

I do like to be beside the seaside

David Whittle

Our speaker, David Whittle from Harwich, entertained us with a talk based on some of the coastal resorts of Essex and Suffolk. Originally from Epping Forest himself, his wife came from Felixstowe so he was familiar with the area. The seaside is our greatest national health service and the sea air has always been regarded as a tonic. Bathing machines, donkey rides, sandcastles and sea front hotels became a new craze. The popular Victorian practice of sending a postcard home from the seaside could result in the arrival of the postcard before the sender did! David showed us many slides of local attractions including a variety of piers from Clacton to Lowestoft, and all points in between. Before the railways, travel for ordinary folk was limited to horse and cart. Steam power harnessed the paddle steamers which picked up passengers from the ends of the piers. That explains why Southend Pier is over a mile long as the steamers needed the depth of water and Southend has an extremely flat beach. Felixstowe Pier was built in 1905. The Halfpenny Pier at Harwich was originally 100ft longer until a fire occurred in 1977. The large Pier Hotel was formerly the Great Eastern Railway Hotel. Harwich station was built in 1854 and Parkeston Quay developed between 1879 and 1883. The train journey from Harwich to Liverpool Street station was one and a half hours without stopping. David continued his talk with some interesting information about the history of Harwich. The town was promoted as a Spa until analysis of the spring water was declared unfit for public consumption! In 1909 the Electric Palace cinema was opened - the second oldest cinema in England. It is currently operated by volunteers. He mentioned the town's proud naval history too. Dovercourt's John Bagshaw (1784-1861) was a British Whig property developer and politician. He took over the shipyard, built himself a mansion, bandstand and landscaped gardens. In the 1930's the Dovercourt Bay Holiday Lido opened, sitting in 40 acres of seafront land. It later became a holiday camp under the Warner's brand. At the end of the 1938 season, the camp was taken over by the Refugee Children's Movement. Kindertransport children, fleeing from persecution in Europe, arriving in Harwich via the Hook of Holland, were temporarily housed there. A question and answer session followed and we agreed that it had been a most enjoyable evening.

Ann Sanderson

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