

About QueenSpark Books

QueenSpark Books was founded in 1972 as part of a campaign to save the historic Royal Spa in Brighton's Queen's Park from being converted to a casino. The campaign was successful and it inspired participants to start collecting memories of people living in Brighton and Hove to preserve for future generations. QueenSpark Books is now the longest-running organisation of its kind in the UK.

More than one hundred books later, as part of our 45th anniversary celebrations, we are making the original texts of many of our out-of-print books available for the first time in many years.

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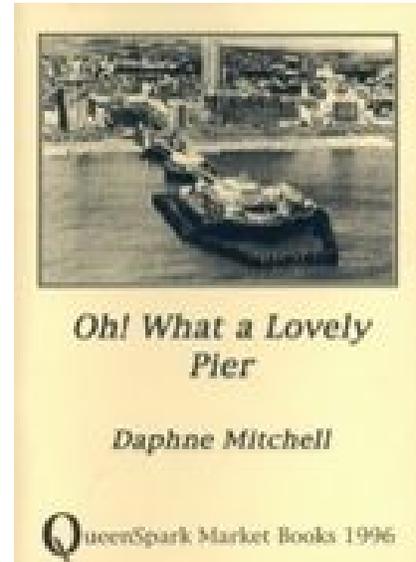
About this book

Working on the West Pier from 1956 to 1970, Daphne Mitchell's 1996 memoir evokes the atmosphere of the seaside in bygone times. Daphne recalls seaside shows that featured acts such as local stunt man the Great Omani, floating by on a bed of nails.

She describes day-to-day life working on the pier, twelve hours a day for six days a week, even on Christmas day. Daphne documents the decline of the West Pier, until its eventual closure in 1975.

In this account, the working routine of the West Pier is vividly brought to life for the modern reader, who today can only view a ghostly wreck.

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Oh! What a Lovely Pier

Dedication

I dedicate my memories to the late Mr L.Dainton, ex-manager, Mr J. Taylor, ex-pier master, and my closest friend Bonny James.

Also remembering all the permanent and seasonal staff from 1956-1970.

I must point out Mr L. Dainton was the general manager until the Pier was sold. He was devastated; he could not carry on. We all respected him as he treated us with respect. He expected a high class of work from us, which he always had, and we were pleased to give it.

Daphne Mitchell

Introduction

There is not a great deal to write about myself. I was brought up in Woodingdean when it was a small village. I remember the long hot summers. Sometimes the winters were very severe. Times were hard, but it was a lovely place to be as a child.

I went to Warren Farm School until I was a senior. During the War I lived for a while in Brecon, South Wales. I came back and finished my schooling at Whitehawk Senior Girls which, although taught us mainly the basics, was an excellent school.

I had various jobs, mainly in cinemas: the Regent, the Palladium and the Curzon. Ironically I had a job on the Palace Pier, Peter Pan's Playground, where I sat in a little wooden shed taking the money, but I did not stay as it wasn't for me.

I enjoyed the Regent; I was salesgirl and usherette. You had to be smart as you had to go on parade every day before starting work. The manager would inspect us and tell us where we were working for that day. We wore a very smart uniform: blue and white with silver buttons, also a forage cap with G.B. on the side: Gaumont British. It made you really feel important.

The last cinema I worked at was the Odeon in Hove, the largest cinema on one floor. An organist played in the interval and they had a lovely cafe, the Tudor Rose - all gone now.

I settled in Hove, had two children, and when they were eight years and six years, decided to go to work. A friend of mine was a waitress on the West Pier and said they needed stillroom hands, so that's how I ended up on the Pier myself, never thinking I

would be there fifteen years. I sometimes have felt guilty about missing so much of my children growing up. We all do things of which we think 'should we' or 'shouldn't we' have done. But that's life, we cannot change it!

The Peer of Piers

My memories of the West Pier started when I commenced work there in 1956. There was this beautifully-designed Pier, everything shining and spotlessly clean. It was a hive of activity. I did not know what to expect; it turned out to be fifteen of the happiest years of my life.

It's strange that I had never been on the West Pier before I applied for a vacancy, although I had lived in Hove for quite a few years. I thought it would be quite frightening working over the sea, strange thing was you never noticed it. Several times I saw porpoises basking in the sea. The first time I thought they were whales.

There was the lovely Concert Hall which catered for five hundred people when it was full, which it often was in the height of the season. It was waitress service. There was the Ocean Restaurant for six hundred. It was really nice and it used to be filled with people every morning in the bay looking out to sea. Like being on board ship. There was also the West Bar and the East Bar, both licensed, and amusements.

The Pier was seldom short of staff as they came back year after year for their jobs. It was one big happy family. I realised after working a season that the cleanliness and appearance of the Pier was due to the hard work done in the off-season period by the pier master and deckhands. Also during winter they checked and repaired the decking. There was also a team of divers who came every year to repair damaged girders and pylons, so we all felt very safe. It was a credit to all concerned. Every season it was as though it had had a spring clean.

The sea end had quite a lot of little shops: candy floss, popcorn, fortune tellers, shellfish, cockles and mussels - various shops. The people who rented the small shops came back every year to sell their wares and enjoy the happy atmosphere. The same anglers came on all year round. They used to hold the prize giving for the anglers in the Concert Hall. I suppose that was for the biggest catch. They were a friendly bunch. They spent a lot of money on the Pier: all through the winter they were on every day and helped to keep the Pier going in the winter months. A few of them loved and cared so much about it that after it closed they volunteered to sleep on it to look after it to stop vandals getting on. They did this for a long time.

The ladies' loos, of which there were two, one at the entrance and one at the sea end, were spotless and both had full-time attendants to look after them, which is a thing of the past today. Outside the Pier on one side of the entrance was a lovely chemist shop which always looked smart and was very handy.

We all would have done anything to try to save the Pier, it is heartbreaking to look at it now and remember all those wonderful times when it was a great attraction and so busy. There was never any trouble on the West Pier. We were told the manager of the Palace Pier said the West Pier was his dream pier. The West Pier, like the film, had 'a touch of class'.

Faces on the Pier

The Pier was very efficiently run by a board of directors. It had a wonderful manager, Mr L. Dainton, who loved the Pier. One day I was asked to cook trout for Mr Dainton. Mrs Richardson, Catering Supervisor, said, 'Don't worry, there's nothing to it, just grill it with butter and almonds.' I had a go, the almonds wouldn't stay on. Anyway, I did my best and decorated it. The waitress took it out. Then she said, 'Take your overall off. Mr Dainton wants to see you.' I thought, 'Oh dear, probably it's not cooked properly,' but he said, 'I have eaten in some of the best places, but I've never had trout so beautifully cooked and beautifully presented and thank you.' I was really elated and pleased with myself. He was a great manager, he respected people and in return we would have done anything for him. It broke his heart when the Pier was sold soon after.

From 1956-1970 there were three pier masters: first Mr Phillips, I think he was an ex-sea captain, he retired; then it was Mr Les Taylor, a very nice kind man. When A.V.P. Industries bought the Pier they got rid of Mr L. Taylor and promoted his brother Mr J. Taylor. The Taylor brothers were quite well-known.

Mr J. Taylor, was an outstanding figure in his naval uniform. He looked like James Robertson Justice, same beard. He shouted a lot but had a heart of gold, helped everyone, looked after us all. He often took his jacket off and got cracking, helping out wherever needed: cooking, cleaning up for us - you name it he did it. I remember many a time when we were all up the wall and packed out. He would help with washing-up. What a character!

Mrs Davies was the manageress of the Concert Hall when I started work there. She was very good to me. After I had been there for a while I went to work one day and she said, 'Go into the staff room, there are three boxes. I want you to try on what is in them and whatever you like is yours.' I couldn't believe what she was saying. I picked out a blue and white dress. She said, 'Now you need a nice hair-do.' It all happened so fast I couldn't say anything. She sent me to Louis in Preston Street. I had never been inside a hairdresser's before. I was treated like royalty, told to pick out any style I liked. My hair was long. I had the works: cut, shampoo, style and friction, it was like being in another world. I went back to work. She said, 'It looks great, but now you need a nice handbag and shoes to go with it.' I felt like Eliza Doolittle being transformed. I felt really great, but also guilty that I had accepted all that, as I have always been independent and hate saying thank you. I don't like things given to me unless I've earned or paid for it. She had pleasure she said doing it, and it didn't hurt to be a little spoilt after working so hard. Plus the fact she was a very large lady, I couldn't argue with her!

Miss Hardy was the head of catering when I started there. She really frightened me. They said she had been in the Army Catering Corps, and even the dog sat to attention when it saw her! She was always fair. If we were sitting down having a break she would say, 'Where else could you get paid to sit down?' and then she would wink and smile. Some always used to jump up if she was around. She always knew. If you had done your job properly, why worry?

I met and made many friends during my time on the Pier, especially a Mr and Mrs Doughty. Although they did not live locally, they came every opportunity to spend time on the Pier. My closest and true friend was Bonny James, who I think I must have laughed with the most in my life. She was a real hard-working person. I will never forget her and wish she was here to voice her memories. Unfortunately she died a few years ago. It was so good to laugh. There doesn't seem to be enough of it in the world today.

The other friendship I had was with a Mrs Jones who was in charge of the stillroom which served the Ocean Restaurant at the sea end of the Pier. She was over six foot tall and as far as we knew seventy years old. After work we used to go to the Queensbury Arms, now called the Hole in the Wall, by the Metropole. She was so crafty. We would go in there, then the film crew from *Oh! What A Lovely War* would come in. They would ask her age, it used to jump from seventy to seventy-five. They used to say, 'Buy that woman a drink.' Wonderful working at that age; it would always go up if there was a drink going. I didn't like Guinness. I usually had two, she sometimes had ten. Some evenings I know she drank fourteen Guinnesses and was always up and early for work next day. I asked her how she could drink so many. She said, 'I've got hollow legs.' I often sit and have to smile when I remember. She was a great character. Even the cook, Mrs Green, was about seventy. She used to go on the Pier at 6 o'clock in the morning to get all her roast chickens cooked.

I remember one day, it was a very hot day, the man who sold the cockles and mussels said, 'Daphne, I think I'm going mad. Every time I look up I see the same woman keep going past.' He said, 'I'm beginning to wonder if something is wrong with the stall food.' It was one of Mrs Jones' washer-ups who was rather peculiar. She kept going round the bottom of the Pier trying to find her way off. I said to her, as round she came again, 'Just keep going upwards.' I think he was relieved to think he hadn't got shellfish poisoning. We sure did have some funny people working on there in the later days.

I remember the fishermen saying they had a lot of mackerel. They say at certain times mackerel give themselves up. I said, 'Don't forget us if you have any to spare.' I found two huge baskets full outside the Concert Hall doors. Sometimes they would give me a huge cod which I had no idea how to fillet and gut. The pier master usually did it for us, and we would all enjoy a bit of fresh fish.

Many humorous incidents occurred, but some stayed in my mind. For example, we went to work one day and saw a line of washing blowing in the breeze. The porter had done

his washing: shirt, socks, pants - everything. He was really in hot water. The manager was not amused! Apparently, he had got soaking wet, even his shoes, so the old lady in the kitchen put them under the grill and set them on fire. He went off the Pier with just the soles tied to his feet, he wasn't amused either.

When we had the divers on once a year they used the old-fashioned divers' suits and round clear helmets screwed on. One day one came up and walked into the canteen, a woman dropped a teapot and screamed, 'We have an invasion from Mars!' We never saw her again.

Work on the Pier

When I just started work on the West Pier, I was part-time. Then, after a while, my day started at 10am till 10pm, six days a week. Also I usually worked my day off, plus some of my holidays.

Before I went to work there I had only ever cooked for four. I ended up cooking for hundreds. It was so hectic during the season, it was really hard work, grafting, in fact. I do not want to give the impression it was all a laugh, it really was hard work combined with humorous happenings.

Sometimes it got to the stage when we were so busy that you didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Mrs Richardson, catering supervisor, would come to the Concert Hall and make us all go off for a cup of tea and a cigarette. She would take over. After five minutes and a laugh and a joke we would all go back to work. You wished it was the end of the season but then it was sad as everyone left until next season.

We were taught to look after the customers. Always heat the cups before serving tea or coffee. Everything was freshly made. Even a sandwich had to be cut, turned upside down, put on a doily and decorated. We also had a high standard of hygiene from the local food inspector. He never caught us on the hop, as we were always informed he was on his way down the Pier. Each department let the other one know, so we were always ready. Even the phones were old with the ear-piece and winder but they never broke down, not like the modern ones today.

Even if we hadn't had the phone calls letting us know the food inspector was on his way, we wouldn't have been caught with anything wrong. The catering supervisor was very strict. The catering rules were on the walls everywhere. No nail varnish. and everyone connected with food had to wear stockings and put their hair up. I was annoyed one day when the food inspector came. I asked one of the counter staff to put a pot of tea on a tray for him, and she put a cracked cup, which were usually thrown away. It always happens like that. I don't think he said anything, or I would have got a ticking off. You were never allowed to smoke, only right away from food. I would have a quick puff during the day, my rejuvenator. When I started work on the Pier I was twenty-six years old. I never smoked or drank. Mrs Jones started me having a Guinness, and everyone

smoked, so I picked up the habit. I was so naive then, anyone would have thought I had been brought up in a convent. Going to work certainly taught me about life.

Although the Pier itself had no problems when it came to the equipment, in the stillrooms and kitchens it was quite a different story. Everything was antiquated, even the fish fryer was a black cast-iron affair, years old, but it did its job very well.

Although everything regarding equipment was old, with frequent phone calls to the handyman or electrician, it served its purpose. It was definitely old, but mostly reliable. The biggest asset the Concert Hall had was a handmade egg-poacher, which poached twenty eggs at a time. Although it was burnt dry so many times, it kept going. One of the electricians made it. Considering there were thousands of eggs poached, he did his good turn for the catering department - he should have had a reward for his own designed egg-poacher. You got to know and understand the equipment and got the best out of it.

There were two electricians, Mr Pratt and Mr Washington. I think Mr Pratt was the one who designed the amazing egg-poacher for the Concert Hall. They kept themselves to themselves, they never got involved with us. They kept to their cubby-holes, unless we sent out an S.O.S. to keep the antiquated equipment going or unless they were hungry. They kept aloof from us workers. Everyone else all helped each other.

In the stillroom there was one long counter from which everything regarding food and drink was served. There were usually four of us behind it: one on salads and ice cream; one doing all sorts, to keep a supply of anything which was running out or needed; one on tea and coffee, and myself. I did the cooked snacks, such as poached eggs, Welsh rarebit, beans, spaghetti and so on.

One day I was rolling a ten-gallon churn of milk; there is a way of rolling them. The lid came off and the ten gallons poured out all over the Concert Hall floor. I was petrified. The supervisor came in. She said, 'What are you worried about? It's lucky to spill milk.' I got off lightly!

In the very busy seasons the motto was, 'You don't have to be mad to work here, but it helps'. We certainly had some different characters working temporary. I remember one young man working in my department. He was very temperamental. We used to sell hundreds of Welsh rarebits, so needed lots of grated cheese. If he was in a mood I used to wait for Ken Lyon to strike up a military march and get him grating. He grated to the tempo and in a few minutes had a huge bowl of grated cheese. It would have taken anyone else about an hour. You had to get to know each individual and get the best out of them.

I usually did the evenings on my own as it was mainly ice cream and coffees. That was easy. All the evening trade was at the licensed bar, at which two barmaids served with the porter doing all the fetching and carrying for them. As I sometimes had a bit of time

between orders I would do some preparing for the next day, such as grating cheese. If I was lucky I would finish about 9 o'clock. I would go into the Concert Hall and watch the last part of the show, order myself a drink and enjoy being on the other side for a change. Another day over.

Mrs Davies and Miss Hardy shared a flat and Miss Hardy opened a bridge club on the seafront. In fact they played other types of card games. I was asked to do the refreshments, which I did for a couple of weeks. As I worked from 10 till 10 o'clock on the Pier and I wasn't getting home till 3 o'clock in the morning I could not have kept that up.

That was not the main reason, however, that I left. I did very well in tips. I had to change all my chips in for cash. I was told to be nice and look after the clients then they tip well. No way! My old independence came into it. No way would I bow and scrape to people for a tip. The men were not too bad, at least they were polite, but the women made sure you knew you were there to serve their every need. That was not for me. I certainly saw another side of life which I didn't like. I left. I found it obscene that people could lose hundreds of pounds in a few minutes, when I knew what it was like not to have the price of a loaf of bread. It was a different world. I was seeing people who played with money like water.

Miss Hardy couldn't understand why I felt that way. Perhaps my pride has been the cause of me missing out on a lot of things, but it has and always will be important to me. One incident at the club: we had a power cut and I was working with a candle to do sandwiches and tea. One woman complained that her tea was too strong, too weak, too milky. So I gave her a cup of water. 'How pathetic,' I thought, 'You know what you can do!'

During the season they employed ladies as floor seaters to look after and seat the customers. They used to come to work immaculate, not a hair out of place, and fresh and cool. We would have been slogging away hours before they started. They walked in and got the waitresses to get them a pot of tea. One day they came in, I was frying fish and chips. They stood and started saying there were too many chips on the plates. I said it was the usual amount. It was a hot day. I asked them to do their job and leave us to do ours.

They continued to take chips off, so I took my overall off and left them to it. I went to the office and asked Mrs Richardson to please tell them to do their own job, also to see how many chips were being served. She said, 'Go and find yourself a deckchair and leave them to it.' There was no one else to fry, so they had to get themselves soiled, also smelling of fish and chips.

They never criticised again. They stayed out of the stillroom. We all were friends really, especially one Mrs Reynolds, but they had the idea their job was so important. Everyone was important. We were all part of one job. If it wasn't for the back staff who

did all the dirty work there would not have been a cafe. Perhaps it was a good thing we had the disagreement, as we all knew where we stood after. No one interfered with someone else's job after that.

When I think now how much work there was to do, I wonder how we did it. Today is so different - fast food - everything is made so easy. If it was now, you wouldn't need half the workers, but then it was a lot of work for very little money. I suppose I was lucky. I was earning £14 per week when I left.

How I wish I could do it all again!

Winter on the Pier

After I had been there one season I was asked if I would like to be on the permanent staff, which meant working all the winter. There was only a skeleton staff on the Pier in the winter: office staff, manager, catering supervisor, Mrs Jones and myself. We looked after customers and fed the staff. We were open Christmas Day and Boxing Day, right through to the next season. That was quite an experience. When it snowed, it was like working on a desert island: toilets frozen up and no water until we thawed some for tea. It was hilarious, we had to save the water and have one wash-up every now and again. There was a tank and when I needed water I just used to go and get a lump of ice.

When we were frozen up, which we were many times, we were told that if we needed the loo, we had a choice of the trap door or Lyons Tea Shop, Western Road. I opted for Lyons but Mrs Jones chose the trap door. Many a time I thought she had gone down it. She must have been a contortionist to have mastered the art. It was hilarious, no wonder she often said she was freezing. I wasn't surprised.

Our quarters for the winter was the West Bar, which in the summer was a licensed bar. It was bitterly cold sometimes, gale force winds, but we all got there every day. I used to make a large pan of home-made soup and bread pudding. The deckhands and fishermen used to like it, for it was 3p a bit. Also a lot of the locals and fishermen were on every day, including Christmas Day.

Stars on the Pier

In 1956 when I commenced work in the Concert Hall, Harry Groombridge was the orchestra which played for afternoon teas. One member of the orchestra was well-known; he played the saw. His name was Jack Vallaise. He was a bit of a heart-throb as the same middle-aged ladies were there every day at the same tables to see him. That was in the afternoons, then we had talent nights and Peter Robinson's fashion shows. We were always packed out on those evenings.

Later on came the Old Tyme Music Hall, which was very popular. I must admit that was

my favourite. It was run by Alan Gale and wife Patty. They had a marvellous female impressionist named Gary Webb who, in many people's opinion, was equal to Danny La Rue. When one sees *The Good Old Days* on television, it was very similar. I spent a long time one day trying to separate two beer glasses, then found out it was the chairman of the Old Tyme Music Hall's glass, which gives the impression he downs a pint every few minutes. I found the secret was they pour beer round the inside only. He wasn't too happy when I said what I was doing. Still, live and learn. Also there was the Great Omani who did daring stunts at the end of the Pier. I think he is actually still doing all sorts of stunts today! He has been on television a few times. I think his name was Ron Cunningham if my memory is right.

Ken Lyon played for the music hall. I think he played on the Pier for about eight seasons - a very nice man. I used to love the afternoon sessions when he would sometimes ask us if we had any requests for him to play. The music certainly helped to keep everyone going when it became a madhouse, and often chaotic. Sometimes they would run out of teapots, they couldn't get them washed quick enough. We didn't use tea bags then, so it was a case of all hands on deck and do anything to ease the situation. You had to get stuck in to anything to keep the trade going. Sometimes after you were afraid to sit down in case you couldn't get up. But usually with a puff on the cigarette and a quick cup of tea you felt rejuvenated to start washing everything down ready for the evening show.

We did not get the chance to meet many celebrities when they visited the Pier. We knew whoever it was, but owing to us working behind the scenes and not in the public eye we missed out. It wasn't a case of being seen and not heard, rather heard and not seen.

During the making of the film *Oh! What a Lovely War*, Mrs Jones and I were told to stay in and not to go out at all while filming was in progress. We were confined to barracks. The Pier was closed to the public. We felt a bit like *Upstairs, Downstairs*. We were not to be seen. They were filming right outside our window of the West Bar. Knowing us, we had to be nose-y and have a look outside. There were dozens of extras in army uniform of the First World War singing *Goodbye Dolly Gray* to their loved ones before going to war. The military band was playing. It was a very moving scene. Poor Mrs Jones, being the age she was, had a tear in her eye. I think Maggie Smith was filming that day.

Actually, we were only on there to look after the office staff. The film crew had their own chef and didn't honour us for our catering facilities. We couldn't blame them; they certainly had more to eat than we did. The food looked so appetizing we decided to try our luck, so off with our overalls, we joined the queue and we had a lovely cooked trout. We were delighted until the men on the Pier saw us and joined the queue. The poor chef ended up not having enough food for everyone, so that was the end of our culinary feasts.

Hughie Green took over the Concert Hall for a week to make an advert for White Tide.

My friend and I had to look after them, making cups of tea and coffee. The woman they had to say her lines kept getting it wrong. The old lady working with me said, 'I wish I was doing it, I would soon tell him the difference between White Tide and other powders.' Every few minutes the cameraman would shout, 'Quiet, everyone,' just as the water was going down the plug hole. We had to hold the dishcloth in the hole till the shot was taken. In the advert on television, you could hear breaking china where we had dropped a cup on the last take. Hughie Green gave us ten shillings each for looking after them.

Parties on the Pier

Both the Concert Hall and the Ocean Restaurant catered for parties. They would close one half of the Concert Hall for the party. My first job was to thaw great big slabs of fish out and make the batter. Once I was asked to help out and fry fish and chips as the fish fryer had walked out. I had never done it before. The supervisor said, 'It's easy, anyone can do it.' I made the batter with self-raising flour and the plaice looked like rolls of lino. Anyway we said it was a new way of cooking it! It was always garnished with lemon and parsley so it wasn't so noticeable. I was quite proud of my batter after my first disaster.

We would all be working away and then we would be told the party was arriving, so on go the fryers and it would be me frying the fish and Alice frying the chips. When the last piece of plaice was cooked we would all sigh a sigh of relief. During this time whoever was on teas would fill dozens of jugs with tea from the urns. When the afternoon session was over we would close up. Everything had to be washed up and the counter washed down ready for the Old Tyme Music Hall.

I remember I had a party for two hundred and fifty old-age pensioners. The afternoons were hectic enough without parties, of which I had about fifty at odd days during the summer. Sometimes there would be a party for two hundred and fifty fish and chips, bread and butter, cakes and jam, and tea. I went to work extra early on those days to prepare, otherwise it would have been total chaos.

I had to count the two hundred and fifty plates, put them on the hot plate, which was temperamental and worked sometimes. All the other jobs connected to the parties had to be done, such as putting on the tea-urns. The way to make the tea was to put two urns on the gas when boiling. Tie some tea in a cloth, secure to the end of a broom handle. Stand on a chair and lift up and down till right colour. It was quite a job as the bundle of tea got heavier. We were always told it was a smashing cup of tea!

I also had to cut cakes, butter loaves of bread and lay up sixty-three tables. Everything so I could forget the party and concentrate on preparing for the public. Once the doors were opened the waitresses would be shouting for what they wanted.

The Ocean Restaurant once had five hundred dockers for lunch; Brown Windsor Soup was on the menu. The waitresses all went out with their soup jugs. The manager saw

they were pouring white soup. Back to the kitchen he sent them where the old cook stood with a large tin of gravy browning and shovelled a spoonful into each jug. They all went in one door with white soup and came out the other with Brown Windsor Soup! Quick change-over!

One miserable day weather-wise, I had a party of East End old-age pensioners for high tea in the Concert Hall. This was after the Pier was sold to the Hotel Metropole. There was no orchestra. It was very depressing. I asked the manager if we could have some music on the speaker. We had previously had the Palm Court Orchestra on the Pier. They gave the manager a record. In answer to my request he said he would think about it.

The old-age pensioners came in and can you imagine, suddenly, there was playing *In a Monastery Garden* and *None but the Lonely Heart*. I was depressed - those poor old-age pensioners. After, he came bouncing in and asked if everyone had enjoyed their meal. I said, 'The meal was alright but if you want to finish them off keep playing that depressing music.' I said, 'They need something to sing to like a Mrs Mills piano medley.' He begrudgingly bought one record. I had side one for one party, side two for the next. I knew every note of that record. How mean can one get? We all have to get old.

Things were not always smooth. One day I had everything ready for a party. I had fifteen minutes before they arrived. I went up to the end of the Pier. I was gone about ten minutes. During that time one of the men thought he would turn the fryer up for me. I came back, stood in front of the fryer and all of a sudden all the oil came pouring out, gallons of it - panic stations - I couldn't believe it. I didn't know anyone had touched it, until after. Apparently the deckhand thought he was turning the fryer up but he turned the emptying tap. The oil spread and spread. I couldn't move without skidding. I had about three inches of oil to fry two hundred plaice. The pier master sent the men to find any old cloth. He found me a duck board to stand on.

How I did it, I don't know, but I fried the fish not being able to move either way, just swishing it round onto the counter for someone else to plate up. We managed to keep the party happy. During this time the Mr Tarling, the manager, was out on the deck. When he came in he said, 'How did it go? Everyone happy?' I got told off for allowing the deckhands to touch the equipment. The oil was still in the cracks years later. It wasn't funny at the time, but I dare say I had to laugh later.

Apart from that episode all parties went off perfect. Salad parties were more work as everything had to be washed and cut up. I never used to do them too early as they'd go limp and it spoiled the look. One woman, who was supposed to wash lettuce, just used to hold the whole lettuce under the tap until she was told to pull them all apart and put them in salt water.

One time I had a party in the afternoon for three hundred and seventy fish and chips. I

had a Miss Alice Leppard working. She would chat with the waitresses, she never stopped talking. I think trying to stop Alice talking was harder than the work. So this day I said, 'Alice, just keep frying. Don't talk at all and I will tell you when to stop.'

During this time Mrs Richardson came down with some cream cakes. She said, 'These are for the public, don't let the staff have any.' So after Alice had finished her frying she looked at me and said, 'I've been good, haven't I? I haven't talked.' She looked at the cream cakes, I said, 'Oh, go on then, have one but get down behind the counter.' Just after Mrs Richardson came in. She said, 'Are the cakes going alright?' I said, 'Yes.' She said, 'You are not letting staff have them are you?' I said, 'No.' Just then Alice got up from behind the counter with cream all over her face! I got away with it, as I said I'd squashed it and couldn't sell it.

The Hotel Metropole did a buffet in the Concert Hall one day. They sent over their own chef. It was mostly seafood which included winkles. All was going well until they realised they hadn't cooked the winkles. One young boy, who was working behind my counter, broke the sack of winkles. Can you imagine trying to work treading on winkles? They were everywhere. Oh, happy times!

Promotion on the Pier

When I was told I was in charge of the Concert Hall catering, I was told I was a floater, just float about and see how the work was done. I couldn't do that. I found by working with the workers they worked harder and respected you more.

I was in charge of the Concert Hall, kitchen and stillroom. Miss Hardy always told me she picked the best workers for me and sent the others up to Mrs Jones in the Ocean Restaurant. I was lucky, I had the same ones back nearly every year. Miss Hardy employed quite a few African students during the summer holidays. They were excellent workers and enjoyed working with us. I have often wondered what happened to the young student I had in the Concert Hall. He was from Ghana. I know he went to Plymouth University. We all liked him very much and he was happy with us.

Before I went there, apparently, if the waitresses had nasty customers they always took it out on the back staff. When I was put in charge, I said if they were rude to us they would wait for their orders, then they wouldn't make the tips. If they treated us with respect they would get quick service and luckily a good tip. After all, no one was more important than the others. We were all part of one job. But like a lot of jobs, the main part and all the hard graft is behind the scenes. I had no trouble with the waitresses. They were really great. We had to have an understanding or it would have been rows and arguments all the time. Mrs Davies asked them to put something each week in the box for the back staff. A couple of them moaned. I said, 'Keep your pennies, we're not asking for anything.' The next week they all put in and always did. We helped them and they helped us. We never ever had any rows in the Concert Hall, only a word here and there, which was expected when we were really busy. We all worked together, great!

Mrs Jones had quite a problem with her staff - fights - some walked out. She had a husband and wife working in the stillroom. They used to drink and there were empty bottles everywhere. Poor Mrs Jones, she had quite a job. No wonder her first stop when she finished work was over the Queensbury Arms for her Guinness. I think she needed her Guinness to calm her nerves.

Once, after it was sold, we had a dozen real hard-working navvies come to do some structural work for two weeks. It was Mrs Jones and my job to cook them a meal every day. Sometimes the manager only allowed two pounds of mince for twelve men. I used to get the vegetables in Preston Street on my way to work. Regarding the mince, I used to make a big pie and we did the best we could for them. On the day they were leaving one said, 'Come here you,' in a commanding voice like a sergeant. I thought, 'God, what have I done?' He said, 'Shut your eyes and open your hands,' which I did. I felt the feel of money. He filled my cupped hands with silver coins. I opened my eyes and he said, 'That's for looking after us so well.' I couldn't get back to Mrs Jones quick enough. We sure did have a couple of Guinnesses in the Queensbury Arms that evening.

The workmen asked me to go and work in their canteen, I think it was at Redhill. I was too attached to the West Pier, but I felt very pleased that they were satisfied after all. It was a case of making something out of nothing, more like wartime, but it's surprising what one can do as long as you have a bag of flour and fill people up.

Danger on the Pier

The Pier had sad moments, when a body was seen attached to the girders. The firemen could not recover it until the morning when the tide was out and we had to come home knowing it was there all night.

The first time I was scared was when we did not know the Red Arrows were performing. We were at the end of the Pier and they did their stunts between the Piers. It was terrifying; people got under the tables. If we had known, we would have been prepared. The other frightening thing was storms, fascinating but frightening. Once there was a real gale force wind and I had terrible trouble getting over to the Pier as I had been blown round the monument at the bottom of Regency Square. When I did get on the pier the men had half the decking up for repair. The gale kept forcing me to the side which was up. That was very scary. The sea was so high it was flipping through the deck. It was a battle but we all won.

One Saturday, it was a very hot day, we were just going to begin the afternoon concert. Ken Lyon was tuning up the orchestra. I thought I would go and open a window. They were the ones you pulled down. Someone had had greasy fingers. My hand slipped and I cut my wrist just missing the artery. I went to hospital and had five stitches put in. When I got back it was chaotic. Miss Hardy asked me how I got on. I told her I was lucky it missed the artery. She said, 'Well, if you do it again, don't do it on a Saturday

afternoon.'

Owing to the fact we had been threatened with fire, we had a very strict fire drill from Brighton Fire Brigade, who came on regularly, to make sure we all knew the password for fire, which was 'Mr Alert'.

The Old Bedford Hotel burnt down. There was also a fire at another hotel. We were owned by the same people. One day I had the grill on fire - three-foot flames - I was shouting, 'Mr Alert!' No one even looked round. A lot of good that was. I managed myself, with salt and wet cloths.

We also had bomb scares in the sixties. One Saturday, the Brighton Police came into the Concert Hall with their smart white helmets and told me to get everyone out as there was a bomb scare, and they were going to search the Pier. We didn't need telling twice. I had just given the porter his dinner. He wouldn't leave it. So myself and Bonny Jones went over to the Queensbury Arms and really enjoyed our unexpected break. Pat Cullen, who was known as Professor Cullen, the fortune teller, was there; he was a character.

Professor Cullen had a woman working for him. He called her 'Mystic Maggie'. When he was told about the scare he said to Mystic Maggie, 'Get your coat and get off the Pier.' She replied, 'Oh, what have I done wrong for you to talk to me like that?' He said, 'You are sitting on a bomb.' He said she flew off the Pier as though she had wings.

We went back to the Pier and found everyone had been back an hour before us. I think we were in the doghouse, but it was a real treat for us. We didn't always get a break, but we did that day.

Decline of the Pier

Brighton had it right at one time regarding the two Piers. The Palace Pier was, and always has been, more for day-trippers and as they say, a 'Kiss Me Quick' time. If you preferred somewhere quieter there was the West Pier where you could have afternoon teas with light music, more like the Palm Court. Local residents were on every day. I have been all round the coast and Brighton has had two of the most beautiful piers.

I do not know why the board of directors decided to sell it. There was a lot of speculation but we really did not know. It was very sudden. It must have been drastic as the manager was devastated. He died soon after.

What I couldn't understand was even if you decide to close certain parts as not paying, surely what you do decide to keep open should be made attractive, run efficiently and everything put into it, then it would take money. But the attitude that anything is good enough doesn't work. The public won't be treated that way. Slowly the trade goes.

During the time the Concert Hall was closed it was used to house quite a few vintage and historic cars. They must have had great faith in the safety of the Pier, to drive them into the Concert Hall. Included in the collection was Rommel's staff car. I sat in that. In fact Bonny and I sat in all of them. One could imagine what it was like when it was mostly society people, who had the privilege of being driven around. Some were really comfortable; beautifully upholstered and padded. The poor drivers of some had to sit outside in all winds and weathers. Bonny and I had a great time letting our imagination run away with us.

They did not stay in the Hall long, as the floor started to crack. I was not surprised; Rommel's car was amoured and must have been a colossal weight.

The Pier ended up like a ship without captain and crew. It was virtually running itself. Utter chaos. After all the years it had been kept going, it didn't take long for the obvious outcome.

I was serving tea one day in the West Bar when a gentleman came in. He spoke to me about the Pier, then asked me if I would do a write-up on it. I couldn't as I was still employed there. I could not freely say what my heart would have wanted me to say. I often wish I had. He gave me his card in case I ever changed my mind. He was John Marley, the editor of The Argus. This was the latter years after it had been sold to A.V.P. Industries. No one knew what was going on about their jobs. It was awful.

The last straw for me was spending Easter Bank Holiday entirely alone. I had to open the cafe, cook for the office staff, take the money, cook the snacks and wash up, all on my own. It was hopeless. I did two days of the holiday and never went back. It broke my heart but I could not do the job properly. There should have been at least four to keep it running smoothly. There should have been one washer-up, one on the till, one cooking and one table cleaning. The cafe was a sight: dirty tables, dirty ashtrays - the complete opposite of what we had been taught. As it was, we lost a lot of residents. They will never realise you cannot throw anything at people or you lose your trade. Some had been regulars for years. For years we had used china cups and saucers, china pots and tea strainers. We went from that to paper cups and paper plates. Sandwiches were made up hours before. The days of everything being fresh, even a sandwich, were gone for good.

There are a lot of people who must remember when there was nothing cheap and nasty on the West Pier. It was only from the late sixties when it was changed and there was nothing any of us could do except see it go down to become what it is today.

Nothing could stop it going from bad to worse, to us it was like part of us being taken away. I look at it now and I go back to its heyday when it was beautifully kept and I take myself back to the fifteen happiest years of my life. I can hear the noise, the atmosphere - everything. I will never forget, that's how much of an impression it made on my life.

I went on the Pier once, about six months after I left. I was offered £27.50 a week to go back. I said, 'No thanks.' I had broken my ties working for those people. If it had been as it was I would have worked for nothing. If I'd have gone back, I would have felt I was helping to turn it into the tatty pier it had become. It's strange, I felt by not going back I had not let it down. Sounds silly, I know.

I don't know what will happen to what remains of it in the future, but I feel lucky when I think I had a job I enjoyed, looking forward to every day, which is unusual today. I know it is a changed world, but most businesses which are properly run and are happy places usually can survive, but I'm sad to say I think those days are gone. I will always, like a lot of ex-West Pier staff, keep my memories of that once beautiful pier.

I would like to feel one day I may tread on the Pier again. I'm not a pessimist but I can't see it materialising: as my friends say, let it go with dignity instead of being what it is today, an empty shell. It seems we are losing everything of historic value. The pounding the remains of it has had from the weather and it is still standing! I wonder how many modern buildings could cope with it, not many I should think. I hope something can be done with it. We will always remember it with great affection.

A brief history of the West Pier

The popularity of the Chain Pier - built in 1823 - inspired a group of local investors to engage an experienced pier engineer, Eugenius Birch, to design an entirely new pier at the Western end of Brighton. The Pier took three years to build and was opened to the public with great celebrations on 6th October 1866.

The Pier, at first called the New Pier, soon became known as the West Pier. The toll of 2d was enough to deter most poorer people from entering. Entertainment was provided by military bands; there were deck chairs and kiosks sold refreshments and such items as silhouettes. The Pier became a fashionable place to see and be seen - early pictures show people walking up and down it in all their finery, breathing in the fresh sea air.

The Pier became extremely popular - in 1875 for example, 875, 000 people visited it. As a result, in 1893, the owners decided to enlarge it by widening the seaward end and erecting a large Pavilion on it. The new building, at first used for concerts, was converted into a theatre in 1903 and this is the building we can see today.

After the landing stages were built in 1902, paddle steamers used to call to take people on trips along the coast. In between the landing stages and the main Pier there was a lagoon which was the centre for many aquatic entertainments. There were diving exhibitions by Zoe Brigden and Gladys Powsey, and there was the famous Professor Reddish who used to dive off the West Pier on his bicycle.

In 1916 the Concert Hall was built on a widened section of the deck midway between the Pavilion and the root End. This building, designed in a neo-classical style, became well-known for excellent concerts of classical music under the baton of Lyell Taylor.

After the First World War, the coming of 'holidays with pay' and cheap day return tickets from London brought the Pier within easy reach of millions of people. The Pier flourished.

The Pier was closed during the Second World War and a large section just south of the Concert Hall was cut out: this was to impede a possible German invasion. After the War, because of the many repairs necessary, it took several years before the Pier re-opened. The impresarios Tom Arnold and Prince Littler became the new owners. The theatre was divided into two sections: the top part became the Ocean Restaurant, and the ground floor a children's entertainment centre.

Maintenance was neglected and in 1965 the Pier was bought by A.V.P. Industries, the owners of the Metropole Hotel. After buying the Pier, they surveyed it and found it to be in such poor condition that they announced that they would be seeking permission to demolish the southern end - including the theatre - as they considered it too expensive to maintain. Thus began a long battle to save what after all was the main part of the Pier.

When in December 1974 the Council's Policy and Resources Committee recommended that the Council should agree to demolition there was an outcry. A petition with 5000 signatures was presented to the full Council on 2nd January 1975, as a result of which the Council deferred a decision on the matter.

Thus began a long campaign lasting 21 years to find the money to restore the Pier. The Pier became a Grade 1 listed building in 1982, and in 1984 was bought by the Brighton West Pier Trust. Twelve years later, in August 1996, the Trust was assured of an initial grant of £1 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund and repairs began in earnest at last.

The West Pier was built to last for ever. Now, there is a good chance that it will do so.

John Lloyd, August 1996