

Norman's seaside special is a

Clacton-on-Sea once greeted more than 100,000 visitors a week and had six cinemas and 10 theatres. Times change, but there's still much to admire. STEVEN RUSSELL enjoys a new book about the resort

PRODUCING his seventh tome about his adopted hometown – and his 24th book in total, give or take – was far from a chore for Norman Jacobs. He might be a born-and-bred East Ender, but he's lived in Clacton-on-Sea since 1979 and his ties run deeper still. Back to 1950, in fact – when he was three and was brought to the Essex Sunshine Coast for the first time.

“My father had been stationed here during the war – he was in the Royal Artillery and they used to practise firing the guns over the sea – and always said that when the war was over he'd like to come back,” he explains. “We came in 1950 and went to Butlin's. We came back every year for six years.

“Then we started to go to more exotic places . . . like Dovercourt! . . . but always tried to visit Clacton for at least a day. My parents also bought a caravan in Clacton in the '60s and had that for a few years.

“So I knew Clacton really well. And when I got married, we were looking for somewhere to live. I said ‘What about Clacton?’ My wife said ‘Where's that? Never heard of it!’ She came from Brixton, in south London, and people from there used to go down to Brighton, Hastings and places like that.

“I thought it would be nice to move to a seaside town. Property prices round here were so cheap, as well. Even taking into account the cost of commuting, it was quite a good deal.”

So they came, more than 30 years ago, and it quickly became home. Norman started the town's local history society and in the 1990s spent four years as a Tendring district councillor. Chairman of the leisure committee for a time, he also became the council's man on the trust that ran the West Cliff Theatre. Even though he's no longer a councillor, he stayed involved and is in fact the trust's current chairman.

He hadn't done a book on the town for a few years, so was happy when his publisher suggested a new work – *Clacton-on-Sea Then & Now*.

It's one of those books that does what it says on the tin. Archive photographs show Clacton and surrounding areas the way they used to be (in the days when signs advertised a “Pot of Tea, Roll and Butter for one, 5d”) and modern shots taken from similar angles record the changes that have taken place in the intervening years. Norman's complementary text, full of rewarding facts and anecdotes, puts the scenes in historic context.

Game wife Linda took 44 of the 45 contemporary photographs – often risking life and limb by standing in the middle of the road to get the required shot!

Personally, I can't help thinking that “improvements” have rather dented the beauty of the place in years gone by. To be fair, the coming of the car has caused a lot of aesthetic damage, bringing ugly signage, but man hasn't helped by sticking coarse



SIGN OF AMBITION: Top, the large building on the left of this 1920s view of Pier Avenue is the old Public Hall, built by the town's pioneers in 1877



BUSTLE: Left, a busy Edwardian scene at the junction of Pier Avenue and Marine Parade



LEAFY: Far left, a 1950s view of Clacton, looking up Electric Parade from the junction with Station Road

frontages onto many fine old buildings – as has happened in many towns, to be fair.

Have I been a bit too prickly and critical?

“I'd say you have!” laughs Norman. It does look nice in the old days, with the trees, he admits, but there are still attractive wide stretches – such as Pier Avenue and Station Road. He does concede that alterations to some ground-floor facades could have been done better – “they're not in sympathy with the buildings themselves and they're not in sympathy with each other!” – but reminds us that old shops were really quite small and crammed with goods. From the 1960s on came a desire to display wares in a modern way, with wide windows and better use of interior space.

“I suppose it's easy for us to say ‘It looks a lot nicer then’, but for shopkeepers who want to sell things it's probably not such a good way of trying to do it!”

The tall trees that made streets such as Station Road such attractive and softened scenes were often elms claimed later by disease, and not replaced.

“I think the one big change is the old town hall clock. When you see that and the town

hall building in the photos, and how it dominated the skyline . . . When you see the new building, that is dreadful! The clock is nothing now; before, it was quite a statement: ‘proud to be Clacton.’”

It's only a small quibble. “It's nice to look back and say ‘It was wonderful then,’ but it probably wasn't! I like the centre of Clacton and I think we are lucky with the way it developed.

“Go back to the beginning: (developer) Peter Bruff did lay out the place properly and I think we still benefit greatly. It didn't grow up like places like Brighton and Yarmouth, where there were little fishing villages and narrow streets and which grew piecemeal.”

In the book, Norman reminds us that before 1871 there was no Clacton-on-Sea. The area was known simply as Clacton Beach – named after the nearby inland village of Great Clacton. It was when farmland was sold to Peter Bruff, whose vision was made concrete thanks to the financial backing of the Woolwich Steam Packet Co., that the new seaside resort began to take shape.

In the 1880s a water tower was built near the corner of Rosemary Road and Pier Avenue. Only a few years earlier, the population of Clacton-on-Sea was still under 500.

In the spring of 1894, Clacton's first town hall opened in Station Road. It would have a bank on the ground floor, council offices upstairs and a theatre – the Operetta House – at the back.

The council moved out in 1923. The

downstairs stayed a branch of Barclays Bank, says Norman, and the Operetta House became the Tivoli Cinema.

“The whole building was badly damaged during the Second World War when, in May 1941, a lone raider dropped a bomb on the corner of Station Road and Rosemary Road. Much of the front of the building was blown away and the clock had to be pulled down. It wasn't until 1957 that the bomb-damaged building was replaced by the one currently standing on the spot . . .”

Electric Parade, Norman points out, got its name because it was the first part of town to be lit by electric light.

“From 1901 until 1927, the post office was situated at No. 9, Electric Parade, at which time it moved to its present site in the High Street.”

WHSmith took over the old premises. “They already had a shop on the other side of Electric Parade (which curiously was still called Pier Avenue) but closed it when the new shop opened.

“In the early days, WHSmith also operated a ‘circulating library’ from the premises. WHSmith holds the honour of being the oldest shop in Clacton still in the hands of its original owners and still on the same spot, and will celebrate eighty-five years in 2012.”

Change is something we can't avoid. The town's first purpose-built cinema, The Kinema – later the Kinema Grand – came in 1913 to West Avenue. It was demolished in 1962, the site becoming a Fine Fare