SOUTHEND PIER MUSEUM FOUDATION TRUST LTD

PIER REVIEW

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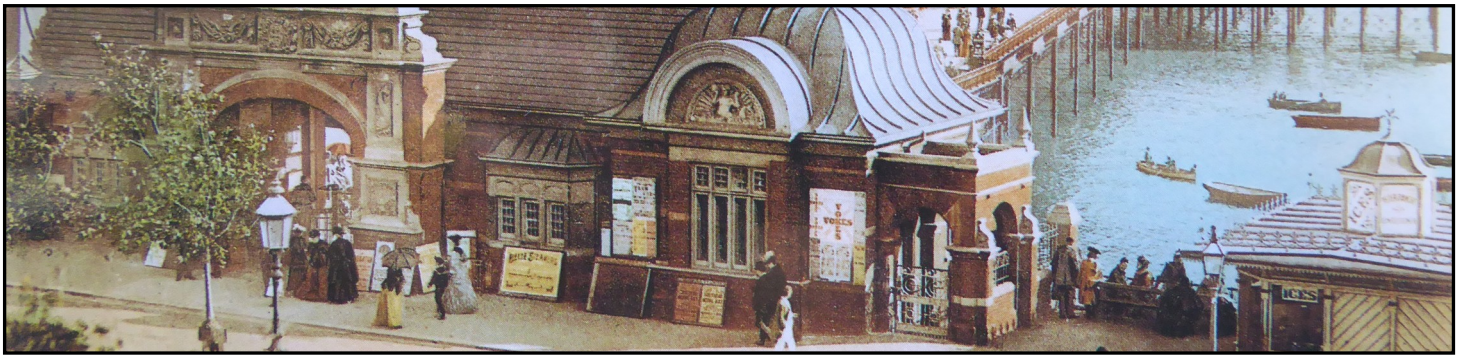


From Tim Watts, Pier Museum Chairman

Hello all, I hope you are enjoying the summer. We are very busy in the museum having decided to open additionally on Fridays during the schools' summer holiday. This is stretching our small volunteer pool to its limits. We have weathered the schools visit season and welcomed hundreds of children who enjoyed their visits, enthusiastically and noisily. However, numbers of schools visiting were significantly down on last year with rising transport costs being mentioned by some as a contributing factor.

The pier has long welcomed ships and an interesting arrival this year was the Nao Santa Maria, a full size replica of Christopher Columbus' 1492 flagship. This was a floating museum and was enjoyed by many. However, visiting it proved challenging as its unusual hull shape meant mooring to the good old pier was not easy and an access ramp could only be used at certain times of the tide.

Behind the scenes, we concluded our mammoth project to create the necessary documentation for our Arts Council re-accreditation. This has all been submitted for review by a panel in September. Fingers crossed all goes well! One remaining action is to conclude the renewal of the museum's lease with Southend City Council – we have been advised this will not be a problem and that we have security of tenure in our current location.

In the next edition of the newsletter, look out for an article on our new divers exhibition.

AGM

This year's Annual General Meeting will be held in the museum at 10.30am on Tuesday, 23 September 2025. The entrance is in the far corner of the Pier Railway entrance foyer. If you are interested in attending then please either email the chairman@southendpiermuseum.co.uk. or call and leave a message on our answerphone 01702 611214.

History of AC cars

The story of the manufacturer of the 1949 train

Book Launch

The museum is proud to be hosting the launch of a new book by local author Marian Pearce.

Simulated Signal Box

How the interactive animation was designed and built

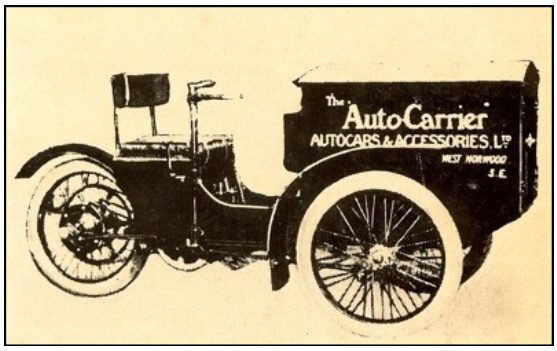
Who were AC cars ?

Of all the childhood memories that visitors to the Museum tell us about by far the most common is the ride on the train. Sometimes, it's the 1986 trains they remember, very rarely it's the toastracks (and you would need to be well over 80 to remember them), but mostly it's the clickety-clack of the green and cream cars that was etched on their childhood memory.

As you will probably know, we have one of these iconic vehicles (Car 22) on display in the Museum, and we know of at least four others that still survive complete. On climbing the small set of steps that gets you into Car 22, many people have noticed the maker's name etched into the floor—'Built by AC Cars of Thames Ditton, Surrey.' But who were they?

From Cars to Trains

It's astonishing to realise that AC Cars have a history that dates back to 1901, the very early years of motoring. Back then they were known as Auto Carriers Ltd, and were just one of hundreds of small British companies making and selling cars.



The Autocarrier 1904

1939 Supercharged Tourer

Very few of those early companies survive today, among them Ford and Vauxhall, both founded in 1903. And AC Cars, still making cars, despite a very chequered history and many changes of ownership over the years.

Saved by the Invalid Car

The years after the Second World War were not good for makers of expensive sports cars, which was the niche market that AC had got themselves into before the war. So, they diversified. They built boats, they built trains, and they designed a three-wheeled car for the disabled called the Invacar.

Many thousands of these were made in the years up to 1976, and they provided useful income to a company that was certainly struggling.

The Invacar built from 1946 to 1976

Factory in Thames Ditton

During the Second World War, AC Cars had bought an island in the middle of the River Thames, near Hampton Court, and not far away from the main factory at Thames Ditton. Tagg's Island had once been a summer retreat of the rich and famous, but its hotel had lost its grandeur and the bankrupted owners were forced to sell. Here AC built a factory, and set about building the Invacar, and also (in 1949) the 32 carriages that formed the next generation of the Southend Pier Railway. They had been designed to look like London Underground trains, though a bit smaller as the Pier railway's gauge (the distance between the rails) was only 3 feet 6 inches, compared to the standard gauge of 4 feet 8.5 inches used by the Underground and almost every other railway in the country. But the windows and the electrically-operated doors were a great improvement on the windswept toastracks, and the fully enclosed driver's cab was much appreciated. It is said that AC were awarded the contract because they had some experience of building boats, and could thus understand the effects of wind and a salty atmosphere when designing the trains.

Perhaps they might have transported the new trains to Southend by loading them on a barge, and floating them down the River, but it was too expensive that way, so each was loaded on a lorry and sent down the A127.

Car 22 in its working days.

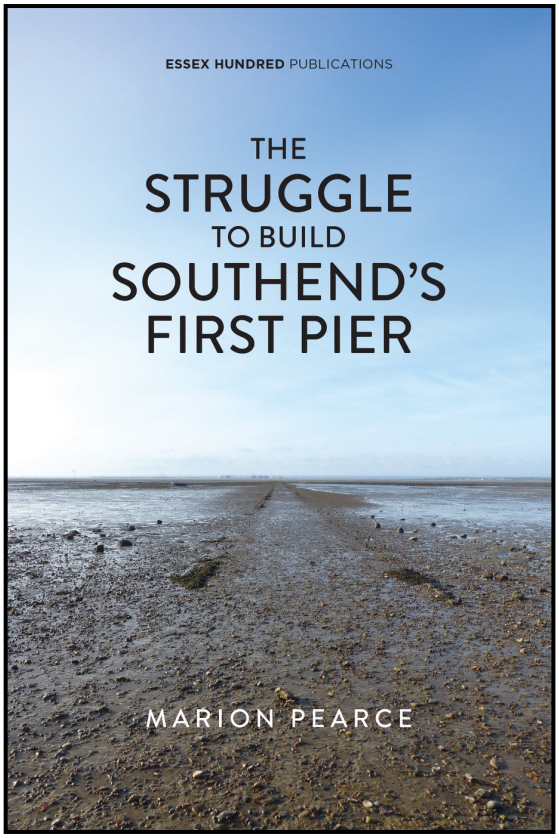
Trains are a massive success

The first two years of the new trains (1949 and 1950) were the most successful ever in the history of the Pier, with more than 5 million people each year carried to the Pierhead. But the 1950s and 60s were not kind to Southend, or any other English resort, with the rise of the package holiday and cheap holiday flights, and by 1972 Southend Council, faced with the usual need to save money, decided to scrap half the railway. Up came one of the two tracks, the signalboxes were removed (into the Pier Museum, fortunately), and two of the four 7-carriage trains were scrapped. In 1978, having spent nothing on Pier maintenance, the Council scrapped the rest of the railway as being 'too dangerous'. The remaining cars ended up in a scrapyard in Shoeburyness.

The Future is Sports Cars

Meanwhile, despite many changes of management, AC Cars survived. It built the car for which it is best known—the Cobra, a twin seat sports car with a Ford V8 engine built from 1962 to 1969, and still makes exotic sports cars today. See https://ac.cars/en-us/

An AC Cobra



Book Launch

The Museum is pleased to advise that we will be hosting the book launch of "The Struggle to build Southend's first Pier", a new book written by well known local author, Marion Pearce.

The event will be between 2-3pm on Saturday 6th September and will include a short talk and a visit by the Mayor of Southend. The author will be there signing books - remember that all members receive a 10% discount.

Simulated Signal Box

It started with a trip to a mini railway, it finished with an interactive exhibit in our Museum. This the story of the Simulated Signal Box

A couple of years ago, trustee Garry Stickland visited Ride on Railways in Romford. This company is owned by Paul Middleton and produce quality ride on railway items for small gauge railways.

Following various discussions Paul and his son Clark drew up 2D drawings of an animation of a scene on Southend Pier set in the 70's when there were 2 railway lines, 4 trains and signal boxes. Clark was studying mechanical engineering at university at the time and was able to convert the 2D drawings to 3D graphics and from there to produce the graphics, using a Roblox platform and Raspberry Pi software. The graphics also show the old lifeboat station and the covered indoor south railway station.

The system was installed in the signal box in the Museum and was linked to the mechanical signals to simulate how a signalman would have operated the signals in sequence to change the points and enable two trains to crossover.

Paul and Clark have been loyal supporters of the museum and gave up their time to design and build the graphic package free of charge. A new TV in the signal box was kindly purchased and donated by Paul Stranks the Director of CEP Engineering Ltd based in Rochford.

All adult visitors can now appreciate the work of the signalman as the animated trains respond to their action of pulling and pushing the signal levers.