

Wiltshire Holidaymakers in the Past ... What were the options?

Allan Brodie



For a good holiday what is needed? I'm not talking about sun cream, beach towels or a camera. Instead, there are four main conditions required for a holiday:

1. *Money to pay for your holiday*
2. *Time off work*
3. *An affordable means of transport*
4. *Destinations that can cater for large numbers of visitors.*

How to Get There

So, if you have saved enough money and have been given time off from work, you can head on holiday. Until the 19th century this might be on foot, on horseback or in a stagecoach. And in a few parts of the country, there were services to take holidaymakers to their destinations along rivers and, in some locations, there were trips along canals.

Steam would revolutionise going on holiday. By 1815, steamships were running along the Thames to Margate and along the Clyde to the west coast of Scotland. These services were more affordable than taking a coach and introduced a limited form of mass tourism; for instance, Margate had over 100,000 visitors in 1835.

However, it was the steam train that would allow most people to enjoy a day trip or a holiday at some point in their life. In 1837 stagecoaches had brought around 50,000 travellers to Brighton, but in a single week in 1850, 73,000 people arrived by train. Blackpool, a large village in the early 1850s, welcomed up to 12,000 visitors by train during a busy summer weekend. In 1861, 135,000 passengers arrived per year and by 1879 this had risen to almost one million. By 1914, around four million passengers were travelling to Blackpool each year and in July 1945, 102,889 people arrived in one 24-hour period.

In the second half of the 20th century, the motor car, the charabanc, and the coach would largely replace the train as the main way to go on holiday. They meant that more places could be reached by large numbers of visitors and many resorts began to expand along their adjacent coastline as holidaymakers were no longer limited to staying near the railway station. Travelling by aircraft then became affordable and while some remote British locations might have benefitted from this, the main effect was to allow people to head abroad for guaranteed sunshine.



Destination Choices

The transport is in place, so what destinations await?

Sunshine, sea and sand defines the classic summer holiday, but long before that people were heading to destinations that had to adapt to cope with growing influxes of tourists. Places of piety became focal points for pilgrimage during the Middle Ages, arguably the earliest form of mass tourism. Among the popular sites were the shrine of St Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral and Walsingham Priory as it was in the Middle Ages, where the Shrine of Our Lady was visited by large numbers annually.

Spa Resorts

The Reformation and the Dissolution of the Monasteries resulted in an official end to pilgrimage. Instead of enhancing spiritual well-being, people turned to mineral waters to improve their physical health. By the end of the 16th century Bath had begun to establish a template for spa tourism involving taking the waters but also enjoying a lively social scene. By the 18th century, Bath, and other leading spa towns, would find a significant place in the English social calendar.

Scarborough was a popular spa town in the north of England from the 1620s onwards, and it was probably the first place where using sea water as a medical treatment gained popularity at the beginning of the 18th century.

Seaside and Bathing Destinations

Liverpool, perhaps surprisingly, was once used as a destination for sea bathers and other large ports of today were also used for sea bathing, including Portsmouth and Southampton. This leisure function disappeared but at other ports the commercial function declined and was supplanted by holidaymakers at places such as Margate, Brighton and Hastings.



Some historic ports have managed to cater for visitors while continuing their commercial function. Weymouth (pictured left) is a good example and is one popular with people going on holiday from the West Country. Among these by the 19th century were workers from the Great Western Railway works in Swindon. Thousands of visitors, during the 'Swindon Week', latterly the 'Swindon Fortnight', boarded trains at the beginning of July to head to the seaside, often Weymouth or Weston-super-Mare.

Weston was a hamlet in 1801 but a century later it was home to almost 20,000 souls and large numbers of tourists during the summer. An infrequent visitor to Weston is the sea, and during the early 20th century bathing facilities were created so that people could bathe in sea water even when the tide was out. Weston also had two piers, Birnbeck Pier which officially opened in 1867 and the Grand Pier which opened on 11 June 1904.

Grand Pier is still a popular destination for visitors, but Birnbeck (pictured right) suffered years of neglect and has been closed for many years, perhaps a symbol of people losing interest in holidaying at the British seaside. But funding has been found and



the revival of the pier should begin soon, and many seaside resorts in recent years have seen major investment. Although many people take their main holidays abroad now, the seaside is still popular for short breaks or day trips.

Countryside Holidays

But if you don't want a lively time at the beach, many tourists have headed out into the countryside, to enjoy nature, perhaps on the moors of Devon and Cornwall or in the



mountains of Wales, for example Snowdon (pictured left).

Diarists since the 18th century have recorded their private journeys and sometimes have regaled the public with the sights they have witnessed. As well as natural beauty, many set off to experience the romantic appeal of ruined castles and abbeys. Some of

these travellers were famous, like Celia Fiennes or Daniel Defoe, but there are a wealth of published and unpublished travel diaries in archives around the country.

Wiltshire

People today might not think of Wiltshire as a holiday county; it is a county for Londoners to speed through on the M4 or A303 to reach Devon and Cornwall or South Wales, though some will come to enjoy Center Parcs at Longleat.

However, while we might look outwards for destinations, Wiltshire and its surrounding counties have figured prominently in historic travel journals. Particularly popular since the 18th century have been Salisbury Cathedral and Stonehenge, often *en route* to Bath and the Wiltshire countryside and its quaint villages are often admired.



So, if a Bratton resident wants a holiday destination today, there are plenty on your doorstep to enjoy and much more within easy reach.

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This article is based on a talk given by Allan Brodie the Bratton History Association on 19 May 2024.

Allan is a tourism historian and architectural historian. He has worked for Historic England (and its predecessors) since 1986 and is now a Visiting Fellow at Bournemouth University.