

The Seaside Resort as World Heritage Site? The Case of Blackpool

John K. Walton and Jason Wood

In this chapter we discuss the English seaside resort of Blackpool and its bid for inscription as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, as the world's first working-class seaside resort.¹ We start from the premise that the seaside resort has become a ubiquitous kind of town across the globe, adapting itself to varying climates, cultures and markets, but forming a distinctive kind of urban experience for residents and visitors alike.² The beach holiday, in particular, is a highly important component of the international tourist industry, the greatest and fastest-growing agent of economic expansion, social and cultural transformation of the new millennium, and with the potential to have the most disruptive environmental impact.³ Its origins are firmly rooted in the British Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and it has become an even more ubiquitous and significant British cultural export than association football, as its reach has become truly global, extending across North America in a way never matched by 'soccer', and limited only by extremes of latitude and temperature.

The commercial exploitation of the shoreline and the sea as sites of health and pleasure has antecedents in classical antiquity, but began in its modern guise as an English invention of the early eighteenth century, as bathing under formal medical direction became visibly a commercial operation, and part of a wider commercial leisure culture, at the North Sea resort of Scarborough in the 1730s.⁴ It then spread along much of the English and Welsh coastline during the eighteenth century, in step with the commercial and incipient industrial revolutions of the period but building on older popular sea-bathing customs which had widespread analogues elsewhere in Europe. It was soon stimulated by the revaluation of maritime (as well as mountain)

¹ For an earlier discussion, see John K. Walton and Jason Wood, 'World heritage seaside', *British Archaeology* 90, pp 10-15.

² John K. Walton, 'Seaside resorts and maritime history', *International Journal of Maritime History* 9 (1997), pp. 125-47.

³ www.unep.org/pc/tourism/sust-tourism/economic.htm and www.wttc.org accessed 28 January 2007.

⁴ Loykie Lomine, 'Tourism in Augustan society (44 BC – AD 59)', in John K. Walton (ed.), *Histories of Tourism: Representation, Identity and Conflict* (Clevedon: Channel View, 2005), pp. 71-87; Jack Binns, *The History of Scarborough, North Yorkshire* (Pickering: Blackthorn Press, 2001), pp. 93-104.

landscape and spectacle as attractive, exciting and sublime, making seaside and shore into worthy objects of artistic appreciation as well as being sites of health and physical exercise and places of curiosity, collecting and classification. The conventional trappings of pleasure and polite sociability were soon added. Alain Corbin has rightly drawn attention to the importance of this sea-change in attitudes to the beach, the shore and coastal activities, but he underestimates the pioneering role played by the early English seaside resorts in the development and fostering of these new sensibilities.⁵

Blackpool makes no claim to be in the vanguard of these developments, although it was already developing a summer sea-bathing season by the middle of the eighteenth century and was well established as a small resort with a few hundred habitués when its first history was written in 1788.⁶ It lagged behind Scarborough, Margate, Brighton and other pioneering centres of the seaside holiday in England and the world; and by the time it emerged as a large and distinctive seaside resort in the late nineteenth century the seaside holiday had spread into Europe, starting with northern France and its North Sea neighbours from the late eighteenth century onwards and spreading northwards, eastwards and southwards in the nineteenth century, adapting to differing cultures and circumstances along the way.⁷ Blackpool's distinctive character developed during the third phase of the rise of the British seaside resort system, following the rapid expansion of many resorts between the 1840s and the 1870s as railway extension cheapened access to the coast and reduced journey times for the middle-class family market which became the main staple of the Victorian coastal resort. The period between the 1870s and the First World War saw the consolidation of existing resort networks, the development of small new resorts on remote coastlines, and the rise of working-class demand as a distinctive and significant element in seaside resort economies within easy reach of London and the industrial conurbations of the English north and midlands.⁸ Within this framework Blackpool

⁵ A. Corbin, *Le Territoire du Vide* (Paris: Flammarion, 1990); John K. Walton, *The English Seaside Resort: a Social History 1750-1914* (Leicester University Press, 1983), Chapters 2-3.

⁶ William Hutton, *A Description of Blackpool in 1788*, edited by R. Sharpe France (London: Hodder and Stoughton for the University of Liverpool Press, 1944).

⁷ John K. Walton, 'The seaside resorts of western Europe, 1750-1939', in Stephen Fisher (ed.), *Recreation and the Sea* (University of Exeter Press, 1997), pp. 36-56.

⁸ John K. Walton, 'The demand for working-class seaside holidays in Victorian England', *Economic History Review*, second series, 34 (1981), pp. 249-65; idem., 'The seaside resorts of England and Wales, 1900-1950: growth, diffusion and the emergence of new forms of coastal tourism', in A. Williams and G. Shaw (eds.), *The Rise and Fall of British Coastal Resorts* (London: Cassell, 1997), pp. 21-48.

emerged at this time as the world's first working-class seaside resort, and a unique centre of the popular entertainment industry, as it moved from being a second-rank provincial middle-class centre depending for its custom mainly on the industrial towns between Preston and Manchester, to explosive growth based on expanding working-class markets drawn from wide areas of industrial northern and midland England.

The growth of the popular holiday market in Blackpool during this period has no parallel in Europe, and the only possible challenge to its claims to primacy comes from the United States. Statistics of visitor numbers are notoriously 'soft', but calculations based on passenger train arrivals during the summer months suggest that the numbers increased from up to 850,000 in 1873 to 1.3 million in 1883, 1.9 million in 1893, 3 million in 1903 and 3.85 million in 1913. These are corroborated by informed contemporary estimates, and were far ahead of any other British resort, despite the burgeoning popularity in these years of seaside towns on the Lancashire and North Wales coasts, and also in the east and south-east and on the Bristol Channel.⁹ Meanwhile Blackpool's resident population, counted at an April census before the summer season began, nearly quadrupled to more than 48,000 between 1881 and 1901 and continued to grow to more than 58,000 over the next decade. Blackpool was neither the largest nor the fastest-growing British seaside resort between 1881 and 1911: the southern and south-eastern resorts of Brighton, Bournemouth, Southend and Hastings, in London's orbit, had larger off-season populations in the latter year, and Bournemouth and Southend added more inhabitants to their resident populations over the thirty years.¹⁰

But what was unique about Blackpool was the sheer scale of the growth of its working-class holiday industry. Above all, its spectacular expansion was fuelled by increasing family incomes and spending power in the manufacturing towns of Blackpool's industrial hinterland, especially the 'cotton towns' of south and east Lancashire. This was the birthplace of the world's first working-class consumer society in the late nineteenth century, which saw the origins of professional football and convenience foods (especially fish and chips), and the growth of the popular entertainment industry on an altogether novel scale. Paid holidays were a thing of the

⁹ John K. Walton, 'The social development of Blackpool, 1788-1914', PhD thesis, Lancaster University, 1974, p. 263, Table 5.2; *idem.*, *English Seaside Resort*, pp. 71-2.

¹⁰ Walton, *English Seaside Resort*, pp. 64-9.

future, but wave upon wave of visitors descended upon Blackpool week by week, sustained by annual savings through holiday clubs, as the traditional summer ‘Wakes’ festivals adapted themselves to the new popular fashion for the seaside as they followed each other in regular succession from early July to early September.¹¹ The town’s infrastructure responded to the growth in demand, and municipal and private investment in amenities and entertainment stimulated it further in return. Local government invested in a uniquely spacious promenade, which opened ceremonially in 1870, and took a pioneering role in the supply of gas, electricity and electric tramways, while from 1879 onwards the local authority obtained unique powers for advertising the town’s attractions, and made full use of them on a widening stage. In 1912 it inaugurated the electrical Illuminations along the promenade which sustained a lucrative extension of the season in September and October and further enhanced Blackpool’s visitor numbers and competitiveness through the twentieth century.¹²

Meanwhile a series of limited companies, drawing their capital from hundreds of small shareholders, built pleasure palaces of increasing elaboration from the 1870s onwards, the highlights being the Winter Gardens, developed in phases from 1875 onwards, and the iconic Tower, which opened in 1894 and became the emblem and symbol of the resort as the epitome of the popular British seaside holiday. The Grand Theatre, a recognized masterpiece by the specialist theatre architect Frank Matcham, was one of many impressive smaller products of these years. There were also three promenade and pleasure piers, solidly constructed to withstand the challenging local climate, from the middle-class North Pier of 1863, through the South Jetty (Central Pier) of 1866, which was soon given over to the clogs and heavy-footed dancing of the working-class ‘cheap trippers’, to the Victoria or South Pier of 1893. Between the Central Station, which became the point of arrival for swelling throngs of trippers from the mid-1870s onwards, and the South Jetty the passing crowd generated a new demand for cheap informal amusements, which called forth a full-scale fairground on the beach. In the late 1890s, when the local authority began to regulate and reduce it, the operators of this array of stalls and booths transferred their businesses to the front gardens of the sea-front houses. This created what became known as the ‘Golden Mile’, famous for its freak shows, fast food, fortune-tellers and risqué entertainments. At the same time, and responding to the same imperatives, the first stirrings of what

¹¹ John K. Walton, *Lancashire: a Social History 1558-1939* (Manchester University Press, 1987), Chapter 13.

¹² Walton, ‘Social development of Blackpool’, Chapters 4 and 7.

became the Pleasure Beach amusement park became visible among the sand dunes beyond the terminus of the promenade electric tramway. This developed rapidly in the early twentieth century, with iconic rides and attractions such as the Sir Hiram Maxim Captive Flying Machine of 1904 and the Casino building of 1913.¹³ A further dimension of the town's sustained investment in the built environment of the popular holiday industry was the proliferation, following the promenade and radiating from the two main railway stations, of street upon street of distinctive red-brick houses purpose-built to accommodate visitors who came for a few days or a week at a time.¹⁴

There was nothing to match the sheer scale, range and originality of this development of a popular holiday industry before the First World War, driven overwhelmingly by demand from the industrial working class, anywhere else in Britain. Nor could the rest of Europe generate a credible competitor. The most dynamic French resorts in seaside locations catered for completely different markets, whether wealthy seekers after therapeutic winter climates or a festive summer combination of comfortably-off Parisians and international high society, as at Trouville or Biarritz. And, Nice apart, these were much smaller places. France was the leader on the European mainland, but the late and very limited development of working-class seaside holidays here, as compared with Britain, was indicated by the levels of fear and panic that were generated by the Popular Front's holidays with pay legislation in 1936, and its failure to live up to apocalyptic expectation. Elsewhere in Western Europe, Ostend and San Sebastián already had popular elements to their holiday economies, but these were lower middle rather than working class, and their numbers and visibility were dwarfed by the mainstream middle- and upper-class markets. Popular honey-pots of the future, from the Baltic to Rimini and the Spanish Mediterranean coast, were still in their middle-class infancy.¹⁵

Blackpool's only real competitor for the status of world's first working-class seaside resort was Coney Island, in the north-eastern United States. Other potential

¹³ P. Bennett, *A Century of Fun* (Blackpool: Blackpool Pleasure Beach, 1996).

¹⁴ Walton, 'Social development of Blackpool', Chapter 6; John K. Walton, *The Blackpool Landlady: a Social History* (Manchester University Press, 1978); idem., 'The Blackpool landlady revisited', *Manchester Region History Review* 8 (1994), pp. 23-31.

¹⁵ Walton, 'Seaside resorts of Western Europe'; John K. Walton, 'Seaside resort regions and their hinterlands in Western Europe and the Americas, from the late eighteenth century to the Second World War', *Storia del Turismo* (Naples) 4 (2003), pp. 69-87; idem., 'Tourism and politics in elite beach resorts: San Sebastián and Ostend, 1830-1939', in L. Tissot (ed.), *Construction of a Tourism Industry in the 19th and 20th century: international perspectives* (Neuchatel, Switzerland: Alphil, 2003), pp. 287-301.

transatlantic contenders came later to the fray. Argentina's Mar del Plata, a current candidate for the title of world's largest seaside resort, was still in its infancy in the late nineteenth century, when the railway arrived from Buenos Aires, and was taking off as a summer resort for the prospering middle classes of Argentina and its neighbours at the beginning of the twentieth.¹⁶ It is tempting to compare Blackpool with Atlantic City, the New Jersey resort for (especially) the north-eastern United States, but its census population was less than half that of the Lancashire resort in 1880 and less than a quarter at the turn of the century; and even as its visitor numbers surpassed those of Blackpool in the inter-war years, reaching 16 million on one estimate in 1939, the composition of this visiting public was still overwhelmingly middle-class.¹⁷

Coney Island was a different matter. It developed slightly later than Blackpool, but its enduringly famous amusement parks proliferated from the end of the nineteenth century, when the sheer number of its visitors, drawn overwhelmingly from New York City and its immediate surroundings, overtook Blackpool and left it well behind. By 1910 it laid claim to twenty million visitors per year.¹⁸ But there is more to the story than this. The visitors were overwhelmingly day, half-day and evening trippers, drawn mainly to the beach and the amusement parks, stalls and cheap shows. There was very limited accommodation for overnight visitors, much of it in the form of bungalows, and the famous amusement parks, Steeplechase, Luna Park and the short-lived Dreamland, were flimsily built, vulnerable to fire, and lacking in permanence. Even as its beaches attracted their biggest crowds in the early 1940s, Coney Island was already in decline as a popular resort; and it failed to generate and sustain the lasting architectural legacy of Blackpool.¹⁹

Meanwhile, the English resort was continuing to evolve in ways that matched and sometimes anticipated the new trends of the 1920s and 1930s, involving fresh air, exercise, swimming, sunshine and modernity, and reaching out to national middle-

¹⁶ E. Pastoriza, 'La historia política de una ciudad balnearia durante la primera mitad del presente siglo', *Nexos*, www.mdp.edu.ar/rectorado/secretarias/investigacion/nexos/11/politica.htm

¹⁷ Bryant Simon, *Boardwalk of Dreams: Atlantic City and the Fate of Urban America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 22, 34.

¹⁸ John K. Walton, 'The transatlantic seaside from the 1880s to the 1930s: Blackpool and Coney Island', in Neil Campbell *et al.* (eds.), *Issues in Americanisation and Culture* (Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 114.

¹⁹ M. Immerso, *Coney Island: the People's Playground* (Piscataway, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Charles Denson, *Coney Island: Lost and Found* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2002).

class as well as working-class markets as consensual estimates of its visitor numbers reached seven million in the latter decade. Blackpool is often imagined as an essentially Victorian resort, but the municipal Beaux Arts development of Stanley Park, the promenade gardens to north and south, the Solarium at Harrowside, and a string of swimming and paddling pools including the imposing classical South Shore Open-Air Baths, all offered ambitious and distinctive new amenities during this period, while the Pleasure Beach was given a modernist makeover during the 1930s under the supervision of Joseph Emberton, and private development brought an array of characteristic buildings of the 1930s to other parts of the town. Much of this provision endured into the twenty-first century, although there were more casualties here than among the late Victorian buildings that marked the original rise of the working-class holiday industry.²⁰ And Blackpool itself has continued to adapt to the changing desires of the popular holiday market through the difficult final third of the twentieth century, while retaining and celebrating much of its unique landscape of popular seaside enjoyment, and sustaining its distinctive atmosphere of popular revelry and participation. At the beginning of the twenty-first century Blackpool is passing through a difficult period of declining older markets and problematic new ones, but its present Council is making determined efforts at urban regeneration in ways that respect not only its traditions, which have a potent market value of their own, but also its ‘tradition of invention’ and innovation, as expressed enduringly in the town’s motto, ‘Progress’.²¹

Despite its iconic prominence in British popular culture (emphatically including Scotland, Wales and Ireland in the twentieth century), Blackpool has lacked the international visibility of some more glamorous European seaside resorts. The British seaside may have pioneered a great international cultural phenomenon, but its own resorts remained overwhelmingly for domestic consumption, and were hardly promoted, or even mentioned, by national tourism agencies and guide books aimed at international markets, which focused on London, the Home Counties and a conventional array of historic and scenic destinations such as Stratford on Avon, Oxford, York and the Lake District.²²

²⁰ John K. Walton, *Blackpool* (Edinburgh University Press, 1998), Chapter 5.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Chapters 6 and 7, and see commentary below on current developments.

²² John Beckerson, ‘Marketing British tourism 1914-50’, PhD thesis, University of East Anglia, 2003.

This emphatically does not invalidate Blackpool's case for World Heritage Site status. This is firmly grounded in the criteria for inscription listed by UNESCO, and corresponds to the growing recognition of the importance of industrial sites and remains in Britain, beginning with Ironbridge Gorge in 1986 and accelerating in recent years with the inscription of Blaenavon Industrial Landscape (2000), Derwent Valley Mills, New Lanark and Saltaire (2001) and the Mining Landscape of Cornwall and West Devon (2006). Blackpool is a living, evolving expression of the industrial archaeology of the popular seaside holiday industry, and its pleasure palaces, promenade, boarding-houses and shows are integral to this identity. The town will seek inscription for designated sites and areas associated with the working-class holiday and entertainment industries under one or more of the cultural criteria. It could go forward under any or all of at least three of the criteria: (iii) 'a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or has disappeared'; (iv) 'an outstanding example of ... (an) architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates a significant stage in human history'; and/or (vi), in that it is 'tangibly associated with ... living traditions', in this case of regional and national popular entertainment, and the notion of a 'living traditions' justifies the necessary openness to continuing change, which is essential to future survival and prosperity. Indeed the idea of continuing change that builds on living traditions is essential to the character of the place.²³

Having explained the context, made the case and examined it in relation to the World Heritage Site selection criteria, we now turn to the benefits World Heritage Site status would bring to Blackpool. Inscription as a World Heritage Site would formally acknowledge Blackpool's global status and prestige as the flagship site in the history of the popular seaside resort. In fact it would be the first seaside resort to enter the World Heritage List.²⁴ To be conferred with such recognition of the site's unique character and historical importance would be seen not only as a stamp of international approval, but also increase brand recognition for Blackpool worldwide.

Recognition as a World Heritage Site would raise the benchmark for heritage management in Blackpool. In the past the Council was slow to recognise the town's

²³ *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2005), para. 77.

²⁴ The World Heritage List currently includes 830 sites; 644 cultural, 162 natural and 24 mixed. See whc.unesco.org.

heritage. The years spanning the 1960s to the early 1990s saw the loss of a number of important historic buildings including, for example, the Palace, a late Victorian leisure complex (originally the Alhambra of 1899, and demolished in 1961) and Palatine Hotel (demolished in 1973), the (mainly) turn-of-the-century Central and North railway stations which had been the main traffic arteries into the town until the 1950s but were demolished in 1964 and 1973, and the interwar South Shore Open-Air Baths (demolished in 1983 to be replaced by an indoor pool complex) and Derby Baths (controversially demolished as recently as 1990). On a more optimistic note there were successful campaigns to avert demolition threats such as that mounted to save the Grand Theatre in 1973.²⁵ Regrettable though the losses are, redevelopment in a place like Blackpool was always inevitable and many of the buildings affected were unprotected by any form of heritage designation and/or under private ownership and therefore, with the important exception of the baths buildings, removed from the Council's direct intervention. Happily there remain abundant and accessible survivals and the number of losses has now been arrested.

Today, heritage, and World Heritage in particular, is seen as a key driver for sustainable regeneration. As a result, Blackpool Council is actively engaged in several conservation projects encouraged specifically by the interjection of grant aid from the Heritage Lottery Fund, whose north-west regional office identified Blackpool as a priority area for targeted development support in 2002-04.²⁶ The first of these projects saw the conservation of the Art Deco Solarium at Harrowside, opened in 1938, and transformed in 2004 as an environmental centre of excellence. The HLF has also supported projects at the Grand Theatre, St John's Church (the original Blackpool parish church) and elsewhere, and is currently funding the enhancement of the historic core of the town through its Townscape Heritage Initiative and the Stanley Park regeneration project.²⁷

²⁵ For these buildings, see Ted Lightbown, *Blackpool: a Pictorial History* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1994); Jane Shotliff, *Images of Blackpool* (Derby: Breedon Books, 1994). For an historical background to these events, see Walton, *Blackpool*, chapter 6.

²⁶ The HLF distributes a share of the income from the UK's National Lottery to projects aimed at preserving and making accessible the nation's heritage. For further information, see www.hlf.org.uk. Blackpool was one of five urban priority areas in North-West England. Selection was based on the Index of Multiple Deprivation, HLF commitment to date (i.e. number of grants under £1 million) and other regional factors.

²⁷ For further information, see www.blackpool.gov.uk

Aspiring to and obtaining World Heritage Site status are often triggers for increased inward investment by helping to lever additional sponsorship and enhancing the chances of grant aid for new projects. For example, the Blaenavon Industrial Landscape World Heritage Site in South Wales has generated an estimated £25 million in the eight years leading up to and beyond its inscription in 2000; and this to a relatively small-scale and niche market based on industrial archaeology and second-hand bookshops.²⁸ As well as further conservation work, including an extension to the THI area, Blackpool's ambitions are seemingly boundless. A number of heritage-related attractions are planned, including the relocation from London of the National Theatre Museum, the creation of a National Seaside Centre, and the development of a new Heritage Exhibition Centre in the Central Library and Art Gallery.

Heritage is a prized commodity in the competitive tourism market with the choice of tourist destination increasingly influenced by heritage provision. Blackpool already attracts some 11 million visitors every year, considerably more than existing World Heritage Sites.²⁹ The town's enhanced status as a heritage destination would provide significant additional tourism opportunities and may help attract a new, different, more up-market visitor base nationally and internationally.

Heritage is also increasingly seen as an indicator of local prestige and well-being. Building a successful case for World Heritage Site inscription can often raise civic pride in an area and play a part in social regeneration. In the case of Blackpool, which has suffered from extreme deprivation in recent years, a place on the World Heritage map would promote a positive image of the town and a clear focus for community cohesion. Putting together the bid will require the engagement of as many people as possible in helping to determine the significance and value of Blackpool as a place. This type of initiative will build support for what the Council is trying to do in the community, as well as providing many educational opportunities to preserve and celebrate further Blackpool's unique history and heritage.

Having outlined the potential benefits let us consider how Blackpool Council has pursued the initiative and examine its achievements to date. An important milestone in

²⁸ Personal communication from John Rodger, Blaenavon Project Director.

²⁹ According to the latest Visit Britain figures (2005), five of the UK's World Heritage Sites appear in the top twenty paid attractions in the country, the most visited site being the Tower of London (1.93 million). Top of the list of free attractions is Blackpool Pleasure Beach (6 million). For further information, see www.tourismtrade.org.uk

the bid for World Heritage Site status was the publication in July 2006 of the Council's first Heritage Strategy. In the introduction to this document the Council acknowledges it is a relative latecomer to the heritage scene, having focused its energies in recent years on arresting the decline in the town's economic and social fortunes. But to judge from the strategy's mission statement the conversion is sincere – 'to discover, conserve, learn from and celebrate the past in order to inspire a better future for the town and people of Blackpool.'³⁰ Setting out an agenda for action over the next five years, the document includes a range of ambitious projects and initiatives exploring the overlap between tourism and heritage interests with the aim of enhancing the value of Blackpool as a place for residents and visitors alike. In particular, the strategy seeks to capture and preserve memories, renovate and celebrate outstanding buildings, safeguard and defend a unique social history, and educate and converse with the public in a variety of exciting ways. The World Heritage Site campaign will plug into this agenda and seek to showcase Blackpool's fantastic heritage and colourful history on an international scale.

Publication of the Heritage Strategy coincided with the creation of the Blackpool Heritage Forum, designed to take the strategy forward by bringing together key players to ensure that projects are planned coherently and without duplication of effort. The Forum is chaired by the Council's Cabinet Member for Leisure and Culture who also acts as the Council's Historic Environment Champion.³¹ 2006 also saw the establishment of a World Heritage Site Steering Group of senior Council officers and consultants to oversee the development of the bid, and the appointment within the Council of two new managerial posts devoted to arts and heritage. Further appointments may be necessary as the World Heritage Site proposal gains momentum.³²

The initial task of the Steering Group was to prepare a campaign action plan and timeline outlining the specific tasks that would need to be addressed and by when, and

³⁰ *Heritage Strategy 2006-10* (Blackpool Council, 2006) p. 14. The importance of heritage for regeneration was already embedded in the Blackpool Local Strategic Partnership's *Vision for Blackpool: Blackpool's Community Plan 2004-2020* (Blackpool Council, 2004), especially p. 2; and *Corporate Performance Plan 2005-07* (Blackpool Council, 2005), pp. 27-8.

³¹ Historic Environment Champions provide leadership for heritage issues within local authorities to ensure that the implications for the historic environment are taken into account when authorities consider key decisions. For further information, see www.helm.org.uk

³² The need for proper resourcing at the local level for management and enhancement of World Heritage Sites was recently recognised in the *Government Response to the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee Report on Protecting and Preserving our Heritage* (DCMS, 2006), p. 12.

setting out the management and communication systems necessary to ensure that the World Heritage Site proposal gathered and sustained the support and endorsement of relevant organisations. To this end the Council became a corporate member of both ICOMOS-UK³³ and the Local Authority World Heritage Forum³⁴ and began to hold discussions with other potential stakeholders and interested parties, initially with a number of local authority officers responsible for existing World Heritage Sites in the UK, especially those in the neighbouring city of Liverpool (inscribed in 2004). The Council also sent delegates to a number of relevant seminars and conferences during 2006³⁵ and is in the process of creating a dedicated website hosting feature articles and an on-line newsletter. Promotional material is also being prepared.

It is recognised that seeking World Heritage Site status is as much a political as an academic exercise. An early meeting was therefore arranged with relevant officers at English Heritage, and later with that organisation's Chairman, Sir Neil Cossons.³⁶ The purpose of these meetings was to ensure the proposal would be taken seriously and to gain English Heritage's support. Following his visit to Blackpool Sir Neil agreed that '... there is potential for Blackpool to make a serious bid for World Heritage Site status. The historical arguments for the outstanding universal value of Blackpool have been well marshalled, and a good start has been made on understanding whether the physical manifestation of this history in the built environment of the town is sufficient to give Blackpool a chance of gaining a place on the Tentative List of UK World

³³ ICOMOS, the International Council on Monuments and Sites, is a non-governmental organisation whose mandate is the world's cultural heritage. It has special responsibility as adviser to UNESCO on cultural World Heritage Sites. ICOMOS-UK provides a UK forum for all those involved in the conservation of cultural heritage. For further information, see www.icomos-uk.org

³⁴ LAWHF is a forum of those British local authorities responsible for a World Heritage Site in their area or seeking World Heritage status. It seeks to raise awareness of World Heritage Site issues, to represent the interests of local authorities in relation to World Heritage matters, and to assist local authorities to fulfil their responsibilities in relation to the World Heritage Convention. LAWHF operates as a Special Interest Group of the Local Government Association. For further information, see www.lawhf.gov.uk

³⁵ These included the International Sites and Monuments Day Seminar 'Towns and Cities as Cultural Landscapes' organised by ICOMOS-UK (London, 6 April 2006); the 'World Heritage: Global Challenges, Local Solutions' conference organised by the University of Birmingham Ironbridge Institute and the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust (Ironbridge, 4-7 May 2006); and the 'Inspiring Cities: New Design in a World Heritage City' organised by the Organisation of World Heritage Cities (Edinburgh, 31 May – 2 June 2006).

³⁶ English Heritage is a government advisory body with responsibility for all aspects of protecting and promoting the historic environment. Sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport it works in partnership with several government departments, local authorities, voluntary bodies and the private sector. English Heritage manages a number of World Heritage Sites and employs a small unit responsible for World Heritage and International Policy. For further information, see www.english-heritage.org.uk

Heritage Sites.³⁷ As well as English Heritage, briefings were held with the local Members of Parliament representing Blackpool to seek their advice and approval and to encourage them to play an active role in the All-Party Parliamentary Group on World Heritage Sites.³⁸

In due course it is intended to launch a local campaign to get the people of Blackpool behind the bid. Participation in heritage projects and in local events, perhaps linked to national events like Heritage Open Days, will be important to get the community engaged in working together to discover, present and conserve the town's heritage. Particular emphasis will be given to involving young people as both participants and heritage 'ambassadors', with perhaps a World Heritage Discovery Day being staged in conjunction with local schools.³⁹ A crucial aim will be to understand what Blackpool's heritage means to local people and to learn how and why their heritage moves them, inspires them and keeps them fascinated. Initially this will be achieved through a qualitative survey of residents, businesses, students and school children, to which the views and attitudes of visitors could be added later. By this means it is hoped to encourage people to tell their own stories, to share their acutely personal and often intangible heritage and 'unofficial' history of Blackpool, and to explore further the forces that link these memories to specific places and thus hold together what the Council is seeking to identify, mark and celebrate under the World Heritage banner.⁴⁰ Obtaining such material may prove difficult in a town like Blackpool with its low indigenous and often transient population but a positive start has already been made with a number of oral and community history programmes either under way or being planned. These include an oral history of Blackpool's former villages and community

³⁷ Letter to Councillor Roy Fisher from Sir Neil Cossons dated 16 June 2006. In a lecture on 12 October 2006 to a meeting of the Society of Antiquaries of London, entitled 'Industrial Archaeology: The Challenge of the Evidence', Sir Neil made public his support for Blackpool's bid.

³⁸ Set up to promote UK World Heritage Sites in Parliament, the Group raises issues relating to World Heritage Sites with government, and works in partnership with LAWHF. English Heritage acts as the Group's secretariat. Gordon Marsden, MP for Blackpool South, is President of the British Resorts and Destinations Association and also Chair of an all-party group of seaside MPs.

³⁹ For this theme, see the educational resource kit *World Heritage in Young Hands* (UNESCO, 1999); *Mobilizing Young People for World Heritage*, World Heritage Papers 8 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2003).

⁴⁰ There is an expanding literature on the theme of public history, heritage value and community engagement; for example, the publications and projects of the charitable organisation Common Ground, especially the idea of 'local distinctiveness' which it pioneered. For further information, see www.commonground.org.uk See also the government sponsored document *People and Places: Social Inclusion Policy for the Built and Historic Environment* (DCMS, 2002) that argues that getting people involved with improving the local environment can lead to positive social and educational outcomes. *Heritage Counts: the State of England's Historic Environment* (English Heritage, 2006) further develops the theme of communities and heritage.

projects focused on the surviving windmill at Little Marton and on topics such as the Blackpool landlady and boarding-house, the role of the resort in wartime, and Blackpool's place in political history.⁴¹

Having established what progress and achievements have been made by Blackpool Council, let us now consider the international and national contexts within which a World Heritage Site bid can move forward, and what kinds of research and other initiatives will be required to support a future nomination.

UNESCO's inter-governmental World Heritage Committee receives annual nominations for inscription on the World Heritage List. Nominations are put forward by the appropriate national authorities or 'State Parties'. In the case of the UK, the State Party is the UK government. In an effort to redress imbalances in the World Heritage List, the World Heritage Committee presently restricts European countries effectively to one nomination per year. The World Heritage Committee cannot consider a nomination for inscription unless the site has already been included on the State Party's so-called Tentative List.⁴² The current UK Tentative List, published in 1999,⁴³ is now due for review by the government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport; although at the time of writing the terms of reference and timetable have yet to be announced. What is clear is that the DCMS is considering subsuming the review of the Tentative List into a fuller review of its World Heritage policy. All the indications are that the DCMS proposes to conduct research to look more closely into the costs and benefits associated with World Heritage Site status and to explore implications for future nominations.⁴⁴

According to English Heritage, the time may be right for a radical examination of the options for future nominations, ranging from perhaps a moratorium for a period of years (thought unlikely due to the desire from many places for World Heritage Site status) through to a review of themes which could continue to focus on

⁴¹ *Heritage Strategy*, p. 18.

⁴² See *Operational Guidelines; The World Heritage List: Filling the Gaps – an Action Plan for the Future* (ICOMOS, 2005).

⁴³ *World Heritage Sites: the Tentative List of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland* (DCMS, 1999).

⁴⁴ See, for example, *Government Response to the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee Report*, pp. 11-12. The Tentative List Review Committee's membership is likely to include representatives from the DCMS, English Heritage, ICOMOS-UK and LAWHF, with English Heritage providing secretarial support. It is expected that ICOMOS-UK will host some workshops to inform the review process.

industrialisation (as the current Tentative List does), or explore new areas such as 20th-century architecture and planning, cultural landscapes,⁴⁵ or even the growing interest in intangible heritage and popular culture.⁴⁶

Blackpool's ambition for World Heritage Site status therefore comes at a very apposite time. The next twelve months or so, or however long the review takes, will be the only opportunity for some years to secure a place on the new Tentative List and thereby stand any chance of nomination. During this relatively short window of opportunity it will be absolutely critical for Blackpool Council to maintain its case and seek to influence the right people. And there will be other contenders. There are already serious expressions of interest among a growing number of possible candidate sites against which Blackpool will have to compete. If Blackpool is successful, inclusion on the Tentative List is still no guarantee of actually achieving World Heritage Site status. The process is a lengthy one, and assuming government policy is to continue to nominate sites each year, the next available slot in the annual cycle is not until 2010 for consideration in 2011.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, in anticipation of the forthcoming Tentative List review and in accordance with UNESCO guidelines, Blackpool Council continues to assemble appropriate documentation to reinforce Blackpool's claim for World Heritage Site status. In addition the Council, with the support of English Heritage, has initiated an important piece of research that will be of direct benefit to the bid, namely the Blackpool Historic Townscape Characterisation Project. While the key buildings and places of the entertainment and leisure industry are well understood, appreciation of the historic significance and value of the rest of Blackpool is less well developed, especially for the large boarding-house districts and residential areas. The project sets out to map this significance and value on the ground and to characterise intensively the whole historic townscape and seascape. The aim is to ensure proper recognition, protection and enhancement of Blackpool's cultural and natural heritage and also to help define a potential World Heritage Site boundary and buffer zone. As well as adding to the sum of knowledge of the town and aiding conservation planning,

⁴⁵ Draft working document *A World Heritage Strategy for English Heritage* (English Heritage, 2006).

⁴⁶ *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (UNESCO, 2003).

⁴⁷ The next four UK nominations will be drawn from the current Tentative List. Charles Darwin's home and workplace is the UK's 2006 nomination for consideration in 2007. The running order for nominations thereafter is the Antonine Wall (2007), Pontcysyllte Aqueduct (2008), and the twin Anglo-Saxon monastery at Wearmouth and Jarrow (2009). For further information, see www.culture.gov.uk

development control and related projects such as the THI, it is intended that the character maps will provide a comprehensive, rigorous and consistent baseline of information to inform spatial planning, regeneration and other development decisions.

The townscape aspect of the project will build on the existing extensive urban survey undertaken as part of English Heritage's national Historic Town Survey Programme. The latter provides an overview of the historic environment across the Blackpool area from prehistory to the present day.⁴⁸ The new, intensive survey will focus almost exclusively on the period from the late 18th century to the mid-20th century. Site visits, preceded by desk-based study of relevant maps and record systems, will establish the integrity and distinctive qualities of the urban built form and identify the predominant surviving historic character on the ground. The level of detail will be such that individual neighbourhoods, streets and associated buildings will be characterised.⁴⁹ The seascape aspect of the project will build on the initial pilot study for English Heritage's Historic Seascapes Programme which fortuitously included the whole of the Blackpool coastline.⁵⁰ All the mapping and database information will be captured and presented in a Geographical Information System format.

In tandem with the characterisation project is a proposal to inaugurate a book series celebrating Blackpool's heritage. Themes might include historic buildings; parks and gardens; industrial, commercial and transport history; art and sculpture; archives and collections, etc. The books would be aimed at the general market but be academically sound, and in due course could be linked to a heritage trail and/or plaque scheme.

We turn our attention now to a frequently asked question: is there a danger that World Heritage Site status would be at odds with the much-needed regeneration work being

⁴⁸ *Lancashire Historic Town Survey Programme: Blackpool – Historic Town Report* (Lancashire County Council, 2005).

⁴⁹ The project methodology will be based on the principles of Historic Landscape Characterisation, pioneered by English Heritage. For further information, see, for example, Jo Clark, John Darlington and Graham Fairclough, *Using Historic Landscape Characterisation* (English Heritage & Lancashire County Council, 2004). For the methodology's application in urban areas, see *Low Demand Housing and the Historic Environment* (English Heritage, 2005); *A Model Brief for the Commissioning of Work to Assess Historical Significance in Areas of Housing Renewal* (English Heritage, 2005). The project will also draw on experience of pilot work in Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder Areas.

⁵⁰ The Historic Seascapes Programme extends the principles of Historic Landscape Characterisation into the intertidal and marine zones. The pilot study focused on Liverpool Bay stretching from the Dee estuary in the south to Rossall Point on the Fylde coast in the north, and seaward to the limit of territorial waters at 12 nautical miles. For further information, see www.english-heritage.org.uk

planned in Blackpool? The answer is a qualified negative; and for two separate reasons.

First, inscription as a World Heritage Site need not be a brake on future development. True, the status would make it easier to defend the site against any threats; but World Heritage Sites currently have no statutory basis in the UK. Some parts of World Heritage Sites are protected by specific designations through the planning system (scheduled monuments, listed buildings, etc). However, the sites as a whole are protected primarily through policies contained in local development plans and the need to consider them as ‘a key material consideration’ in determining planning applications.⁵¹ The UK government has been carrying out a review of heritage protection designations with the aim of simplifying the current system of scheduled monuments, listed buildings, historic parks and gardens and battlefields and replacing these with a single register of heritage assets. The reform will also introduce a unified consent regime and heritage partnership agreements. The government has stated that World Heritage Sites will be included within the new register. A *Heritage Protection White Paper* is expected imminently (March 2007) though it is not yet known what this will mean in terms of enhanced protection or how this will impact on the regulation and control of World Heritage Sites. Legislative changes are not likely to be implemented until 2010.⁵² A prerequisite for World Heritage Site status is, nevertheless, the existence of effective legal protection and the establishment of a management plan, agreed with the site owners, that ensures the safeguarding of World Heritage values.

Second, Blackpool would be put forward for World Heritage Site nomination under the category of ‘cultural landscape’. Cultural landscapes, represent the ‘... combined works of nature and man’ and ‘... are illustrative of the evolution of human society and settlement over time, under the influence of the physical constraints and/or opportunities presented by their natural environment and of successive social, economic and cultural forces, both external and internal’.⁵³ They are seen as retaining

⁵¹ *PPG 15: Planning Policy Guidance: Planning and the Historic Environment* (DoE & DHN, 1994), paras. 2.22, 2.23, 6.37.

⁵² For further information, see *Review of Heritage Protection: the Way Forward* (DCMS, 2004). Heritage partnership agreements will allow better planning for the future management of complex assets on the register, like World Heritage Sites, and will operate as an alternative to the requirement to obtain formal consent for an agreed range of works.

⁵³ *Operational Guidelines*, para. 47.

‘... an active social role in contemporary society closely associated with the traditional way of life, and in which the evolutionary process is still in progress’ while at the same time exhibiting significant material evidence of their evolution over time.⁵⁴ UNESCO recognises that World Heritage Sites falling under this category are living and working places that must be allowed to grow dynamically and organically in response to their local environment and society as they have in the past. Cultural landscapes have also been recognised as a legal entity in the European Landscape Convention, with its emphasis on the strong inter-relationship between people and place and bringing together social, cultural, economic and environmental values, concerns and opportunities.⁵⁵

At present the cultural landscape category applies mostly to rural landscapes and communities but the concept of towns and cities being considered as cultural landscapes is an emerging one, the category having recently been applied to urban areas like Rio de Janeiro and Istanbul. There is therefore a need for new tools to address planning issues in order to respect the balance between organic growth, people and the environment and to sustain the places concerned.⁵⁶

Blackpool is at a critical point in its historical development, looking to re-invent itself through a new urban Masterplan, now being pursued through the ReBlackpool Urban Regeneration Company, chaired by the distinguished planning academic Professor Sir Peter Hall. The Masterplan sets out an ambitious vision that will transform the town by re-defining Blackpool’s future as a top-quality, world-class resort destination, improving the lives of residents and visitors alike. It represents the single most comprehensive programme of developments in the town since the park, promenade improvement and planning proposals of the 1920s and 1930s.⁵⁷ This vision for the ‘New Blackpool’ can be seen as an example of the town’s continuing evolution in response to economic and social change. Here, the cultural landscape category comes

⁵⁴ Ibid., annex 3, 10, ii.

⁵⁵ *European Landscape Convention* (Council of Europe, 2000).

⁵⁶ For this theme, see P.J. Fowler, *World Heritage Cultural Landscapes, 1992-2002*, World Heritage Papers 6 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2003); *Cultural Landscapes: the Challenges of Conservation*, World Heritage Papers 7 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2003); Peter Fowler, *Landscapes for the World: Conserving a Global Heritage* (Macclesfield: Windgather Press, 2004).

⁵⁷ *New Horizons Blackpool Resort Masterplan* (Blackpool Council, 2003). Much of the regeneration programme pivots on developing major conference and leisure facilities, and especially attracting the licence to operate the UK’s first ‘super-casino’. In the event, the decision on the location of the super-casino went against Blackpool in favour of Manchester; see *Towards a World Class Resort Destination: Submission to the Casino Advisory Panel* (Blackpool Council, 2006); *Final Report of the Casino Advisory Panel* (2007).

into its own. World Heritage Site status therefore is unlikely to have a detrimental effect on the implementation of the Masterplan. The crucial concern, however, will be to ensure that the next phase of Blackpool's regeneration adds to the heritage and cultural traditions of the place, rather than replacing them.

Accepting that contemporary architecture is part of our lives and a competitive tool for cities in attracting tourists and capital, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee has now adopted the Vienna Memorandum, which recognises that urban World Heritage Sites can change without losing their essential character. The introduction of complementary new buildings, or the creative reuse or extension of historic buildings, are espoused. In all cases the stress is on the need for high quality of design and construction that is sensitive to the historic, spatial and townscape context and the protection of key visual relationships, panoramas and vistas out of and across the site.⁵⁸ The guidance is not always being followed. The World Heritage Committee has become increasingly concerned over the potential impact of proposed tall buildings on urban World Heritage Sites and has been instrumental in stopping some major developments which it judged to be inappropriate in scale and character. Recent reactive monitoring missions to consider proposals affecting the World Heritage Sites in Liverpool and London (the first such missions to any site in the UK) show that the Committee is continuing to flex its collective muscle, and is a reminder that World Heritage Site status comes with strings attached. As it happens, the impact of new tall buildings on sight lines and sky lines is already a consideration for Blackpool because of the Grade I listed Tower.

In taking the Masterplan forward Blackpool Council accepts it needs to strike the right balance; '... it is important to regenerate and innovate to make Blackpool a modern resort but we also recognise the importance of our heritage, which in itself attracts visitors': it also acknowledges that its actions will be under scrutiny as '... the heritage of Blackpool has a place in the whole nation's consciousness.'⁵⁹ Changes to the physical and social face of the town are inevitable so a well-informed appreciation of the heritage context in which the Masterplan will operate will be essential.⁶⁰ This is why the aforementioned Blackpool Historic Townscape Characterisation Project is so

⁵⁸ *Vienna Memorandum on World Heritage and Contemporary Architecture: managing the historic urban landscape* (UNESCO, 2005).

⁵⁹ *Vision for Blackpool*, p. 2.

⁶⁰ *Heritage Strategy*, p. 5.

important. Decisions for the future need to be based on a detailed knowledge of how the town developed. Even at the present stage the bidding brief for ReBlackpool's application for Heritage Lottery funding for the 'People's Playground', a major promenade regeneration programme, in 2006-7 has emphasized the need to take full account of the town's history and heritage in a 'cultural landscape' sense. The process of bid evaluation has involved inputs from a historian as well as an artist and a spectrum of expertise in urban planning, engineering and financial management. The characterisation project will provide the additional site-specific knowledge that is needed to sustain a World Heritage Site bid. At a strategic level it will make a significant contribution to the further development and implementation of the Masterplan and Urban Design Framework, and the overall capacity for large-scale change and renewal. At an individual scheme level, through the medium of planning and design briefs, the information generated by the project will help influence and encourage imaginative developments that either secure the future reuse or enhancement of heritage assets or inform a new high quality architecture that responds to and respects the resort's distinctive heritage and character.

We have demonstrated that Blackpool has no credible challenger for the title of world's first working-class seaside resort. The town pioneered popular tourism in the nineteenth century, and today constitutes a unique cultural landscape – a meeting point and melting pot of contested and contradictory spaces, always in flux but always retaining a core identity and ambience, with an impressive array of surviving architectures and built environments dedicated to the provision of leisure and enjoyment. In making a case for World Heritage Site status, such a unique site will require a unique kind of bid; one that embraces changing perceptions of, and conflicts around, the heritage of the recent past, stretches established categories and challenges received assumptions about the content and nature of cultural heritage. This may prove to be the most difficult aspect of the campaign.

John K Walton is Professor of Social History at the University of Central Lancashire. His most recent books are *The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester, 2000); (with Gary Cross) *The Playful Crowd: Pleasure Places in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2005); and (ed.) *Histories of Tourism* (Clevedon,

2005). The forthcoming *Blackpool Pleasure Beach: a Cultural History* will be published by Skelter Books in 2007.

Jason Wood is Director of Heritage Consultancy Services, a practice specialising in the public history and heritage of sport and leisure. He is a member of the Executive Committee of ICOMOS-UK and Chairman of the National Trust's Archaeology Panel that advises the Trust on World Heritage Sites in their care.

Both are currently acting as consultants to Blackpool Council's Leisure, Culture and Community Learning department. John K. Walton also acts as a consultant to ReBlackpool on its promenade regeneration scheme, 'The People's Playground'.