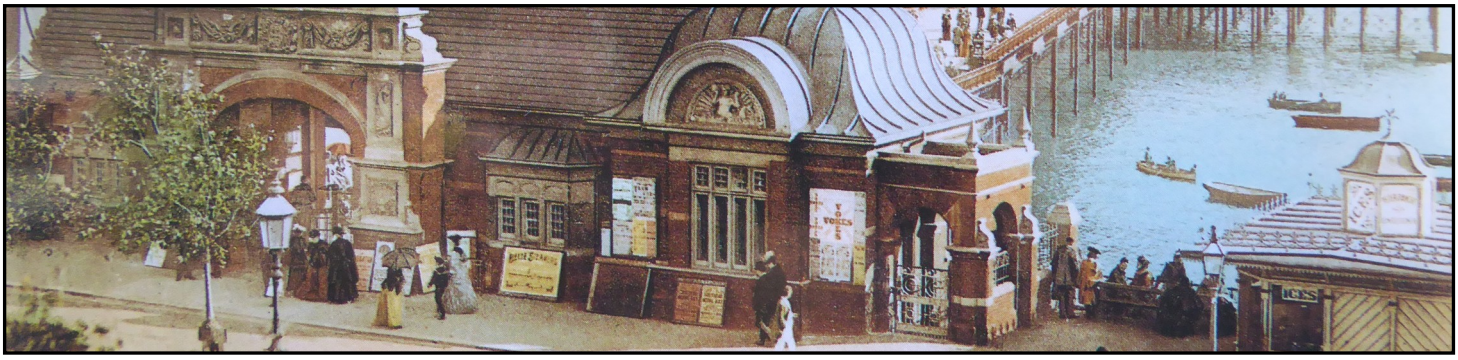
SOUTHEND PIER MUSEUM FOUNDATION TRUST LTD

PIER REVIEW

ISSUE NO 18 | WINTER 2025 |



From Tim Watts, Pier Museum Chairman

Hello all, now the nights have now well and truly drawn in, we can look back on a very successful summer in the museum. Our visitors numbers have been comparable with the main Southend Museum and, on the days we were open, we were getting about 10% of all visitors to the pier coming down to the museum. That's not a bad proportion!

As usual, the Waverley paddle steamer visited the pier in early Autumn. Weather affected its schedule slightly but it proved as popular as ever and many passengers popped into see us too.

The highlight of the autumn season though was the Poppies on the Pier exhibition – see the article later in this newsletter for more detail.

Behind the scenes we held our AGM in September and continue to work to keep the museum in good condition. We are still working to conclude the lease extension with the council - these things take time, as they say.

With the depths of winter approaching, it would be only fair to say that some of us are looking forward to the museum's short closure period! We hope to additionally open on Boxing Day and New Years Day to greet those taking the air but will then close until Easter. This will give us the opportunity for a deep clean in the museum and to improve some of the display units. We have recently welcomed a few new volunteers and will hope to keep them busy until they can help us greet the visitors in 2026.

Accreditation

I am delighted to confirm that the Arts Council England have confirmed our Full re-accreditation with no caveats or requested changes to our plans. A lot of documentation had to be produced to achieve that and the policies will stand us in good stead in the future. It also means we are able to seek the full range of heritage grants – something that may be essential as we try to improve accessibility to the museum, potentially via a lift.

Poppies

The story of Poppies on the Pier. A unique art installation on Southend Pier in November

Pier shopping

The history of the Pier Hill buildings

Sopot Presentation

The conclusions of a project by College students to compare the piers of Sopot in Poland and Southend on Sea

Poppies on the Pier

The idea was a simple one. Southend would like to mark Remembrance 2025 by knitting poppies to display on the Pier. The Royal British Legion came up with a knitting pattern, and the word went out – get knitting, crocheting or embroidering.

The word spread, not only across Southend but the rest of Essex, then it seemed across the rest of the world. Altogether, 110,000 poppies were knitted and sent to Southend Pier – an incredible result which far exceeded any expectations – and they were connected together in a three mile ropeway which extended the 1.3 miles down the Pier and back, and many other places.

2,106 poppies were used to make this Warrior figure at the end of the Pier, the number of Southenders who gave their lives during two world wars.

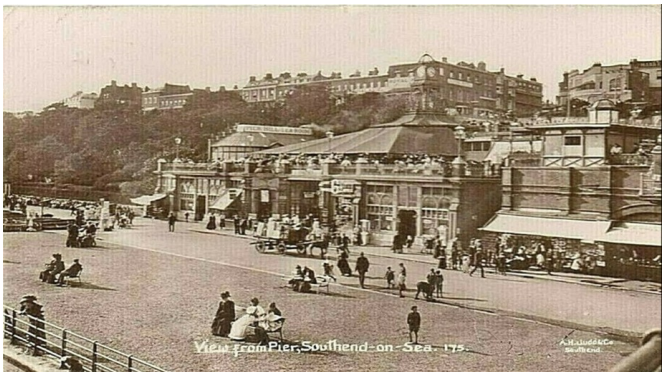
A Special Art Installation

The display was open from 5th to the 16th November, and attracted record numbers to Southend Pier especially at the weekends, when the queueing time was up to an hour and a half, just to walk on the Pier.

Another week was added, and the display finally closed on the 23rd November.

Surplus poppies even made their way into the Pier Museum, and the Museum extended their opening hours during the remembrance period. With thanks to Lynn Stickland, Pauline and Gerald Hudson Crane for creating the Museum display.

Southend's First Shopping Centre

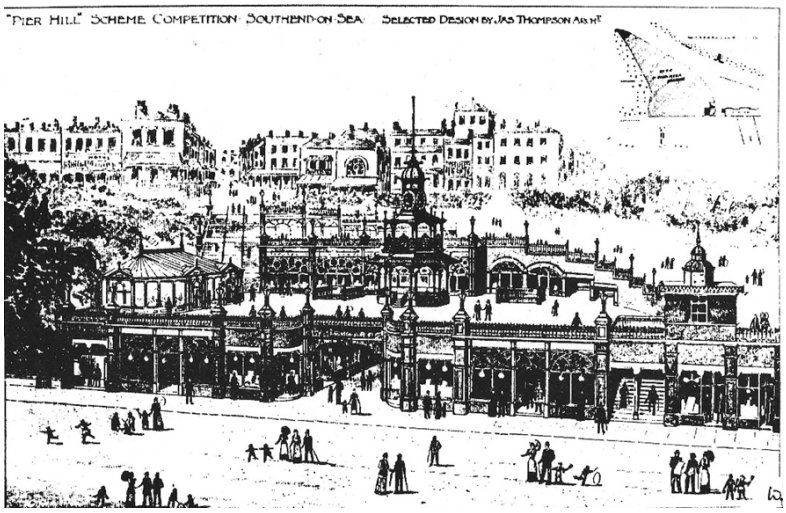


Southend may often appear to be a bit run-down and depressing, but it wasn't always so. Hot on the heels of the opening of the new Iron Pier in 1890 came the Pier Hill Buildings.

Only a couple of miles away, Westcliff's Hamlet Court Road was rapidly developing a reputation for fashionable shopping (and many of the elegant shopfronts remain), and Southend was not to be outdone.

Tourism has always been a strictly commercial business, and the complex of shops, an arcade and promenade and thermal baths was designed to promote the town and add a touch of class.

For real glamour, the leading London football clubs were said to send their players to the baths, just before important matches.



Development of Pier Hill

All trace has long since gone, but Pier Hill Buildings were situated immediately to the west of the Toll House, built into the slope of Pier Hill, and next door to the Shrubbery, in the area where Never Never Land was built, and later the 2003 Pier Hill lift.

They were built in 1896 to a design by James Thompson, who had won an architectural competition held for the purpose, and cost £18,710.

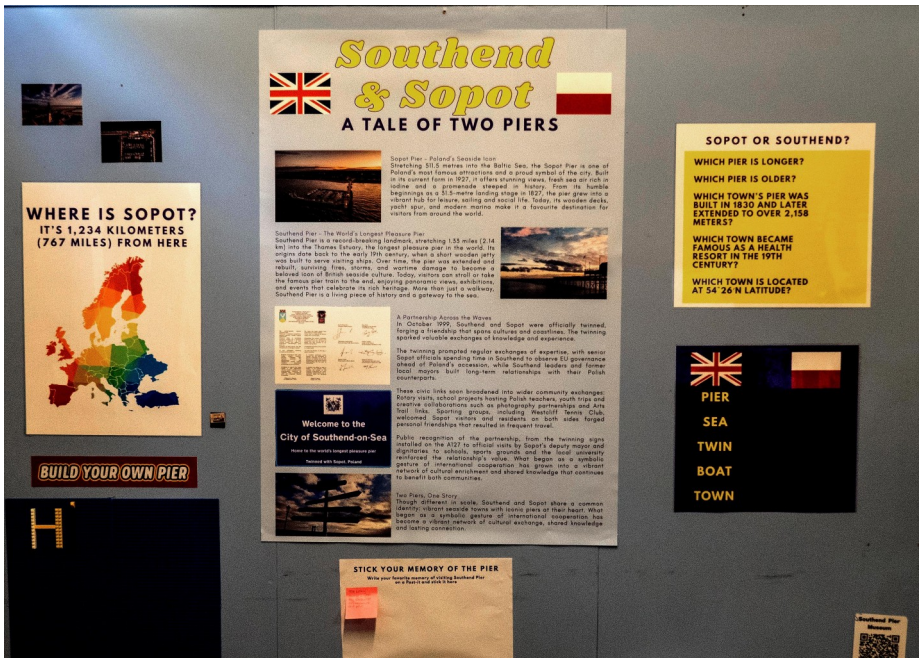
This early version of The Royals seems to have been a success for a period, but perhaps, like many things associated with the Pier, not a lasting one.

Dilapidated Pier Buildings

When the Toll House was demolished in 1931, the Pier's administration was moved next door into the upper deck of Pier Hill Buildings – even then, there was empty space.

The buildings lasted into the 1970s, by which time they were in a terrible state and due for demolition. This 1975 picture shows them boarded up, along with all the cafes that now are mostly fish & chip shops.

A Tale of Two Cities and Two Piers



You may be aware that Southend is twinned with Sopot in Poland. The question is why? In the Pier Museum we had two small pictures of Sopot pier. However, the specific details remained largely unknown.

Part of the Museum's charitable status is to enhance understanding of the pier and to educate our visitors. We also have an aim to work with education communities. The question of Sopot has brought this all together.

We approached Southend College with the idea and the Hospitality and Travel sector agreed to undertake a project on Sopot and to look at how our Museum is performing. The students spent over two months researching the background to the twinning and our Museum visitor profile.

Student Presentation

On 25th November 2025, the students presented their findings at the Pier Museum to the Mayor and Mayoress, Museum Trustees and Volunteers. And what a fantastic job they did.

We now know more facts about Sopot Pier, and we have a semi-permanent interactive display about Sopot and Southend.

Together with ideas on how to raise awareness of and improve our Museum. Which has been a great experience and help to us.

If you want to know more about Southend's twinning with Sopot, come and visit Southend Pier Museum.