

Many happy returns

Sandy sandwiches, cramped car journeys and home-made bikinis – four authors take a nostalgic trip back to their childhood holidays, from Jonathan Dimbleby on West Wittering 50 years ago to Marian Keyes discovering her old Irish haunt is now a surfers' paradise

JONATHAN DIMBLEBY ON WEST WITTERING

This was to be a real trip down memory lane. The last time I went to West Wittering was over 50 years ago and I was a small child cramped in the back of a Morris Minor estate (or 'shooting brake' as they were then known) with my younger brother and sister. My parents were in the front and there were two small dachshunds in the back, too. The first sign that we were nearly there – 'Are we nearly there?' being our maddening back-seat chorus as soon as we were ten minutes away from our home in West Sussex – was Chichester Cathedral spire. We played I-spy: the first to claim 'I spy Chi spi' was the winner. We always cheated.

I remember driving past the cathedral, down a long leafy road, past cows in fields and a scatter of cottages and then suddenly we would be there. We parked on a strip of grass by a long tamarisk hedge, which bordered a range of apparently mountainous sand dunes. We could smell the sea and hear the surf and we used to race through a gap in the hedge and along the beach to our wooden hut, which was the size of a modest garden shed. If we had been away awhile, the sand would have piled up against the door, blown up the beach from

the strong westerly winds that drove in across the Solent. Some of the finer grains would infiltrate the hut itself, depositing a light sprinkling of yellowish dust on the primus stove (to heat the kettle), a huddle of worn deckchairs, the black inner tube of a car tyre (the best rubber ring ever), and a detritus of buckets, spades, and rubber balls.

Sometimes when the tide was in, giant waves crashed against the beach and we braved the surf, half-terrified that we would be washed out to sea. More often, the sea was almost out of sight and we built sandcastles and paddled in the lagoons left behind by the departing tide or played cops and robbers in the sand dunes. At the end of the day we ate jam sandwiches and then piled back into the car, itching the salt and sand out of our hair and from between our toes – so exhausted that we were invariably asleep long before Chichester Cathedral came into view again from the opposite direction.

I have retained a nostalgic affection for West Wittering, so I dreaded my return. Would I find an amusement park, slot-machines and competing stalls selling useless trinkets? In short, I feared

my childhood summer haunt might have been turned into a dumbed-down, over-crowded rip-off? I need not have worried.

We paid at a toll booth (£5 for a car and all its occupants) and parked on the grass close to that very same tamarisk hedge. There was a café, modest not garish and a windsurfing club. Otherwise West Wittering was virtually unchanged – even the loos were in the same place. The line of beach huts had not been turned into chalets but, still faded by the weather, shaded into each other in soft blues and greens and browns. Even the sand was still piled against the doors of one or two, which had not yet been opened for the summer.

We had been blessed by the weather. It was a balmy late spring day. The sun was warm on our backs despite a brisk sea breeze and the beach (which still stretched towards eternity in either direction) was busy but not crowded. Children skipped bravely in and out of the water, defying the waves or constructed elaborate castles in the sand. The older ones played cricket or threw Frisbees; if they were lucky they were allowed to watch even bigger brothers struggling to control giant kites

that threatened to lift them across the Solent to the Isle of Wight. Elderly couples in Barbours strolled along the water's edge with labradors. We saw not one piece of litter and heard nothing but the gentle roar and hiss of the surf.

There are differences of course. Most notably, the wooden breakwaters, which used to stride out into the sea, towering over my head, have all but disappeared under the sand. And the dunes where we used to hide are sadly diminished. However, the West Wittering Estate (which bought the 250 hectare estate in 1952 for what today seems to be a peppercorn £21,000 to save it from becoming a leisure centre) is making valiant efforts to stabilise and restore this precious heritage: fencing off and reseeded the most vulnerable areas with the coarse grass that used to prickle the soles of our feet but binds the sand and stops it blowing away.

The view to seaward has changed as well. Half a century ago, when Britain had yet to escape wartime austerity, the Solent was still virtually deserted except for an occasional liner; I once saw the Queen Elizabeth (two funnels to the Queen Mary's three) steaming out from

Southampton. On this Sunday, though, the weekend waterway was strewn with expensive yachts and glossy speedboats.

My wife, Jessica, had never been to West Wittering before but she was soon equally entranced by the time warp in which everyone on the beach seemed to be happily ensnared. We vowed to return with our baby daughter – 'the best day-out you could imagine – and all for £5,' Jessica said. Well, not quite. The friendly boutique hotel in nearby Bosham, The Millstream – where a pianist in a comfortable, chintzy, drawing room played Cole Porter for me – costs somewhat more. And the delicious fresh fish at the pub in Itchenor wasn't cheap. But both these villages are on the edge of Chichester Harbour and they manage to sustain the illusion that in this corner of West Sussex by the sea, all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds. *A double room at The Millstream (+44 (0) 1243 573 234, millstream-hotel.co.uk) costs from £145 including breakfast. Russia: A Journey to the Heart of a Land and its People by Jonathan Dimbleby is out now (£25, BBC Books). >*



Still waters
East Head, West Wittering;
a young Jonathan
Dimbleby outside the
family beach hut (above)

Britainonview/John Miller, courtesy of Jonathan Dimbleby