



Clacton seaside heritage walking trail

The heart of the UK's sunshine coast (Introduction)

Clacton holds a special place in Essex's heart. From its long stretch of sandy beaches and vibrant pier, to its scenic gardens, traditional entertainments and exciting history, the town has something for everyone to enjoy.

This heritage walking trail will take you to a few of the town's main landmarks, bringing to life its journey from one man's dream to a holiday hotspot teeming with visitors.

No. 1 North Sea (Clacton Pier)

It wasn't until 1865 when Victorian engineer and entrepreneur Peter Bruff bought land where Clacton town now stands, with a vision to transform it into a new seaside resort.

With financial backing from the Woolwich Steam Packet Company, the pier was built and opened for paddle steamers to use in 1871. A few years later the Pier Pavilion was built at the end. This was later renamed the Jolly Roger and today houses the Circus Fantasia.

Over the years the Pier was home to four theatres: the Ocean, the Jolly Roger, Ramblas and Clown Bertram's Children's Theatre. The Ocean Theatre attracted some household names including Tony Hancock, Dick Emery and Morecombe and Wise. Clown Bertram's ventriloquist's dummy, Filbert, can now be found at the Clacton & District Local History Society's Museum in Clacton Library in Station Road.

In between the two world wars the Pier's attractions grew to include the Steel Stella roller coaster, dodgems, speedway, the Peter Pan Railway, the Helter Skelter and the Ghost Train. It also had a 50-metre swimming pool – the first pool built on a pier anywhere in the UK - in which the Great Britain water polo team played their matches. There was also the popular Blue Lagoon dance hall with a sprung wooden floor and space for 400 people to dance.

Known as No. 1 North Sea, the Pier is undergoing great improvements and looks set to continue its journey for years to come.

A little taste of Italy (Venetian Bridge)

In 1914 the Venetian Bridge was built to span the road now known as Pier Gap. The road used to house shops selling all manner of tourist paraphernalia and beach essentials but were cleared away to allow for improvements under the General Beautifying Programme. The Venetian Bridge, in all its splendour, is still going strong and was recently refurbished.



Around the Venetian Bridge you will find Armstrong's restaurant and entertainment complex. Formerly the Band Pavilion, then a Winter Garden, the restaurant remembers Henry Armstrong, an American boxer who used the Pavilion to train for a World Championship fight in 1939.

The beginnings of a community (Pier Avenue)

Pier Avenue, the main central road of Peter Bruff's Clacton town, is home to Clacton's first Public Hall, built in 1877. Further on Pier Avenue you will find Magic City. Dating from the 1870s, the building was originally a boys' boarding school before it was converted into a hotel and restaurant called the Brunswick, an amusement arcade in the 1930s and Magic City in the 1980s.

Those who know Clacton will know about Christmas Tree Island, better known as Clacton Town Square, where the town's festive tree is erected every year. From here you can spot Clacton's first Town Hall to the right, and Electric Parade on the left, which was the first part of Clacton to be lit by electric lighting.

Cinemas and theatres galore (West Avenue / Ellis Road)

This area was home to some of Clacton's six cinemas, including Kinema Hall, the first purpose-built cinema which ran from 1913 to 1962 and since demolished. Many cinemas were demolished to make way for new development, including the Odeon, housed in an Art Deco building and now the site of shops. Just one cinema remains – the Century, on the corner of Old Road and Wash Lane.

Turning left into Ellis Road is the police station, built to resemble a ship as a nod to the seaside resort. Originally the site of Rigg's Retreat in the late 1880s, a large entertainment complex and restaurant, the venue regularly catered for 2,500 at lunch or afternoon tea.

For the love of theatre (Tower Road)

Passing St James' Church and Hall is West Cliff Theatre, Clacton's only independent theatre. It can be traced back to 1894 when Bert Graham got a concert party together to perform during the summer season. The theatre as we see it was built in 1928 and is a thriving example of local theatre. Host to Clacton Amateur Dramatic Society and Clacton Musical Theatre Society, it still runs an annual summer season – the longest running continuous summer season in the UK, which celebrates its 125th anniversary in 2019.

Red Coats and chalets (Marine Parade West)

Past Clacton Hospital is Marine Parade West and the Martello Tower, a monument of wars gone by. The Martello Tower, the only surviving moated tower with its drawbridge still



intact, dates back to the early 19th century when, during the Napoleonic Wars the British War Office built them to defend the east coast.

Clacton's entertainment theme continued along Marine Parade West with a Palace-by-the-Sea based on London's Earl's Court and a boating lake. Best known will be Butlin's holiday camp, the second in the country which opened in 1938. Loved for the freedom it gave children and the relaxation for parents, it was a popular holiday spot for many years. It is said Cliff Richard had his first ever professional job as a Red Coat in Clacton. Sadly, cheap air travel meant visitor numbers declined and the camp closed in 1983.

The place to be (Upper Promenade)

After the war Clacton's popularity as a holiday destination grew. It became such a destination that visitors would arrive in their droves by train, coach and steamer from London for a day or a week's holiday. Local schoolboys would earn some tips by carrying visitors' luggage to their accommodation, which was sometimes a long walk away.

There was plenty for holidaymakers to enjoy and a lucrative time for local businesses. Walking back towards the Pier you can imagine the throngs of people flocking to the beaches on sunny days and catching the Punch and Judy shows to the right of the Pier.

Not just a holiday destination (Popular Culture)

It's not just Essex residents and Londoners who have taken Clacton to their hearts. The town has become a popular destination for filming for films, TV and music videos over the years.

Famously, EastEnders' character Pat met husband Frank Butcher at Butlin's in Clacton in 1958 and returned to the town in 2011 with other characters for a holiday. Films including Kinky Boots and Starter for Ten were partially filmed in Clacton and Del Boy, Rodney and Grandad went to stay with Auntie Rose in Clacton in one episode.

Clacton was also the chosen location for the Pet Shop Boys' music video, Always on my Mind, and their film, It Couldn't Happen Here.

For those living in Clacton in 1964 will remember Easter weekend when Mods and Rockers descended on the town for a face-off, making headlines in the tabloids.

This walking trail was funded by the National Lottery Fund for the project Resorting to the Coast. Our website showcases the unique seaside heritage of the Tendring coast and stories from local residents and holidaymakers: www.tendringcoastalheritage.org.uk



This walking trail would not have been possible without the hard work and support of Clacton residents Norman Jacobs and Josie Watson and the Clacton and District Local History Society.

The Clacton Heritage Walking Trail has been developed in conjunction with Essex County Council, National Lottery Fund and Tendring District Council for the Resorting to the Coast heritage project.

Expanded content edited by Vanessa Moon.