

**Reputation and Regeneration:
History and the Heritage of the Recent Past in the Re-Making of Blackpool**

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British seaside resorts present particularly difficult problems as regards the ‘heritage of the recent past’. In the first place, their experience and circumstances raise contentious questions under the headings both of ‘recent’ and of ‘heritage’. Secondly, their current economic difficulties, and problematic relationship with central government, add additional dimensions to the question of what is to be done to regenerate these **places**, which are peripheral by definition but owe their existence and identity as resort destinations and residential areas to external demand for what they have to offer, if not from the metropolis then from regional cities and their satellite towns. Thirdly, proposals for regeneration are sometimes threatening in themselves to the identities of such towns as seaside resorts, to components of their ‘heritage’ in that guise, and especially to those aspects of the ‘heritage of the recent past’ that are not obviously iconic in the manner of Bexhill’s De La Warr Pavilion or Morecambe’s Midland Hotel.¹

The popular Lancashire resort of Blackpool is of especial interest in all these respects, as its unique history as the world’s first working-class seaside resort has left a sufficient legacy of seaside architecture, public spaces and entertainment traditions to merit serious consideration as a potential World Heritage Site under UNESCO’s ‘cultural landscape’ rubric. But such a proposal, despite the flexibility of the category, generates potential tensions with proposals for regeneration through modernization under the auspices of the urban regeneration company ReBlackpool and the local authority’s Masterplan. These questions have arisen, and become pressing, at a time when the resort’s holiday and leisure industries appear to be suffering from a deepening crisis whose symptoms include sharply falling visitor numbers, average spends and length of stay, sustained decay in aspects of the public realm (despite recent successful investment in significant aspects of

¹ A. Fairley, *De La Warr Pavilion: the Modernist Masterpiece* (London: Merrell, 2006); B. Guise and P. Brook, *The Midland Hotel: Morecambe’s White Hope* (Lancaster: Palatine Books, 2007).

the resort environment), **persistent** and often ill-informed or uninformed hostility from sections of the media, and mixed messages from central government on policy initiatives whose outcomes have been mainly negative, most obviously the rejection in 2007 of the town's bid to be nominated as the site of **the UK's first so-called 'super-casino'**.

This chapter looks at Blackpool's efforts to regenerate itself, combining innovation and the search for new markets with an appeal to tradition, identity and the 'heritage of the recent past', as it **begins to implement** a heritage strategy, seeks inscription as a World Heritage Site, trades on the industrial archaeology of the holiday industry and tries to generate **alternative** income streams for regeneration **following the decision not to grant the casino licence**.² It also investigates conflicting media attitudes to these strategies and to the changing nature of Blackpool itself as a seaside resort at the beginning of the new millennium.³

The 'heritage of the recent past'?

The concept of the 'heritage of the recent past' in this setting requires some introductory and contextual discussion. Definitions of the 'recent past' are likely to be arbitrary, but a sensible cut-off date for present purposes is probably the end of the First World War (**i.e. just within living memory**), although the growing vogue for some kinds of inter-war building (especially lidos and anything that can be labelled 'Modernist' or 'Art Deco') might be identified with a growing cultural acceptability that betokens the development of a historical or nostalgic perspective and undermines the notion of 'the recent'.⁴ As in other British seaside resorts, much of Blackpool's surviving architectural heritage is Victorian in origins, and thus might not fall even within this relatively generous canon; but the full picture is much more complicated. Among the important surviving entertainment centres, the Winter Gardens dates back to the mid-1870s, but almost all of

² J. K. Walton and J. Wood, 'World Heritage Seaside', *British Archaeology* 90 (2006), pp. 10-15; J. K. Walton and J. Wood, 'La Station Balnéaire, Site du Patrimoine Mondial? Le Cas de Blackpool', in J.-P. Poussou and Y. Perret-Gentil (eds.), *Les Villes Balnéaires. Actes du Colloque de Boulogne-sur-Mer, 5-6 Octobre 2006* (Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2008).

³ J. K. Walton and J. Wood, 'History, Heritage and Regeneration of the Recent Past: the British Context', in N. Silberman and C. Liuzza (eds.), *Interpreting the Past V, Part 1: The Future of Heritage: Changing Visions, Attitudes and Contexts in the 21st Century* (Brussels, 2007), pp. 99-110.

⁴ J. Smith, *Liquid Assets: the Lidos and Swimming Pools of Britain* (London: English Heritage, 2005); F. Gray, *Designing the Seaside* (London: Reaktion, 2006).

it is a subsequent addition or has been rebuilt or extensively altered, sometimes more than once. The present Opera House, completed in 1939, is the third one at the Winter Gardens; the Pavilion Theatre, originally opened in 1878, has been through several incarnations including adaptation as a cinema in the 1930s, while in 1986 its stage became the Palm Court Restaurant; the Indian Lounge of 1896 became the Planet Room in 1964 and then the Arena in the 1980s; the Empress Ballroom was modified in the 1970s in response to falling demand for formal dancing; the Galleon Bar, the Baronial Hall and the Spanish Hall are survivors from 1931. This partial potted history of a complex site shows how the architecture and decoration of the ‘recent past’ can be serially overlaid on earlier features, in ways that are particularly characteristic of the entertainment industry, with its urgent commercial imperative to keep abreast of or ahead of changing fashions and preferences in popular taste.⁵ The three piers, dating from 1863, 1868 and 1893, have all experienced recurrent changes to their attractions and superstructure. The North Pier lost its ornate Indian Pavilion of 1874 to a fire in 1919, and its successor went the same way in 1938. The Central and South (originally Victoria) Piers have added fairground rides as well as regularly updating leisure buildings on the superstructure.⁶ The resort’s signature structure, the Tower of 1894, has itself undergone many changes in the internal arrangements and functions of the large brick building in which the entertainments are housed, including the abandonment of the menagerie and of live animal acts in the Circus; and the ornate Ballroom was completely reconstructed, including the decorative plasterwork, after a serious fire in 1956.⁷

The ‘recent past’, perhaps especially under the circumstances of the seaside entertainment industry, is in practice a movable feast; and even more so if we include Blackpool’s industrial landscape of several thousand boarding-houses for seaside visitors, most of them purpose-built in the late nineteenth century, some in the 1930s, and all incorporating complex sequences of **refurbishment** as extra bedrooms were added in the eaves and at the back, updated plumbing entailed tangled lattices of additional pipes, and internal remodelling responded to changing visitor expectations about privacy and en-suite bath

⁵ <http://www.blackpool.gov.uk/services/M-R/PlanningConservationAreasandListedBuildings/> accessed 20 April 2008.

⁶ <http://www.theheritagetrail.co.uk/piers/blackpool> accessed 20 April 2008.

⁷ <http://www.theblackpooltower.co.uk/facts.htm> accessed 20 April 2008.

and shower rooms.⁸ Most of Blackpool's buildings are a legacy of continuous embellishment, improvement, piecemeal replacement, and responses to damage and disaster over a long period, with only the integrity of the core structures (themselves subject to rolling replacement) sustaining 'authenticity' in a literal-minded sense; and such changes have usually arisen from perceived commercial necessity, as part of the shifting culture of entertainment or accommodation provision in a popular resort, which is necessarily resistant to the preservation of physical 'heritage' as a dominant value in itself, for its own sake or even (in most cases) as part of the enterprise's own appeal.

Questions of legitimacy

The heritage of the seaside holiday industry also carries a significant perceived legitimacy deficit, especially when the forms in which it manifests are low-key and easily disparaged. A good example is the car park and bus station in Blackpool's Talbot Road, built in 1937-9 and described by the English Heritage seaside historians as 'a rare example of a multi-storey car park outside London or a major industrial city before the Second World War'.⁹ It does not seem to occur to them at this point that Blackpool was itself a 'major industrial city', whose dominant economic activities, on a unique scale, were tourism, leisure and accommodation. The building itself, neglected for years and slated for demolition in the current remaking of Blackpool's 'Talbot Gateway', was never a serious candidate for listing, historically significant though it was. Industrial archaeology as more commonly understood, that of the 'Industrial Revolution' of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, of manufacturing and transport, ironworks, steam-powered factories, canals and railways, has made headway in overcoming these problems since the 1960s, when the pioneer Beamish open-air industrial museum attracted denigration and derision for harking back to a dirty, undignified, painful, undesirable past and desecrating a rural area in the process.¹⁰ But these attitudes die slowly, as witness Bradford's recurring problems with the derisive triviality of the media as it attempted to

⁸ J. K. Walton, 'The Blackpool Landlady Revisited', *Manchester Region History Review* 8 (1994), pp. 23-31.

⁹ A. Brodie and G. Winter, *England's Seaside Resorts* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2007), p. 61.

¹⁰ G. Cross and J. K. Walton, *The Playful Crowd: Pleasure Places in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), chapter 6.

reinvent itself as an industrial heritage tourism destination or, **as we will show later**, the enduring media assumption that legitimate aspirants to World Heritage Site status are limited to such icons as the Taj Mahal and the Great Wall of China, while industrial inscriptions such as Blaenavon are a matter for surprise and mockery.¹¹

The frontier of legitimacy moves at different speeds in different settings and for different aspects of surviving ‘heritage’, even at the seaside: the humblest cottages in the imagined ‘fishing quarters’ of Whitby and St Ives already had articulate and well-organised defenders against proposals for demolition and redevelopment in the 1930s¹², while Brighton’s Regency Society was founded as early as 1945 to protect the resort’s Georgian terraces against redevelopment for flats, followed in 1960 by the Hove Civic Society which organised local residents against similar proposed demolitions. By the mid-1970s residents of Brighton’s North Laine area, a distinctive group of early Victorian streets which was threatened by wholesale demolition, were banding together in search of Conservation Area status, and starting their own newsletter as a focus for their successful campaign.¹³

But these were campaigns that gained legitimacy from the historical patina, if not always the architectural distinction, of the places they sought to conserve. Blackpool’s holiday and entertainment industry suffered from a shortage of credibility on both counts, as well as a paucity of campaigners. This helps to explain the loss of several iconic entertainment buildings during the last quarter of the twentieth century, as we shall see. It was not until 1975 that the town acquired a Civic Society, and it was never a powerful local organization when set against the local authority and the entertainment industry. Earlier campaigns against a post-war town centre redevelopment plan had been mainly on the grounds of disruption to existing businesses, and it was the mobilisation in 1973 of the ‘Friends of the Grand Theatre’ to save this Frank Matcham masterpiece from demolition and restore it to live theatre use that marked the most plausible emergence of sustained

¹¹ D. Russell, ‘Selling Bradford: Tourism and Northern Image in the Late Twentieth Century’, *Contemporary British History* 17 (2003), pp. 49-68; S. Morris, ‘Forget the Taj Mahal and Pyramids: Blaenavon is the Place to Visit’, *Guardian*, 26 March 2008, p. 9.

¹² J. K. Walton, *Tourism, Fishing and Redevelopment: Post-war Whitby, 1945-1970* (University of Cambridge: Institute of Continuing Education, Occasional Paper No. 5, 2005), pp. 5-31.

¹³ <http://www.regencysociety.org> accessed 25 April 2008; <http://www.hovecivicsociety.org> accessed 25 April 2008; http://www.nlcaonline.org.uk/html/history_rewriting.html accessed 25 April 2008.

and determined 'heritage' campaigning in Blackpool. Even in this case, the agenda was more theatrical than architectural, although Brian Walker's published opinion in 1980 that the Grand was 'one of the finest that Matcham designed' was music to the ears of the 'Friends'. Moreover, the campaigners' attention to the continuous history of theatrical performance on the site marked out a concern for a lived, and living, version of the 'heritage of the recent past' that was to become significant on a broader front. We shall return to these issues: what matters for the moment is the delayed and enduringly contested nature of perceptions of the cultural legitimacy of seaside entertainment heritage, architectural or otherwise, in the Blackpool setting, even as compared with other seaside resorts.¹⁴

Economic difficulties and problems of government

Questions of seaside regeneration through the 'heritage of the recent past' must also be seen in the context of the economic difficulties faced by many coastal locations, especially provincial popular resorts, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and the reluctance of government to address the issues of falling demand, unemployment, ageing populations and deterioration in the public realm. The well-known economic and demographic analysis by Beatty and Fothergill, issued in 2003, has challenged the more alarmist assumptions about the 'decline of the seaside' between 1971 and 2001 by demonstrating the resilience of many British coastal resorts, and their capacity to attract new migrants and generate new jobs, in tourism as well as other sectors.¹⁵ But there is no doubt that some resorts, or districts within resorts, faced – and continue to face – serious problems. Blackpool was later than some provincial popular resorts in sliding into difficulty, but by the 1991 census it was already occupying high places in league tables of multiple deprivation, especially in central wards which had been the core of its traditional holiday industry; and by the turn of the millennium the resort was demonstrably in crisis,

¹⁴ <http://www.blackpoolgrand.co.uk/information/6/273/How-the-Grand-was-Saved.htm> accessed 26 April 2008, reminiscences of Burt Briggs; B. Walker, *Frank Matcham, Theatre Architect* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1980), pp.125-6; B. Band, *Blackpool Grand Theatre 1930-1994* (Lytham: Barry Band, 1994).

¹⁵ C. Beatty and S. Fothergill, *The Seaside Economy* (Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, 2003).

as visitor numbers, length of stay and per capita spending entered a sustained downturn.¹⁶ Beatty and Fothergill's Blackpool case-study shows that the town had performed less well than most other substantial British seaside resorts. Their calculation of 'real unemployment' for January 2002 placed Blackpool 15th of 43 resorts, at nearly one-third higher than the overall figure; its growth in total employment between 1971 and 2001 stood at 17 per cent of the total in the former year, but this made it 35th out of 40, behind Morecambe and only slightly ahead of blighted Thanet; its figure for net in-migration of people of working age was also positive but relatively low, putting Blackpool in 31st place out of 40; and it actually came bottom of the table showing changes in the economic activity rate for women of working age, although here again the indicator itself was positive.¹⁷

Blackpool's economic performance was thus below the average for British seaside resorts on a range of indicators; but the actual figures were positive and, in themselves, encouraging. The two leading 'headline' conclusions of the research team were that, 'The tourist component of the Blackpool economy should certainly not be written off as a lost cause', and that, 'Efforts to generate new jobs in Blackpool should be strongly endorsed.'¹⁸ If this diagnosis was accepted, the question was how to go about revitalising Blackpool's tourist economy, and what form the new jobs should take. **Blackpool Council had already unveiled a new Masterplan, pursued through the urban regeneration company ReBlackpool, chaired by the distinguished planning academic Professor Sir Peter Hall.¹⁹ The Masterplan originally envisaged the funding of a thoroughgoing regeneration programme through an income stream derived principally from casino gambling – a possibility signposted at the time by government thinking – and promised to re-define Blackpool's future as a top-quality, world-class resort destination. This immediately generated potential problems involving expropriation and site clearance, as well as the inevitable arguments about the form and content of the new buildings and attractions. In the event the government's decision on the location of the much-anticipated 'super-**

¹⁶ J. K. Walton, *Blackpool* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

¹⁷ C. Beatty and S. Fothergill, *A Case Study of Blackpool* (Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, Seaside Town Research Project, Paper No. 3, 2003), pp. 19, 33-5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 5.

¹⁹ *New Horizons Blackpool Resort Masterplan* (Blackpool Council, 2003).

casino' went against Blackpool in favour of Manchester, but this too has now been abandoned following a reversal of government policy.²⁰ However, the decision not to grant Blackpool the casino licence produced an unexpected windfall in the shape of a Blackpool Task Force, led by the North West Development Agency, set up to rethink long-term regeneration plans for the town.²¹ The result is a revised Masterplan which still represents the single most comprehensive programme of developments since the park, promenade improvement and planning proposals of the 1920s and 1930s.²² However, given the lack of central government support for Blackpool, it is questionable whether the necessary funding to deliver the regeneration plans will be forthcoming.

Heritage, regeneration, uncertainty and conflict

The use of history and 'heritage' in urban regeneration through cultural tourism and associated 'gentrification' poses problems of direct relevance to Blackpool, which have generated an extensive literature, wittily pulled together by Melanie K. Smith in her introduction to a recent collection of essays. She points out that the up-market 'creative' tourists who spend heavily and enhance destination status require 'more authentic indigenous or authentic venues' as opposed to the proliferation of 'international blandscapes' and 'generica', or the 'serial monotony' of 'standardized developments that could be anywhere'. She also offers a series of dichotomies that might form the basis for further elaboration in the light of local circumstances: tensions between the global and the local, between standardization and 'place-making', the preservation of 'heritage' and the promotion of contemporary culture.²³ The 'heritage of the recent past', or perhaps that of the continuing and evolving past, can be called in to reconcile these contradictions, at least in the particular setting of Blackpool.

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 regeneration in ways that respect not only its traditions,

²⁰ *Towards a World Class Resort Destination: Submission to the Casino Advisory Panel* (Blackpool Council, 2006); *Final Report of the Casino Advisory Panel* (2007).

²¹ *Blackpool: An Action Plan for Sustainable Growth. Report of the Blackpool Task Force*, July 2007.

²² *Blackpool Resort Masterplan: Rethink, Rebuild, Renew* (ReBlackpool, 2007).

²³ M. K. Smith (ed.), *Tourism, Culture and Regeneration* (Wallingford: CABI, 2007), pp. xiv-xvii, 4-5.

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'. In taking the Masterplan forward the 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'. The Council also acknowledges that its actions will be under scrutiny as '... the heritage of Blackpool has a place in the whole nation's consciousness.'²⁴

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. An important milestone in this respect was the publication in July 2006 of the Council's first Heritage Strategy with its mission 'to discover, conserve, learn from and celebrate the past in order to inspire a better future for the town and people of Blackpool.'²⁵ 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. A positive start has already been made with a number of oral and community history programmes either under way or being planned.²⁶ In addition, Professor Vanessa Toulmin, Research Director of the National Fairground Archive at Sheffield University, is working with the Council to bring themed weekends celebrating the history of past entertainment (cabaret, variety, circus, burlesque) to local venues.²⁷

Recently, the Council, with the support of English Heritage, has initiated an important piece of research in the form of the Blackpool Historic Townscape Characterisation Project. While the major buildings and places of the entertainment and leisure industry are well understood, appreciation of the rest of Blackpool is less well developed,

²⁴ *Vision for Blackpool: Blackpool's Community Plan 2004-2020* (Blackpool Council, 2004) p. 2.

²⁵ *Heritage Strategy 2006-10* (Blackpool Council, 2006) p. 14.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁷ <http://www.admissionallclasses.com> accessed 28 April 2008.

especially for the large boarding-house districts and residential areas. The project sets out to map and characterise a number of key areas of the historic townscape to ensure that their value and significance permeates through to generate effective policies so that planning, development and tourism decisions are based on informed knowledge, understanding and respect for what has gone before and people's interest in and attachment to it. It is also intended that the character maps will help define a potential World Heritage Site boundary and buffer zone. At a strategic level the project will make a significant contribution to the further development and implementation of the Masterplan. At an individual scheme level, through the medium of planning and design briefs, the information generated 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.

A pre-emptive example of this kind of collaboration in action was the bidding brief for ReBlackpool's application in 2006-7 for Big Lottery funding for the 'People's Playground', a major promenade regeneration programme, that emphasized the need to take full account of the town's history and heritage in a 'cultural landscape' sense. Although this was ultimately turned down for funding, the process of bid evaluation involved inputs from a historian as well as an artist and a spectrum of expertise in urban planning, engineering and financial management.

Blackpool's history and the 'heritage of the recent past'

As part of such a process, and specifically in relation to Blackpool's proposed bid for World Heritage Site status, a strong case for the distinctiveness, indeed uniqueness, of Blackpool's history on a global stage can be readily constructed, and harnessed to the exploitation of the 'heritage of the recent (and less recent) past'. In the last decades of the nineteenth century Blackpool became the world's first working-class seaside resort, and in the inter-war years it acquired a national visitor catchment area and became a unique centre of popular entertainment.²⁸ This entailed immense investment in infrastructure

²⁸ J. K. Walton, 'The Demand for Working-class Seaside Holidays in Victorian England', *Economic History Review* 34 (1981), pp. 249-65; Walton, *Blackpool*.

(almost all by the local authority), transport facilities, entertainment facilities funded by the ‘shareholder democracies’ of big limited companies (three piers, the Winter Gardens, the Tower, the Pleasure Beach and much else besides), and accommodation (nearly 5000 boarding-houses at the 1921 census).²⁹ Blackpool’s heyday came in the 1950s and early 1960s, although its entertainments failed to move with the times; and it acquired an equivocal reputation, loved by its loyal customers from industrial Britain but sometimes suffering the condescension of politicians and journalists who attended the party and trade union conferences at the resort.³⁰ It continued to reinvent itself successfully during difficult times in the late twentieth century, but fell into the difficulties that were common across much of the popular British seaside at the turn of the millennium.³¹ Despite sharply falling visitor numbers, length of stay and average spend in the early twenty-first century, Blackpool is still by far the most popular British resort, after a career which saw it attracting over 3 million visitors per annum by the 1890s and over 7 million by the 1930s.

It has retained its three Victorian piers, together with the Tower and the Winter Gardens, with all their subsequent adaptations to changing tastes, preferences and visiting publics since the decline of the manufacturing industries of northern England, the English Midlands and the Clyde Valley, and their associated town holidays, since the 1970s.³² The Pleasure Beach, an Edwardian amusement park in origins, but the subject of an impressive Modernist makeover by Joseph Emberton in the 1930s, is similarly a palimpsest of popular culture despite the recent loss of well-established rides, with the Sir Hiram Maxim Captive Flying Machine of 1904 and the inter-war Noah’s Ark and Big Dipper rubbing shoulders with the Big One roller-coaster of 1994 and subsequent spectacular rides,³³ while the Beaux Arts influences on the municipal Stanley Park, which was opened ceremonially in 1926 and is now the subject of regeneration through the Heritage Lottery Fund, provide another distinctive strand in Blackpool’s entertainment-based ‘heritage of the recent past’, as do the promenades and their associated maritime

²⁹ Walton, ‘The Blackpool Landlady Revisited’.

³⁰ Walton, *Blackpool*.

³¹ J. K. Walton, *The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester University Press, 2000).

³² Walton, *Blackpool*.

³³ J. K. Walton, *Riding on Rainbows: Blackpool Pleasure Beach and its Place in British Popular Culture* (St Albans: Skelter Publishing, 2007).

parks, gardens, and cliff walks, mainly of inter-war vintage. Particularly remarkable, and difficult to deal with for regeneration purposes, are the long parallel streets of Victorian holiday lodging- and boarding-houses, together with the Edwardian private hotels of the North Shore and the 1930s developments south of the Pleasure Beach. These constitute a unique industrial landscape, without parallel anywhere else in the world, which will be difficult to sustain in the light of changing tastes and preferences, as has been demonstrated (for example) by the difficulty of saving Miami's Art Deco South Beach hotel area.³⁴ Similarly, the survival of the promenade tramway, unique in England, generates tensions between its role as heritage transport attraction and the need to provide a modernised passenger service for visitors and residents alike. These are complex issues, exacerbated by the unique and compelling nature of what has survived in an industry whose buildings and practices are normally, as at Coney Island and Atlantic City, ephemeral. And there is the further problem of deciding at what point really recent additions to the entertainment and hospitality menu, from the **Sandcastle indoor pool complex** (which replaced the magnificent **South Shore** Open-Air Baths of 1923), the Hilton Hotel or the Pleasure Beach's Big Blue Hotel become 'the heritage of the recent past', alongside the recent public art of the renovated south promenade or the southern road approaches.³⁵

Blackpool's distinctive, indeed unique history has not been reflected in the listing of buildings officially perceived to be of architectural or historical importance. As of April 2008, the Tower is Blackpool's only Grade I listed structure. There are four listings at II*: a Victorian Roman Catholic church, a war memorial shrine, the Grand Theatre and most of the structures that make up the Winter Gardens. Of the 28 listings at the lower Grade II, seven are directly connected with the holiday and entertainment industries: the North Pier of 1863 (but neither of the other piers); the 'New Clifton Hotel' on the site of the early Clifton Arms, opposite the North Pier; the Victorian Imperial Hotel at North Shore (with its extension of just before the First World War); the Raikes Hall Hotel, a Georgian mansion turned hotel which was at the core of the Royal Palace Gardens, an outdoor entertainment complex that flourished from the early 1870s to the turn of the century and

³⁴ M. B. Stofik, *Saving South Beach* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005).

³⁵ Cross and Walton, *The Playful Crowd*; B. Simon, *Boardwalk of Dreams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

was then turned over to housing development; the former King Edward cinema of 1913; the splendidly florid former Miners' Convalescent Home of 1925-7 on the north promenade; the former Odeon Cinema of 1938-9, a very large and impressive example of its kind whose auditorium was divided in 1975 to create two smaller cinemas, before conversion at the turn of the millennium into the Funny Girls cabaret venue; and the White Tower, the second Casino building of Blackpool Pleasure Beach, which in 1939 replaced the original [structure](#) of 1913, and has twice undergone extensive renovation and adaptation. The Pleasure Beach, although willing to market itself as the home of historic as well as futuristic amusement park rides, has resisted any suggestion of listing any other of its appurtenances, preferring to label its vintage attractions with commemorative and informative plaques based on and using the United States 'National Historical Marker' terminology, which has no official standing in Britain.³⁶ Blackpool's listed buildings also include two groups of distinctive shelters on the Promenade, probably dating from the completion of a major municipal scheme for widening and embellishment in 1905. Of this limited roll-call (alongside seven religious buildings and [associated structures](#), two vernacular cottages and a farmhouse, a windmill and several municipal or other public buildings, including a clutch of red telephone boxes), only the Odeon and the White Tower, together with the more recent additions to the Winter Gardens, Tower and North Pier, and the former Miners' Convalescent Home, really qualify for consideration under a post-First World War 'heritage of the recent past' rubric; and this constitutes a reminder that Blackpool's official interest in its seaside heritage is not of long standing.³⁷

Moreover, Blackpool has only two Conservation Areas. Both were designated in 1984, and the one covering the Talbot Square area was renamed the Town Centre Conservation Area when it was extended during 2005-6. The Council's descriptive leaflet represents it as Blackpool's 'civic heart', including as it does the Town Hall and the former central Post Office building as well as the North Pier and the Metropole Hotel, on the site of Bailey's which was one of the [first](#) Blackpool buildings to be purpose-built to accommodate visitors. It also extends to the Winter Gardens. It is still limited in [size](#), but it does contain short but significant stretches of characteristic mid-Victorian bay-

³⁶ Walton, *Riding on Rainbows*.

³⁷ <http://www.blackpool.gov.uk/services/M-R/PlanningConservationAreasandListedBuildings/> accessed 20 April 2008.

windowed boarding-houses now converted to shop, office and restaurant use as well as its concentration of assorted listed buildings.³⁸ The second designated area contains Stanley Park, a Grade II* listed park since 1995, and its surrounding planned boulevard system.³⁹ Here the ‘heritage of the recent past’ does come into play: the park’s opening in 1926 is still just within living memory, and its fiercely supportive group of ‘Friends of Stanley Park’ have played an important part in securing Heritage Lottery Fund support for extensive refurbishment, with Stage 1 approval in 2003 and a new Visitor Centre opening in 2005.⁴⁰

Even this constitutes a significant advance on 1969, when the Blackpool entry in the North Lancashire volume of Sir Nikolaus Pevsner’s *Buildings of England* series was shorter than those for Blackburn and Burnley, industrial towns of comparable size and vintage.⁴¹ At this time, as Pevsner noted, ‘The Ministry of Housing and Local Government (had) issued no list for Blackpool, which means that there are no buildings of architectural or historic interest in the town. It depends of course on what one means by historical and by architectural... English social history of the second half of the C19 and the first half of the C20 cannot be written without Blackpool.’ The first listings came soon afterwards, just in time to help the ‘Friends of the Grand’ to organize their successful resistance to the proposed demolition of the theatre. Pevsner’s observation about social history was prescient, but ‘*The Buildings of England* is not about social historiography’, and Pevsner’s brief comments on individual buildings are often damning: ‘the lack of aesthetic discrimination which we shall find everywhere at Blackpool’; ‘terribly mechanical-looking’; ‘everything is done to avoid beauty’; ‘typically joyless’; ‘rather gloomy’. More space is given to the Winter Gardens than to the Town Hall, but even Joseph Emberton’s Pleasure Beach Casino, which might have been expected to appeal to the international Modernist in Pevsner, is passed over in three and a half lines. Perhaps the clearest indication of the lack of ‘fit’ between Pevsner’s expectations and the nature of Blackpool’s architecture of popular pleasure occurs in his

³⁸ <http://www.blackpool.gov.uk/services/M-R/PlanningConservationAreasandListedBuildings/> accessed 25 April 2008.

³⁹ H. Meller, *European Cities 1890-1930s* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2001), pp.197-202.

⁴⁰ <http://www.friendsofstanleypark.org.uk> accessed 25 April 2008.

⁴¹ N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: North Lancashire* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), pp. 61-8, 68-72, 79-84.

comments on the Tower: ‘What a pity its base is wrapped up in a big brick building! Just remember how beautiful are the ascending curves and arches of the Eiffel Tower..., Blackpool’s admitted model.’ It seems unlikely that Pevsner set foot inside the Tower, and his remarks betray a startling lack of awareness of the economics and purpose of the structure: the ‘big brick building’ was where the money was made. It is also revealing that Pevsner missed the Grand Theatre altogether (along with – among other places – Stanley Park, the South Pier, the South Shore **Open-Air Baths** and the rest of Emberton’s work at the Pleasure Beach), and chose to award the limited accolade of ‘the architecturally best building in Blackpool’ to the District Bank at the corner of Corporation and Birley Streets, which has never achieved listed building status. The key point, however, is the failure of an acknowledged enthusiast for Modernist architecture, always eager to report on pit-head baths or new secondary schools in other contexts, to find out what Blackpool had to offer in this regard in the 1960s, and his lack of understanding of the nature and significance of a century of pleasure architecture in this unique setting. This selective lack of architectural vision, which complements the failure to recognise Blackpool’s importance as an industrial monument, was not confined to Pevsner and has only recently begun to be rectified.

But we must also consider what Blackpool has lost from its ‘heritage of the recent past’ over the last generation. The roll-call includes the Palace, originally the Alhambra of 1899, a particularly opulent ‘pleasure palace’ which gave way to a department store in 1961; the Central Station, closed in 1964, whose site still lies fallow **after being earmarked for the abortive casino**, and the original North Station, which was demolished ten years later; the municipal **South Shore** Open Air Baths of 1923, ‘an aqua arena of quite astonishing proportions and grandiosity’⁴², which was demolished in 1983; the Derby Baths of 1939, also municipal, which were **controversially** lost in 1990; and on a smaller scale the Lytham Road municipal swimming baths, demolished in 2006, and the Water Tower of the Blackpool Sea Water Company on North Shore, which disappeared almost unnoticed early in 2008.⁴³ What is significant, however, particularly on a comparative perspective, is how much was there in the first place, and how much has (in

⁴² Smith, *Liquid Assets*, pp. 62-7.

⁴³ T. Lightbown, *Blackpool: a Pictorial History* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1994); J. Shotliff, *Images of Blackpool* (Derby: Breedon Books, 1994). For an historical background to these events, see Walton, *Blackpool*, chapter 6.

one form or another) survived, whether the British comparator is Brighton, Scarborough or Morecambe.

Blackpool's case for World Heritage Site status

Blackpool's case for World Heritage Site status 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.⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵ International recognition would raise the benchmark for heritage management in Blackpool. As we

⁴⁴ *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2008), para. 77.

⁴⁵ The World Heritage List currently includes 851 sites; 660 cultural, 166 natural and 25 mixed; <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list> accessed 28 April 2008.

have seen, in the past the Council was slow to recognise the town's heritage and the years spanning the 1960s to the early 1990s saw the loss of a number of important historic buildings. Today, heritage, and World Heritage in particular, is seen as a key driver for sustainable regeneration. As a result, the present Council is actively engaged in several conservation projects encouraged specifically by the injection 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. The first of these projects saw the conservation of the Art Deco Solarium at Harrowside on the South Promenade, opened in 1938, and transformed in 2004 as an environmental centre of excellence. The HLF has also supported projects at the Grand Theatre (now re-branded as the National Theatre of Variety), 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.⁴⁶ 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. 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 set to become the National Museum of Performing Arts.

Heritage is a prized commodity in increasingly competitive tourism markets, with the choice of destination increasingly influenced by heritage provision. Blackpool already attracts some 10 million visitors every year, considerably more than existing World Heritage Sites. 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, parts of which have 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

⁴⁶ <http://www.blackpool.gov.uk/Services/S-Z/TownscapeHeritage/Home.htm> accessed 28 April 2008; <http://www.friendsofstanleypark.org.uk> accessed 28 April 2008.

require the engagement of as many people as possible in helping to determine the value and significance of the place. 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.⁴⁷ A crucial aim will be to encourage people to tell their own stories, to share their personal and often intangible heritage and 'unofficial' history of Blackpool, 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.

It is important to note that World Heritage Site status will not be at odds with the much-needed regeneration work. This is because Blackpool would be put forward under the category of 'cultural landscape'. Cultural landscapes are seen as retaining '... 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.⁴⁸ 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. The Masterplan vision for the 'New Blackpool' can be seen as an example of the town's continuing evolution in response to economic and social change. It is here, together with the 'Admission All Classes project, that the cultural landscape category comes into its own. 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 erasing them.

Media representation and misrepresentation

⁴⁷ 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).

⁴⁸ *Operational Guidelines*, annex 3, 10, ii.

Initial reaction to the proposed World Heritage Site bid when first announced in March 2006 was largely positive if a little muted. Charles Nevin, author of the frivolous but thought-provoking *Lancashire, Where Women Die of Love*, wrote in *The Independent*: ‘Why shouldn’t the world’s finest example of the potency of popular culture be celebrated? Outstanding ancient, royal, religious, natural and industrial achievements have been recognised, so why not more than a century and a half of providing roaring, rollicking fun?’⁴⁹ Other commentators recalled and echoed Bill Clinton’s endorsement following a visit to the resort: ‘I like Blackpool. The weather’s great and the town’s kinda ... sleazy isn’t it?’ Even the *Daily Star* proclaimed Blackpool as the ‘Eighth Wonder of the World’.⁵⁰ More predictable was a *Daily Mail* poll – 21% thought yes, Blackpool should become a World Heritage Site; 79% said no, it’s too tacky. The loaded manner of presenting the question presaged what was to come later in the year, as did the assumption that avoidance of ‘tackiness’ was an essential pre-requisite for World Heritage Site status.

Further television, radio and newspaper coverage in August 2006 followed publication of our cover feature article in *British Archaeology* magazine.⁵¹ Much of the reporting was stereotypical and tongue-in-cheek as we had come to expect, though this time the *Daily Mail* was more positive.⁵² The ‘You and Yours’ BBC Radio 4 programme even commissioned a poem by Ian McMillan called ‘Heritage Me Quick!’⁵³ What came as more of a surprise was the widespread condescension towards, even outright hostility to, the Blackpool proposal from other parts of the media, especially the BBC website which posed the question ‘Should Blackpool become a World Heritage site? Or should the honour go to your local town or city?’ In what was deemed to be ‘the funniest Have Your Say in ages’ bloggers did not hold back with their views with over 200 comments registered, the vast majority being against.⁵⁴ This was unsurprising, as several attempts to post positive comments from domestic email addresses were rejected by the webmaster, who clearly had an agenda. Nor was any attempt made to explain how a World Heritage

⁴⁹ C. Nevin, ‘The Third Leader: the Other Tower’, *The Independent*, 3 March 2006.

⁵⁰ J. Mahoney, ‘Blackpool Eighth Wonder of the World’, *Daily Star*, 3 March 2006.

⁵¹ Walton and Wood, ‘World Heritage Seaside’.

⁵² J. Wheldon, ‘Blackpool Could Join Pyramids and Great Wall as a World Heritage Site’, *Daily Mail*, 10 August 2006.

⁵³ Broadcast 11 August 2006; <http://www.uktouring.org.uk/ian-mcmillan/>

⁵⁴ newsforums.bbc.co.uk/nol/thread.jspa?threadID=3181&&edition=1&ttl=20070612201322

Site might be defined, that the ‘obvious’ sites like the Great Wall of China and the Taj Mahal were not the only potential comparators, and that several decidedly grimy and unromantic sites associated with the Industrial Revolution had already been inscribed.⁵⁵

Finally, an extraordinarily aggressive and ignorant article by the ‘humorist’ Giles Coren appeared in *The Times*.⁵⁶ His piece began ‘I’m not knocking Blackpool ...’ before doing just that by suggesting spoof justifications for a World Heritage Site nomination – ‘That the Pleasure Beach is longer than the Great Wall of China ... that Blackpool Tower is older than Stonehenge ... that the ballroom pre-dates the Pyramids at Giza ...’ etc, etc. The piece ends in a flurry of inaccuracies and common misapprehensions – ‘The sad thing is that once a place is made a World Heritage Site it means that life there is, to all intents and purposes, over’. No-one with the slightest awareness of the continuing conflicts and debates brought on by World Heritage Site inscription in, for example, Vienna, or Puebla, or Machu Picchu, or indeed Liverpool, could have made a comment of such confident, consummate absurdity. But Coren’s piece is merely an extreme example of a deplorably widespread set of media assumptions in this area.

Conclusion

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 has continued to adapt to the changing desires of the holiday market while retaining and celebrating much of its unique cultural landscape, and sustaining its distinctive atmosphere of revelry and participation. Today Blackpool constitutes a meeting point and melting pot of contested and contradictory spaces; a living, evolving expression of the archaeology of the popular seaside holiday and entertainment industry; 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

⁵⁵ For a detailed assessment of the BBC ‘Have Your Say’ website, see Walton and Wood, ‘History, Heritage and Regeneration of the Recent Past’, pp. 106-8.

⁵⁶ G. Coren, ‘Shhh! You are Entering Blackpool’, *The Times*, 12 August 2006.

around the 'heritage of the recent past', stretches established categories and challenges received assumptions about the content and nature of cultural heritage by further provoking the overlap between heritage studies and popular culture. This may prove to be the most difficult aspect of the campaign.