



## Birnbeck; Weston's first pier

The new railway meant that, by 1841, many more people could come and enjoy what Weston had to offer. Among the ideas for new tourist attractions was a plan to link Birnbeck Island with the mainland. The power of the tide caused problems in building a suspension bridge. However, in 1864, the foundation stone of the present pier was laid. Designed by engineers, and made from parts built in Gwent, it included 15 supports fixed into the rock and a walkway 317 metres long and six metres wide.



*Birnbeck pier in its heyday © Weston Museum*

**Excitement must have been high when the pier opened on 5 June 1867. The turnstiles let in 120,000 people in the first three months, each paying a one penny admission charge. At the end of the summer the price doubled.**

Over the next 15 years activity on the pier grew to include paddle steamer visits from Cardiff, a jetty and a plunge bath. In the new pavilion was a large hall and reading rooms. There was also a tramway to make moving luggage easier. The island's important function as a lifeboat station also began.

By 1890, Harry Coles was in charge of a range of exciting activities, including a Theatre of Wonders, Mechanical Models, Alpine Railway, Shooting Gallery and Park Swings. The popularity of the island's attractions is clear from the 15,000 people who arrived by boat on an average August bank holiday. They could also have refreshments at tea and coffee rooms, listen to bands, try their hands at shooting and have their photos taken.

Disaster struck on Boxing Day 1897 when a fire destroyed many of the main buildings. Weston was so keen not to lose its crowd-puller, though, that only eight months later most had been replaced.



*The Water Chute on Birnbeck pier © Weston Museum*

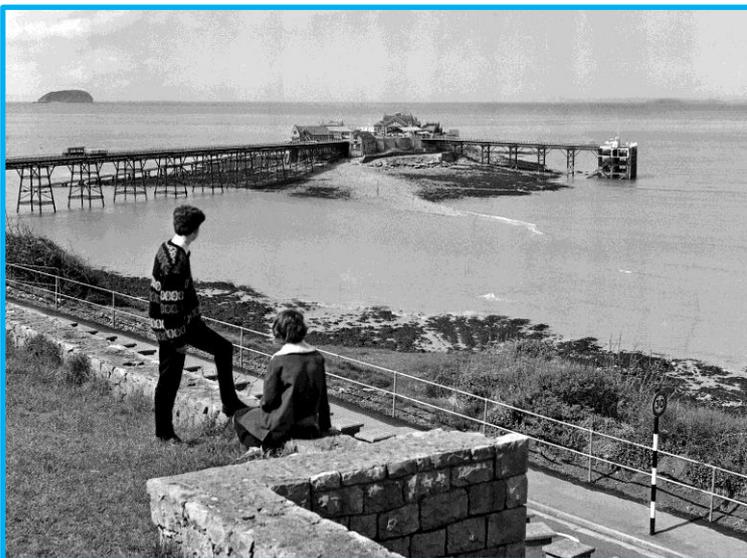
During the early 1900s, a new lifeboat station was built so that a larger boat could be used (the 'Colonel Stock' was its name). A tram service began, linking the pier with the railway station. The pier was clearly still thriving when two problems arose: a gale which caused much damage and the start of competition from the Grand Pier which opened in 1904.

The need to keep people interested meant that effort was put into creating new amusements. In 1908 the list of exciting things to do included a 'Flying Machine', Helter Skelter, Water Chute, Zig Zag Slide, Maze, Shooting Jungle, Cake Walk, Darts, Ping Pong and an Aunt Sally.

**The pier continued to do very well until the 1930s as the Grand Pier focused mostly on shows and concerts. However, when it opened a large funfair in 1933, Birnbeck Island began to decline.**

The war signalled the start of a new phase for Birnbeck Island, when the government took it over and it was renamed HMS Birnbeck.

Remaining amusements were removed and it was closed to the public so that scientists could be based there in secrecy. New weapons were developed there with nicknames like Wheezers and Dodgers.



*A view of the pier from above the Kewstoke road, 1964 © Weston Mercury*

Although it was returned to its owners and re-opened in 1946, the Grand Pier continued to be more popular for modern amusements. Birnbeck was mostly used for strolling and refreshments.

The final season of regular passenger steamer services was in 1971. These had been especially popular with Welsh miners who often spent the whole day on the pier. In a good year, visitors could number 750,000. Later that decade, the pier, including the toll house, was listed Grade II as a monument of historic importance. This did not stop the decline continuing, though, and over £1m worth of damage was caused in 1984 by stray dredging equipment.

Weston watched in dismay as more mishaps happened to Birnbeck during the 1980s. There was a fire, marina plans were refused, further storm damage and finally complete closure due to safety concerns.



*Birnbeck pier in a state of disrepair, 2016 © Sharon Garland*

**Recently there have been several ideas for redevelopment plans including competitions and campaigns by forward-looking organisations such as 'Urban Splash', but so far all have come to nothing.**

Bringing the story of Birnbeck up to date, a degree of mystery surrounds the fate of this important Weston landmark. In recent years the pier has declined further but despite promises, development plans have not appeared. The pier remains in a sorry state.

