



Seaside Entertainment

The arrival of the railway allowed more people from inland towns and cities to discover the seaside. From the mid-1800s, Weston began to attract huge crowds of visitors. Numbers continued to rise as leisure time increased. Bank holidays were introduced in 1871, and more workers were given a paid holiday.



Entertainers on Weston Beach, c. 1900 © courtesy of Weston Library

Stallholders and showmen established attractions on Weston Beach, which became much busier and noisier during the holiday season. By the end of the 1800s entertainments included fortune tellers, donkey rides, peep shows, Punch & Judy, performing animals, and troupes of singers and dancers.

Donkey Rides

Weston's donkeys have always been working animals. The postman rode one on his delivery round, and fishermen used them to collect their catch from Birnbeck Island. They carried seaweed from the beach to be used as fertiliser, and took smuggled goods into the sand dunes. Donkeys were also hired out to visitors for trips into the surrounding countryside. One female visitor in the 1820s wrote of riding as far as the villages of Locking and Uphill.

William Mager came up with the idea of donkey rides on Weston Beach in 1886. There were soon as many as 150 donkeys for hire at any one time. If business was slow, the arrival of a group of visitors on the beach would cause a stampede. The high-spirited “donkey boys” who led the donkeys and touted for business were a frequent headache for the authorities. Unlike today, rides were not restricted to children and there was no distance limit.

Donkey carriages, like the one shown below, were used in Weston from the 1830s – 1920s. They were an early form of taxi service, and ideal for visitors who were elderly or in poor health. Passengers sat in the chair, and a carriage-man went alongside steering the donkey. Wearing bowler hats and long coats, the men were distinctive figures in the town.

William Mager attached carriages to his donkeys so that those people unable to ride or walk on the beach could be pulled along.



Donkey Carriages at Weston, c. 1902 © courtesy of Weston Library

Punch & Judy

Mr Punch's origins are in Italian comedy theatre of the 1500s. Called Pulcinella, he became Punchinello in England. Judy was originally called Joan. Punch made his first recorded appearance in England in 1662. The puppets were originally a type called marionettes, which were controlled from above by strings or wires. They were replaced by hand puppets in the late 1700s.

A Punch & Judy show is performed by one puppeteer, known since Victorian times as a Professor. There would often be an assistant, or "bottler", who gathered an audience, introduced the show and collected the money ("the bottle").

Originally performed for adult audiences, Punch & Judy became children's entertainment in the Victorian era. Scary characters like the Devil were no longer included, and humour largely replaced the violence. The knock-about silliness of a Punch & Judy show is known as "slapstick". The term comes from the large stick which Punch uses to hit other characters.

The Staddon family ran Punch & Judy shows on Weston Beach for over 100 years. The puppets were usually destroyed after a professor's death, so we are lucky to have a complete set on display in the gallery.



A Judy puppet from our collection © Weston Museum

Minstrel Shows & Concert Parties

Donkey rides and Punch & Judy still entertain Weston's visitors. Minstrel shows, however, aren't something you see today. Most minstrels were white performers who blackened their faces with burnt cork. They dressed in brightly coloured tailcoats and waistcoats, striped trousers and large bow ties. Playing banjos and squeeze boxes, they sang and danced in mimicry of black people.

The Weston Wandering Minstrels were made up of members of the Town Band. Andy Merrilee's all-female Amazon Minstrels wore white dresses to contrast with their blackened faces. Arlotte's Minstrels performed on Weston's sands from 1894 – 1906. The Alabama Minstrels were the best known troupe. They claimed to be former slaves, and were genuinely black.

By the early 1900s, minstrels had mostly been replaced at seaside resorts by pierrot concert parties. Pierrot, a sad clown, is another character from Italian comedy theatre. The first pierrot troupe was formed in 1891, and performed for the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII). Groups of entertainers appeared at seaside resorts across England, putting on shows of song, dance and comedy.

The performers dressed in traditional pierrot costume: a loose shirt with large buttons and a frilled collar, wide trousers, and a pointed hat. Troupes performed on the beach up to five times a day and in all weathers, using mobile platforms dressed to look like theatre stages. These were dismantled and wheeled away when the tide came in. Weston's resident concert parties included The Hopkins & Hawthorn Pierrots and The Purple & Pink Pierrots.



The Hopkins & Hawthorn Pierrots, 1912 © courtesy of Weston Library

Pierrot concert parties gave young entertainers the chance to break into show business. There were over 1,000 troupes performing at English seaside resorts in the 1930s. Sadly, they did not survive much beyond the 1950s as their type of variety show became less popular.



Weston-super-Mare
Town Council