A band of marauding Vikings, a galleon in full sail, soldiers waiting tentatively for the D-Day landings, even mermaids in an underwater fantasy world. These astonishing creations, some towering up to five metres, have been crafted by some of the world’s best sand sculptors and are part of the impressive opening display at Sandworld, Weymouth’s striking new visitor attraction.

It might seem something of a leap from the simple bucket and spade pleasures of a childhood beach holiday but these magical sculptures are really just a super-sized version of the sandcastles we all once made. Of course you need to add some extremely talented artists but, apart from that, all it takes is sand and water.

Sandworld, which is right next door to Weymouth’s Sealife Centre, is the brainchild of Mark Anderson who is himself an award-winning world-class sand sculptor. He established the attraction with business partner David Hicks. They now aim to make it a must-see favourite with Weymouth residents and visitors.

“It is perfect for creating a massive amount of detail. It is the best natural sand I have ever used” — Mark Anderson

Jeremy Miles discovers how bucket and spade pleasures have become an art form at Weymouth’s Sandworld.
Mark, who has competed around the world and once recreated Windsor Palace in sand for the Queen, has lifelong connections with the seaside town. As a young boy he watched his grandfather, the legendary sand sculptor Fred Darrington, at work on the beach. For generations of holidaymakers Fred was a Weymouth institution. He began making sand sculptures back in the 1920s. Mark started working for him in the 1970s “picking up pennies, making tea and collecting water.”

Although he observed the master at work, with unceasing fascination, he admits that it didn’t really occur to him to become a sand sculptor until, at the age of 22, after trying several “proper jobs” without success, he asked Fred if he could become his apprentice.

Mark, who had been destined for a career in banking, wrote a list of all the things that he wanted from life. “They included working outdoors, doing something creative, being able to travel, and earning money as a direct reward for the work that I did. Suddenly the penny dropped. I realised that my granddad had all those things.”

Fred died aged 91 in 2002 but Mark, who now works internationally for blue-chip clients like Sky, BBC, O2, BA, Peugeot and BMW, still ensures that the famous Sand Sculptures of Weymouth remains one of the town’s signature attractions. Now 45, Portland-based Mark describes Sandworld as a natural progression from the still popular seafront business and also one that builds on the increasing international interest in sand sculpting events, exhibitions and festivals.

With ten international sand sculptors from the US, Canada, the Czech Republic, Russia, Holland, Italy, Ireland and beyond exhibiting in the inaugural show, there are some truly impressive works. Visitors are being asked to vote for...
their favourite. The outcome of this will bestow the title of the UK’s First International People’s Choice Sand Sculpture Master on the winner.

However, even though Sandworld is offering a new competitive platform for the superstars of the sand sculpture world, its primary function is as a visitor attraction. There is plenty of hands-on fun to be had in what may well be one of the biggest sandpits in the world. When I visited I found children playing happily, and with a few simple instructions several of the young visitors had moved beyond basic sandcastles to try and create a sand turtle.

“’It’s so much fun,” beamed Mark, falling to his knees and getting stuck in with sand and water. “That’s what it’s all about – to play and learn. It helps build social skills and inspires creativity, and because all we use is sand and water it has a minimal impact on the environment.”

Experts believe that its special properties are down to the slightly angled shape of its grains. Whatever the reason, it has attracted sand artists to Weymouth for decades.

There’s one very good reason why Weymouth has become a centre for exceptional sand sculptures. The resort has what is arguably the finest beach sand in the world. “It is absolutely unique,” says Mark. “You won’t find anything like it anywhere else,” and he should know, he has worked with sand from all over the world but says that nothing compares to the very fine sand that
collects on this small stretch of Dorset beach. It is perfect for building sand structures, sculpts like a dream and remains solid and strong for a remarkable length of time. “The extraordinary thing is that every beach is different,” says Mark. “For instance, the Blackpool stuff is amazing, you can make anything out of it but it only really lasts for 10 or 15 minutes before the moisture level drops and it turns into a pyramid of semi-dry sand. Weymouth sand keeps its form for ages.”

Experts believe that its special properties are down to the slightly angled shape of its grains. Mark thinks it must be a combination of factors. Whatever the reason, it has attracted sand artists to the resort for decades. So where else in Dorset can you find good sand for sculpting? According to Mark, Bournemouth’s OK but not spectacular, the sand at Alum Chine

Mark still ensures that the famous Sand Sculptures of Weymouth remains one of the town’s signature attractions.
Fact File
Sandworld is open until the end of October. Mark hopes to establish a "Weymouth Winter Wonderland" attraction for the Christmas holidays, before inviting some of the world's top sand sculptors back in 2012 to create masterpieces based on an Ancient Greek Olympic theme.

Sandworld, Lodmoor Country Park, Preston Beach Road, Weymouth, DT4 7SX. 07411 387529 or visit sandworld.co.uk

is quite decent and Studland's sand is very useable. Although in his expert opinion, not one of them comes close to rivalling the granular gold that can be found on Weymouth beach. Even just around the headland at Nothe, he says, the quality drops dramatically. "It's extraordinary, it's only a few hundred yards away but the sand is no use at all."

There is plenty of hands-on fun to be had in what may well be one of the biggest sandpits in the world.

Mark's high opinion of Weymouth sand is backed up by another master sculptor, Dutchman Michel De Kok, whose Viking warriors are part of the new Sandworld exhibit. The former world champion, who also sculpts in ice, says: "It is perfect for creating a massive amount of detail. It is the best natural sand I have ever used."

So, with that ringing endorsement, there's no excuse for not getting your bucket and spade out and creating something really special on the beach at Weymouth this summer. □

Sand Sculpture

Canadian sand sculptor Karen Fralich at work on her 'Underwater Fantasy' at Sandworld

Mark Anderson demonstrates sand sculpture techniques at Sandworld

PHOTO: SANDWORLD
PHOTO: HATTIE MILES