



On Worthing Beach

Activities and entertainments

Reports from a local newspaper of the period tell us that in mid-August 1805 – just a month before the Austen party arrived in Worthing – the sands were, on fine mornings, “crowded with fashionable families” from as early as six o’clock. After breakfast the beach was full of barouches (four-wheeled horse-drawn carriages), curricles (open two-wheeled carriages), ponies and donkeys.

Cricket was often played, and “pony and donkey racing were frequent on the sands”. On 27 August “the whole of the fashionable visitors” to the town congregated on the beach to watch a two-mile pony race. There were four ponies involved. Lady Gordon’s pony was the 2-1 favourite, but Mr Broderick’s bay pony won by a length.



This animated John Nixon watercolour of Worthing Beach in 1808 shows the seafront buildings almost exactly as they were during Jane Austen’s visit – the only addition since 1805 being the Steyne Hotel (far right, now the southern end of the Chatsworth), built in 1807

At that time it was widely held that bathing in the sea was beneficial for all kinds of ailments. Jane Austen herself makes this point, with light irony, in *Sanditon*: “The sea air and sea bathing together were nearly infallible, one or the other of them being a match for every disorder.” Indeed this may have been the reason for the Austens’ visit to Worthing, for Jane’s mother worried constantly about her health.

About thirty bathing machines were available for hire at Worthing. John Evans, author of *A Picture of Worthing* (1805), tells us that the cost was a shilling, or sixpence for children under the age of seven. He says that “proper persons” were in attendance, and that these attendants could be “recommended for their civility”.

The poet Paul Potion (the name is a pseudonym), who published a verse version of Evans’s book, adds the information that the male and female bathing machines were on separate parts of the beach – allowing “the timid virgin” to “kiss the blue translucent wave / At distance from the’ intruding eye.”

The bathing machine experience was actually rather unpleasant. They were often stuffy and smelly and, though most had small windows, were ill-lit. They were usually pulled into the water by horses – this was quite a rough ride – after which the occupant was able to swim close to the machine, where he or she was invisible from the beach.

“G”, author of *A Tour to Worthing* (1806), is less convinced than Evans and Potion that sea-bathing at Worthing was properly organised and monitored. Indeed there seems to have been a certain amount of male loutishness on the beach.

“Worthing is yet in its infancy,” he writes. “Consequently we cannot expect to find there perfection. But in the course of a few seasons, I trust, some better regulations will be adopted in respect to bathing – the present practice of ladies and gentlemen going in sometimes nearly in the same place (and always at a distance sufficiently short to distinguish each other’s features) being perfectly indecent and inconsistent with the rules of propriety and morality.

“I should also recommend to the gentlemen, to recollect the delicacy that is due to the female sex, and – instead of lounging upon the beach, and indulging in unpleasant observations – to direct their attention to amusements more manly and unbecoming.”



The building at the far right of this pen and wash representation of Worthing Beach from around 1811 still stands today, opposite Splash Point. To its west is the Steyne Hotel, with Steyne Terrace extending northwards