

**Fresh Air and Fun:
Networks of Production and Patterns of Consumption**

Leonard Mars
University of Pécs

Paper for the Sixth International Archaeological Congress in the session “Heritage:
An Archaeology of Leisure Resorts”, University College of Dublin 29 June-4 July
2008.

This paper, an example of personal archaeology, is based on retrospective participant observation in Blackpool during the late 1950s and early 1960s when I was first a schoolboy and then a university student. The case material derives first from my employment as a waiter in a family-owned restaurant and secondly as a deckchair salesman for the corporation on the seafront. Initially I consider the problems of retrospection and memory before I examine my first theme, networks of production in the restaurant, which involve kinship ties and religious affiliation. The second theme investigates the consumption of food and also of leisure by both permanent residents in the town and the visitors who spent one or two weeks there in the course of their holidays. The third theme considers the impact of the seasons on the social structure and culture of Blackpool.

Seaside resorts, especially those that cater for mass tourism in the UK, were a product of the 19th and 20th centuries, facilitated by the development of the railways and also by social policies which granted industrial workers paid holidays. These resorts served different social classes so that Lytham St Annes was the realm of the middle class whereas its neighbour, Blackpool, catered for the working class. The primary reason for their existence was recreational, to provide entertainment and a break from the discipline of everyday routine in the textile towns and mining communities of the British Isles. The ludic nature of the holiday allowed for an inversion of everyday norms in clothing, food and drink and sexual behaviour. Max Gluckman termed such conduct “rituals of rebellion” (1954). The holiday by the sea was held to be therapeutic, and this medical aspect, together with the element of indulgence, was summed up in the phrase “fresh air and fun”.¹ The fresh air contrasted with the smoggy, polluted atmosphere of the home towns, whilst the fun represented the escape from the discipline of the workplace. This geographical

¹ The title of a volume edited by Bob Dobson and Doreen Brotherton (1988) based on a monologue by Stanley Holloway called *Albert and the Lion*

dichotomy between the coastal resort and its industrial hinterland was also reflected in the distinction between their respective populations, expressed as that between residents and visitors also termed holiday makers. The former were permanent and the latter were transients and although there was a symbiotic relationship between them it was one marked by ambivalence, at least on the part of the hosts. The permanent residents regarded the influx of visitors in the summer as an invasion which disturbed the town and which would return to normal life in the winter in what was termed “the off season”. Life for residents consisted of two seasons whereas for visitors it was confined to one. We can express the two sets of binary oppositions as follows:

Summer:Winter::Visitors:Residents

My parents, three brothers and I moved to Blackpool from Manchester in 1946, after the end of WW II to start a new life. My mother already had a brother and a sister who owned respectively an hotel and a guest house and so she decided to follow their example. This venture was short-lived so that by 1948 we had moved to a residential, semi-detached house, but occasionally in the 1950s, when summer accommodation in the town was scarce, and based on appeals from the local authority to make a room available, we took in a few visitors to supplement the family’s income.² Thus my family became involved in the main economic activity of the town, tourism. My brothers and I as young teenagers were involved as part-time wage-labourers in various activities that supplied services to the thousands of holidaymakers who flocked to the seaside to spend a week or two. We took such employment as part of our everyday life and so we did not take any notes or records of this work though I did record the hours of my labour on which my wages were based in my schoolboy diary³ nor was I particularly reflective at the time about the job. Consequently I draw on my memory, fifty years later, to structure my activities and relationships in the restaurant and on the deckchairs. My recollections are informed and coloured by my anthropological training and practice and would not have occurred to me at the time.

² Since we accepted visitors at the behest of the local authority to cope with the peak demand for accommodation we were exempt from the hotel and boarding house rate of taxation

³ Unfortunately these diaries have been lost during the many moves over the years.

The restaurant

I was fifteen years of age in 1956 when I began to work weekends in the Bloomfield Restaurant located off south central promenade and owned by Mr. and Mrs. Weston⁴. The latter managed the restaurant whereas her husband, whose main business was a shop that sold electrical goods, would pop in occasionally to keep an eye on things and to lend a hand on Saturday afternoon and on Sundays. I was told about the job by my aunt who had a lodger, an Irish, seasonal worker, who was employed as a waitress in the Bloomfield. The restaurant was only open during the holiday season so that all the employees were seasonal, some, the cooks and the fish fryers were retired local residents and others, the waitresses, were young women, Irish migrant workers who were saving for their dowries. These employees worked full-time during the holiday season, whereas I, and a few supplementary waitresses, were employed at weekends, or in my case seven days per week during the school holidays. The recruitment of the young Irish women was facilitated by the Catholic Church of which the Westons were members. I was the only male who waited on tables.

Mrs. Weston had a brother who had a farm locally and who supplied meat, poultry and potatoes to the restaurant. He also purchased fish from the nearby port of Fleetwood. Although the Bloomfield styled itself as a restaurant, it was mainly a fish and chip eatery which also sold steak pudding, a popular Lancashire dish.

The restaurant would be mothballed during the winter months since it did not cater for local residents and existed simply for the visitors. Even during the high summer season demand for its fare fluctuated according to the weather. If the sun shone then customers would flock in from the beach or the promenade since most boarding houses did not serve lunch. Whole families would arrive and if demand were high then they would queue until a table became available. On these occasions service was poor and we, the waiting staff, were urged to get people in and out as fast as possible especially if customers were queuing inside the restaurant both on the stairs and even in the aisles between the tables. In fact customers would seize a table before it had been cleared and set up for them. On such days staff would work

⁴ I have changed the names of the owners and of the restaurant.

without a break for hours on end. On the other hand, if the weather was bad, that is rainy, then visitors would not frequent the beach and so would not eat in the restaurant. Then, hourly staff like me would be told that they could go home early, perhaps at 2.00 or 3.00 pm. Of course my earnings would be cut because of the reduced hours and because of the lost tips. The amount of tips would also be lower in the peak period because it was impossible to provide a good service.

Health and safety legislation was non-existent in the late 1950s. For example, there was a single cubicle toilet on the upstairs floor that served both staff and diners, approximately 120 persons. Again at peak periods customers would queue to use this facility.

The whole business was based on minimal investment and maximum profit as the treatment of casual labour demonstrates, just as I might be dismissed early if demand was slack, so I would be obliged to work late, perhaps until 7.00 or 8.00 pm if there was a boom. The type of food that the staff was permitted to eat for their lunch also illustrates the economics of the restaurant. Thus we were restricted in our choice of menu. No meat dishes were allowed. The choice of fish too was limited to cod, which sold at two shillings and sixpence per portion (including chips, tea and bread and butter) whereas plaice at three shillings and sixpence was excluded. Steak pudding, which cost the customer two shillings and sixpence was allowed⁵. One further example that illustrates the profit margin concerns the bread and butter that accompanied any dish that included chips. There did not seem to be a Trades Description Act in those days so that the butter was in fact margarine. However a few years after my first employment it was possible to buy margarine premixed with 10% butter and this I would apply to the twelve to fifteen loaves of white sliced bread that I buttered first thing in the morning before I began to wait on the tables.

Consumption. The food served in the restaurant is an obvious and literal example of consumption by visitors and I shall elaborate on this topic before I proceed to discuss the consumption of leisure for which seaside resorts cater.

The vast majority of the restaurant's clientele comprised working class families who

⁵ In an historical reversal the current price of cod exceeds that of salmon even if the latter is farmed.

came from the industrial towns of Lancashire and other parts of the United Kingdom. The family, father, mother and their children, would arrive for lunch and the paterfamilias would order for the whole family as follows, “Soup, roast beef and Yorkshire pudding for me, fish and chips for the wife and half portions for the kids.” At first I thought this was idiosyncratic on the part of this particular father but later I discovered that it was normative.⁶ The father was entitled to a qualitatively, and quantitatively, different meal from that of the rest of his family.

If the service was often so poor then why did queues form for their fare? The answer is simple, namely, the restaurant did not seek to build up a loyal clientele that would return in future years. These were one off customers who in all probability would never come back, however if they were satisfied then they might return during the remaining days of their holiday, if they happened to be in the vicinity. This situation contrasts with the situation in the boarding houses where guests would book in year after year. Relationships between landladies, who may well have originated from the same town as their visitors, frequently developed into friendships manifest in the exchange of Christmas cards and sometimes invitations to the weddings of the visitors’ families.⁷

Leisure

The consumption of leisure and pleasure constitute the *raison d’etre* of seaside resorts and Blackpool provides such facilities in abundance. The most conspicuous example is Blackpool Tower, constructed in 1894 on Central Beach and visible for miles around, especially when lit up during the period of the Illuminations. This building is the icon of the town, reproduced as a souvenir in model form and also emblazoned on pottery and clothing. The tower hosts the famous Circus, a zoo, an aquarium, a dance hall and the renowned Wurlitzer organ, played for decades by the nationally known Reginald Dixon. The complex serves to satisfy the diverse needs of families, couples, and individuals in search of entertainment. The covered facilities provide a dry environment on rainy days which are not uncommon in a British summer.

Further south along the promenade is the amusement park called the Pleasure Beach which competes with the Tower as a major attraction. As the title of the complex makes clear, the purpose of the various activities on offer is fun, and the escape from mundane routine.

⁶ For further discussion see Mars (1997)

⁷ Cf. Walton (1978)

Liminality⁸ both in terms of time and place pervades the Pleasure Beach. Behaviour beyond the norms of everyday life is permissible, even demanded. “Carnavalesque” best describes the scene. At the entrance to the park stood the Casino which permitted gambling and also included a cinema, a restaurant and a billiard hall. Further inside was the Fun House, outside of which was a figure, encased in glass, of a mechanical dummy named the Laughing Man which entertained the thronging crowds infected by his guffaws. The dominant attractions were a series of rides such as the Big Dipper, the Grand National and Helter Skelter, a flying machine among others. Interspersed among these large attractions were a series of small stalls such as Guess Your Weight, Gypsy fortune tellers, coconut shies, shooting galleries, test your strength. Candy floss and sticks of Blackpool Rock were popular with both adults and children.

Another famous area dedicated to leisure, though often of a less salubrious and more voyeuristic kind, was the Golden Mile, situated on the sea front close to the Central Railway Station and stretching south towards Central Pier. This was where the spivs, racketeers and conmen operated alongside legitimate businesses such as Pablo’s icecream stall and Louis Tussauds’s Waxworks which housed the gruesome chamber of horrors.⁹ Titillating nude shows, freak shows such as the Fattest Lady in the World, the Bearded Lady, the Man with Two Heads, the giant rat and the defrocked priest, Rector of Stiffkey, who was exhibited in a barrel, featured at various times between 1920-1965. In addition dubious auctions of crockery, watches and bed linen were conducted by spielers whose patter would entertain the crowds that gathered both to buy and to watch. In the 1950s and 60s ownership of cameras was not widespread so that a few photographers would tout for trade among the visitors. Among their props were humorous cardboard cutout figures into which the punters would place their heads. On the beach opposite were several Punch and Judy shows as well as strings of donkeys that could be hired for a ride along the sands. The soul as well as the body was catered for by various groups of evangelical Christians that sought to attract converts. These were itinerant missionaries, often from the same cotton towns as the holidaymakers. The writer Jeannette Winterson relates her experience in one such group.¹⁰ This form of evangelism was generally looked on with tolerant

⁸ V.W.Turner (1969).

⁹ For an account of the Golden Mile see Mars. G. (1959) and also his paper to this conference.

¹⁰ “I was preparing for my sermons for a tent mission we had all planned in Blackpool” (1996: 111) Writing about a seaside resort in north Wales, she remarks, “we all took the bus to Llandudno to testify on the beach” (ibid; 37)

amusement except when conducted around midnight when it disturbed the slumber of holidaymakers in nearby in nearby guest houses (ibid: 113)

Consumption of fresh air by the seaside was considered to be therapeutic and an antidote to the smoggy, polluted atmosphere of the industrial hinterland. Thus convalescent homes for miners were established in Blackpool and hotels such as the Norbreck Hydro catered for health visitors. Many visitors would avail themselves of the deckchairs which the Blackpool Parks Department would hire out for a modest sum. Stacks of deckchairs, some holding 5000 others 1000, would be stored at intervals under waterproof canvas along the promenade. Each stack was manned by a permanent Parks employee, assisted by one or two students who were employed for the season. Families or couples would collect their chairs for a fee, which included a returnable deposit, from the stack and go down to the beach to breathe in the bracing air, to play in the sand, watch the Punch and Judy, play ball or eat ice-cream.

The deckchair business was weather sensitive. If it was raining then the stacks would be so uncovered as to construct a shelter for the attendants who would burrow inside like troglodytes. Occasionally, despite the rain, a hardy couple, would insist on hiring chairs which they would set up under the cover of one of the piers. "We've come for th'air and we're goin' to git it", they would utter with grim determination. Two or three hours later they would trudge back to collect their deposit. If it was sunny in the morning or the afternoon then perhaps 1000 deckchairs from a single stack would be strewn across the beach. Woe betide a sudden downpour for then the chairs would be abandoned on the beach because the modest deposit would not be worth the soaking. Thus the student attendant would be charged with collecting the chairs from the beach, an arduous task, made occasionally more difficult by the incoming tide.

Sometimes the customers would return the chairs inside out or would be unable to return them in their original folded shape. Then, with a deadpan face we would ask if they had hired them from our stack since we did not issue them in that form. On one occasion when my youngest brother manned a stack on the promenade opposite the Golden Mile which was exhibiting "the two-headed man", a customer remarked to her friend, "Ee! I would n't like to way up in the morning with that next to me on the pillow." "Don't worry love. It's two 'eads what 'ees got!" wryly commented the veteran attendant.

It goes without saying that the permanent residents did not hire deckchairs in the summer season.

Seasonality, culture and social structure.

As early as 1904 Marcel Mauss had analysed the impact of the seasons on the social organization and culture of Eskimo society. Since then others such as Evans-Pritchard (1940) have pursued this problem among the transhumant, pastoral Nuer of southern Sudan. Both of these studies concerned tribal societies with rudimentary technologies. Leisure resorts in industrial and post industrial societies allow us to pursue Mauss' insight in a different social context. In the case of Blackpool it is as if we are dealing with two different societies, that of the summer and that of the winter season. We have seen that the permanent residents of the town derive their livelihood, to a great extent, from the summer influx of hundreds of visitors for whom they provide facilities, both natural and cultural, that are not available in their own hometowns. Although the residents provide summer leisure facilities for the visitors they themselves do not usually consume them. For example, they do not eat Blackpool rock or candy floss; frequent the seasonal restaurants; ride on the donkeys.

In the winter the cultural activities of the permanent resident were more akin to those of their visitors who were now back home in their mining towns and textile cities. In the 1950s and early 1960s Blackpool Football Club regularly attracted crowds of 30000 or more spectators, who would travel there on the special buses provided by the municipal transport company these crowds resembled those painted by the Salford artist, L.S. Lowry. Greyhound racing was popular. In 1954 the town's team entered the Rugby League which was more the favoured sport of the industrial towns of Lancashire and Yorkshire and hence strengthened bonds with the places from which the holidaymakers came.¹¹ Fishing with rods from the piers provided cheap food as well as recreation for numerous men, whilst youngsters would race along the deserted promenades in their roller skates. Saturday dances, hops, both at the Tower ballroom and at the Winter Gardens were favourite places to meet the opposite sex as was the case across the country.

¹¹ The team moved out of Blackpool to Wigan in 1987 and was renamed Springfield Borough.

Frugal living in the winter months on the part of the residents was exemplified by the sale of mushroom stalks purchased from Moors market. It was in my late teens before I saw a mushroom with a head let alone consumed one. In Blackpool, as in the country at large, it was rare for people to eat out. Chinese, Indian and Italian restaurants were not yet part of the national landscape. Take away fish and chips was the typical fare of the working and lower middle classes.

Conclusions

Blackpool as a leisure resort catered mainly for the British industrial working class in the first two decades after WWII. A few middle class visitors would stay in the five star Imperial Hotel. There were also hotels and boarding houses that served the needs of the Jewish population. The boarding houses accommodated working class Jews whereas the Palm Court Hotel on South Shore was favoured by their middle class co-religionists. The Brereton Hotel near North pier was frequented by the upper working and lower middle class Jews. All these establishments were under the supervision of the Blackpool *beth din* and declared so in their advertisements which appeared in the Manchester and Leeds Jewish newspapers. With increasing standards of living from the mid 1960s, together with mass charter flights to the Spanish holiday resorts, so Blackpool suffered some decline in its popularity with the British working class.

In terms of production both boarding houses and restaurants were family businesses in which woman, usually wives but also divorcees and widows could achieve some degree of financial independence.¹² Usually a married couple would manage the boarding house but the husband would be a part-timer whose main income derived from a full-time job which sustained his family throughout the winter period and also throughout the summer. As a family business children would perform chores in the summer. Members of the extended family, for example a divorced or unmarried sister, might live with the landlady's family. In the restaurant business family networks were important in providing labour and additional labour was recruited from religious and neighbourhood networks.

¹² Walton (op.cit. chapter four.)

Leisure was a consumption activity. The fresh air and the beaches were free but the leisure resort provided a range of activities and objects to entice the visitor to spend the money¹³ that they had saved during the year to splash on their annual indulgence excursion to the seaside. Some objects were frivolous such as fancy hat that sported the logo “ Kiss Me Quick” and which represented the inversion of conventional norms. A permanent reminder of the holiday might be a photograph taken on the promenade by one of the professional photographers who touted for custom.¹⁴

The dichotomous social structure and culture of Blackpool was based on the seasonal distinction between summer and winter. In the summer the town was geared up to supply the needs of the massive numbers of visitors. As a service industry it was labour intensive and so demanded a supply of temporary workers. This labour supply came to some extent from local sources in the form of students who would be employed on public transport, in the hotels, bars, restaurants and in the municipal parks department. This pool of labour could not match demand so that workers were recruited from outside including Eire whose economy was depressed in that era. Generally the town’s permanent residents did not consume the leisure facilities which they supplied in the summer for the visitors, who were regarded as sheep to be fleeced so as to sustain the townsfolk in the unproductive winter months. It was during the winter that Blackpudlian popular culture came to resemble that of its inland towns and cities from which many of its citizens had originated.

Can a case study of Blackpool illuminate general anthropological problems of leisure resorts? It is singular in some respects, for example its seven mile stretch of beach and its cut down version of the Eiffel tower, but it exhibits general characteristics of a town whose economy is based on a service industry which caters for the British working class.

Numerous seaside holiday resorts developed in Britain in the mid- nineteenth century, facilitated by the growth of the railway network. Some of these visitors came on “railway specials”, an excursion train that took passengers for a single day to the seaside, a magical place that many industrial workers from the cotton and woolen mills of Lancashire and

¹³ Martin, “As we moved along the Prom we kept nearly colliding with people who wanted our money: the flowersellers, booksellers, quack doctors, all trying to stop you in your tracks by shouting at you.” (2005:250)

¹⁴ Cameras were expensive and so not part of the kit of a working class visitor. The Kodak Brownie 127 which was manufactured in 1952 and which sold 127 million units in the next fifteen years signalled the eventual demise of the street photographers. (Kodak Brownie website.)

Yorkshire had never seen.¹⁵ During the “wakes weeks”, when the factories would close, the workers would migrate en masse to Blackpool, to partake of the air and the fun and to indulge themselves. This would be a liminal week in their calendar when the normal rules, discipline, and routine of working life would be cast aside.

How people behave on holiday has been and still is a topic worthy of further research. Such research could compare different resorts in Britain and examine their clientele in terms social class and their different leisure pursuits. The investigation could be extended to how Britons behave in foreign resorts and how continental Europeans behave on holiday. An anecdotal account of behaviour in a Black Sea, Romanian resort from the 1950s, supplied by my wife, Agneta, is revealing. This resort was not accessible to the masses but was the preserve of privileged members of the Communist party to which my wife did not belong.¹⁶ Tourists from other parts of the Warsaw pact would also holiday there. Swimming into the sea Agi, and others, would buy foreign-made cosmetics which were not available in Romania and would also engage in dangerous and prohibited conversation with foreigners. Thus an element of political protest against the regime contributed to a risky part of the exchanges, both economic and conversational. Thus an element of political protest against the regime constituted a risky part of the transactions, both economical and conversational. Once again we can see that the seaside resort afforded the opportunity to transgress norms decreed by the state and so results in rites of rebellion.

Acknowledgements.

My brother, Gerald, provided the stimulus to write this paper for this conference which was written during my tenure of a visiting professorship at the University of Pécs, funded by the European Union’s Marie Curie Foundation, whose assistance I am pleased to acknowledge. I am grateful to my colleague, Professor Gábor Vargyas, then Head of the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at Pécs for his invitation to join him and his colleagues. The University of Swansea, Wales continues to provide welcome help through the award of an Honorary Research Fellowship

¹⁵ cf. Andrew Martin’s novel, *The Blackpool Highflyer*, set in the year 1905, for a fictional but accurate account of Halifax mill workers making the trip to Blackpool and other northern resorts.

¹⁶ She accompanied illegally a friend who was the daughter of a party official.

References

- Dobson, Bob and Brotherton, Doreen 1988. *Fresh Air and Fun: A Blackpool Miscellany*
Landy Publishing. Blackpool.
- Evans-Pritchard, Edward, E. 1940. *The Nuer*. Clarendon Press. Oxford.
- Gluckman, Max 1963 "Rituals of Rebellion" in *Order and Rebellion in tribal Africa*,
(first published 1954) Cohen and West. London.
- Martin, Andrew. 2005. *The Blackpool Highflyer*. Faber and Faber. London.
- Mars, Gerald. 1959. *Blackpool's "Golden Mile" Unpublished manuscript* . 19 pp.
- Mars, Leonard. 1997. "Food and Disharmony: Commensality Among Jews". *Food and Foodways*. Vol 7 (3). 189-202
- Mauss, Marcel. 1979. *Seasonal Variations Of The Eskimo*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
London. Translated from the French edition of 1950
- Turner, Victor, W. 1969. *The Ritual Process*. Aldine. Chicago.
- Walton, John, K. 1978. *The Blackpool Landlady: A social history*. Manchester University
Press.
- Winterson, Jeanette. 1996. *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*. Vintage. London.

