was about 10 ft. available depth. Estimates vary, but between 350 and 500 tons of pre-fabricated wrought iron parts were brought by train from Hamiltons Ironworks in Liverpool and assembled on site by gangs working a shift cycle geared to the tides, working often continued through the night. The castellated Toll House was designed by Hans Price, a Weston-super-Mare architect and small-scale land speculator, who was responsible for a number of the villas in both resorts. It was begun in 1868 and completed in time for the opening on Easter Monday (March 29th) 1869. The Clevedon sea front was packed with residents and visitors for this occasion, but despite the propitious beginning the pier could never be credited a financial success, one cannot however estimate its impact upon the rest of the resort's economy.

To save it from neglect and decay the pier was bought by the Clevedon Council in 1891. Considerable alterations and repairs were then carried out, mainly to the pier head, but a substantial part of the ironwork is original and remains as a testimony to designers and builders despite 100 years of tide and weather. it is undoubtedly one of the finest Victorian piers, and is a legacy of the Victorian Leisure Industry that continues to add beauty to the coast. It is to be hoped that despite an annual loss of over £3000 the local authority will see fit to preserve it both as an Industrial Monument and local amenity.

Note: Part of the above is based upon work being undertaken by the author for a higher degree thesis in Bath University of Technology "A Survey of the Development of the Leisure industries in the Bristol Region with Special Reference to the History of the Seaside Resorts."



THE OPENING OF THE PIER (as pictured in the Illustrated London News dated April 10th 1869,p.369)

A TECHNICAL DESCRIPTION compiled from notes in THE VISITORS' GUIDE TO CLEVEDON AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD published about 1870

The structure rests on a series of arches of 100 ft span, each of the piles supporting these arches being formed of two Barlow rails rivetted back to back. The piles at the deepest point reach 65 ft above ground (with about 15 ft in the ground making the longest 80 ft long). They are placed at a rate of 1 in 10 both ways, and at the top the pair on each side are brought into intimate union by means of a wrought-iron plate passing between them. The two united rails are bent over, and form an arch of considerable stability. The piles are kept in position by a complete system of diagonal bracing and distance pieces or struts. That part of the pile which enters the mud is made of 5 ft solid wrought-iron stems, at the end of which comes a 2 ft 3 in. cast-iron screw. These are carried down to the rock. Where the rock is at the surface the piles are screwed to it.

The superstructure of the pier is formed by two continuous wrought-iron girders, 3 ft 6 in. deep, running the whole length of the pier on either side. The pier-head measures 42 ft x 60 ft, and is 65 ft high. It is built of 18 piles, each made of two Barlow rails rivetted back to back. At vertical intervals every 10 ft come five lower landing decks. These are made up of open boarding laid upon a complete rigging of wrought iron rods as bracing, and in the centre up the entire stairway are carried stairs which are wide and ample. The deck is of 3 in. planking, machine planed and close jointed and slightly cambered to "give the effect of a flush deck on board ship." The main girders are supported by double cantilevers, so that they could be divided in two in their centres without danger.