



Knightstone Island

Knightstone is a rocky outcrop approximately 100 yards off the northern end of Weston beach, now linked to the mainland by a limestone causeway.



A painting of Knightstone Island in the early 1800s © Weston Museum

The area was originally known as Nightstone or Nitestone, presumably a reference to the black appearance of the sea-drenched rock. The name was changed to Knightstone around 1758.

The island, originally part of the Pigott estate, was bought in 1819 for £200 by John Howe, an umbrella and parasol maker from Bristol and his partner Charles Taylor, a carpenter, from Yatton. Their aim was to make money from the new fashion for sea bathing then being encouraged by doctors as an aid to both mental and physical health. With this in mind they built hot and cold salt water pools, 'medicated with sulphur, iodine, chlorine or otherwise', a guesthouse and reading room.

The baths were ready to open by July 1822 but because Knightstone was an island at this time you could only walk to it at low tide, otherwise a local fisherman would ferry customers out by boat.

In December 1824 Reverend Thomas Pruen took over the island and added a low causeway, giving easy access to the baths. He also built an outside swimming pool which could be drained and refilled at high tide.

Six years later the baths were bought by Dr Edward Long Fox (1761-1835) a prominent Quaker doctor from Bristol and pioneer in the humane treatment of the insane.

In the 1700s and 1800s there was little understanding of mental health. People with depression and other psychological health issues were often locked away in asylums. Places where they were away from public view and were often physically restrained. Dr Long Fox believed that the best way to help patients was by treating both mind and body. At Knightstone this involved, among other things, seaweed and mud baths (very good for the arthritic) and 'taking the waters' (drinking Weston sea water). Rather you than me!



An image of Knightstone showing the causeway added by Rev. Pruen © Weston Museum

Dr Fox developed the bath complex over a twenty year period. He came from a family of Cornish quarry owners and used his own stone and ships to make the causeway more substantial and indeed it remains to this day. He also built three Lodging Houses for patients; Arthur's Tower, Upper House and Central House as well as a new bath house. Although most of these buildings were replaced in later improvements the bath house remains.

It is estimated that Dr Fox and his son Dr Francis Ker Fox invested some £20,000 in the new resort at a time when the average labourer earned around seven shillings a week (35p).

Such is Dr Long Fox's importance as a pioneer in the treatment of mental health that the psychiatric unit at Weston General Hospital was named in his honour.

Knightstone was sold by Long Fox in 1850 and changed hands a number of times afterwards. In 1880 a Mr Griffiths spent £9,000 enlarging the open air men's swimming pool and building a covered pool for ladies which later became a teaching pool. The former open air pool became a settling tank.

Later, in 1890, Knightstone was bought by a Limited Company in a short-lived scheme to explore commercial use of the wharf, which failed because it was only usable at high tide.

By now the fashion for exploiting Knightstone as a spa was a thing of the past. Arthur's Tower and the lodging houses were demolished and there was much discussion about the future of the island.

This ended in 1894 when the newly formed Weston Urban District Council saw the importance of the island and its potential for a much need new attraction to satisfy Weston's booming holiday trade. In 1896 the council purchased Knightstone for £13,482. Part of the island was extended by filling in the outdoor swimming pool, giving space to build a pavilion.



An aerial shot of Knightstone showing the pool and the theatre, 1964 © Weston Museum

To begin with this was used for band concerts and light opera but later plays were also put on. The type of production was limited by the smallness of the stage but even so many big names of the time appeared there including Rex Harrison, Paul Robeson and Dame Clara Butt.

With the opening of the Winter Gardens Pavilion in 1927, Knightstone Pavilion became a Theatre.

The 1900s saw a great deal of activity on the island. In 1902 a new swimming pool was opened and as a direct result of the excellent baths, Weston Swimming Club grew into one of the finest in the country. Its most famous member was Paul Radmilovic, an Olympic swimmer from 1904-1928.



The redeveloped Knightstone in 2009 © Matt Buck

Knightstone Island continued to be a popular attraction throughout the first half of the century and was thoroughly modernised in 1978. However, as holidaymakers began to discover the possibilities of cheap overseas travel and guaranteed good weather (in destinations like Spain) Weston started to decline as a resort.

With fewer visitors Knightstone also suffered, falling into disuse and decay. The baths closed in 1992 following the opening of the new pool at Hutton Moor Leisure Centre.

It was not long before developers recognised the advantages of the site; the Victorian baths were converted into homes and a £20m redevelopment was opened by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in 2007.

