

Holidays



A child launches himself into the water at Guildford Lido in the summer of 1943. Beaches were closed to the public during the war, so the many Lidos built in the 1930s became immensely popular. Guildford Lido, built in 1933, is still open.

After the war we had something called Holidays at Home. A fair came round, there was a council gala and day trips to the coast. There were nine feeder coaches lined up waiting in Ealing to take us to a central hub in the East End, and then on to Southend in an old charabanc with wooden-spoke wheels. The driver was over 70, less than five foot tall, wearing a hat and with a pipe in his mouth upside down. He cranked up the engine the old-fashioned way, and we set off at full speed through a narrow-arched bridge and away.

Before World War I, few working people could afford to take long sea-side holidays. The day trip was the norm, via a ubiquitous train network which was far more extensive than today's. At the outbreak of World War II some 11 million people in Britain lived in families where the breadwinner had a paid holiday, mostly taken at the seaside, but rarely abroad. By the 1950s that had risen to 25 million holidays taken here and 2 million abroad. By 1975, the peak for holidays in Britain, those figures had grown to around 40 million and 8. Then came the boom in cheap foreign package holidays, so in 1995 the respective figures were 33 and 25 million.

Let's start by looking at some of the pre-war holidays in Britain. Southend, Westcliff-on-sea, Brighton and Margate were the favourites for day trips, which was all most Londoners could afford..

One day Mum decided we'd go to Southend for the day with Grandma. She put the sandwiches and everything we would need for the day into one of two wooden suitcases which Dad had made during the years he used to play in a dance band. We took a steam train, and as Mum took the case down from the luggage rack at Southend it made a rattling noise, and she said it must be the hard boiled eggs. Not quite. Our picnic lunch turned out to be spanners, screwdrivers, hammers and plugs.

We never had holidays, just a day trip to Southend once a year.

Clothing workers did not get paid holidays and so we went away to Southend or Westcliff-on-Sea in the summer, and my father would come down for the weekend to join us.

We went to Margate for our holidays. Most men wore suits on the beach back then.

I adored those day trips to Brighton – by train, tram, down and up the hill and there's the sea. I remember my grandfather at a bus shelter with his coat collar up, hat jammed down, asleep with the paper in front of his face.

We went to Scotland from London by train, and my mother bought us kilts. My brother had a sporran, and a dirk in his sock. American tourists were delighted to meet real Scottish children.

We were one of the few who owned a car – once we even hired someone to drive us – and we had an idyllic holiday in Devon in the summer of '39, our last proper holiday for seven years. People don't believe me when I tell them we were stuck in a long traffic jam on the way, so there must have been plenty of people with cars.

Very few working people ever had a holiday abroad in the 1930s. This one is an exception.

My father was a mechanical fitter at Stepney power station, an AEU shop steward, and he saved hard for holidays, so that most unusually for those days I'd been abroad four times before I was ten. We used to go to Knokke in Belgium – when I was three the crossing was so rough everyone was sick. Next year we went to Interlaken, and I remember sucking glacier ice on the Jungfrau.