

# Pier Review

## A journey to the outcrops of a dying culture

By Danny Smith and Jon Bounds

### Chapter One

"You're wasting your life"

It's an exclamation more than a statement, but still not what you want to hear from your own mother. Anyway, we both knew that this conversation would follow the usual pattern of surprise, confusion, disapproval and then grudging support; a well rehearsed emotional dance born of the many left field life choices I tend to make. Okay I'm thirty-two year-old temp with a passport full of stamps, an impulse control problem and a Fine Art degree which is about as much use as tits on wardrobe. But wasting my life? That stings a little.

It began, like all good things, in a pub. The night itself is a blurred mess eroded by time and booze but Jon assures me it was my idea. I'm not so sure. Buck passing aside, the idea was spoken out loud, the splinter of an idea in our mind's thumb that would bother us until exorcised. We agreed September was the month to do it so we could catch the end of the season and the unusually sunny autumn we've had for five years running but everybody still seems to be surprised by. The idea seemed to be doomed to the fate of most of our 'beer good' ideas, that is when examined with more sober heads it's illegal, incredibly hard work for the sake of an only slightly amusing pun, or pig-headedly obscure.

The next September appeared like the girl at the party that you fingered once but couldn't remember the name of and we ignored it with the same forced nonchalance. But I knew then that next year it'd happen, it had to happen, otherwise I would be forced to re-evaluate how I saw myself, forced to ask the question: am I one of them? the grey? the normal? another prick in a loud shirt boring everybody with the same stories of youth and excess while drinking in the same pubs and being in bed before twelve?

Jon and me have been friends now for about five years, mostly because we were normally the loudest and drunkest people at the party, both with a latent desire to be the centre of attention, and both with a peculiar sense of humour. Jon was already 'internet famous' when I met him and had a reputation for his Birmingham-centric blog and one of the local media go-to guys for sound bytes about 'the internet'. The main difference between me and Jon is that I have an art degree but chose not to be an artist, where Jon has been a practising artist for several years but didn't know it because he hadn't done an art degree.

Planning something massive is difficult and baffling, the stress ulcers alone will melt your bones from the stomach out within a month or two. That's why you never plan anything massive, just do a series of smaller easy tasks that add up to something big when you put them together. How difficult is it to look at the National Pier Society website and see how many piers there are? Five, ten minutes tops. Draft a press release blurb explaining the project for the crowdfunding website? An hour, maybe two? Whack it all on a massive and unnecessarily complicated spreadsheet and you're laughing. It wasn't Visigoths or Spartacus that caused the fall of the Roman Empire it was the lack of Excel and poor cell formulae.

Before we knew it we had a website accumulating funding from our friends and family. People were giving us money for no other reason than they liked the project. Which was frankly baffling to us. It seems that people like the idea that there are other people out there doing strange and pointless things and are willing to give money to make the world a more interesting place. And for that we thank them, not just for the money, but for the knowledge that there's room in the world for the silliness.

We had a route, sort of, the funds, sort of. But we were missing a driver, I have never learnt to drive and Jon while can drive he didn't trust himself not to be too lost in one of the various states of drink fuelled creative reverie to be able to handle a car, legally or spiritually.

Midge is always there, any meet-up, party, hootanany, social, mixer, or get together, Midge'll be there. And most importantly Midge is unemployed and has got nothing better to do. I consider Midge one of the city centre's spirit loci, a permanent feature in the landscape. Midge is a small and wiry man that is almost impossible to age except for his references to 'before your time'. We get him good and drunk and ask him in front of a crowd if he'd be up for it.

A few weeks later we're in the pub to finalise the plans: I'm carrying a Carling, a Kronenburg and a Strongbow with ice back to the table and thinking how the drink maketh the man, or at least reflecteth anyway. I place the no frills larger in front of Midge I see him with his standard issue black workers hat pulled down over his dark glasses against the seasonal sun. Apart from the shades he has no real concessions to the season, black t-shirt dark denim jacket and standard issue punkish jewellery and badges adorning them all. If Midge wasn't drinking Carling it would be Carlsberg, in a plastic cup, at some gig the arse end of town where fifteen bands play in a day because most the running time of all their rehearsed songs still don't last longer than an episode of Quantum leap. Carling is solid, not to everyone's taste, but does the job.

Jon's Kronenburg is served in a pint glass that looks like its been made by a glass blower who briefly forgot he wasn't making flamboyant science equipment. The paradox of Korenburg is that while being a more complex flavour and an acquired taste not only will it get you pissed, but it will do it much better than the cheaper beer. Jon accepts his beer with a "cheers muck". He always says 'cheers muck'. He's wearing a jacket today, back from a morning doing his job which, in the five or so years I've known him, he hasn't adequately explained, I do know that he does social media things, hence the the jacket, shirt, jeans, trainers combo. In the movie of this book Jon will be played by Phillip Seymour Hoffman, which will piss Jon off no end.

Mine is the Strongbow with ice, but I've had three different drinks since arriving.

We're sitting by the canal, a fitting waterside meeting for a project concerned with the sea. It's as nautical as Birmingham gets: in a country of ports and market towns the Midlands is exceptional in its isolation from the sea. We have no real affection for the canals despite every few years the council trying to re-brand them as exciting redevelopment potential or inner city resort. If you believe the hype the canal system in Birmingham is a cross between the a corporate open air gym and cosmopolitan café culture paradise. But people in Birmingham rarely think of the canals, to us they're a quirk of our industrial past that everybody half suspects are full of dead prostitutes, shopping trolleys and nearly sentient fungal diseases.

In Birmingham we're divorced from nature almost completely, most of us are third generation inhabitants of dark factories, as far from the sea as the population of gulls that live on our roof tops near our high streets and concrete school playgrounds. Some more than others, Jon actually asked me at one point in which direction the sun set, perhaps even more shamefully I only knew because I remembered westerns as a kid.

The pub we're meeting in is the same place where Bill Clinton the then President Of The United States once enjoyed half a bitter on the balcony. The greatest irony of this being that this particular pub is neither interesting, old, or particularly nice. The only remarkable thing about it is how relaxed, down to earth and spontaneous someone would look on the balcony if anybody, say the worlds press, was taking their picture. We're here because the pub where we had planned to meet round the corner wasn't open for another hour or two. It seems that we can't even plan a planning meeting. But seeing as our first planning meeting was held in a pub where we set out the route on a metal coach map from the early 70s it didn't seem to matter that much.

'Planning' and 'meetings' and any combination of those two words had long ago become a euphemism for me and Jon for 'drinking as much as we possibly can'. Please bear that in mind later.

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This is happening a lot recently. I awake with only limited knowledge of getting to bed, my head fuzzy in that not-hungover-maybe-still-drunk state. I'm out of bed quickly, there are text messages from Danny telling me his address and that I should be up and there to pick him up. Too many farewell drinks yesterday have put paid to a clean and organised start to the trip, I'm not packed nor do I have any real idea of what I'm taking.

I drink Pepsi Max and fire off a few apologetic texts, then ask my significant other to drive me to Dan's house to get him. He's not only packed and organised, with the camping gear we all need, but raring to go and offering me a can of pop—he knows how it's possible to hydrate the oncoming crash away. It's Diet Cherry Coke, which I know we have a bottle of in our supplies but which I've never drunk before. It's okay. This is an aspect of Danny Smith, friend and now artistic collaborator, that isn't always immediately obvious: he's relentlessly sensible and organised when it matters.

I feel that I'm already falling into a role: the unpractical one, and hence the ingenue for you, dear reader, to use as your entry point to the plot. So, what are we doing? At the moment, I'm

blundering around the upstairs of my house wondering what the hell one packs for a two-week trip around the piers of England and Wales. I'm not a list maker, or a light packer—normal 'going away' practise would be to shove as much of anything I could possibly need into one large sports bag: a T-shirt, pants, socks for each day, various jumpers and as many pairs of trousers as are currently clean and then fill in the empty space. This isn't going to work in this instance, we've no space and I'm not sure I own 14 pairs of anything. Delegating most of the decisions to either Danny or Julia, I concentrate on making sure I'm sober enough to drive to Weston-Super Mare—this involves more pop, and coffee.

Midge, our designated driver doesn't feel comfortable enough to drive my car on the motorway straight away, so I'm to pick everyone up and drive to our first pier. First town, for Weston has two piers on the list. My car, as the cheapest option, is to take on the two thousand miles. It's a ten-ish year-old Renault Clio which hasn't exactly been badly maintained but I know nothing of cars so leave it to its yearly service. I've not driven half a mile, when I get a voicemail to tell me I've forgotten my iPod. This also reminds me that despite thinking hard about which towel to take I've not got one. But you can't go back.

Our tiny punk Passepartout is waiting outside his house when we get there, very economically packed. We get his kit into the car without a problem and head straight to the nearest petrol garage. This is the real start to our journey, we break into the float for the trip with 50 quids worth of unleaded and immediately hit a problem of sorts, none of us really know where the M5 is. Or, I know a way to the M5, but am pretty sure it's out of our way and the others don't have a clue. The satnav we're to rely on so much during this adventure is useless for such a short-term decision (into the centre of Birmingham, or out towards the airport in the hope of seeing a sign for the motorway) so I take charge and head into town. Ritualistically, and with affectation as to be expected, Danny has placed somewhere about the car an image of Ganesh—Hindu God of travellers of some such. We'll need luck, but I'm not sure there are any gods we can appease at this stage.

For what is the god, or who is the saint, of the pointless? As will become increasingly obvious throughout the text, we don't have a good reason why we're doing this.

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'WAKE UP WAKE UP WAKE UP'

'WAKE UP'

'WAKE UP'

'WAKE'

'FUCKING'

'UP'

Jon last night made me promise that I would wake him up next day so he could pick me up before we set off because he wanted me to help him pack. You see, despite a wholly undeserved reputation for hedonism, its worth bearing in mind that I was in the scout movement for a huge portion of my life which has ingrained a certain pragmatism into me. I've been phoning and texting for an hour. I have, by now, packed. I've also put the fire on because I get the feeling that this might be the last time, maybe until next summer, I would be warm. The television is sincerely giving me an Amber Wind Warning and I am in the process of deciding whether to find out what one of them actually is when Jon calls, I can hear his hangover and smell the stale lager over the phone. He sounds delicate but putting a brave face on it. He tells me he's on his way so figure I've got an hour or so.

My packing went better than Jon's which involved him grumpily banging round his house in surly confusion while me and his girlfriend answered obvious questions.

"Will I need a towel?" shouts Jon from upstairs. Apparently there are no stupid questions, but there are naive hungover ones shouted at you by a blond troll that can flummox you with their obvious answer.

"Do you want to use mine?" I venture back.

"Will the Camp-sites have them?"

"Would you use a communal towel left in a public shower room even if they existed?"

You can hear him thinking for a beat.

"So do I need one?" says Jon completely missing the point.

"YES" both me and his girlfriend near shout in unison. I decide to make myself busy and pack the car, something that would be my job for the next two weeks. I'm good at packing cars, I expect it's years of playing Tetris.

Ganesh is Lord of New Beginnings, Remover of Obstacles, and a Patron of Letters, Writing, and The Arts. It was only fitting when the journey began to pay tribute. On a makeshift shrine in a petrol station in Sheldon, because Ganesh is fond of offerings of red sweets, I place some cherry throat sweets and some Big Red chewing gum and say a quick prayer while Midge, who we picked up ten minutes earlier with an efficiently small rucksack, looks on with confused disgust. My belief system is a complex mess or devastatingly simple depending on my mood or willingness to explain.

"What's that for?" I explain about Ganesh and how he's perfect totem for the beginning of the journey.

"But you're not Hindu." Midge points out.

"I don't have to be, I'm just using it to focus our intentions and, hopefully, use our will to affect our reality. The simplest definition of magic there is." I explain.

"That's bollocks" says Midge

"Oh it's that too"

And then we're off.

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I pull into a shopping centre car park in Weston-Super Mare get out of the driver's seat and, as theatrically as I can manage after two hours driving on a hangover, toss the keys to Midge with "that's me done, anyone for a pint?". In truth I expect to drive, or share the driving, fairly often as we go—it's just unfair not to—but I'm in serious need of a drink and this is a way of announcing that intention without seeming desperate. From the car park, I don't know where the pier is, none of us do. I have been to Weston before, quite a few times, but don't recall ever having seen the sea front.

Weston-Super Mare is the spiritual home of the Birmingham worker, it's often—disparagingly one would assume—called 'Birmingham-on-sea'. It is the nearest seaside resort to our home town and was the place we felt compelled to visit first. As it turns out it's not quite the geographically closest pier to Birmingham, that would be Clevedon. But this is a journey into our race-memory, and once the rules are set we must stick to them as closely as possible. We'd assumed Weston was nearest, so that's where we headed first.

Ah, the rules. Every pointless escapade must have rules—in fact rules are more important when the objective isn't. Revealed to me in the pub after one of our editorial meetings which require vast quantities of strong European lager, Danny's idea of visiting every pier in the country didn't have any more structure than that. He thought it would make a good book, and I didn't think it would make a bad one, so we idly resolved to do it. But not so idly, that we didn't summon a photographer/artist friend of ours, Pete, to the pub that very instant and attempt to press him into accompanying us. Pete shoots photos through a camera, then through a cardboard tube, then through the viewfinder of an old camera—something about working through the deficiencies of the medium to produce art—the images are often grainy, flecked with impurity and saturated with colour, all which would have made a nice metaphoric parallel for our assumptive view of the seaside.

He wasn't uninterested, but didn't bite. His lack of drink-fuelled enthusiasm let us resolve to do it, without doing anything rash like doing anything about it. But, around a year later I'm guessing rather rouged with the success of getting two issues of our magazine out without pandering to taste or tastemakers, the plan was resurrected. This time we went as far as searching for piers on the internet, and discovered the National Pier Society, who publish a list of 'surviving piers'. That list became our target and our god-head, once we'd rationalised it down to something we thought roughly manageable. The process went like this: there's only two in Scotland, they're miles apart, lets not do Scotland. Okay, England and Wales then, does the Isle of Mann count, well it has it's own parliament so maybe not, the Isle of Wight does count though. That left 56 'surviving' (a

word we didn't care to discover a definition of) 'piers' (ditto), which were all seemingly within reach; but only by car and only at a Fogg-esque pace.

Which lead us to search for a driver—Danny can't drive and if he wasn't, I wasn't—which lead us to be rebuffed by most of the people we can usually bully into supporting us, which lead me to tossing my keys to a man who's real name I'd only learned because I needed to put on the car insurance and whom I'd probably never spent more than a few hours with in total. Danny didn't and still doesn't know Midge's real name, but anyone who would trust us gains our trust.

Midge's involvement also adds a rule. We've got to get him back to sign on on Monday week.

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Weston is the only place to start the journey. The whole way down the motorway my memory is jogged by certain vistas and road angles, including the moment when the motorway splits and winds around a sheer drop to the right. I remember this because without fail this would be the point where my mother would freak out because she's scared of heights, and my dad plaintively explain that short of taking a twenty or so mile diversion this was the only way they could go. Looking back I don't know if my imagination is adding it but I'm sure there's a slight smile on my Dad's face.

People from Birmingham been going to Weston-Super-Mare since the motorcar became popular because its pretty much as close as we get to the sea. It's about a two hour drive, most Dads will boast an hour and a half, but in actuality because everyone in Birmingham have the same idea at the same time, you'd be lucky to do it in three with traffic. On that bright September day the traffic was minimal but I would be hard pushed to name what time because I was far too excited about the whole thing. It was long enough for Jon to shake the hangover anyway.

When I was ten I was put in the car with some friends of my mom's, they were going to drive down to Weston for the day and I was going so I could keep there eldest son company because 'we got on', we didn't get on, I was the only person in class that didn't pick on him despite his habit of sticking his fingers up his bum and making people smell them. I later found out he became a police officer, figures. So we drive for the two hours, in kid time that's ten squillion billion , and when we get there. Its closed, literally everything is closed, we sit in the car for a bit, have a walk on the beach, ignore the smell coming from Trevor's fingers, and drive the ten squillion billion hours home. I only mention this because when Jon parks in the car park, and we get to the front, I get the same feeling because, again, its closed. Pretty much the entire front is closed. Everything except the pier.

"The tide's out" I say

"The tide is always out in Weston" Jon says darkly.

Grand Pier is the newest pier on the list, open less than a year after the second devastating fire in its one hundred and seven year history. The second fire coming as recently as 2008 after what

officials deemed as a probably electrical fault. The 2008 fire happened after a million pound refurb and needed a further 28 million pounds to turn it into the glistening white structure that juts out into the curve of Weston's beach. There's a covered walkway in the middle of the promenade with a gently undulating patterned roof that sure was probably described as 'an echo of the seas dynamic waveform' by a very expensive architect. Halfway up is a hut that sells beer in plastic pint glasses to refresh the dads whose two hour driving stint shouldn't have to wait the full length of the pier to be rewarded.

Describing itself as the 'ultimate indoor theme park' it was a surprise when we arrive at the arcade complex to hear David Essex telling us to hold him close and not let him go. Surely the soundtrack to the 'ultimate indoor theme park' is frantic European techno? Or 15ft robot Vega-Boys playing Jive Bunny covers on an endless loop forever? A little later we wouldn't have been surprised at hearing David Essex, only because David, for us, would haunt the south coast like a varnished cockney ghost.

The massive multi storied arcade looks like London's Torocadero used to look: with several floors of exciting, closed looking rides and huge arcade machines. Hidden about them are still the tuppenny sliders and ratty eighties fruit machines but I'm not sure if they ran out of attractions or kept some of the old ones for the Nans. We note the 4D cinema and postulate that perhaps a pendant pointed out that time is also a measurable dimension. We walk past the Laser Maze, the dodgems, the go-kart track and Crystal Maze which as far as we can make out is just a hall of mirrors re-branded for the 'meh' generation. The Psychedelia Experience, from what I can make out, is a series of darkened rooms with black lights and decorations you crawl around while wearing paper glasses with light polarising lenses. Its branded as a 60s experience, suggesting the only important notable thing about the 60s was the mind bending drug use. I swipe a pair of the gaudy paper glasses.

The wind on deck is strong enough to lean at a 45 degree angle so we head for the bar, the pier promises 'Capt. Jacks' pirate themed bar, but despite the doors being open the bar is devoid of customers and bar staff and the tap nozzles are all soaking in soda water. Holding onto Midge's shirt so he wasn't carried off in the wind we walk back down towards land, trying to ignore the frantic sound of the Wall's Ice Cream branded flags thwipping in the wind.

Jon wanted what's known in the drinking game as a 'evener', that is a drink the day after a hangover to get you back to even. Personally I try never to drink before three thirty in the afternoon because, well, a man's got to have rules. On holiday all rules are suspended so was eager for the first official pint of the trip.

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The shopping centre deposited us on a patch of grass, ringed by shrubs and benches in the best regenerative style, with still no clear route to our first pier. Grand Pier has been regenerated too, but not to the extent of putting signs up this side of the grass—regeneration always has a habit of



wanting to keep you in it's landscaped bosom, the developer-council partnerships don't extend to partnership with the rest of a town especially if it's been paid for from a different pot of money.

We wander round the town, taking what look like more sea-front-y streets based on the type of shop and the names of pub. The surroundings become more beaten and ripe for generation, re- or otherwise, and we strike local colour. Opposite a near-brutalist college is a piece of what must be civic-sanctioned graffiti. In the modern, stencil, style it depicts what eventually I twig to be famous sons of Weston. John Cleese, although the front-on orthographic projection of his silly walk gives his face a Terry Jones quality I'm sure he'd not like, is easy to place. Jeffery Archer was a little more difficult—even the most localistic of citizens must have thought it odd to celebrate the Lord high perjurer, but no he's there smugly peering over the harbour wall. The others I can't place, but these two beacons of the middle class are a nice icon for the start of the trip: one funny but with age not as nice as we'd thought, the other nice but with age not as honest as, well not honest.

The Grand Pier is a proper pier, arcades, shops, candy floss and the like. It's recently been rebuilt following a fire and the shops are very keen to tell you all about that rebuilding via letting you purchase books and DVDs. It does in seem a little like the wrapping has yet to be taken off—for a building that's designed to be so open to the elements it's not got a mark on it. Like the shopping area, it's a little too clean—antiseptic even—a bit corporate. We're searching for a bar, the drink will be more ceremonial than pleasant as we're prepared to sip from plastic glasses in a tiled-floored café. The eating area is service stationesque and dry. We need to work out what we'll be doing when we get to these piers. Getting to the end of each is already off the agenda, for here only corporate clients get to do that.

Captain Jack's bar is in darkness, the doors from the arcade are locked, the dark wood looks cold, the shadows gloomy. We approach it from the outside, the 'stunning outside terrace' I later read about on the website, a woman with a pushchair struggles with the door against the wind but gains entry. Danny inches in, shuffling against the wind, leaning forward, letting his shirt billow like a cape. But an unlocked door is not an invitation to the Captain's table, there is no more life in the saloon than in the fibre-glass Depp that guards it. Naming a family bar after a Disney character, even one that's a notorious alcoholic, is an odd move. Not that this Jack is in any way official, like the insurance-pimping meerkats in the claw games this is culture appropriated not licensed.

Oddly appropriated too, the rebuild happened in 2010: years after the first *Pirates of the Caribbean* film so it can't have been at its most ubiquitous and piracy doesn't seem to be a very Weston thing. It's not a grand naval town, nor port—it doesn't even have the smuggling tradition that the Cornish coast can claim. Later, searching for some connection, I learn that part of the fourth film in the franchise was filmed not too far away really, about 150 miles up the road in St Ives. So it's possible that after exhausting the heady arty delights of the mini Tate they have there, the faux-pirate band could have sought a more boisterous tavern up the A30.

They may indeed have stumbled, Keith Richards-like, into the very same Wetherspoon's we do now. The nautical stylings and cheap burger offers may have attracted them. It may have been, as it was with us, that all of the more interesting and independent looking places were shut at 3pm on a Monday. We had scouted and baulked at venue after venue, until eventually the consistency

of a chain won over the desire to do a place properly. Standing at the bar there's a sort of decision to be made—we have our pier budget, but we've been unable to decide quite what this covers and also lazy, and also drunk at most times we could have thought about it. We're discussing this, still working round our new intenser relationships, while ordering and the barman struggles to focus on what we're after (lagers and a coke for the designated driver).

We don't really decide, but we know what we're going to do with our drinks: sit out on the front. After all we're at the seaside, we're on a holiday of sorts and we're going to make the most of it. Hurricane Jeffrey is making difficult to open the front door, and we've not reached our table before a good proportion of Danny's foaming tankard is down his T-shirt, and Midge's. Lager preservation being the better part of valour we get back inside what I now know to be the Cabot Court Hotel.

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The sea is always out at Weston and the pubs are always shut it seems, After several failed attempts to get into a clearly open Tourist Information office we chance walking into the town, the further away from the front the more Weston transform into your average working class market town with a shopping centre, bored looking youths and vomit shadows in the fire escapes. We detour back towards the front and finally settle for the Wetherspoons because if we can't open a set of doors that hadn't stopped several old people from getting into the Tourist Information centre, then I didn't fancy our chances in town.

The Cabot Court Hotel is large and has many levels, mostly decked out in the uniform Wetherspoons décor; new wood stained old, coffee house beige and framed history on the walls that only the most social awkward or stood-up will ever read. One level is themed quite convincingly as below deck on the most relaxed ship ever, even going to the trouble of having two large window shaped screens showing the wake of what one would presume is a large boat. I decide we should sit outside and perhaps enjoy the last of the sun. As soon as we step outside the gale takes a quarter of my pint, turns it into lager vapour and distributes it over a spluttering, near blind Midge. We head inside.

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All Wetherspoons do make a bit of an effort to appropriate local colour, there's one in Birmingham that has a picture of Jasper Carrott quoting his number one hit single, and we've got a slight nautical theme here. If it's not exactly the interior of the Black Pearl, there are maps and moody lighting, enough to convince you that it might be the skinny one out of The Office that is sitting in a unlit alcove talking to a girl whose jeggings are less je- that she would imagine.

We're starting to appropriate culture too, David Essex's big hit Hold Me Close was playing as we entered the Grand Pier and it's an instant hit. It's one of those songs that it's impossible not to 'do the accent' for when singing, which enhances its comedy potential, which makes it acceptable for

men to indulge each other with. Danny starts first, a wavering cockney attempt at the title line, which will soon overwhelm sentient thought. Which means it's started: leave a group of males together for an extended period of time and conversation will soon be drowned in a mess of stock phrases and in-jokes. Less that four hours in was a little sooner than I expected, but I guess that the planning stages brought us together and exhausted the "getting to know you shit" that might have held this point off.

I don't know Midge well, but just how well I've come to know Danny Smith is still a little unnerving. Like Midge I met them first at a meeting in a city centre pub for—and yes, a section of the audience is going to think this in some way nerdish—bloggers. That is people who considered themselves to write blogs on the internet.

Neither came to the first Birmingham Bloggers meeting, which had been held in a cafe in the upcoming suburb of King's Heath. That meeting had been geekish, and full of theorising on the state of the planet; in short, for me, work. The second was a much more social affair, with people crowded round pub tables and talking of nothing heady, the joy was at that time three or four years ago to be able to converse about your online lives without having to stop and recap ("so what's a blog again?"). Midge I liked, still like, and see in a fair amount of social situations—but Dan and me have become much closer than that.

The reason is something about shared backgrounds, for most of the people who live near us and most of those in our social circle (including our then partners) where 'not local'. Graduate careers and easy mobility (geographical if not social) do mean that you end up spending a lot of time with people where the common touchstone is culture and the now. The past is more difficult to work with, the lack of—what I want to call—a race memory of your locality means that experience gets homogenised. No matter how much you have in common, the tricky geo-shortcut with create a deeper bond. We're both a little obsessed with a local 'King of Clubs' (with all the implication that entails) from the '70s and may surely be the only people in their early thirties to have read his poorly written and boastful autobiography.

We also have class in common, both being educated working class kids now a little uncomfortable in both surroundings, and that has to be part of the roots of this project. Middle class people of our age from Birmingham didn't go to the seaside for summer holidays, we were born at the boom of the package trip, and if you're not from the Midlands you can't understand just how alien the coast seems to us. Our writing and art has also drawn together over the years, we're interested in a lot of the same things even if for differing reasons, becoming de facto editors for each other.

It's the non-art stuff we know about each other that is the real frightener, or bond. Danny knows things about me that almost no-one else does—including many of my trigger points for self-destruction—the process of stitching our texts together is the fail-safe for one of us revealing something by accident. I'd broached some kind of signal, a safe word for what shouldn't be noted, but that isn't going to work. I've just got to trust the edit, and by extension Midge too as he'll no-doubt learn much unpalatable about me by the last pier.

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Weston-Super-Mare has two piers, the creeping spectre of our own poor planning shows its ghoulish hum-drum face when we realise that we have no idea where the other one is. Our mobile devices, those slick slabs of plastic and magic that all three of us spend all our furtive glances and spare minutes are rendered near useless. It seems that out of the major cities in England, mobile phone coverage is as rare as Tory tears. After a few minutes of watching still progress bars and screen tapping frustration Jon exhales angrily and mutters "I have no idea how these animals live" as he heads to the bar and ask the less than cognisant bar staff for directions.

Assured it's "that way" we head off. When we asked for the list of all the working piers in England and Wales from the National Pier Society, it never occurred to us that it could be wrong. We neither had the arrogance or motivation to check so took the list a gospel. This, in a sense, is probably the only logical way of doing it. There has to be an official list from another party or else we could have got lost in the ever decreasing spiral of details and semantics 'what constitutes working?' 'what is a pier?'

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Our next pier is our first non-pier. Non in the sense that we know it's not open, it's been the subject of design competitions and sales and bankruptcy but seems to be no nearer to being open than most of the shops on the sand-battered prom. As we strike out north, in vague direction and assisted by sporadic GPS, I'm most disappointed that a shop called The Rock Shop Newsagents is shuttered. Not only does it promise proper seaside delights, and newspapers, it announces itself 'Home of the Steve Yabsley Outside Broadcasts': I have not much of a clue what those might entail. It could be the newsagent with a megaphone, it could be some endearingly terrible hospital radio DJ that does his request show live from there on a Saturday morning.

Thing is, I'm now back at home weeks later, looking at a picture of it on the internet—in the picture the shop is open: postcards on a spinning stand, a hatch through which to serve ice cream, various windows full with seaside ephemera. I can also find out all about Steve Yabsley, including that the show is an "annual Saturday Spectacular". Nothing like defining yourself on a seasonal event, which is very seaside indeed I suppose. I've also spent as much time as I can stand listening to Steve's output, it was exactly how I suspected it to be, which makes our decision later in the trip to listen to as much local radio as possible for local colour even more baffling.

Turns out that there's an easy route and a hard route to Birnbeck Pier, one is to take Birnbeck Road.

We hoist our trouser bottoms and cross a kind of path circling an inlet, the sea breeze smoothing water across the concrete. If it were dangerous it would be roped off we reason, the same with the uneven causeway that's at the end of it. The rock pools contain the usual mix of potential sea creatures and discarded wrappers. When we get there, our trust in Britain's paranoid health and

safety culture allows us to get up close and underneath the fading structure. It's not much more than a framework, and the island that it reaches and forks off—which if I was being critical might make it more of a bridge—may be all that's holding it up and out.

And that's it, we don't have a ritual to perform, so we head back to the car and after Midge complaining greatly about the biting point and the handbrake to the real nearest pier to Birmingham.

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Birnbeck pier was closed to the public seventeen years ago, ninety years after it had opened in 1904. Often used and abandoned as a jetty to visiting steamers and pleasure boats because of the notoriously varied tidal waters of the Bristol Channel. At the moment it's a gothic sketch in iron and barbed wire that we couldn't get near, used as a launching station for lifeboats. Of all the piers we were never to get on, this one haunts me the most, its old weather worn wooden buildings and Victorian iron works set a tone that told of ghost stories and boys own adventures.

In 2006 the Manchester developers Urban Splash bought the pier and held competitions about how they should redevelop the property. Everything from luxury apartments to sea life centre were suggested but the 4 million pound price proved to be too costly and the pier was sold privately in 2010. the future of Birnbeck pier is often speculated locally but I think the romance and danger of the rusting iron struts and lonely distant island framed by a low setting sun will almost certainly be ripped away and a focus grouped concrete 'complex' will be put in its place.

Logically the next pier would have been first, but Weston-Super-Mare is where we needed to start, not where we should have started. If logic or reason was part of the trip then it would have never happened four or five times over. So we get in the car and drive the twenty mile diversion backwards to Clevedon.

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Parking on a coast road, the sun is slowly fading and the junction between land and water is looking more English and peaceful than I think I've ever seen. My seaside has always been the commercial seaside, this is not it's just quiet. Nice.

And it's closed.

We arrive at the toll gate at ten to six and are just working out how to pay when the realisation that the closing time is five thirty pops a crimp in our visit. There's nothing we can do but gaze through the wrought iron gates. The gates look darker than they should due to a thick coat of green paint, and the pier looks older and more fragile than perhaps it is due to the growing dark.

Getting down on to the beach, I'm feeling a desire to feel some sort of loss. I swing my legs off the side of a concrete jetty and stare out to sea. This first time I've looked at the sea properly as at Weston all focus was the town and finding our way. Here the sea is where the action is, the tide is encroaching and breaking gently onto the slope. Others such as ourselves are taking the wind, including a internationalist array of flags across the beach road. I watch a cute couple enjoy the emptiness: she's taken her shoes off to slip into the surf and he's dotingly taking her photograph.

Take notes, then up. Clevedon has little else to offer us, Burnham-on-Sea I have at least heard of before and Midge is keen to get on. He's not going to push, but I can sense the desire to make it where ever we're headed as soon as we can.

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The sun was not entirely set, but buried under the thick and dramatic cloud when we arrived. The pier was closed for the day, a factor we would run into again and again on the trip. Although we were assured that piers rarely close for the season any more, they do close for the day. The pier towers above the beach on the slope of a hill. A simple enough design with walk way and small seating pavilion at the end, built in 1844 and lasting despite minor upsets until the 1970's where it was closed when stress testing collapsed some of the boards. Then began a long scrabble for funding, local councils, a preservation society and grants from the English Heritage council meant its re-opening in 1989.

The sea at Clevedon is coffee brown with weak white foam and the Bristol channel was acting its roughest as it came in, I left Jon in his reverie and Midge to mooch as I walked out onto one of the concrete jetties, if you walk out far enough it feels like being completely surrounded by the sea. The sea is so big it doesn't fit into a human brain, when faced with it I find its hard not to believe in the existence of a higher power, because I'm in the presence of one. A big expanse so complicated, nuanced and ancient that not only do you not matter, but its unlikely that your existence is even registered.

Midge negotiates the coastal roads while me and Jon pretend he doesn't smell of slightly stale vaporised lager. We arrived in a slightly shabby seaside town and for the first time worried about hiding our valuables under the seats as we locked up and head to the front. Burnham-on-Sea is very proud of its status as shortest pier in Britain status and is laughably small, with a Edwardian pavilion roof it sits defiantly on an empty sea front. Basically an elaborate hut on stout concrete stilts we venture inside to drift amongst the arcade which appears to not have updated itself since the 70's, browns and creams swirl into the carpet and Thus Sprach Zarathustra plays wryly and grandiosely from one of the ticket machines at the back as we walk in. I beat Jon at a rifle game but have nothing to claim the tickets on.

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If you're a back-seat non-driver like the supine Mr Smith, reclining in a nest of bags, supplies, and cardboard, then the tension of the passenger is relived. For me every crunch of gear, every slip of hand on steering wheel, every audible "What?" at the satnav is a tiny shard of wince. Midge is still getting used to the car and on unfamiliar roads, I can hear the engine and it's not revving how I would assume for the speeds we're doing. Worse is that the indicators don't click off too sharply once you're round a corner, it's worth you doing it manually or else you look like you're swapping two lanes or parking or are a fool.

I try to mention it casually, but to no obvious effect. The tick-tick wells frustration. I distract myself, and the car, with music. In this case Fleetwood Mac.

It works until we have a little scrape as we park in the dusky back streets of Burnham-on-Sea, but the worry about the surroundings and leaving laptops and so on in the car is more pressing. Eventually I make a resigned pact with myself—I'm going to have to leave it in worse places, for longer, so I need to trust my luck. If anything can go wrong it will, trust fate to shit on you and you'll never be disappointed.

We're going to learn all sorts of facts about piers and Burnham-on-Sea is I'm told by Danny 'the shortest'; in essence it's nothing but an amusement arcade on stilts. We're in need of amusement, so that's okay.

Most games in an arcade aren't really much fun, either being simple games of chance or ones where the time needed to gain the knowledge and skill is never rewarded. As long as you know what you're getting into it's fine, but not all do. The worst kind for me is the 'skill with prizes' scam—you win tickets which can be redeemed. If one is of a iconic bent the neon-lit 'Redemption Area's provide great metaphor about a higher power. I'm not thinking this right now, but there's something in the hundreds of tiny steps needed to gain a much-postponed reward. What I do think right now is that it would take something like ten years of constant prize bingo to get near the 1450 tickets required to win a box of PG Tips. I'm also trying to take a furtive photograph of the box, and after doing so embarrass myself to the exit.

It's about seven o'clock now, and I manage to manoeuvre our party into a small hotel bar which advertises Banks's ales outside. Banks's is a local brewery to us, so I comment on how unusual it is to find here—I'm not too sure it is, but it's enough to sell it to Dan. Midge is still keen to press on, he wants to get to his mate's place—where we've been invited to pitch camp halfway to the next pier—as soon as possible. He's got reasons, driving in the dark across the top of Exmoor won't be pleasant and it won't be polite to arrive too late at a working man's house. But I'm already deeply uncomfortable about stopping at the house (or indeed in the garden) of someone I don't know, so want to be spending as little time as possible there. I will try to tease this pint out for as long as possible.

The bar itself is functional, worn monogrammed carpet betraying past pretension, regulars crowd the serving area but the staff are friendly enough and we settle down to make notes overlooked by current TV favourite *Come Dine With Me*. I drink quickly and order another while Danny quizzes Midge about just where we're stopping.

"So, where do you know this guy from?"

“He used to let us sleep on the floor of his pub.”

“...”

“I used to follow this band—Strap-on Jack—and they played at the pub in this village we’re going to, the landlord was great.”

“And it’s him we’re stopping with.”

“I got in contact again with him on Facebook not long ago, I don’t know him that well really.”

I’m now even more nervous, I think about writing this in as being genuinely scared but in truth I’m just imagining being terribly uncomfortable, a weak tie to a weak tie. No bond at all.

“He says it’s going to be windy, so we can stop on his bus.”

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We manage to find a hotel bar open, although 'hotel bar' gives where we found a classier air than it deserves, it was pleasant enough in a mock Tudor way. But the kind of place that uses a windows publisher template for its menus, and you can play pool as long as you don’t mind stepping over the dog. Going to the toilet, as I walk past reception the staff look up with puppy dog hope and I almost check-in out of pity.

When someone abandons the satnav you expect to be on the home stretch, but its night, miles from anywhere and Midge seems to be navigating on The Force alone. I find the best thing you can do in the back seat is shut up and let the adults worry about things, but Midge is swearing softly under his breath and I can't help up offer my opinion occasionally. On the steepest hill I've ever been driven up Midge confidently turns left. He hesitates next to a gate and pulls in, we follow a gravel path as it turns into a grass and abruptly finishes surrounded by fence.

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Where we’re going does not have a postcode we can put in to the satnav, Midge has instructions in his head and that’s all we’ve got. Heading to the village we listen to more of Rumours, perhaps a peculiar choice given Midge’s punk credentials, Danny’s rock stylings and my studied modishness. We’d discussed the idea that music might be a problem, but Lindsey Buckingham’s masterpiece finds agreement. I’m fascinated by the group dynamic at this point, he wrote an album of songs about how he didn’t love a woman and then she sang them.

I’m also interested in how time changes people, and using myself as the closest example. My 18 or 20-year-old self—lost in the throws of a mod revival—would have despised anyone who



expressed a preference for such soft countrified rock, but at 36 I can hear it differently. Has the World changed or have I changed? I'm still quoting Morrissey, so I've not changed that much.

It's now dark, headlights have to be flicked from full-beam to dipped, Midge mutters about a hill and a pub and a left turn. Despite not driving quickly, he's taking turns very late. I say nothing, I've run out of insight. Eventually he makes a decision and turns up a gravel path which soon becomes a grass one. It doesn't look right, but it's not my call.

We come to a halt hemmed in by wire fence and brambles. Midge gets out to check we're in the right place, a glance at Danny suggests he doesn't think it is. Neither do I.

A figure is silhouetted in the doorway, it's obviously no-one Midge has even a passing acquaintance of. A torch flashes. We can't hear what's said, but what we hear is an answer to an unheard question:

“See, what you want to do is... get the fuck off my garden.”

*Thanks for reading the first early draft of chapter one of Pier Review, we hope the finished book will be out at some point in 2012. You can sign up to get release news or read some of our on-road notes at [pierreview.co.uk](http://pierreview.co.uk).*

*Please feel free to spread this sample chapter, it'll be good publicity, but please don't rip it off and remember to tell your friends to buy the actual thing when it comes out.*