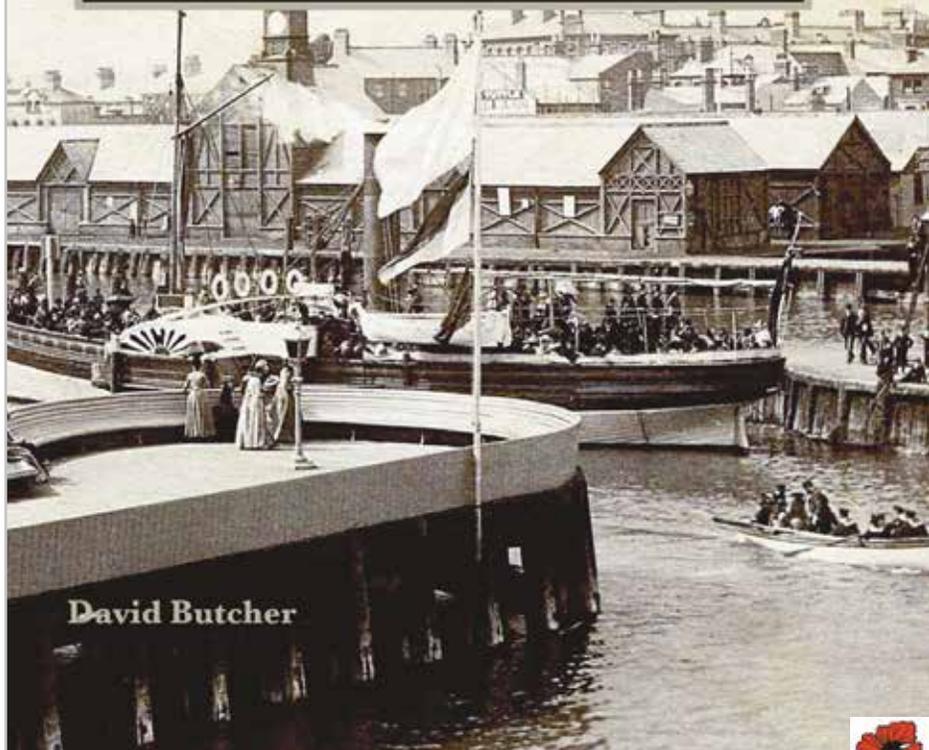


Sample

*The Photographs of*  
*William Rayson Smith*

Volume II:  
Lowestoft



**David Butcher**

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William Rayson Smith seated on a classic piece of Victorian light engineering—a tricycle. His close-fitting cap, with its small peak, is absolutely typical of its period and seen worn by so many sporting gentlemen in late 19th and early 20th century photographs.

Poppyland Publishing is pleased to announce *The Photographs of William Rayson Smith Volume II: Lowestoft* by David Butcher.

William Rayson Smith hardly left his native land being baptised in Dickleburgh Church in 1841 and dying only five miles away in Harleston in October 1932. Purchasing a camera he was to spend much of the late 1880s photographing what he saw around him. The result is a special collection of distinctive photographs covering Norfolk and beyond. This second volume comprises of his photographs taken while visiting his father who retired to Lowestoft in 1887.

In presenting this Lowestoft collection, an attempt has been made to accompany the images with substantial commentary, showing not only what can be seen in them but, also, what is there to be seen. The excellence of William Rayson Smith's work lies not only in the immediate visual quality of his photographs, but in what they are able to tell us about the times in which he lived.

### **About the author**

David Butcher is a well known local historian, his books include *The Driftermen, The Trawlermen, Living from the Sea, The Ocean's Gift, Lowestoft 1550-1750 – Development and Change in a Suffolk Coastal Town, Medieval Lowestoft – The Origins and Growth of a Suffolk Coastal Community* and *Fishing Talk*. He is an Associate member of the Centre for East Anglian Studies at the University of East Anglia and a member of the Suffolk Local History Council.



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## RESORT ACTIVITY

### 14. South Beach & Pier, Whit Monday



No date is given for this view, to say which year the photograph was taken, but it appears to be fine weather and the bank holiday crowds are out in force. The Pier itself, seen as just one long, almost-unbroken run down to its terminating lighthouse, looks as if something is missing—and there is! The single-storey Reading Room (a rectangular building of quality, with low-profile roof, overhanging soffits, decorative cornices and ornate doorways east and west) had burned down in 1885 and was later replaced by a large and imposing Pavilion, which opened in 1891. The Reading Room obviously served more purposes than its titular one, because photographs of it show that the edges of the roof formed a viewing balcony with an elegant cast-iron rail, and summer balls were held within it for the delectation of local people and visitors alike. Not far from where it stood, and built into the fabric of the Pier, is a building of rather shed-like appearance with three tall windows inserted on the seaward side (there were also three much narrower ones, of identical height—not visible here—occupying what seems to be the space between the first one and the second). This was a wooden shelter, seated on the inside, for the amenity and comfort of users of the Pier, previously referred to in the *Coastal Scenes* section, in connection with the photograph showing the salvaging of a wreck.

Following the disaster which befell the Reading Room, construction of the South Pier Pavilion began in 1888 and, while there may appear to be little (if any) evidence of building activity in this shot, closer scrutiny suggests that this may not be the case. Even though the photograph's background is faint, it is possible to discern two structures of some kind rising above the level of the wall of the Pier. The nearer of them is

directly in line with the North Pierhead's lighthouse, while its companion sits between this lighthouse and the one located on the end of the South Pier. Could these be the western and eastern extremities of the Pavilion, in the earlier stages of its construction? Whatever the case, the photograph itself is obviously one of WRS's earlier Lowestoft studies—of similar date to the second view of Ness Point (1888), which featured in the **Coastal Scenes** section much earlier on.

The main focus of the scene here is the beach, with novelty pony and donkey rides well to the fore—visually as well as in terms of novelty attraction—and the time of day would seem to be about noon, if the length of people's shadows is anything to go by. Perhaps that is why the bowler-hatted gentleman, seated on the sand in the left foreground, appears to be contemplating what lies underneath the white cloth spread over his lap. Is he about to eat his lunch? The man just behind him, wearing a boater, is obviously on the move, but what he is carrying can't be made out. And what the bonneted woman, nearest the camera, is looking down at over the Esplanade's wall is anyone's guess. Just beyond her, and seated on the beach (or on the near-buried section of the wall's curving lower section), close to one of the two signs visible, is another female. She seems to be engaged in some kind of artistic task, making a sketch or drawing perhaps of the activity taking place before her.

Further removed, in the middle ground to the right of centre, some adventurous boys can be seen standing on the timbers of a breakwater or groynes of some kind, while others are visible in the left-hand sector of the frame sitting or standing on the outer timbering of the Pier itself—along with one or two adults. A perfect place, really, for catching the sun on such a day. Then there are the tents (two or three of them), right in the middle of the photograph. Are they there, perhaps, to sell food to people? Shellfish, maybe, including locally caught shrimps. And brown ones in Lowestoft, of course! Not the pink variety, sold further up the coast in Great Yarmouth—which, in any case, were *prawns*.

A scene of relaxation and enjoyment, then, for all those people, young and old—even for the two men (one standing and one sitting) on the upper level of the flint-faced promenade wall, engaged in conversation perhaps with a third one almost hidden by the sign-board. They appear to be wearing working clothes rather than the smarter holiday garb of everyone else (one of them having a nautical cap, of some kind) and may perhaps have walked over from something they were engaged in elsewhere just to have a look at the bank holiday activity. It is noticeable that the people involved in this (with more men and boys immediately visible than women) seem to be wearing clothes of less elegance—for want of a word—than those in the following photograph. That was taken in August, at the height of the holiday season. This one was shot at Whitsun, which falls either in May or June. Can it be that the public holiday here (which was for everyone) has attracted a largely working-class clientèle, keen to take full advantage of a day's break from routine? Whereas, the people in the next scene, being better off financially, could afford to pick and choose when they visited the seaside.

However, even though enjoyment on the sands is everyone's aim, the world of maritime endeavour is there to be seen in the masts of shipping showing above the wall of the Pier and in the twin funnels of a GER paddle-tug moored up in the Yacht Basin—to say nothing of the Trawl Market's roof-line and The Mount lookout-tower, in the distance.

## 56. South Pier & Beach

A similar location to that of the previous picture is on view here, but with the South Pier Pavilion dominating the middle ground. This photograph being taken the year after it had opened. The quality of the print is marred by fading of the image over much of the area covered, but it is still of interest. A bandstand can be seen in front of the Pavilion and better definition would give the gentle oggee curve of its roof more visual impact and also show more clearly the onion-shaped cupola surmounting it. This being a feature perhaps borrowed from the Brighton Pavilion. The high timber wall along the western section of the Pier, on its southern side, is hardly visible here (the previous photograph shows it much more clearly) and would hide anyone walking the



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planking of the deck, but quite a number of people are visible in front of Pavilion and Bandstand, as well as on the open part of the Pier down as far as its end. And, just to the right of the Pavilion, the shadowy outlines of sails show that a smack is leaving the harbour to go trawling.

Again, as with the previous image and commentary, it is the beach itself which takes most of the reader's attention and there is an impressively high level of holiday use in evidence here if the number of people on the sands is anything to go by—though there is no one sitting along the woodwork of the Pier, as in the previous picture, and no young lads standing on the breakwater. There are, however, a few children here and there, paddling at the water's edge. Looking closely at the attire of both adults and children, it would seem that most (if not all) of them are from what might be described as the comfortably-off "middling orders" of society. Right from the beginning, Peto's model resort aimed at attracting that particular social level and, in doing so, it was continuing what had started in the town nearly 100 years before—but a mile or so away, to the north. The High Street area of Lowestoft (as it might conveniently be described by Peto's time) was a much older area of settlement, dating back to the first half of the 14th century, and it had also had its time of local high fashion, during the second half of the 18th century and the earlier decades of the 19th.

It had all begun during the 1760s, with the building of an assembly-room annex at the *Queen's Head* inn (this stood on the south side of Tyler's Lane—now, Compass Street—backing on to the yard of its near-neighbour and rival, *The Crown*), which was a sure sign of the growing "politeness" of towns, both large and small, all over England. This was followed, not long afterwards, by the formation of a book-club and then, in 1768, bathing-machines were introduced to the North Beach (modelled on those in use at Margate) and "taking the waters" became the thing to do for people so disposed and able to afford both the time and money to do it. And, as if this were not enough, the town was able to start and sustain its own soft-paste porcelain factory, which was in production from 1757 to c. 1800—the third longest-lived of all such enterprises after those at Derby and Worcester. One of the factory's leading decorators, Richard Powles, produced a number of fine ink-and-wash sketches of late 18th century Lowestoft and its attractions—perhaps the most evocative

of which is a wonderful panoramic view across the Denes, looking towards the town. People are seen “perambulating” there, in the manner that the Revd. James Woodforde, Norfolk clergyman and diarist, did when he paid a visit on 5 April 1786 (accompanied by a nephew) and was highly impressed with what he saw.

Even one leading member of the aristocracy, Charles Sloane (third Baron Cadogan), was sufficiently taken with Lowestoft to have a holiday residence built there, on the top of the cliff, in 1789—something which was deemed newsworthy enough to merit publication in *The Norfolk Chronicle* of 7 November 1789 and 10 July 1790. It is still standing where raised and is now No. 3 High Street. Twenty years or so after this, in 1812, the Fisher family built one of their Norfolk and Suffolk market-town theatres in Bell Lane (later, Crown Street and, now, Crown Street West), to replace a converted fish-house in Blue Anchor Lane (now Duke’s Head Street). It, too, is still standing, though converted to flats after serving for many years as a community hub known as *Crown Street Hall*. And, to round everything off culturally, the first two decades of the 19th century also saw the construction of a medicinal bath-house, using local spring water, which welled out in various places along the face of the cliff, as well as at its base. There were two of them, in fact—the first one being built in 1809, followed by a larger replacement in 1824 which remained in use until about the end of the century. Both stood close to what is now the junction of Hamilton Road with Whapload Road.

Thus, Samuel Morton Peto was but one part (albeit of great significance) of an ongoing process in Lowestoft’s development as a holiday venue. And the scene here, itself, is exactly the same: part of the late Victorian phase of its overall existence. Reference has already been made to the style and quality of the clothing worn by the people using the beach, this particular day, and there are other things also deserving of comment. The number of parasols, for instance, being used by women to protect them from the heat and glare of the sun; a perambulator, with its hood up, in the middle of the frame, just a little way up from the bottom; and an early pair of deck-chairs in use, just a bit further along to the right (these had only been manufactured in England since 1886—in Macclesfield, of all places). Most interesting of all, perhaps, is a food-vendor or seller of novelties, with a long tray slung around his neck, standing about a third of the way in from the left (on a vertical line down from the bandstand). “What’s in the tray?” you ask. The writer’s suggestion is shrimps!

### 15. View of Esplanade from South Pier (tide in)

The eye is immediately taken, in this view, by the bowler-hatted man occupying the bottom right-hand corner of the shot. Was WRS so restricted in getting his photograph of the Esplanade and beach that he had to include him in the frame? Did he, perhaps, ask him to move? Or was it someone he knew, who was included to give an added dimension to the photograph? It certainly does this, even though the person is a little out of focus through being so close to the camera. Not as much, it has to be said, as two other, incomplete figures, one of them apparently wearing a very large top hat (an illusion, surely) and the other poring over a newspaper or magazine of some kind. Immediately behind all three of them can be seen the termination of the high wooden wall of the western section of the South Pier (from where this view was taken), on its southern side.

Obviously, the main focus here is meant to be on the South Beach and Esplanade, both of which are busy. The limited area of the former, available for those occupying it, shows that the tide is in (and quite a high one, at that) and the upper part of the breakwater is only just visible above the water. Close scrutiny shows that the level of the sand is quite high against the wall of the Esplanade and a number of tents, or booths, are plain to see on the right-hand side of the picture—food-stalls, perhaps, or ones which had items of interest for visitors. The four-storey *Royal Hotel* rises impressively behind them, Lowestoft’s premier place to stay, almost certainly designed by J.L. Clemence (rather than John Thomas)—as were the row of large three-storey sea-front *villas* stretching southwards. Their command of the promenade was two-fold, both in terms of physical occupation of the space and of the view to be had from each one of them, eastwards, out over the waves. Three sets of composite chimney-stacks are visible between the hotel and the first of the villas and these, of course, belong to Marine Parade—the terrace described at the time of its construction as consisting



of “excellent second-rate houses”. It is not difficult to work out the thinking which lay behind this particular description!

It will not go unnoticed that the Esplanade’s flagstaff (in front of the *Royal Hotel*) is flying the red cross of St. George, with the Union Jack as an inset in the top left-hand quarter. Could this be 23 April, then—the feast-day of the patron saint of England? Use of a perpetual calendar shows two years set within the known, dated time-frame of WRS’s Lowestoft photographs (1887-92) when this fell on a Saturday—1887 and 1892. Perhaps it was the latter of the two, as other images within the collection have this particular year recorded, whereas the former appears just the once: the earliest dated image of all—a view of Ness Point, which featured in the **Coastal Scenes** section. Or is it perhaps the preceding weekend, which was Easter? The people seen on both the beach and the Esplanade are too far away to ascertain the nature of the clothes they’re wearing, but April can be a chilly month and it doesn’t look particularly sunny here, with a fair breeze blowing if the set of the flag is anything to go by. Significantly, perhaps, hardly anyone is in the sea, paddling—except for three of four children between the third and fourth villas (as seen in the image) and maybe a few more further along. The only thing really occupying the water (which may be too small and indistinct to see here) is a solitary herring gull, which is riding a wavelet a short distance from the Pier, at about a 30° angle from the elbow of the bowler-hatted gentleman, with whom this commentary began—and, now, ends.

## 20. View of Esplanade from South Pier (another day, tide out)



Another day is presented here, with nothing flying from the Esplanade's flagpole on this occasion, and with the tide much further out than in the previous photograph. The buildings on show are exactly the same, though slightly less is seen of the *Royal Hotel* and a lot less of the sea-front villas, with only four of the latter visible. *White's Directory of Suffolk* (1872) informs the reader that the hotel was built in 1848-9 and that it had eighty bedrooms, with hot and cold baths available. There were billiard rooms inside, as well as "spacious and superbly furnished dining and drawing rooms". It was, in every way, a building worthy of its creator's vision.

Activity on the beach in front of it, and further along, would seem to say that the summer has arrived, as lots of children can be seen playing and enjoying themselves in the shallows, and the left forearm of the person resting on the edge of the South Pier's parapet (barely in frame, in the bottom right-hand corner of the image) suggests that he or she is watching them. What looks as if it may be over-exposure of the shot diminishes its effectiveness, but not to the point of failing to show the level of the sand against the Esplanade's wall which, as in the previous view, is quite high, especially to the left of centre. A figure standing in line with the end of the first villa (as the print makes it appear) suggests that the promenade's surface is somewhere between waist and shoulder high.

The chimney stacks of the Marine Parade houses show much more strongly here and the vegetation seen growing to the rear of the *Royal Hotel* and the villas provides quite a contrast to the uncompromising outlines of the buildings. The scale of these structures is impressive (as it was meant to be) and so is their vertical and horizontal geometry, with the low-profile roof-lines perfectly angled to create a sense of harmony and order. Two of the hotel's ground-floor bays have sun-screening in place and it is just possible to make out a balcony

running along the façade on the level above. An engraving of the building, dating from the 1850s and made not long after it was constructed, shows this to have been of metal fabrication with each panel between the uprights having diamond patterning. The northern, three-bay elevation is equally impressive, with rusticated stonework at ground-floor level and elaborate brickwork and stone quoining of both outer bays, which project slightly from the middle one and have low-profile, triangular broken-pediments to crown them. The whole of this important and impressive building was demolished in 1973, its heyday long gone and, unfortunately, with no obvious use to ensure its survival. Such has been the fate of many a structure, both in Lowestoft and in other towns and cities throughout the country.

### 58. Beach, *Royal Hotel* & Esplanade from South Pier (1)

A similar view to the previous one is shown here—except that a good deal more of the sea-front villas is visible and the Esplanade's flagstaff has moved to the other side of the *Royal Hotel*. And what a difference in the level of the beach! This has dropped by six feet or more and not only are two of the rounded buttresses of the esplanade plainly visible, but a shelter has been installed between them. It has been established that this particular date was a Monday (see the previous section, last photograph but one) and it was obviously a very busy one. And hot! All seven bays of the *Royal Hotel's* ground-floor have sun-screens in place on the walkway below the balcony—the latter being clearer to see in this shot than in its predecessor—and many of the villas have both ground- and first-floor windows similarly shielded by awnings. A substantial number of children are enjoying a paddle in the sea and at least one boy is climbing over the fully visible wooden breakwater, with another one about to follow suit. The beach, as a whole, is thronged with people—young and old alike—and so is the Esplanade, with both of the buttresses (decorative features, as much as structural ones) serving to provide seating convenient for sitting down and taking a breather.



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