

# The West Pier, Brighton

## Disrepair and destruction

**Richard Morrice** *Historic Buildings Inspector, South East Region*

**The loss of this Grade I pier highlights the importance of a national strategy for buildings at risk.**

**T**hat the West Pier is the greatest pier ever built is without question. That it should not now be possible to fund its repair is one of the great post-war defeats for architectural conservation. The issues involved are many, and the history of the pier will show what mistakes were made in trying to give it a future. What is almost certainly true is that, had the current regime for arresting the decay of listed buildings – English Heritage’s Buildings at Risk Strategy – been in place in the mid 1970s, the pier would still be with us. Time, and the assault of the weather, eventually made the costs so high that repair became impossible. The pier did, however, have the benefit of underlining how important it is to stake out significance in detail when making decisions about a site. The case underlines, therefore, the general approach to conservation that is most usefully set out in the Burra Charter.

### Significance

The West Pier has significance of several kinds and on several levels. Built from 1863 to 1866, the West Pier was a highlight, if not the climax, of seaside pleasure pier development. Eugenius Birch, the most important of the Victorian pier engineers, here built the most elegant pier structure then possible in iron and timber, with a lightness derived from using the smallest number of columns possible (none of which were raking), and did it at a scale commensurate to its setting. Prior to the West Pier, only Birch’s Blackpool North Pier of a couple of years previous was of similar size, and this was built with a less elegant substructure. In that sense, the West Pier is the culmination of a development that Birch had himself begun at Margate Pier (1853–7, where he first used screw piles) and at Blackpool North Pier (1862–3). At the West Pier he perfected screw piles, using two sorts, one like those used at Margate and Blackpool, appropriate for anchoring into sand;

but these proved not to be sufficient for chalk and were superseded during building.

The West Pier, in its use of larger kiosks than earlier piers, was also the essential precursor to Hastings Pier (1869–72), the first to have been built with an integral pier-head pavilion. It also introduced festive architecture to the seaside. It was not the first building to be built by the sea that took this line, but it was the leisure building that made it obligatory to build in ‘fun’ styles at the seaside.

The scale of the pier was matched by the quality of aspiration of the architecture. It was designed much more with monumentality in mind than earlier piers, and it is one of the very few that were consciously laid out as part of a grand ensemble. First, instead of making the transition to the lower level of the pier from the seafront by a ramp alone, it used spacious flights of steps (although side ramps were provided for bath chairs – a very early example of disabled access). Second, the pier is one of the few that were consciously placed so as to be part of a greater whole. The building is arranged symmetrically along the centre line of Regency Square, so that the pier reads as part of a much larger, monumental piece of town-planning than was usual for piers that were generally sited for commercial rather than architectural impact. Third, it was constructed of cast iron of the highest quality, the quality of the moulding being very high. Birch modelled its buildings (the various kiosks) and its architectural features on styles that were not only locally available but were also of the greatest celebrity – largely and freely from the Royal Pavilion.

The building of the West Pier during the mid 1860s was a mark of the local concern that was felt over the possible loss by Brighton of its social cachet as a fashionable resort. However, changes in the market for leisure in seaside resorts, cheaper travel, the introduction of education and particularly of Bank Holidays



The West Pier, Brighton (Grade I), built in the mid 1860s, shown here in May 1970, with its historic promenade and pavilion.

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during the 1870s and 1880s meant that Brighton generally – and the West Pier in particular – later needed to change its approach to visitors. As at all piers, facilities were added, especially under competition from the Palace (now Brighton) Pier, which replaced the Chain Pier from 1891. It is no surprise to find that the Pavilion was built at the same time as the new pier. The Concert Hall followed during World War I.

### Spiral of decline

Why has it proved impossible to save the acme of pleasure piers? All piers are essentially fugitive structures, but those along the Sussex coast are peculiarly vulnerable due to sea conditions that lead to the largest swell in UK waters. Piers – being buildings of cast-iron (proof against rust but without bending strength), wrought-iron (not much better against rust than mild steel, but with some bending strength), steel (only after about 1900, not good against rust but with some bending strength) and timber (subject to rot) – need to be repaired continually. Their susceptibility to storm damage is also well known, especially along this stretch of coast. Piers therefore need to be maintained continually if they are not to begin a spiral of decline.

Unfortunately, the history of the West Pier was not one of regular maintenance. Following the last war, when it had been partially dismembered to save it from use as a landing stage for invasion forces, it suffered from a general lack of maintenance, which resulted first in the closure of the pier-head in 1970 and then in full closure in 1975. That there had been

so little maintenance is perhaps understandable, given its problematic location at the western end of Brighton seafront, away from the tourist heart of Brighton. The intention of its original backers – to provide Brighton with a more exclusive attraction – was always problematic; had it been built at the end of West Street, it would have been more profitable and may have survived more readily.

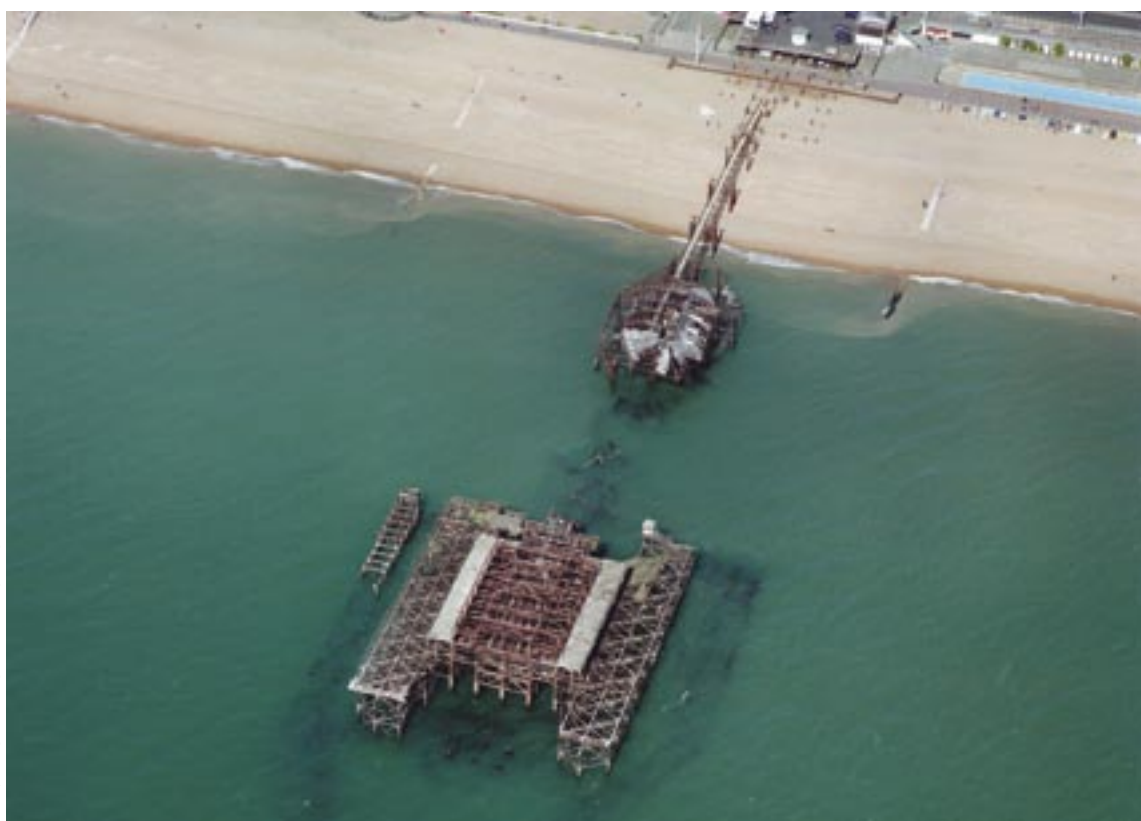
During the later 1970s, the pier had been taken over by the Brighton West Pier Trust, the intention being to repair the structure and put it back to use as a pleasure pier. Consideration of the relative importance of English pleasure piers by the Historic Buildings Council, following on from earlier research jointly sponsored by the Industrial Archaeology Panel of the Council for British Archaeology and the Victorian Society, underlined the importance of the West Pier. Grant funding was sought from the Historic Buildings Council, unsuccessfully at first; but then between 1986 and 1989, English Heritage and the National Heritage Memorial Fund combined to assist a scheme of repair. Only a small section was repaired, however, before the offers were withdrawn during discussions concerning a scheme for commercial redevelopment which, it was then felt, would effectively have denatured the pier. All at that time seemed lost, until the setting up of the National Lottery in 1994 offered the promise of sufficient funding for the repair of the pier.

Unfortunately, in any repair case, there is a point where the escalating cost meets the reducing amount of historic fabric, and this point was eventually reached during the storms of 2002–3.

The decline of the West Pier: March 2003, after the final storm of the New Year (above), and March 2004, after fires at the concert hall in March 2003 and the pavilion in May 2003 (below).



(above) © English Heritage Photo Library / Nigel Corrie; (below) NMR 23448 / 20 taken 31 March 2004 © English Heritage NMR



### Some lessons learned

Is it possible, so close to the events, to suggest some lessons? When the remains of the pier head are demolished, as demolished they must now be, it will be the first total removal – if not demolition – of a Grade I listed building in England since 1975 (itself an inauspicious date in the history of the pier).

First, action to save a building at risk must be timely. The continuing decay of the pier led to an increase in repair costs and increasing risk of loss of historic fabric. If a comprehensive scheme had been developed even as late as a decade after the closure of the pier, there would not have arisen the time lag that has allowed the growth of a profound and self-fulfilling scepticism about the project. Any re-use of the pier would have had to fulfil commercial objectives, and those objectives would have

conflicted with private and public interests in Brighton and Hove. Taken early, these interests would have been easier to argue with.

This suggests, second, the need for a strategy to deal with the problem. In the 1970s and early 1980s, not only did this not exist, in the sense of a strategy for dealing with buildings at risk, but also there was no national body capable of formulating such a strategy. By the late 1990s, English Heritage had developed its building at risk strategy and was able to formulate a response. Unfortunately, it was then too late.

If we are to profit from the loss of the West Pier, it must be in realising the promise that a comprehensive approach to buildings at risk offers. By not allowing buildings to fall into disrepair, we reduce the risk to historic buildings and sites. We should never again allow the loss of such a significant building.