

From Victorian Cromer to Qing dynasty Beidaihe

Shi Jin, 10th January 2011

In my first history lesson at school in England in the early 1970s I remember the teacher talking about the tremendous popularity of the seaside towns in the Victorian era, and about well-off sorts who used to go there (they would always go by train I seem to remember) to “take the air” and “bathe in the sea”.

Lesson 2, or then again it may have been lesson 18 (40 years on, the memory has faded somewhat), we were taught about “catchment cities”. People from Birmingham went south-west, to Devon and Cornwall; tourists from Manchester would head for Blackpool, while Londoners would go to Southend-on-sea, Brighton, or Cromer depending on where in London they lived and how much money they had. Looking at the blackboard, it all seemed so clear-cut: People travelled to the seaside town that was the shortest rail journey away. In the 1890s, if you had gone to Cromer, the bathing beach would have been packed with fairly well off Londoners who presumably had read Jane Austen’s *Emma*: “*You should have gone to Cromer, my dear, if you went anywhere. Perry was a week at Cromer once, and he holds it to be the best of all the sea bathing places. A fine open sea, he says, and very pure air.*”

All of that is, of course, is what my history teacher told me. What he didn’t tell me was that Cromer’s glory years in the 1890s had an awful lot to do with media hype. The seeds of Cromer’s popularity had been sown by the future King Edward VII’s love of Cromer golf course. It was the then Prince of Wales’s patronage that put the Royal in the Royal Cromer Golf Club, which teed off in 1888. By then the town was firmly on the tourist map – thanks to the many glowing articles about the area, written by the then-famous London journalist Clement Scott, who christened the area with the bewitching name “Poppyland” – and in so doing captured many a well-heeled Londoner’s imagination. Such was the media hype that the cliff-top Hotel de Paris – which was extensively rebuilt and refurbished between 1895 and 1896 – would not have appeared at all pretentious.

As well as not telling me about Victorian public relations campaigns, my history teacher also neglected to talk about what British holidaymakers were doing in Beidaihe, 175 miles east of Beijing, in China’s Hebei province, at that time.

40 years ago I had never heard of Beidaihe, or Hebei province for that matter,

although I had heard of China – not from a school teacher I hasten to add, because we hadn't yet been taught about China at school (Nixon was yet to go) – but because I collected stamps of the world (our secret I trust).

To be honest, though, the fact that I knew nothing about what it was like to be a British holidaymaker in Beidaihe in the late 1890s never crossed my mind... until last week when, over dinner at a Beidaihe restaurant, a friend showed me an article that appeared in 1899 in the *North China Daily News* – the first English language newspaper to appear in China, and by far the longest-published newspaper in China's history (from 1850 through to 1951).

The article had the title: *A China Sanatorium: Peitaiho* (written in the flavour of the day Gothic typeface of course, and using the Wades-Giles system of phonetic rendering). "Beidaihe" wouldn't be known as such by non-Chinese until the late 70s, when Mao's pinyin system (installed in 1964) began to gain popularity.

So, if your appetite has been whetted and you are keen to know what Beidaihe was like in the late 1890s and why the Brits – and quite a few other nationalities too of course – were keen to go there, then here's a summary of the glowing article that was written by an unnamed British tourist, which did for Beidaihe's popularity what Clement Scott's articles did for Cromer's:

- The article paints a picture of Beidaihe as an oasis: *"The long stretch of coastline [between Shanhaiguan and Tianjin] is for the most part backed by low, barren sand-dunes. The monotony of which is broken by the estuaries of a few unnavigable rivers. The country looks uninviting enough on the chart [Admiralty chart number 1,256], but the reality is far worse than the representation. The salt and soda-ridden plains of Tangu [near to Tianjin] give place to endless stretches of barren sand on which a wren and a worm alike would with difficulty find a living. We know no more depressing country in the Far East. Closer inspection, however, reveal[s] one exception to the dreary waste:*
- *"At the southern end of Shallow Bay... [Shanhaiguan marks the north of the bay and Beidaihe the south]... there is a bold promontory, marked on the chart as Rocky Point. Just here, the coast line runs east to west for a distance of five miles."* This, then, was the "oasis" of Beidaihe.
- The journey time by train from Tianjin to Beidaihe was 6 hours (these days it takes about a third of that time). At the time of writing, the railway extended about 100 miles beyond Beidaihe (to the east).
- Beidaihe was the name of the village in the proximity of the railway station

(four miles from the seaside town that exists today).

- From 1890 to 1892, when the railway line was being extended from Guye to Shanhaiguan, the engineers (all foreigners who were based in Tianjin) "discovered" the delights of Beidaihe, and told others about it.
- There was no tourism as such in 1894, when China was at war with Japan. The article mentions that *"The Chinese military authorities made some provision for opposing a Japanese landing there, and cut the whole country-side up with leagues of well-made rifle pits"*.
- In 1896 there were 20 houses owned by foreigners there, *"Mostly of the cheap and nasty description"*.
- By 1899, foreigners (mostly Brits from Tianjin and Beijing) had summer houses in three main locations: Stewart's End, Rocky Point and East Shore. Stewart's End was the westernmost settlement, which had 30 houses at the time of writing. It took its name from the name of the man who built the first house there, a Scotsman.
- There were 40-50 foreigners' houses at Rocky Point, which some years prior to that only had a missionary settlement. Many of the houses here were *"Of that shoddy, ramshackle, tumble-down type"*. Most were, it seems, four-roomed cottages with servants' quarters that cost between 1000 and 1500 taels.
- Notable among the smaller foreign settlements was a small one between Rocky Hills and Lighthouse Point, where Sir Claude MacDonald and Dr Robertson were building houses.
- The area's Russian Archimandrite (a senior abbot of the Russian Orthodox Church) had built a *"tiny chapel"* on Lighthouse Point (which, these days, is a naval base as well as one of the area's best birding sites).
- Lighthouse Point *"commands the finest seascapes"* and, when the sea was rough was the best place to watch the waves roll in. The author declared that it was *"Beachy Head on a small scale"*.
- *"All these [settlement] sites are within the line proposed for the new treaty port of Qinhuangdao...The idea of course is to give the foreigners at Beidaihe powers of self government and legal titles to their property."*
- The author asserted that bathing in the sea was the best way of removing wrinkles in older women and keeping younger women's soft and smooth.

- The best period for bathing in the sea was (and probably still is) from May 20th to October 1st, when it offered the *"...safest and most enjoyable [bathing] we have ever known for ladies and children."* Unless, that is, there was a gale blowing or there was a jelly-fish invasion...
- Jelly-fish *"appear in great numbers in July and August"* [as they do in modern times].... *"One or two.. [of them] increase the fun and gaiety of a bathing party, but when we are bombarded by them, they cease to be a joke. They have been known to expel a bathing part before now.... The so-called sting is felt like a mild nettle for.. 15 seconds to two minutes."*
- Jelly-fish were at their largest at the end of August when their "crowns" could have been between 14 and 17 inches in diameter and had streamers "A couple of feet long". At this time, the locals *"...bale them up into their boats, and retail their crowns through the countryside as a delicacy"*.
- Then as now Beidaihe's tides were impossible to predict... the author described the tidal system, or rather the lack of a system, as "an abnormal jumble". The reason for this, he hypothesised, is that the tide emanating from the Yellow Sea, flowed in opposite directions around the Bo Sea – clockwise (from the northern part of the Shandong peninsular) and anti-clockwise from the Dalian peninsular – and met in the middle, near Beidaihe. And that the changeable wind around the large area made the collision point random and the influences of each of the currents variable. He likened the phenomenon with that of the currents in the Irish Sea as they affected the Isle of Man.
- The favourite are for walking and riding (donkeys were preferred to the skinny ponies that were available) was the Lotus Hills, thanks to *"the scent of pine trees, the pleasures of wild-flower gathering, and ever-varying scenery."*
- The author admitted however that, as a resident of Tianjin (which he described as "such a ghastly place for natural scenery"), his waxing about Beidaihe's natural beauty may have been a little over the top. That said, he still believed that *"an unbiased observer straight out from home [in Great Britain] would not hesitate to ascribe to the place such beauties and natural advantages as would make it favourable [compared with] any country in Europe."*
- *"Devonshire, Wales, and the Clyde excepted, we cannot recall any British watering place that could have greater natural advantages to begin with. Had Beidaihe been found in Sussex or Suffolk in 1893 it would ere now be*

in possession of a pier, a theatre, several hotels..."

- With regard to fishing: *"The most approved Western gear has been tried in vain.... The Beidaihe simply despise our tackles and methods."* Which was particularly frustrating because: *"The natives can be seen all the time hauling the brutes [ie big fish] on board [their boats] with crude appliances and similar bait."*
- Most of the fishing by locals was done with seine nets (a large weighted fishing net that hangs in the water): *"The variety of fish in the seine (nets) is amazing: fine prawn... crabs... skate, halibut, sole, haddock, gurnet, cod, flounder, mullet...sometimes dogfish and small shark... and a fish that looks like a sea trout but turns out [to be] a speckled deceiver on the plate."*
- The author wrote enthusiastically about Beidaihe's summer climate and compared it favourably to the much-hotter and uncomfortable climate of Tianjin. He cited a weather record that was kept between 18th July and 5th August 1897, when readings were made at 6pm (am?), noon and 8pm: The average temperature was 78.5 82.3 and 79.9 degrees F. respectively. The mean temperature was 80.2 F, whereas it was 85.2 F in Tianjin during the same period (where it was *"sweltering in the nineties on nineteen days"*). He also remarked that Beidaihe was *"entirely devoid of humidity... that renders life a burden in Tianjin and Beijing"*.
- In 1898, the largest food retailer in Tianjin opened a Beidaihe branch, *"...at a modest charge in excess of their normal prices retailed everything... Then a Tianjin native came up with cows, another started a butchery, two or three more laundries of sorts, another an ice-house"*.
- Birds, for which Beidaihe is famous today as a migration stop-off point, are mentioned, but only in the context of shooting them: *"Snipe are fairly abundant in the huge flat behind Shallow Bay... I have seen partridges twice and heard them often in the Lotus Hills; but I imagine the coveys are few and will disappear quickly before the sportive [ie gun-carrying] foreigner. Wild goose and duck are plentiful in their season; best of all, the zealous shikari [big game hunter] can on some occasions get bustard."* Great Bustard can still be seen in early spring in the area.
- With regard to the then future development of Beidaihe, the author believed that the growth of the town would be linked to Qinhuangdao's growth after it had achieved treaty port status (the imperial decree granting the status had been issued in 1898, but it would take three years for the port to open for business). The author wrote: *"If Qinhuangdao becomes a seaport giving access to ocean steamers of deep draft all*

through the year, and if it can develop an export coal trade, then the influence on the fortunes of Beidaihe will be incalculable."

In summary, Cromer and Beidaihe were a world apart, but they did have a few things in common: They were both ruled by strong women (Queen Victoria and the Qing dynasty Empress Dowager Cixi respectively); they were both connected by train to a major population centre; and both towns boasted lovely bathing beaches that attracted city-based holidaymakers.

Cromer, though, was a less dangerous place to spend the summer it would transpire...

...The author makes no mention of the ill-feeling that, in 1899 (the year the article was written), was building up among a significant minority of disillusioned Chinese towards foreigners generally and Christians (including Chinese converts) in particular. The anti-foreign movement, known as the Boxer Uprising, gathered momentum in the winter of 1899/1900, and the animosity degenerated to open hostility – first in Shandong province, and then to the north. In June 1900, the Boxers (supported by some factions of the Chinese Imperial army) attacked the foreign compounds in Beijing and Tianjin. The foreign settlements in Beidaihe also suffered greatly: Sir Robert Hart, a British consular official in Beijing, who was the Inspector General of China's Imperial Maritime Custom Service, and also a regular summer visitor to Beidaihe wrote from Beijing to a friend in England, on 19th December 1900, that *"Matlock seems a nice place to convalesce at, judging from the pamphlet you sent me. Our delicious seaside retreat, Beidaihe, was destroyed by the Boxers."*