



## REGENCY WEYMOUTH

*A visitor's guide to  
Weymouth in the  
time of George III*

## THE HISTORY OF THE TOWN

Long before Weymouth became a popular seaside resort, the town was a major port. Or rather, two ports, as Weymouth was once two towns—Melcombe Regis to the north (the beach side), and Weymouth to the south.

Although united in 1571 in the reign of Elizabeth I, there was still a lot of feuding between the two towns. They had separate Members of Parliament, and even fought on different sides during the Civil War!



After the Civil War, the port went into decline. As ships got bigger, trade shifted to the superior harbour at Poole.

## THE FASHION FOR SEA BATHING

A century later, Weymouth's fortunes revived because of a new fashion—sea bathing.

It had long been customary for the upper classes to escape the unhealthy London air during the heat of summer. They enjoyed life on their country estates or visited a spa town like Bath or Harrogate.

They did not go to the seaside.

But in the mid-1700s, that changed. Two eminent doctors decided that seawater was good for you. They believed seawater could cure you of all manner of illnesses, and recommended bathing in it, and even drinking it!





## SEA BATHING

Weymouth was particularly suited to sea bathing because of its sheltered bay and shallow incline, making it safe to bathe throughout most of the year.

To go sea bathing, you needed to hire a bathing machine. This was a small hut on wheels where you could get changed. Weymouth was well equipped with about 40 bathing machines for hire in 1815.

First thing in the morning, before breakfast, you went down onto the beach and hired a bathing machine. If you wanted more privacy, you could hire a bathing machine with an awning.

After climbing inside, you got ready for your dip while a horse pulled the bathing machine into the water.

Women wore long flannel shifts whilst men wore

drawers or nothing at all. Needless to say, male and female bathing machines were kept well apart!

Once the bathing machine stopped, you climbed down the steps of your machine and an attendant dipped you into the sea.

After bathing, you warmed yourself up with a brisk walk along the sands or on the Esplanade before you were allowed your breakfast.



For those not brave enough or well enough to venture into the sea, there were hot and cold salt water baths available. They had the advantage of privacy and could be used at any hour of the day. But they were much more expensive than hiring a bathing machine.

## **WHY DID WEYMOUTH BECOME POPULAR?**

One of Weymouth's first tourists was Ralph Allen, a successful businessman from Bath. Allen was told to try sea bathing for his health, and he chose to come to Weymouth.

He bought a house by the harbour in 1750, and regularly visited the town.

Allen was a rich and influential man, and while he was staying here, he was visited by other rich and influential people, including Frederick, Duke of York, one of King George III's brothers.

You can still see Allen's house on the harbour today—2, Trinity Road.

## **CLEANING UP THE TOWN**

Spurred on by such illustrious visitors, Weymouth started making improvements to the town. In 1770 a new seven-arched wooden bridge was built across the harbour, with a lifting section in the middle to let tall boats pass out of the backwater.

Street lighting and paved footpaths, watchmen for improved security, a fire service, and traffic regulations were all introduced. Thatched roofs were phased out because they were a fire hazard. The town was soon looking a lot smarter.

## **THE DUKE OF GLOUCESTER**

William, Duke of Gloucester, George III's favourite brother, visited Weymouth in 1771. He liked it so much that he built a house on the sea front known as Gloucester House or Gloucester Lodge. It was separated from the rest of town by an area of ground known as the Shrubbery.

In 1789 the Duke lent Gloucester House to the King who was recovering from a severe illness. George III was probably suffering from a hereditary disease called porphyria which caused recurrent bouts of mental instability.

The King loved Weymouth so much that he visited almost every year from 1789 to 1805. In the end, he bought the house from his brother and Gloucester House became a royal palace by the sea.



You can still see the house today—the Gloucester hotel is just along the promenade from the Gresham.

## GEORGE III IN WEYMOUTH

The King's arrival in Weymouth at the end of June 1789 was met with great celebrations. The words "God Save the King" were everywhere—over shop doors, tucked in children's caps, and on the tip of every sailor's tongue.

And it was not restricted to being on land. When the King went sea bathing for the first time, a nearby bathing machine burst open, and a band started playing "God Save the King" as he went in for his dip.

George III was a popular king, and his subjects were delighted that he recovered from his illness.



## YOU SHOULD HAVE KNELT

An embarrassing incident occurred following the King's arrival. After the mayor had given a welcome speech to the King, he received permission to kiss the royal hand. But—much to the horror of the King's party—as he approached the Queen, he failed to go down on his knees.

One of the King's men tried to rectify the mistake. "You must kneel, sir!" he hissed to the mayor. But the mayor took no notice. He took the Queen's hand and kissed it, still standing upright.

As the mayor walked back, the irate man ranted at him.

"You should have knelt, sir!"

"I cannot."

"Everybody does," the man declared.

"Sir—I have a wooden leg!"

There was no answer to that! Unfortunately, the rest of the mayor's party copied him, and not a single one of them knelt as they kissed the Queen's hand.

## HOW LONG DID IT TAKE TO GET TO WEYMOUTH?

In the days of King George III, you would have travelled by horse-drawn carriage.

Where possible, you travelled on turnpike roads. These were better maintained because they were toll roads. You stopped at the turnpike gate to buy a ticket to use that stretch of road. There were posting inns along the turnpike roads where people could break their journey and hire fresh horses.



Not everyone travelled at the same speed and the richer you were, the faster you could go. The quickest way to travel was in a carriage pulled by four or even six horses. To keep up your speed, you hired fresh horses at regular stages—usually about every eight to ten miles. If you didn't own a carriage, you could hire one at a posting inn along with your horses.

Alternatively, you could travel by public conveyance. The fastest of these was the mail coach. As well as changing horses regularly, the mail coach had the added advantage of not having to stop at tollgates. A guard blew on a horn to let the turnpike keeper know the coach was coming and ensure the gate was open so the mail coach could pass through without having to slow down.

The cheaper option was the slower stagecoach. Passengers could travel inside, or sit on top with the luggage. If the weather was very cold, people sometimes froze to death if they had to sit outside. There was also risk of accident as the stagecoaches were prone to tip over if they were overloaded or the road was particularly uneven. Or—as happened on occasion—a rich young gentleman bribed the coachman to let him take the reins and found he could not handle the horses as well as he had imagined.

When George III travelled from Windsor to Weymouth, he travelled in a carriage pulled by four horses, and usually completed the 120-mile journey in one day. But it was a long day—eleven hours or more on the road including stops.

## WHERE DID PEOPLE STAY?

Like today, the most popular places to stay were on the seafront. The most expensive option was to lease a private house for the duration of your visit. Single gentlemen often took rooms in a lodging house.

You could stay in a hotel, such as Stacie's Hotel on the seafront, or an inn, such as the Golden Lion which still stands at the harbour end of St Mary Street. If you disliked inns, you could stay in a boarding house, such as Scrivens on the Esplanade.



## ENTERTAINMENT IN REGENCY WEYMOUTH

Fashionable visitors to Weymouth needed entertainment—a library, a theatre, and assembly rooms where they could gather for tea drinking, card playing and balls.

The first assembly rooms were on the Weymouth side of the harbour, just around the corner from Ralph Allen's house, but they

had gone out of use by the 1780s. There's a plaque on the building, which is situated behind the Old Rooms inn.

Newer rooms were on the seafront, near to Gloucester House. Stacie's Hotel—later called the Royal Hotel—boasted a hall which could hold 100 couples for dancing.

In 1815 balls were held twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays, starting at seven o'clock and finishing on the dot of eleven, even if a dance was in progress.

The Master of Ceremonies, Mr Rodber, presided over the assemblies and laid down a set of rules to be obeyed. Gentlemen were not allowed to wear boots on ball nights, and had to leave their swords at the door. A wise precaution! The rules forbade ladies from wearing riding habits to dance in, and dogs were not allowed.

The rules also deterred people from leaving a dance part-way through. Some country dances entailed a lot of waiting around whilst each couple took the lead in turn. It must have been tempting to leave the dance after you had taken your turn at the lead, but the rules decreed that if you left a dance part-way through, you were signalling your intention not to dance anymore that evening.

As well as balls, you could play cards at the rooms, and there was public tea drinking every Sunday evening. When the royal family attended, an area was cordoned off for them so they could mingle at a distance.

The rooms were on the site of the Royal Hotel. The current building is not the original which burned down, but there is a plaque on the outside.

## LIBRARIES

Weymouth had several lending libraries available to visitors. Known as circulating libraries, they were private enterprises run on a subscription basis.

The principal library was Harvey's. It was well-stocked, offering around 8,000 volumes, and had a comfortable area to read the newspapers and magazines. Upstairs, there was a large card room.

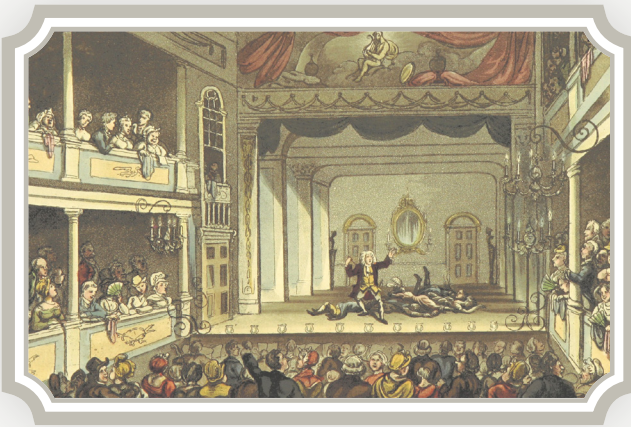
You could also buy Weymouth guidebooks and bathing caps at the library. And you could hire telescopes—to watch the boats or possibly to spy on ladies sea bathing...

Harvey's library was on the Esplanade where Harvey's restaurant is today.

There were several other libraries, including Wood's which was also on the Esplanade. It specialised in the hire of musical instruments as well as books.







## THE THEATRE

The theatre was on the Esplanade, and the entrance was at 10, Augusta Place. The boxes could seat an audience of 400 people. Many top artists performed here after the London season ended, particularly when the royal family was in town.

In 1816 the theatre was open four nights a week. Unlike today, the play was not the same every night. Actors had to know the lines of a whole repertoire of plays that they could perform at short notice. This would sometimes be a command performance, where the King or another important person chose the play.

During his first visit to Weymouth in 1789 George III attended the theatre several times. On one occasion, the King commanded a performance starring the famous actress, Mrs Siddons, but he failed to turn up on time. Of course, they could not start without the King and the play had to be delayed as they waited for him to arrive.

The audience waited. And waited. The King did not arrive until after ten o'clock! The royal party's outing to Lulworth had taken longer than expected and they had only just arrived back in Weymouth.

## KING'S STATUE

Weymouth was understandably proud to be the King's favourite seaside town, and a statue of the King was commissioned to commemorate his visits. It was made of artificial stone by Coade and Sealy of Lambeth.

Uncertainty over the final design delayed the project and by the time the statue was finished, the King had stopped visiting Weymouth!

The statue became a bit of an embarrassment. It finally saw the light of day in 1809 when it was put up on Weymouth seafront to celebrate the start of the 60th year of George III's reign.

The King's Statue still stands on the Esplanade—a tribute to the royal visitor who brought Weymouth into the limelight. Originally, it was not painted—this was added in the 20th century.

## AFTER GEORGE III

George III paid his last visit to Weymouth in 1805 but that didn't stop other members of the royal family coming.

His youngest daughter Princess Amelia came with her sister Mary in 1808, hoping the seawater would improve her health. Sadly, it didn't. She died in 1810, and it may have been his grief over Amelia's death that plunged George III into his final bout of mental instability from which he never recovered.

In 1814, George III's granddaughter Princess Charlotte visited Weymouth, hoping for a bit of freedom along with some improvement in a painful knee. She was the only child of the Prince Regent, the future George IV, and second in line for the throne.

Whilst her father was not well liked, Charlotte was popular. She was seen as the hope for the monarchy. She returned for another visit in 1815, and the following year, the town celebrated her marriage to Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg with enthusiasm.

But her story does not end happily. In November 1817 Charlotte gave birth to a stillborn boy. A day later, she was dead.

George IV finally became king in 1820. He had never liked Weymouth, preferring the bustle of Brighton, and wasted no time in selling Gloucester House, his father's seaside palace.

## THE GROWTH OF WEYMOUTH

George III's visits confirmed Weymouth's place as a fashionable seaside resort. The town expanded to meet the demands of those who wanted to reside here. Terraces of houses spread along the Esplanade north of Gloucester Lodge and along the seafront south of where the King's Statue stands. Then Devonshire Buildings and Pulteney Buildings were developed in the area near the Pavilion.

Royal Terrace was built on the Shrubbery when royal visitors had ceased to stay in Gloucester House, making a continuous run of houses along the seafront to the Royal Crescent. This was then extended to Belvidere, started around 1818—the run of houses where the Gresham is situated.



## THE GREAT GALE OF 1824

It is not known exactly when the Gresham was finished. It is possible that it was still being built when hurricane force winds hit the town on the night of 22–23 November 1824. The esplanade was smashed—its stone posts and chains uprooted and swept away. Huge waves crashed over the road, joining the backwater to the sea. Houses along the Esplanade had four feet of sand and water in their basements. And the sea flooded the area of land where Lodmoor Country Park is today.

Along the coast on the Isle of Portland, the devastation was even worse. The storm

created tsunami-like waves which crashed over Chesil Beach, destroying the village of Chiswell and drowning more than twenty people. Many ships were wrecked along the coast with great loss of life. But one ship fared better than most. The Ebenezer was tossed high onto Chesil Beach by the waves, and most of the crew were saved.



There is a stone commemorating

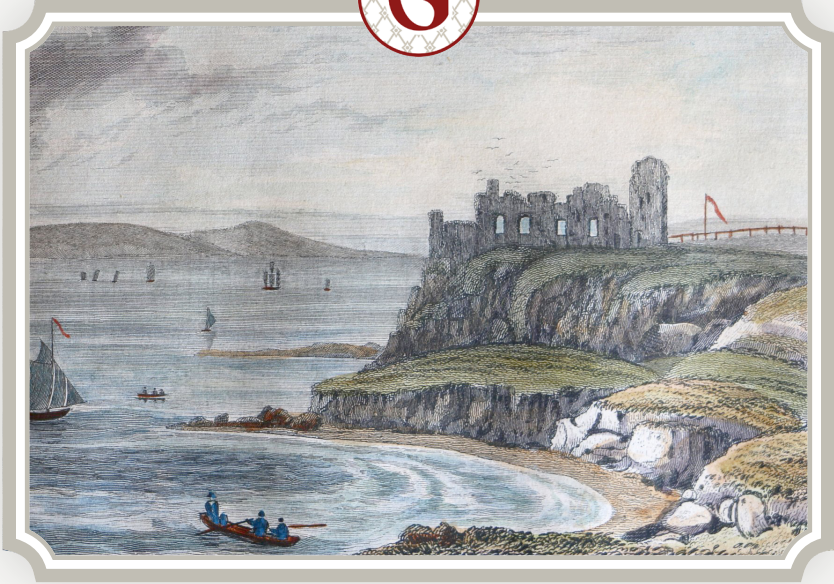
the Great Gale that is built into the wall of a flowerbed on the Esplanade, almost opposite Harvey's restaurant.

## SMUGGLING

Smuggling was rife along the south coast of England and Weymouth was no exception. Lace, silk, wine, tobacco and salt were smuggled into Weymouth as well as the main cargo of spirits. It was a serious problem during the war with France as smugglers put thousands of British guineas into French hands, and sometimes helped Napoleon's spies as well.

Customs officers were unpopular, and it was difficult to combat smuggling as many people were sympathetic to the trade. Even respectable members of society were not averse to a cask of contraband rum!

The temptation to collude with the smugglers rather than combat them proved too great for Weymouth customs officer Abraham Flew and some of his men. In 1815 they were sacked for helping the crews of the Post Office packet boats from the Channel Islands to run large quantities of spirits ashore without paying duty.



## CASTLES

Weymouth was of strategic importance against invasion from France or Spain. During the reign of Henry VIII, twin castles were built to guard the harbour—one on the Weymouth side (Sandsfoot Castle) and the other on Portland (Portland Castle).

Sandsfoot Castle is a ruin—you can no longer go in it because the sea is eroding the cliff, making it unstable, but you can see it through the railings and from the beach below. Portland Castle is owned by English Heritage.

In George III's time, there were barracks on the Nothe and in the Lodmoor area near St John's Church.

## PLAGUE

Although many people came to Weymouth for their health during the time of George III, the town has a more sinister claim to fame that was most definitely not good for people's health.

Back in 1348, a dreadful plague known as the Black Death, entered the country in Weymouth. There is a plaque recording this sorry event near The George Inn on the beach side of the harbour.