BESIDE THE SEASIDE

A CELEBRATION OF THE PLACE WE LIKE TO BE

JANE STRUTHERS

Contents

A fishy list

BEACH GAMES

Donkey rides
Ducks and drakes
French cricket
Beach volleyball
Digging yourselves in
Castles in the sand
Sand sculptures

GETTING UP AN APPETITE

A stick of rock
A perfect seaside picnic
Fish and chips
Killing with kindness
Cornish heavy cake
Potted shrimps
The knickerbocker in all its glory
Flapjacks
The real zing
To make a nice whet before dinner
Getting in a laver
Sea greens
Some scrumptious shellfish

COASTAL LIFE

Searching for shells
Salty tastes
The butterflies flutter by
A word in your shell-like
In a crabby mood
Clinging on like a limpet
Beachcombing
Stings and things

ALONG THE COAST

THE HIGH SEAS

UNWELCOME VISITORS

FIFTEEN MEN ON THE DEAD MAN’S CHEST

Pieces of eight
Customs and contraband
A smuggler’s song
Wreckers!
On a hiding to something
Desperadoes
Moonrakers and owlers

THE SENIOR SERVICE

You’re in the Navy now
The pride of the line
First rate!
Sea salt
Time for the toast
Join the Wrens and free a man for the fleet

FOR THOSE IN PERIL ON THE SEA

Heart of oak
Press gangs
Hard tack and weevils
The scourge of scurvy

KNOWING THE ROPES

Salty speech
At the rate of knots
When eight bells toll
The ship’s bell
Port and starboard
And now the Shipping Forecast
Who, what and where?
Get knotted!
Take that!

TRADITIONS

There she blows

About the Book

There are almost as many stories about the sea as there are pebbles on the beach. Beside the Seaside is a book for anyone who has been captivated by the crash of waves on sand, thrilled to the exploits of pirates or delighted in an ice cream at the end of the pier.

Answering such questions as what to look for in rock pools, which are the best knots and how to avoid being cursed by a mermaid, *Beside the Seaside* is bursting with facts, fables, history and mystery about Britain's seaside and coast.

About the Author

Jane Struthers is the author of over twenty books, including *Red Sky at Night: The Book of Lost Countryside Wisdom*, *Literary Britain and Ireland* and *Britain's Coastlines from the Air*. She lives near Rye in East Sussex with her husband and two cats.

BESIDE THE SEASIDE

A CELEBRATION OF THE PLACE WE LIKE TO BE

Jane Struthers

In memory of my mother, Jean Struthers,
who loved the sea and died five days after I
got the go-ahead for this book – it was the
last piece of news I was able to give her

FOREWORD

This precious stone set in a silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands;
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.

RICHARD II, WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

SHAKESPEARE WROTE THOSE words over 400 years ago, but for many people they still sum up the image of the British Isles as being set apart from the rest of the world. The people who live on these islands have been seafarers, with all that this entails, since they first arrived here. The sea is in the average Briton's blood, whether or not they are aware of it. It has given the country a rich and varied heritage, in more ways than we might imagine.

The British language is peppered with words that are a linguistic legacy of the long list of invaders who have landed on these shores over the centuries. Some of them, such as the Romans and Vikings, left again. Others, such as the Normans, stayed. Words and phrases that were originally used onboard ship have entered the language, and the maritime connections of some of them are almost forgotten now.

The waters around Britain have affected our lives in many other ways. The sea continues to erode some parts of the coastline and create new land elsewhere. For centuries,

fishermen have risked their lives in the seas to bring home their catch. Young boys joined the Navy and sailed away. Some sailed home again, richer or poorer for the experience. Pirates struck fear in people's hearts, privateers brought back legally sanctioned plunder, smugglers helped the local economy or stole from the Crown, depending on which side of the law you stood on.

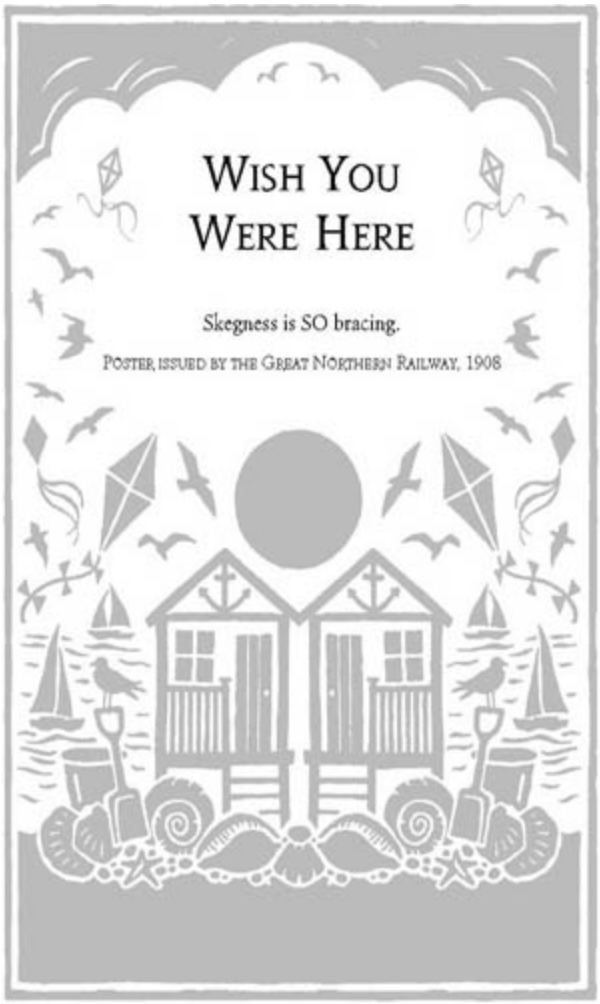
And then there is the pleasure of the seaside, of going to the beach on a hot day and feeling the scrunch of the sand between your toes, the shock of the first cold splash of seawater against your legs, the truly breathtaking experience of submerging yourself in the sparkling sea. Why is it never as warm as you'd imagined? The picnics, the beachcombing, the jaunt to the pier, the boat trip round the lighthouse, the treats of the ice-cream parlour, the struggles to get dressed and undressed without embarrassing yourself, the marvel of sand that gets everywhere.

The seaside offers different charms in the winter, when the grey sea merges into the leaden sky, you hear the repeated boom as the waves pound against the breakwaters, the spume and spray smash on to the prom in a storm, when you try to speak but your words are snatched away by the wind as the seagulls shriek and circle above you, with your hair whipped into your eyes and the tang of salt on your lips. Days when you're thankful to be on dry land and you fear for the fate of those out on the pitching seas, with Davy Jones' locker waiting for them at the bottom of the vasty deep.

These are some of the topics that you will find in this book. Tales of pirates and smugglers, of sea captains and great voyages, of superstitions and fears, of mermaids and drowned villages, of the birth of the Navy and ships of the line. Facts about sand, geology, the tides, and suggestions about how to enjoy yourself when you get to the beach.

Which I hope you will, as this book reminds you of the many pleasures to be found at the seaside.

Jane Struthers
February 2011
East Sussex


WISH YOU
WERE HERE
Skegness is SO bracing.
POSTER, ISSUED BY THE GREAT NORTHERN RAILWAY, 1908

The Rise of the Seaside Resort

BEFORE THE MIDDLE of the 18th century, no middle-class person would ever have dreamt of setting foot on the beach. It was the preserve of working people, such as fishermen, sailors and smugglers, and no fashionable soul would have wanted to associate themselves with it.

But that was before Dr Richard Russell wrote a treatise in the early 1750s on the benefits of seawater in treating glandular diseases. Until then, people had flocked to inland spas such as those in Bath and Malvern in order to improve their health by bathing in the water and drinking it. Dr Russell proposed visiting the seaside, and especially the fishing village of Brighthelmstone (which also went by the name of Brighton), which was near to his home in Lewes, in what is now East Sussex. Perhaps he was anticipating being able to treat lots of new patients, and he certainly

succeeded in that because he eventually could afford to build a large house in Brighthelmstone.

After Russell's death, his house was rented out to seasonal visitors who had come to take the waters. One of these was Prince Henry, Duke of Cumberland and Strathearn. This was already a fillip to the area, but things got even better when his brother, none other than King George III, visited in 1779. Brighthelmstone was by now highly fashionable, so much so that it was styled the 'Paris of its day' by the *Morning Herald*. The arrival of royalty helped tremendously, and when the then Prince of Wales bought a small property called Brighton Farmhouse, Brighthelmstone's success was assured.

In due course, several important changes took place. Brighthelmstone expanded and became Brighton; the Prince of Wales became the Prince Regent and later George IV, and his Brighton Farmhouse eventually evolved into the Royal Pavilion. Another important event was the start of the Napoleonic Wars, which began in 1803. Wealthy and fashionable Britons were accustomed to going abroad for their holidays, but war with the French meant that Europe was out of bounds, so they began to visit the British seaside instead.

The development of the railway system in the mid-19th century made the seaside a more egalitarian place because so many more people were able to visit it. Better roads helped, too. Soon, holidaymakers were flocking to the seaside, and in Northern England such towns as Scarborough, Blackpool, Morecambe and Skegness began to thrive. Llandudno was known as 'The Queen of the Welsh Resorts', and many holiday resorts sprang up around the Firth of Clyde in Scotland.

It was the start of a British love affair with the seaside that has waxed and waned ever since but is unlikely to ever be eclipsed. Our bucket and spade holidays are here to stay.

Bank Holiday Madness

LOTS OF EVENTS helped to contribute to the popularity of a trip to the seaside, including the arrival of the steam train. But what made a huge difference to many people was an Act of Parliament in 1871. This was the Bank Holidays Act, developed by the Liberal politician Sir John Lubbock. He was a banker as well as an MP, and a big fan of cricket. The story goes that he wanted bankers to be able to attend their village cricket matches rather than be slogging away behind a desk, so he introduced four statutory holidays a year when banks were closed and employees could don their cricket whites. These four days were Easter Monday, Whit Monday, the first Monday in August and Boxing Day. Banks already closed their doors on the two great Christian festivals of Easter Sunday and Christmas Day. Although this might seem like progress, in fact bankers had enjoyed many more holidays earlier in the century but the Industrial Revolution, with its emphasis on hard work, had put paid to those.

Bank workers weren’t the only ones to benefit from the newly introduced bank holidays. Until then, Sunday was the only time shops and factories were closed so the introduction of this new holiday meant a rare extra day off for blue-collar workers. Seaside resorts soon became packed when the first Monday in August came round. Railway companies laid on extra trains, and there were extra steamers too to transport people around the coast. Everyone was determined to have a good time.

Well, perhaps not quite everyone. Some resorts refused to welcome the massive influx of holidaymakers who were often notorious for their bad behaviour. Bournemouth, which prided itself on its genteel image, got its railway in 1870 but swiftly banned all trains on Sundays in the hope that this would keep out the riff-raff – a policy that continued until 1914. Sunday steamers weren’t allowed to dock there either, until Bournemouth relented in 1920.

It was all very well for thousands of people to have a holiday at the seaside over the August Bank Holiday, but where were they going to stay? There weren’t enough beds for them all, which could lead to problems with public order. Sometimes holidaymakers who failed to find digs had to sleep in the open air, assuming that they could find a big enough patch of it. On August Bank Holiday in 1926, Southend’s prom was turned into an informal dormitory when 10,000 people slept there. They stretched for six miles. Brighton faced the same sort of problem in the 1950s, and solved it by leaving out 2,000 deckchairs for people who couldn’t find anywhere else to sleep.

Bank holidays in the early 1960s were notorious for more reasons than just a shortage of beds. It was the era of the Mods and Rockers, who regularly clashed at seaside resorts. The Mods rode scooters, wore sharply cut Italian suits and prided themselves on their very neat and ultra-fashionable appearance. The hearts of the Rockers belonged to the 1950s, not only in musical terms but also

where their clothes were concerned. They rode big motorbikes, slicked back their hair and wore scruffy jeans and big leather jackets. Most of all, they hated the Mods and the Mods hated them. Huge brawls became commonplace at such seaside resorts as Brighton, Clacton, Margate and even poor old Bournemouth; the Mods and Rockers might not agree on anything else, but they certainly shared the same taste in holiday destinations.

HI-DE-HI!

'WHERE DO YOU think you are? A holiday camp?' This rather sarcastic question is usually asked of people when they're thought to be slacking. But the original holiday camp was a far cry from the luxurious holiday destination it has turned into.

Although his is no longer a household name, we have Joseph Cunningham to thank for the development of holiday camps. He combined being a flour merchant with his work as a Sunday school superintendent. He also began something that became an institution for millions of people each year.

It all started with the annual summer camps that Cunningham organised for boys' institutes in Liverpool in Victorian times. These did so well that in 1894 he and his wife Elizabeth branched out and set up a holiday camp in Douglas on the Isle of Man. The criteria was strict: only teetotal young men need apply. These men also had to be content to sleep in bell tents in the open air. Despite these apparent privations, the Cunningham Camp, as it was known, was such a hit that by 1908 it had softened up a little and provided all sorts of amusements, including a vast

dining room, a concert hall and a heated swimming pool. The emphasis was on good clean fun, with organised games and entertainments.

After the First World War the camp ditched the bell tents for bungalows and dormitories. Later, it rather daringly allowed girls to attend its dances, although their board and lodgings were a safe and respectable distance from the camp. It was still going strong at the start of the Second World War, when it was requisitioned for official use.

The Cunningham Camp wasn't the only holiday camp to thrive in the Edwardian era. In 1906 the Socialist Camp opened in Caister, Norfolk. As its name suggests it was founded on Socialist principles and everyone did their share of the work. The name of the camp was soon changed to the more jolly-sounding Caister Holiday Camp, which attracted middle-class holidaymakers. Once again, the original bell tents were discarded, this time being replaced by chalets. The enterprise was such a good idea that various interested parties, including trade unions, founded their own holiday camps in the years that followed.

Holiday camps really took off in the 1930s. One of the most successful brands was created by Billy Butlin, a South African who used the proceeds from his chain of amusement parks to set up holiday camps designed to appeal to what he called 'middle-income families'. He began in Skegness in 1936, with 600 chalets that enticingly offered electricity plus hot and cold running water (facilities that today we take for granted), as well as three meals a day and free entertainment. Luxury! The camp was such a hit that it doubled in capacity the following year, and eventually catered for 10,000 holidaymakers a week. A second camp opened in Clacton in 1938. Then the Second World War arrived, which put a bit of a dampener on the holiday trade. But Billy Butlin switched to building military camps that he cleverly bought back once peace had returned in 1945. He had most definitely made the most of

the market: by the late 1940s, one in 20 Britons spent their holidays in a Butlins camp. And the number would have been higher if the camps had been bigger, but they were already filled to bursting.

The popularity of foreign holidays in the 1960s, followed by increasingly cheap airfare, dented the holiday camps' collective fortune, but some of them are still going strong, with their emphasis on fun for all the family.

Piers of the Realm

IN VICTORIAN TIMES, all the best seaside resorts had a pleasure pier. This was a beautiful feat of engineering skill, often with a lacy network of iron girders supporting it in the sea, and it extended from the promenade far out into the briny. Holidaymakers could stroll along it to take the air and enjoy the unusual experience of being able to view their holiday resort from a completely new angle. They might even be able to wave to their more timid friends ashore.

At first, the seaside pier was purely an opportunity to take a leisurely stroll, but when paddle steamers became popular each pier sprouted landing stages where passengers could embark and disembark.

Britain's first pier was built at Ryde, on the Isle of Wight, and was opened to the public on 26 July 1814. It began life

as a wooden jetty for boats, but was extended several times during the next 40 years. It is still standing, unlike the Leith Chain Pier which was built in 1821 and the Brighton Chair Pier which was constructed two years later.

The first iron piers weren't built until the mid-19th century. Southport Pier was one of the earliest, and was opened on 2 August 1860. It's a very long pier, but it isn't the longest. That accolade goes to Southend Pier, which is so lengthy that it has its own train line to save holidaymakers the bother of walking from one end of it to the other. It replaced an older structure, and was opened on 24 August 1890. It was later extended, and in 1897 became the world's longest pier. It was even given an upper deck. The pier was requisitioned by the Admiralty during the Second World War to serve as a convoy assembly point and became known as HMS *Leigh*.

Some resorts were so popular – and wealthy – that one pier wasn't enough. Brighton, for instance, had the West Pier and the Palace Pier, until the West Pier was damaged in a storm in December 2002 and then suffered two arson attacks a few weeks later. Blackpool has not one, not two, but three piers – the Central Pier where people could dance, the North Pier which was considered much more genteel, and the South Pier, an ice-cream cornet's throw from the world-famous pleasure beach.

By their very nature, piers are vulnerable structures and many Victorian gems have fallen foul of storms, fire and old age. Roughly 100 piers graced British seaside resorts at the start of the 20th century, but now that number has almost been halved. The National Piers Society is doing its best to protect those that are left, but tight local authority budgets and arsonists may mean that the surviving piers will go out with a splash, as they gradually disappear into the sea that surrounds them.

Listen to the Band

Oh, I do like to be beside the seaside,
Oh, I do like to be beside the sea.
Oh, I do like to stroll along the prom, prom, prom
While the brass band plays, tiddlely om pom pom.

'I Do Like to be Beside the Seaside',
John H Glover-Kind

and where does the brass band play? At the bandstand, of course. These sprang up in Victorian times like iron-clad mushrooms, to chime in not only with the increasing popularity of seaside holidays but also with the rise of brass bands.

Of course, bandstands appeared in parks as well, which is why many inland towns have them. They were usually either circular or semicircular, with roofs to shelter the bandsmen, open sides and plenty of space around them for everyone to listen to the music.

Some bandstands were much more decorative than others, but every seaside resort worth its salt had to have one. Some Victorian bandstands looked slightly skeletal because of their construction and design, such as the bandstand at Lytham St Anne's in Lancashire, while others like the bandstand at Westcliff-on-Sea in Essex had curved roofs that gave them the appearance of a Chinese pagoda. One of the most iconic and beautiful but more modern bandstands is in Eastbourne in East Sussex. It replaced the previous bandstand, which was built on stilts, and has an elaborate blue dome that is claimed by locals to be unique.

SEASIDE SAUCE

IF YOU'RE GOING on a seaside holiday, one of the pleasures is sending postcards to everyone stuck at home. And the sort of card that you choose says a lot about you. As you look through the carousels of postcards outside the kiosks along the prom, you have plenty of designs to choose from. Should you choose a winsome card with a cat or a bunny on it? Or a photo of your hotel, so you can mark the location of your room with an X? Or perhaps you'd prefer to opt for another sort of seaside holiday tradition and choose a postcard with a saucy message. If so, you will be honouring the work of Donald McGill, whose naughty postcards have adorned countless mantel-pieces for decades.

Although Donald McGill's postcard designs were of the nudge-nudge-wink-wink variety that relied on double entendres, eager honeymoon couples, bewildered vicars, over-endowed women and sex-starved men, he was a respectable Victorian graphic artist who said at the end of his life, 'I'm not proud of myself, I always wanted to do something better'. Although it's thought that as many as 200 million of his postcards were sold between 1904 and his death in 1962, he was paid very little money for his

original designs and his contracts didn't include the payment of royalties. He even got caught up in a censorship trial in 1954, when his designs were branded as obscene. Each seaside town had its own censorship committee, which kept a beady eye on anything that it considered to be vulgar, in poor taste or downright disgusting. And one committee pounced on Donald McGill's work, which was thought to lower the tone in many of the more straitlaced seaside resorts.

McGill was found guilty under the 1857 Obscene Publications Act and fined. This did nothing for his already meagre bank balance and it also dealt a body blow to the saucy postcard industry, which never really recovered. But perhaps he had the last laugh because today his work is highly valued, not only for its light-hearted and very British humour but also for its collectability. The original artwork for what were once considered to be throwaway jokes is now very valuable. You could buy an awful lot of ice creams with that kind of money.

All in The Best Possible Taste

IF ANY OF the people who first used bathing machines in Britain could see what 21st-century holidaymakers wear on the beach, they would probably faint dead away and have to be revived with something a lot stronger than smelling salts. We associate the genteel practice of using bathing machines with the Victorians, but it began a long time before that.

British people first began what is now their enduring love of sea bathing in the mid-17th century. The novel idea of bathing in the sea was considered to be the latest way to improve one's health, and it was rather daring, too, which added to the excitement. And for a very good reason, because when sea bathing first began both sexes took to the water in the nude. But, as far as some resorts were concerned, this practice wasn't acceptable and modesty had to be preserved at all costs, because it would have frightened the horses and caused pandemonium if the women bathers had been seen by the men. Perhaps political correctness isn't a modern phenomenon after all.

The first bathing machines were pulled into the water by horses. The bather climbed into the machine while fully dressed, then took off their clothes in privacy and moved to the end of the machine, which featured a collapsible hood. They stood under this and were helped into the water by an attendant known as a 'dipper'. Once they were in the water, only their heads were visible. Even so, the beach was segregated into one area for men and another for women. In 1805 the bathing machines at Margate in Kent were described in W C Oulton's travellers' guide: '… the bather descending from the machine by a few steps is concealed from the public view, whereby the most refined female is enabled to enjoy the advantages of the sea with the strictest delicacy.'

Before long, men stopped swimming naked and started to wear swimming costumes. Those 'refined females' already wore long dresses, made from fabric that wouldn't turn

see-through in the water (imagine the embarrassment), and with hems that were weighted down so they wouldn't float upwards. The men wore one-piece bathing suits made from wool, with long arms and legs, rather like combinations. By Victorian times, women were wearing two-piece bathing suits. But forget any ideas about bikinis. These suits consisted of a gown that covered the woman's arms and chest, and reached her knees, and a pair of bloomers that went down to her feet. After all, this was an age when the sight of a shapely female ankle was considered to be wildly shocking and provocative.

Segregated bathing continued until the late 1890s, but by then it was becoming out of date. Besides which, many people broke the rules, and mixed bathing was already all the rage in Europe and the United States. The use of bathing machines began to change, too. Bathers still changed their clothes in them, but they were happy to walk down the beach and into the sea, so the bathing machines became static and were eventually superseded by beach huts.

Bathing costumes gradually began to get smaller. The sleeves vanished, followed by the full-length bloomers, and by 1910 women had a lot more freedom in the sea. Even so, swimming costumes for both sexes were still made from flannel or wool (to keep you warm in the cold water), which often sagged most unbecomingly. By the 1920s, swimming costumes were much more streamlined, especially for women, even though they still stopped at mid-thigh for decency's sake.

By the 1940s, the development of man-made fabrics such as rayon revolutionised swimwear and it became more figure-hugging. Two-piece swimming costumes, which had first been introduced in the 1920s, became more popular for women and also a lot more daring than the original modest designs.

The bikini arrived in 1946 (named after Bikini Atoll, which had been the site of nuclear weapons tests, because it was thought that the new fashion would have a similarly explosive impact). It was very modest at first, but in the 1960s it began to look as though it had shrunk in the wash. Men continued to wear bathing shorts but these got smaller too, and those heavy wool cozzies that had drooped so unflatteringly (and sometimes dangerously) were consigned to the dustbin of history.

Today, swimwear is often tinier than ever. Thongs, monokinis, tankinis and skimpy Speedos all make regular appearances on Britain's beaches. So too, strangely enough, do long shorts for men, proving yet again that fashion goes round in circles. As do many swimmers.

A Nice Change

ANYONE WHO HAS ever stood on a sandy beach, wobbling about on one leg while trying to pull up their underwear over their sea-damp legs with one hand and holding the towel protecting their modesty with the other, will understand the attractions of the beach hut.