

The Politics and Realities of One Cultural Landscape

This paper is about Blackpool, the seaside holiday resort in Northwest England that was the first mass working class holiday resort in the world. It is not deeply academic, but it is real. It is about a cultural landscape which played a vital role in the development of the industrial society and which is deeply embedded in the hearts, minds and souls of millions of people. It is also a living landscape which needs to grow and develop, whilst being true to its past. This paper describes the challenges and opportunities of living with this weighty legacy.

Introduction and scene setting

Blackpool does not claim to be the first seaside resort, but we believe it was the first mass seaside resort for the working classes. This paper is not a history lesson, but a brief introduction will help to set the scene. For this section we are wholly indebted to Professor John Walton of Leeds Metropolitan University's Institute of Northern Studies, who is the leading world expert on Blackpool and the development of the seaside resort. Blackpool began as a few scattered farms. There was some fishing, but no port or major commercial activities. The land was divided amongst small yeoman farmers with no major landowners, a fact which was to be significant in the development of the town.

It was not until the 1770s and 80s that people from the professional classes began to make their way to this part of the coast. Yet even in the early days Blackpool was noted for its popularity with 'Padjamers', artisans and small farmers who came by cart or by foot, to bathe and drink seawater at the August spring tides. When the railway arrived in 1840s many of these more lowly visitors took advantage of this new mode of transport, along with mill workers from the rapidly developing industrial towns. The railway company was keen to encourage trippers with cheap weekend tickets and by 1865 rail passenger arrivals had risen to over 285,000 per year.

However it was the period from the 1870s to 1914, which really changed Blackpool's fortunes and turned it into a world leader. It is impossible to provide totally accurate figures, but Prof Walton indicates that the annual total visitors roughly trebled to about 850,000 between 1865 and 1873 and then doubled again to nearly two million over the next twenty years. This figure was to reach nearly four million by the eve of the First World War. These were not solely working class visitors. Blackpool did continue to appeal to the middle-class holiday-maker, but it was the sheer volume of 'lower order' visitors which made such a direct and dramatic impact on the development of the town.

Blackpool's wartime economy (1914-18) remained remarkably buoyant, despite the cessation of the excursion trains. This was due to a number of factors. Significant numbers of British troops were billeted in the town, along with refugees. The rise in working-class purchasing power and the increased earning capacity of women continued to encourage visits to the town. The

physical location was also helpful, away from the 'front-line' resorts of the south coast and the exposed position of the east. In fact Blackpool began to extend its range picking up visitors from the Manx holiday market and further afield across the north of England and into Scotland (especially Glasgow).

The inter-war years saw a continued lead in the seaside stakes. By the mid 1930s it is estimated that there were seven million visitors to Blackpool each year, putting Blackpool well ahead of its rivals. The Second World War brought over three-quarters of a million Royal Air Force personnel to its training centre, along with large numbers of civil servants from London. The holiday trade remained strong too, once again boosted by its perceived 'safe' location, whilst an aircraft factory, opened locally in 1940, employed over 10,000 workers.

Success continued into the 1950s and 60s, with the Council claiming eight million visitors in 1969, but times were changing. A survey commissioned in 1972 indicated an overwhelming working-class, increasingly less wealthy and aging visiting public. There was an heroic fight-back, and a second survey in 1978 suggesting continued growth in the staying visitor public, with an increased proportion of higher spend, more affluent holiday-makers. Recent times, however, have proved more difficult, a fact reflected in Blackpool's move up the ranks of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation from 24th in 2004 to 12th in 2007. Consequently Blackpool is once again facing the challenge of re-inventing itself in an increasingly discerning market. One strand of this is the broadening and deepening of the town's cultural offer in general and the heritage offer in particular, which is completely new in Blackpool and forms the basis of the latter part of this paper.

One of the most significant and influential elements of Blackpool's seaside legacy is its built heritage. Anyone visiting Blackpool must have played the 'Who Can Spot Blackpool Tower First' game. This remarkable structure housing the world-class Tower Circus and the world-famous Ballroom was opened in May 1894 and still continues to draw the crowds today. Close by this is impressive Winter Gardens set of buildings, an intricate entertainment complex encompassing two theatres, the Empress Ballroom and the most amazing suite of 'fantasy' rooms designed by famous film set designer Andrew Mezzei which deserve to be better known. Blackpool is the only seaside resort which still has three piers. The North Pier is of particular note. Always known as the 'posh pier' it was designed by Eugenius Birch and opened in May 1863. It still retains its air of refined elegance. The Grand Theatre is a joy and a great survival story, complete with its interior designed by Frank Matcham. It was saved from demolition in the 1970s by a forceful lobby of predominantly local people.

It is not just the entertainment industry which has provided this spectacular heritage. Stanley Park and the surrounding area was developed in the 1920s.

It was designed by T. H. Mawson and remains one of the most important examples of municipal park design in Britain during the inter-war years.

Blackpool's Promenade was late to develop. The lack of any major land-owners to take the lead and the predominance of small scale developers hampered progress. Indeed it was not until the Local Board of Health took the initiative in the 1860s that the first promenade was created. The Prom is currently going through another transformation with a major scheme to strengthen the sea defences and reshape the promenade into a series of headlands. The scheme, which began in 2005 and will not finish until 2009, is an impressive expression of Blackpool's determination to be a first class holiday destination for the twenty-first century.

Of course it would not be Blackpool Promenade without the trams. Indeed no visit to Blackpool would be complete without a tram ride along the front. It is amazing for many reasons – its early beginnings (1885), its reinvestment in the 1930s and its continued survival to the present day. Yet at the same time it is a very good example of trying to marry the nostalgic expectations of today's visitors with the exacting demands of providing a modern public transport system – more about this later.

A tram ride along the front nearly always ends up at the Pleasure Beach, a truly remarkable amusement park. Its name indicates its origins, literally on the beach. It has been in the ownership of one family since the very beginning. It still has an impressive list of historic rides including the oldest, Sir Hiram Maxim's Flying Machine (1904). The park remains a mecca for roller coaster enthusiasts world-wide, boasting as it does the original 1930s Roller Coaster and Grand National alongside the 1994 Pepsi Max Big One, which was at the time Europe's tallest, fastest roller coaster.

For many people a trip to the Illuminations is an enduring memory and it is another feature unique to Blackpool. They began in 1912 and were an incredibly successful way of extending the traditional holiday season through to the early autumn.

Last, but not least, are the traditional boarding-house areas. Although perhaps not of the most memorable design their sheer number and survival to the present day is significant and they do form an essential part of the Blackpool story.

What this legacy means today

Blackpool's unique and strong heritage brings with it many opportunities, but many challenges too.

Whilst the survival of so many incredible buildings and entertainment sites is something to be celebrated, it presents enormous pressures for their owners. The Pleasure Beach is a good example of this. On a restricted site of forty-two acres it has to provide an amusement park with sufficient pulling power to cover all the running costs, develop new rides and return a reasonable profit. Whilst we heritage enthusiasts may wax lyrical about the importance and significance of the Pleasure Beach's historic rides, is it reasonable for us to expect a private operator to 'cherish' them if their popularity wanes as their maintenance costs increase? This thorny issue is perhaps demonstrated by the fact that English Heritage have been considering listing a number of historic rides in Blackpool for some time. They have yet to make a decision.

The Winter Gardens is a very large and complicated site. It includes some real gems such as the Pavillion Theatre, The Empress Ballroom and the Andrew Mezei themed rooms (the Galleon Bar, the Baronial Hall, the Spanish Hall and the Renaissance Room). It very much represents the golden era of seaside entertainment complexes, of which there are few other survivors on this scale. It is an expensive site to maintain and the changing fashions and expectations of modern holidaymakers make it a real challenge to operate the site as a successful commercial venture. This is sadly reflected in physical appearance of the Winter Gardens, which does show signs of neglect.

Blackpool Tower is our only Grade One Listed building. And our major iconic landmark. Just like the Winter Gardens it contains some amazing interiors. The present Ballroom was designed by Frank Matcham and opened in 1899. For many years, the BBC televised the popular programme, 'Come Dancing' from the Ballroom, although perhaps its best known feature is the Wurlitzer organ made famous by Reginald Dixon. The Circus first opened to the public on 14 May 1894 and has never missed a season since. The present interior of the Circus, completed in 1900, is yet another of Frank Matcham's creations. Probably the most famous entertainer to perform at the Circus in Charlie Cairoli. It retains its world-class reputation to this day.

Anyone looking at the Tower can appreciate the magnitude of its running costs. It takes 15,000 yards of carpet to cover the floor, for example, without even beginning to consider all the essential maintenance required to keep the structure in a sound condition. However the Tower management have taken a very positive and proactive approach to its future care and development of the site. The General Manager happily acknowledges it as 'Blackpool's Tower' and works in close co-operation with the Council's Buildings Conservation Officer to agree planned programmes of repair and maintenance to a high standard. Yet the fact that the Tower, like the Pleasure Beach, the Winter Gardens and the three Piers, is not eligible for public sector grants because it is in private ownership remains a contentious issue.

In the first section of this paper Blackpool's lack of any major land-owner was mentioned. This did have a significant affect on how the town developed physically. Whereas other seaside towns, such as Southport, were planned and laid out to incorporate grand avenues and vistas, Blackpool developed piecemeal and haphazardly and often, it is probably fair to say, not to a good standard either. Also the sheer number of boarding houses is unsurpassed. It was said, until fairly recently (and probably apocryphally) that there were more tourist beds in Blackpool than in the whole of Portugal.

This structural legacy is one of Blackpool's greatest challenges. The size and layout of the boarding houses make them unattractive to the average family of today, whilst proving very lucrative to a new generation of landlords who rent them out as Houses in Multiple Occupation to an increasingly transient and socially excluded clientele. The resulting disintegration in the social cohesion of local communities is one of the most distressing legacies which Blackpool is facing today. Coupled with the poor quality of much of the housing stock this is an issue which has no easy or quick answers.

One of the great joys of working in Blackpool is the opportunity to go behind the scenes at some very unusual venues. One such place is the Transport Depot which is home to the tram fleet. Visiting the tram works is like a trip back in time. Even the most modern looking Blackpool tram will probably have a 1930s chassis underneath and the age of most of the current vehicles means that replacement parts cannot be bought off the shelf. Indeed the tram works is nationally one of the most important custodians of traditional crafts including blacksmithing, upholstery and coach painting.

Talk to the team and what shines through is their passion for public transport and the historic significance of the Blackpool tram system. Yet marrying the two is an increasing challenge. Increasingly stringent health and safety and accessibility laws coupled with European directives mean that most of the Blackpool fleet will not conform to modern regulations within a few years. A Central Government grant will see the replacement of the track and the commissioning of a new fleet of state-of-the-art trams within a few years. Although conscious of their social responsibility (and the enduring popularity of the historic trams) only a token historic fleet, providing a representative sample of tram history, will be retained to ply the central promenade.

Finally we turn to the Illuminations, which demonstrates well one of the enduring issues faced by all Blackpool operators – the pull of sentimental nostalgia versus modern day expectations. Speak to virtually anyone in the North West and they will have a Blackpool story, often many stories going back several generations. People returning to Blackpool with their own children years after the last visit with their own parents is commonplace. Each one of those people will have a rose-tinted memory of the resort and are mighty offended to find that things have changed. Equally (and it's often the same

people) complain that there is no point going to Blackpool because it's just the same!

Marrying these apparently opposing views is a real challenge, which the Illuminations staff are trying to tackle in new and innovative ways. They do acknowledge the importance of maintaining the authentic feel of the traditional promenade show whilst experimenting with new ideas. Last year, for the first time, an external designer, Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen, celebrity and interior designer was commissioned to design a new stretch of lights in front of the Tower. He will return this year to unveil a new tableau. The Illuminations Department has also branched out into developing light shows in other parts of the town and at different times of the year, including commissioning new light installations by leading contemporary designers. They are also working with the local college to develop a new foundation degree in Illumination, which will bring together the technical and creative aspects of light shoe design.

Putting Heritage at the heart of regeneration

One of the most visible demonstrations of Blackpool's regeneration is the new South Promenade and, positioned along it, The Great Promenade Show. The Show is made up of ten specially commissioned contemporary art works inspired by Blackpool's natural and human history. From the natural sounds of wind and water to the freak-shows of Victorian Blackpool this is a genuine example of the past inspiring the present. Nationally recognised as an example of good practice in regeneration through public art, for most people it is known as the project which gave Blackpool the biggest Mirror Ball in the world – a very clear acknowledgment of Blackpool's undisputed role as the ballroom dancing capital of the world.

This very creative demonstration of Blackpool's changing approach to heritage was followed up by Blackpool Council's publication of 'Blackpool Heritage' in 2005, a portfolio of major heritage projects planned by the Council and its partners over the next five to ten years. This was followed the next year by the Heritage Strategy 2006-10.

These documents are important for two reasons. Firstly this was the first time that the local authority had articulated the significance of Blackpool's past on not only a local, but a regional, national and even international level. The significance of this statement was given greater weight as its author was Professor John Walton, who has an international reputation as a social historian who specialises in seaside heritage. Secondly was the sheer scale of the ambition for heritage which the Council proclaimed. It is rare indeed that strategies can be described as visionary and inspirational. Actions included the creation of a heritage service and the appointment of the first ever head of heritage, the implementation of a Townscape Heritage Initiative and the desire

for Blackpool to become a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Updates on all these projects will be provided later in this paper.

Perhaps the greatest legacy of these two documents is the improved infrastructure for heritage which has led to a heightened profile and better co-ordination. External to the Council, the Heritage Forum now brings together all organisations in the town with an interest in heritage. It meets quarterly, with a regular attendance of more than thirty people, and can always be relied upon for a lively debate. The Council's Heritage Officers Strategy meetings encourage a more joined-up approach to heritage initiatives. Attendance at regional meetings, such as the Lancashire Museums Forum, has raised the professional profile within the northwest, whilst regular meetings with significant regional organisations, such as the Heritage Lottery Fund, has helped cement Blackpool's place as 'serious' players in the heritage sector.

June 2008 will see the end of a major heritage project in Blackpool which has seen Stanley Park transformed by a £5.1 million Heritage Lottery funded restoration project. For the Culture and Communities Directorate, this is a very successful demonstration of its the capacity and vision to plan and manage a major project. The result is a nationally significant inter-war public park restored to its former historic glory and still providing a top-class cultural facility. It has included important infrastructure replacement and buildings restoration as well as re-instatement of original planting schemes.

The Townscape Heritage Initiative is a £1.1 million scheme to improve the built environment in the centre of Blackpool through a combination of small shop-front schemes and major projects such as the Metropole and Clifton Hotels and the town's War Memorial, the Cenotaph. The scheme has raised the profile of heritage in the private sector by starting a public debate and providing financial support for quality schemes to help safeguard the built heritage of the town.

One of the greatest unknown treasures in Blackpool is the wealth of historic archive and artefact collections. Many of these are in private hands, although some real gems are in the ownership of Blackpool Council.

The Blackpool Illuminations department has the most amazing archive numbering more than 23,000 items. It is mainly made up of illustrations & technical drawings, photographs and slides although there are also examples of larger 3D items. This collection is unique, representing as it does a special feature of the Blackpool experience which does not exist anywhere else in the world.

The Tourism department's Collection contains almost 19,000 items including brochures, photographs, newspaper clippings and posters. This collection is significant as it records the development of the image which Blackpool has created of itself and how it has projected that externally. The holiday guides, for

example, include an unbroken run from 1924 to the present day and publicity photographs from the 1930s onwards show the development of the seaside industry. The collection also has some really special items such as the truly beautiful posters from the 1930s.

Currently these collections have no documentation, listing or cataloguing. They are stored in poor quality, inappropriate locations and are inaccessible to public and researchers alike. Their enormous potential for exhibition, research, education and community learning has now been recognised and a major documentation, digitisation, re-packaging and re-storage of the Illuminations collection is about to start. The end result will be a collection which is safeguarded for the future and both virtually and physically accessible.

Also at the planning stage is a new Heritage Centre which will be based at the Central Library. The Centre will provide the opportunity to house and make accessible these archive and artefact collections together with the local studies library.

Admission All Classes is another example of Blackpool's recognition of how its heritage remains relevant today and can be used as the anchor for twenty-first century resort development. It is an eighteen-month joint project between Blackpool Council and the University of Sheffield's National Fairground Archive, and is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council's Knowledge Transfer Programme. It consists of ten themed weekends, re-interpreting and celebrating popular entertainment between 1850 and 1950, culminating in a grand finale in October 2008. Based on solid academic research and knowledge, it brings to a new and wider audience modern research on the entertainment history of Blackpool – variety, film, sideshows, burlesque, end of the pier – and brings them up to date with a modern twist.

It has enabled the town's historic venues, such as the Tower and the North Pier, to experiment with new events based on 'old-fashioned' themes. It has raised the profile of Blackpool and its entertainment heritage through national media such as appearances on the Richard & Judy Show and Radio Four's Women's Hour, many column inches in The Guardian, The Independent and others and articles in several Sunday supplements. It has also attracted a new audience, even enticing people from London for the weekend! It will have a lasting legacy too. The Masked Carnival Ball, one of the most flamboyant events held in the Tower Ballroom, will be held again next year as part of the Showzam Festival.

Building on the Legacy

This paper will conclude with Blackpool's two boldest and most dramatic heritage ambitions.

When the Heritage Strategy was published the ambition which caused the greatest interest – and most derision – was the aim for Blackpool to be recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The national media had a field-day with some outrageously rude comments about Blackpool and its lack of culture of any kind, let alone the world class variety.

So what makes Blackpool think it should be recognised as a World Heritage Site? Most people would think of ‘world heritage’ as the most famous, most beautiful and most monumental places around the world, such as The Great Wall of China or the Taj Mahal and indeed they are. However the official definition of a World Heritage Site is a place with ‘Outstanding Universal Value’ which goes beyond national boundaries. In the case of Blackpool it is our belief that the town was the first mass seaside resort in the world and therefore represents the now huge, world-wide phenomena of the seaside holiday.

Becoming a World Heritage Site is a long and complicated process. In the first instance Blackpool needs to secure a place on the UK Tentative List, a short list of potential sites which the UK will be putting forward in the next ten years or so. It is anticipated that there will be an opportunity for Blackpool to express an interest in joining the Tentative List later this year.

The UK puts forward one site from its Tentative List each year to be considered for inscription as a World Heritage Site. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) make this decision.

Much solid work has been done to underpin Blackpool’s claims. They have been academically substantiated by the work of Professor John Walton, whilst the significance of the town’s built heritage is currently the subject of a detailed survey part-funded by English Heritage. The steering group leading the process is working its way through an ambitious action plan. It is probably fair to say that whilst we still have a long way to go, the laughter has been replaced by an intriguing interest on Blackpool’s progress.

In 2006 an article appeared in The Times announcing the closure of the National Theatre Museum in Covent Garden. The Museum was a branch of the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). Blackpool recognised the appropriateness of the opportunity and contacted the V&A. Two years on Blackpool Council and the V&A have formed a strategic partnership to explore the feasibility of developing a brand new National Museum of the Performing Arts.

The plans centre around the creation of a dynamic and vibrant museum which has the National Theatre Museum collections at its core, but encompasses a much more diverse interpretation of performance to include popular entertainment, variety, street theatre and circus. Interaction and participation would be at the very heart of the experience. However, although popular it would also be academically sound and rigorous. This would be reflected in the

relocation of the Theatre Museum collection and archive and the development of a national centre for theatre and performance research.

This strategic partnership is already reaping tangible benefits. The V&A's summer block-buster exhibition is 'The Supremes'. It opened in South Kensington in May. It is an exhibition of international importance and quality. It will be embarking on a limited UK tour in the autumn and the first venue outside London is Blackpool. It is the only northwest venue and it is anticipated that it will draw a new, culturally aware audience to the town. This is a very clear demonstration of how heritage can play an important role in broadening and deepening the culture offer in Blackpool and thus widen the visitor profile and contribute to the visitor economy.

This development is reflective of two very important Blackpool characteristics. The first is the depth and significance of Blackpool's performance history. Even today it has the largest number of theatre seats outside London. The list of popular entertainers who appeared regularly in the town is second to none. It is, after all, home to one of the greatest circuses in the world and remains the mecca for dance enthusiasts worldwide. The second is Blackpool's great entrepreneurial spirit. Who else would read an article in *The Times* and have the audacity to ring up one of the greatest museums in the world with such a proposal?

Conclusion

Blackpool, along with many other historic seaside resorts, face a range of challenges, many of which can be directly linked to its history. Yet ironically its past may also be the key to its future. There is no doubt that the town's heritage is an important resource which is increasingly being seen as an important strand in its regeneration plans. However perhaps the town's most significant legacy is its independent spirit which was very much fundamental to its development in the past and will undoubtedly be just as essential in its future.

Further reading

J.K.Walton: *Blackpool* (Edinburgh and Lancaster 1998)
www.admissionallclasses.com