

The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the Twentieth Century

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Published as part of Manchester University Press's new Studies in Popular Culture series, John Walton's latest addition to his incomparable canon of seaside studies forms part of a concerted effort by new social historians to question what makes appropriate and important history. Reflecting on why the cotton industry rather than the seaside industry, both products of mid-nineteenth century Lancashire, has attracted the attention of historians, Walton suggests that:

"The seaside's significance and capacity for survival have yet to generate a historiography to challenge that of cotton; but that is not for want of importance or scope for posing big questions. Rather, it reflects the enduring preoccupation of economic historians with production rather than consumption, the predominance of class conflict in manufacturing industry among the chosen themes of social history, and the condescension of the political history establishment towards popular culture. Only in the last two decades have the orthodox agenda been seriously challenged, and this book is the product of those times." [195-6]

In the process of challenging this orthodoxy, Walton ploughs his familiar line on the social and economic significance of the seaside displayed in his many publications on Blackpool, but also branches out into cultural history. Thus, the Introduction opens up the idea of the seaside as a liminal space, both an unstable boundary between the sea and land and a space beyond the rules of respectable urban society where one can explore other identities. However, this element is not central to the book, which still concentrates overwhelmingly on the very historiographical orthodoxy and themes which Walton claims his book challenges, the seven substantive chapters dealing with the seaside resort system, the holidaymakers themselves, travelling to the coast, and seaside pleasures, environments, economies and politics.

The book begins by mapping the resorts, travelling around the coast outlining the scale and importance of seaside towns in the various parts of the country, assessing the demographic trends for the period up to 1951

and then looking at changes in visitor numbers, asserting all along that these are imperfect even for recent times. He notes the relatively small and insignificant nature of seaside resorts in Scotland, apart from the links villages of the 'Golf stream', as well as exploring the development of the original 'bungalow' towns of inter-war Essex, Kent and Sussex and the democratic element in their occupation of the coast with ramshackle homes made from railway carriages, timber and iron buildings. In looking at the period of stagnation and dispersal in the fifties and sixties, he asserts that decline was slow and to some extent compensated for by the rise of the retirement resorts, especially along the south coast, emphasising that rapid and complete decline was a feature of the seventies and eighties, especially in northern resorts like New Brighton.

'Holidaymakers' highlights the fact that as holidays were constrained by cost, even for the lower middle class, most classes and ages went to British seaside resorts in the first half of the century, either as long-stay visitors or day-trippers. Such social diversity resulted in ongoing battles over the issue of 'social tone' - with many coastal towns struggling to maintain middle class vacationers looking for peace and quiet yet attempting to attract the free spending trippers and working class holiday makers after entertainment (a theme returned to often in subsequent chapters). Given the importance of cost, decline is seen largely as a product of affluence, with first the middle classes, but soon the lower middle class and workers abandoning the resorts for independent travel in the undeveloped coast and hinterland of areas like Devon and Cornwall, in a variety of inland holiday locations from historic cities to the wilds of Scotland, or even ultimately to resorts abroad.

'Travelling to the Coast' makes clear Walton's belief that the decline of rail was central to the collapse of the resorts and the shift in their physical and cultural character - a theme he returns to in subsequent chapters. It shows how railhead resorts maintained their dominance to the 1950s when motor bikes and cars joined buses and coaches in changing resorts and their environs, whilst planes allowed escape to Europe and beyond. In particular, motor vehicles demanded car parking space and caused jams on the inadequate roads, prompting the promotion of major urban change, as well as changing resorts by decanting the beds from guest houses to caravans, chalets, cottages and tents in the surrounding countryside. Furthermore, they facilitated a shift in the way people used coastal resorts, freeing them from the constraints of the town and beach so that the resort became just one part of the holiday. With these changes the coastal resorts once again became a location for day-trippers, or increasingly for resident retirees and suburbans.

As might be expected, Walton is at his best surveying 'Seaside Pleasures', describing with passion and affection the opulence and splendour of Victorian and Edwardian piers, winter gardens and pleasure palaces. It is here that he returns to the theme of the seaside as a liminal place where people could and did do things they wouldn't do at home - even when most of the folks from home were also there. [96-7] Most liminal of all was the pier, as he explains (possibly a little tongue in cheek):

In principle it is the essence of liminality, with more convincing credentials as phallic symbol than the tallest tower, as it points a stiff masculine technological probe into the mysterious feminine world of the sea, linking the elements to generate the special frisson of pleasure and the privileged gaze that go with occupying the bridging-point of two worlds. [104-5]

Walton is highly critical of the resorts failure to make the most of their Victorian pleasure heritage, especially Brighton's shift to an emphasis on its Regency past and the antiques trade, or even Blackpool's resort to kitsch capital of the north which, whilst owing something to the traditional liminality of the seaside resort, is predominantly focused on the bars and clubs of the town centre. As he shows, by the end of the century the British population were much more inclined to go to inland theme parks with only Blackpool Pleasure Beach rivalling the pulling power of the likes of Alton Towers. This, Walton feels, need not have been if resort politicians and entrepreneurs had acted to capture such ideas in the beginning and fit them into the overall seaside experience. This failure is seen as part of a broader failure to look after the seaside environment, which deterred visitors and changed the character of the resorts.

Thus, 'Seaside Environments' covers interesting ground, discussing attempts to regulate resorts, battles with

the sea through expensive sea defences, endeavours to manage traditional seaside economies and lifestyles, especially those of fisherfolk and their homes, and the long running war with sewerage. Walton places particular emphasis on the 'degradation of the built environment' with architecture losing its distinctiveness, emblems of seaside pleasures demolished or allowed to decay, whilst shopping precincts and sea-front flats typical of 'up-market south-eastern retirement resorts...reduced the visual sense of seaside place identity'. Yet this is an essentially northern, populist conception of what the seaside town was or should be. For one of the very distinctive features of the seaside in the twentieth century, and especially along the south coast, was the way it encouraged a rare willingness in the English to live on one level, whether in bungalows or low-rise blocks of private flats along the seafront. Whilst Blackpool and similar northern resorts may not have adopted such architectural styles so readily, the wide esplanade with white blocks of flats is as emblematic of the seaside to most southerners as the pier or the amusements. But this is a relatively minor point, which should not detract from an interesting chapter, which raises some important general issues about urban environments in the twentieth century.

Linking a number of the chapters together, 'Seaside Economies' highlights their highly volatile nature, the centrality of casual labour, much of it seasonal, high levels of small proprietorship, low wages, long hours and rampant winter unemployment. These generic problems were aggravated first by the changes in the resorts between the 1950s and the 1970s, with the commensurate decline of the guest houses, then made much worse by the collapse of the domestic seaside holiday in the seventies and eighties which saw populations increasingly dominated by retirees on fixed incomes with low expenditure patterns, and the unemployed who gravitated to the seaside drawn by the prospect of casual work and the lure of extensive bedsit accommodation.

The nature of resort economies greatly influenced the structure of 'Seaside Politics', giving Walton one of his most original chapters. Here he explores how politics operated in what were essentially one party towns. He finds that, like Liberal dominated nineteenth century towns, the battles were between spenders and economisers, between those who wished to maintain 'social tone' and those who looked to increase the entertainment side. In general these political divisions mapped onto the two or three main resort constituencies - holiday trade, retirees and suburbans - with the former group often backing the spenders, whilst the latter groups tended to favour low rates and high social tone and thus supported the economisers. In fact what Walton shows is that 'ideology' had little to do with urban politics in much of Britain certainly until the sixties, with Tory administrations in places like Blackpool and Scarborough embarking on extensive public investment and municipal trading, especially on leisure provision, which would have been criticised as extravagant in towns not dependent on the holiday trade. Furthermore, Walton brings the history of seaside politics into the late twentieth century, attempting to unpack the collapse of seaside Toryism in the eighties and nineties as first Brighton then Blackpool succumbed to New Labour, and providing a humorous discussion of the final triumph of Brighton over Hove at the end of the twentieth century, a marriage which appeared to unite all aspects of the twentieth century seaside town.

There are few significant criticisms of this book. It does seem to privilege Blackpool and the northern seaside experience over that of the rather more complex southern coastal towns. In particular, Brighton receives few generous comments, except in relation to its annexation of Hove, whilst Southend and Margate are a little under-represented. In a related criticism, this distrust of the southern seaside leads him to draw too much of a distinction between seaside towns as holiday resorts and retiree 'Costa Geriatricas'. He downplays the links between the two - that many retirees may have holidayed in the town for years, or that retiring to the coast is just an exaggerated form of holiday. Overall neither the reasons why people have chosen the seaside as a main place to retire to nor the positive aspects of the development of older populations in coastal towns are fully explored, whilst the growth of coastal suburbs receives little attention. As suggested earlier, this northern image of the seaside also colours how a resort should look, with the red or white brick Victorian town, with central station, beach, pier, and amusements regarded as archetypal and the southern tendency towards modern blocks of flats on wide esplanades rejected as insufficiently seaside.

Yet these are minor criticisms and do not detract from the merits of what is a highly innovative exercise in urban history. For this stands as the first survey of the impact of a single industry on the urban environment

during the twentieth century and is unique in its coverage of the secular social, economic, political, transport and environmental history of a large number of towns of differing sizes from the substantial boroughs like Brighton and Blackpool, to the small but significant towns of Devon and Cornwall. These towns which were often the fastest growing places in the late nineteenth century and even well into the twentieth century, have, as Walton re-emphasises in his conclusion, been ignored by most historians for their failure to make things, their absence of class conflict, their Tory politics and their dominance by the middle class and by consumption. Yet as this book makes clear, these were paradigmatic urban environments of the mid-twentieth century, and Walton both fills in their largely missing history and provides a template for urban history in the coming years, combining traditional methods and concerns with the new methodology of cultural history in a broad comparative sweep.

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