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Central Pier- A Background

Central Pier, Blackpool came about following the success of North Pier. As Blackpool's popularity grew it soon became clear that additional facilities would be required for the increasing number of visitors. The Blackpool South Jetty Company was formed in 1864, and a design from J. I. Mawson was accepted for the new Central Pier (originally referred to as the South Pier until the construction of a third pier some years later). Laidlaw's of Glasgow were the contractors, having been responsible for the construction of the North Pier five years earlier. Opened on 30th May 1868 the new pier was 1,518ft (460m) in length, which included a 400ft (121m) low-tide jetty at the head.

Managed by Robert Bickerstaffe, a member of the pioneering Blackpool family and former coxswain of the first Blackpool lifeboat, the Central Pier soon became known as the 'people's pier' because of its speciality - dancing. In Victorian times the class system was rife and working-class activities like dancing were very much frowned upon by the genteel folk frequenting the North Pier.

Even though many residents argued that the Central Pier's dancing facilities 'lowered the tone of the area', the pier became a great success with bands frequently playing polkas, barn dances, lancers and quadrilles. Steamer excursions were also popular from the pier-head, running regularly to Liverpool, Barrow, Llandudno, Morecambe and Lytham. The pier entrance was modified in 1877 but was replaced with the new 'white pavilion' in 1903.

The Central pier has always been considered the 'fun' pier and a roller-skating rink was opened in 1909 for an admission fee of a halfpenny. Further novelties to attract visitors followed. Included among the entertainments were a joy wheel in 1911, speedboats and a racing car ride in 1920, and a 'guess your weight' machine, photograph booth and an automatic chip dispenser in 1932.

Open air dancing reached the height of popularity during the 1930s but declined gradually after the Second World War and came to an end in the 1960s. In 1949 the central platform was converted into an open-air auditorium, and the pier-head dance area made way for a new theatre in 1967. Dancing moved into the white pavilion until 1966 when the Dixieland Palace replaced it in 1968. A serious fire in 1973 gutted the Dixieland Palace but it was subsequently rebuilt and now plays host to an arcade and nightclub. The overall length of the pier was reduced to 1118ft (339m) in the 1970s when the obsolete low-tide jetty was demolished.

1986 saw the modernisation of the theatre at the seaward end into 'Maggie May's' (later to become 'Peggy Sue's Showboat'), but the most noticeable feature of recent times was the construction of a 108ft (32.7m) high Ferris Wheel in 1990. This huge structure necessitated £750,000 of strengthening work to the substructure of the pier. Today Blackpool Central Pier still remains brash and bright - the epitome of British seaside entertainment.

Central Pier is constructed mostly of cast iron with wooden decking. The piles on which the structure rests were driven using the screw pile method pioneered by Eugenius Birch. This involved twisting screw-tipped cast iron piles down through the sand until they hit bedrock. The materials and building techniques were similar to those used for North Pier but the structure of Central is a little more delicate in appearance.

The pier has suffered relatively little damage save for fires in 1964 and 1973 which gutted the theatre buildings. The main structural alterations have been the removal of the obsolete 131 yards (120 m) low tide jetty in 1975 and the construction of the Ferris wheel in 1990. The addition of the wheel required the midsection of the pier to be strengthened to cope with the extra weight. The Central Pier caught fire in July 2020, destroying a fairground ride and damaging an engineering shed halfway along the pier.

The pier is not listed, but as shown above has a colourful history to it that is synonymous with Blackpool as an entertainment centre

