

Heritage Trails

Self-led trail information sheet

The Story of Swanage Pier

1895 to present

Pier facts:

- The Old Pier was built in 1859 for the stone trade at a cost of £6,000.
- The New Pier was built in 1895 at a cost of £10,000 and opened in 1897 for the Steamer/Day Tripper Trade
- It was originally constructed of 170 imported Greenheart Timber Piles, the first of which was driven on November 30th, 1895.
- The new pier was partly refurbished in 1997/8 at a cost of £1,000,000.
- Since 1994, Swanage Pier has been controlled by Swanage Pier Trust and run and financed by volunteers, it reopened in 1998.
- It is one of only 14 wooden piers in the UK. There are other Victorian piers though, others are of iron and only 120 Victorian piers now remaining

Swanage Pier's Wooden section is **196.3m (642a ft) long** on the centre line.

The average width is **8.5m (28ft)**, widening to a two-tier landing stage at its head.

The tidal rise and fall is **2m (6 aft)**.

The depth of water at the Pier Head is **4.3m (14ft)** at high water on spring tides.

The First Pier

- The original Swanage Pier was constructed in 1859/60 by James Walton of London for the Swanage Pier and Tramway Company (now known as Swanage Pier Company) and opened by John Mowlem.

The following Numbers refer to the numbers on the downloadable 'Heritage Trail Map'.

1. Narrow-gauge tramway

If you look in front of the main entrance building at the front of the pier you will see the remains of the narrow-gauge tramway which ran along the Pier and seafront. The Pier was built primarily for shipping stone. Horses were used to pull carts along and this was intended as a track to link Swanage and Langton Matravers quarries with the Pier. However, local opposition caused the track to finish at the 'Bankers' (now known as the Parade) where some of the original track can also still be seen.

2. Entrance to the pier

The entrance to the pier has remained the same building since the early 1800s. Outside of the gatehouse there would have been carriages and taxis waiting to take people to their hotels or to the railway station. (in 1885 the railway came to Swanage).

3. Colonnades

The colonnades that are in the Prince Albert Gardens can be seen from here. They were originally from the entrance of a hotel bought as ballast in the boats from London that would ship the stone. They were found on a local council tip.

4. Marine Villas:

- William Pitt , a local Dorset MP, in 1825 built Marine Villas with tourism in mind. He was the first to envisage Swanage as 'a watering place for well to do visitors, for health and recreation'.
- The villas accommodated a fashionable sea water bathing house. People saw sea water bathing as a healthy thing to do and a way to cleanse themselves from the highly polluted air coming down from London. The sea water at the time rose to a height of 5 feet on the north side of the villa letting sea water in through grills. The baths ceased around 1855.
- There was also a billiard room and a coffee house upstairs in the villas too.

Today it is classed as a Grade 2 listed building, housing the 1859 Café, the pier shop, exhibition area and offices and meeting rooms upstairs.

Marine Villas is also home to Purbeck Coast Radio station.

5. 2nd World War defences 1940

As an anti-invasion precaution the toilet block was painted black with 'window slits' to look like a pill box gun housing.

6. Dragon's teeth

(Can be seen at low tide by the men's toilet). These were put in place to stop marine craft during the war from landing on the shore.

In 1940 the landward end of the Pier was blown up as an anti-invasion precaution - being restored in concrete in 1948 when steamer traffic revived.

During the war there was barbed wire in place around the bay.

The bay was part of the practice for the D Day landing operation.

7. Wrecks and under pier graphics

- 7 wrecks were the result of German U Boats. This is an ideal location for diving these wrecks thing to see under pier.
- The SS Kyarra was sunk in 1918.
- She was sailing from Tilbury to Davenport on her way to pick up 1000 wounded Australian troops to return them to their homeland. SINKING 1918: She was sunk by a German U-Boat with the loss of 6 lives on May 26 1918.
- The ship was discovered in the late 1960s by divers and lies one mile off anvil point remaining a popular dive to today.
- Things such as vegemite were found preserved on board.
- The marine information board shows the different sea life that can be found under the pier.

8. Wellington Clockless Tower (1854):

- This came from London in 1868 as it was seen have been keeping very poor timing in its original location on the Southwark end of London bridge. It was built in the memory of the Duke of Wellington
- It was erected by George Burt but remains a curiosity with its 'missing illuminated clockface'. The top is riddled with bullet holes after being used for target practice by Canadian troops stationed here prior to D Day

9. The triskelion or triple spiral

This is an ancient symbol that has many meanings, usually consisting of three interlocking identical spirals stemming from a shared centre. Celtic Christians used the symbol to represent the Christian trinity.

On the lamppost promenade three fishes (Mullet) have been added to the triskelion design.

10. Divers Down diving school

This is the oldest diving school in the UK. It first established in 1958, wrecks can go to, diving courses can, equipment hire.

11. The old pier

Now totally decayed, the surviving piles of the old Pier are still visible to the East of the new Pier. The old pier was constructed in 1859 by the Swanage pier and tramway company and owned by John Mowlem. It was built for shipping stone to London from local quarries in the area. The pier was being used right up to the 20's used then by coal steamers. It then fell into disrepair, in the 1950's being used by Swanage swimming club as a diving platform.

After the 'New Pier' was opened in 1896, the old Pier was used as a coaling station for the paddle steamers and the railway coped with the stone trade.

12. Victorian lamp posts

There are 19 Victorian lamp standards have all been recast in iron in original 1896 moulds, this had to be done as no modern materials being acceptable to English Heritage.

13. Wooden piles

The main construction of the pier consists of 168 greenheart wooden piles which are very strong but flexible tropical wood native to Guyana and Suriname in South America. They must be able to cope with the tidal rise and fall of around 2m every day.

In 1918 major upgrade repairs were done to the pier costing around 2.5 million pounds.

By 1927 the Gribble worm (a marine wood-boring crustacean) had caused such damage to the piles by eating away the wood on them

between the sea bed and the high-water level, that concrete cladding had to be added to the badly eroded timber piles.

In 1994 when Swanage Pier trust acquired the pier, they began replacing 57 of the Pier's 168 Greenheart timber piles at cost of £6,000 each, not including labour and pile driving equipment costs. Over £1,100,000 of has been spent on restoring the timber structure.

With the piles restored, the cross bracing and longitudinal and cross members had to be replaced and then the decking itself renewed in Ekki wood, including the upper or promenade deck, (which was completely missing).

14. The small boat landing deck

This is halfway along the Pier, which was destroyed during the early 1950's has been replaced and is now in regular use by skippers of Dive Boats and visiting Yachts.

15. Lower landing deck.

In 1874 George Burt started a steamer service between Swanage, Poole and Bournemouth in and the Pier was being used for day-trippers as well as stone cargo the Pier was unable to cope with the ever-increasing traffic and it was decided a new and longer Pier was needed to cater for the day-tripper steamers.

The first steamer, the P.S. Lord Elgin landed people on May 1st, 1896. The last was the P.S. Embassy on August 24th, 1966, she was later towed to Belgium and broken up.

The high point of the paddle steamer era at Swanage Pier was before World War 1 - ten steamers a day served Swanage in the 1905 season.

Return fares to Bournemouth were as follows:

1/6d or 7 ½ p in 1899

6/6d or 32p in 1956

Around £5 in 2002

Steamer traffic was temporarily revived after 1948 but with the Embassy's departure in August 1966 the Pier deteriorated for almost 30 years in the hands of often indifferent owners.

Many of the piles were completely eaten through by the Gribble worm, many of the railings were missing and parts of the promenade became extremely unsafe due to the lack of underwater support. Eventually the Pier had to be closed.

16. Victorian Wind Shelter

This was rebuilt to during the 1994 renovations keeping to its original design and when the decking was complete it was reinstated on the top deck.

The concrete pile section has also been replaced with Greenheart piles and Ekki decking. The hand railings have been replaced and the panels for these railings.

17. Fishing area

Anyone fishing on the pier must follow the fishing code of conduct. Fish likely to be caught are:

Wrasse, Pout, Pollock, Bass, Dogfish, Garfish, Mackerel

Swanage anglers are leading the way by using special 'Fishing line bins' which have been installed on the Pier for anglers to discard their unwanted line.

The SeaClean bins help a variety of sea life that was being affected by lost fishing line. These ranged from entangled crabs and sea fan corals [soft corals], to injured seabirds and seals.

The SeaClean project, run by Dorset Wildlife Trust, aims to reduce the amount of line entering the marine environment, where it could last for more than 600 years.

Who owns the Pier?

The Pier is owned by the Swanage Pier Company established in 1859. In September 1994, the Swanage Pier Trust.

What is the Swanage Pier Trust? The Trust is a Registered Charity (No 290397) whose sole objective, set down in the Memorandum of Association, is:

'To promote the permanent preservation for the benefit of the public generally and especially the inhabitants of the Town of Swanage in the County of Dorset, of the Pier within the said Town and generally to protect and preserve the character and amenities of the said Pier for the said Town'.

To restore and maintain the Pier for the benefit of residents and visitors.