

## *The Future of Heritage – Changing Visions, Attitudes and Contexts in the 21st Century*

*Session: New Approaches to Public Interpretation*

### **History, heritage and regeneration of the recent past: the British context**

*John K Walton and Jason Wood*

In Britain today, **as elsewhere**, there is a growing recognition that efforts to enhance the attractiveness and viability of heritage places must be linked to the values, interests and capacities of the people who live and work within or around them, in ways that further the distinctiveness of such locations and recognise the power of their historical legacies while stimulating their adaptation to, and anticipation of, new times and new markets. This ‘power of place’ concept is not **new**, having earlier found its outlet in the work of social geographers and anthropologists and more practically of organisations like Common Ground, applying the concepts of local distinctiveness and shared values to bring people together and strengthen communities through marking and celebrating shared pasts.<sup>1</sup> The work of the New Economics Foundation, with its exposure of the emergence of ‘clone towns’ and the leaching out of urban individuality in contemporary Britain, has become an important strand here.<sup>2</sup> These concepts are increasingly being afforded academic weight and political endorsement, although contesting the continuing drive to globalisation through commercially driven uniformity is still an uphill struggle. The UK government’s reliance on evidence-based policies has spawned a whole new area of heritage research, seeking to develop vocabulary, data and indicators with which to describe and measure the benefits that society derives from inherited cultures, practices, buildings and artefacts, and from the demand they create for unique or distinctive experiences.<sup>3</sup> Prompted by this agenda, **relationships between** history and identity can be promoted as positive and creative, and heritage can be viewed as a multi-dimensional social, economic and environmental, as well as cultural asset. These perceptions remain far from universal, as urban ‘regeneration’ is still capable of replacing low-key but much-loved emblems of the ‘spirit of place’ with the standard currency of the developer’s drawing-board, showing no interest in what has gone before or the nature of the setting.

But how far does this debate extend to include the heritage of the recent past? This was the subject **in January 2007** of a colloquium hosted by the University of Leicester. The colloquium was the start of a new cross-disciplinary research cluster, funded jointly by the British academic research councils, exploring the value and significance of the historic environment. The aim is to explore the ways in which different academic disciplines and the urban regeneration sector as a whole understand the concept of **recent** ‘heritage’, the practical implications of particular constructions of value for policies and programmes for the management of heritage places, and the consequences for communities and individuals.<sup>4</sup> What came across strongly in the discussion were the diverse range of values associated with the recent past and the complex nature of their interaction with contemporary issues. The concept of the ‘recent past’ is of course open to debate, but the dominant interpretation seems to involve those pasts that can be

accessed by living memory, which means that the frontier between ‘recent’ and earlier pasts is always moving with the passage of time. This recent past is a congested and contradictory environment; it is a ‘lived in’ and enlivened heritage with multiple stakeholders **and multiple voices**. It has yet to acquire the legitimacy of age and the consensus about its lasting value that are synonymous with more established and officially endorsed embodiments of ‘heritage’. It can be curious, strange and untidy, often non-material or intangible, linked to **collective** memories and entwined with the ambivalences of nostalgia. It is therefore sometimes invisible, and almost always unofficial, outside the dominant definitions of heritage and disowned by the usual categories and criteria for protection. As a consequence the recent past is also a contested environment, increasingly under threat from sanitising management regimes, more and more a focus for class politics and associated ‘culture wars’ and media inflections, and a growing area of popular concern.

Threats to the heritage of the recent past in Britain come from three main sources. There is an enduring cultural snobbery that favours ‘high’ art and culture, grand designs, planning (even when it is planning for studied informality) and elite associations (especially in architecture), and which resists any acknowledgement of the worth of the spontaneous, the organic, the unofficial, the informal, and the popular in the creation and use of valued environments – **what Jonathan Meades has termed ‘placeism’**.<sup>5</sup> The work of James Lees-Milne at the **infant** National Trust, and the ways in which he wrote about it, provides a distillation of these dominant values.<sup>6</sup> Running parallel to this is a set of bureaucratic values associated with planning and the imposition of standardised systems through local and national government, which prioritises uniformity and defines minimum standards, and imposes a grid of entitlements to spaces and services that kills diversity in the name of distantly mediated and decidedly unrepresentative democracy. Thirdly, there is the tendency to worship the ‘modern’ and the ‘contemporary’ in whatever form developers, working within the planning system and often in conjunction with local authorities, regard as commercial and architectural ‘best practice’ at a given moment. This is liable to sweep aside the heritage (formal or informal) of the recent past (and indeed earlier pasts) in pursuit of a standard orthodoxy which denies place identity and represents what George Ritzer has called ‘the globalisation of nothing’<sup>7</sup> (**Figures 1 and 2**). In trying to explain these pressures, we need to understand why the recent past, and perhaps especially ‘popular’ and ‘informal’ aspects of that past, has remained for so long below the radar of ‘mainstream’ academics and policy makers. This, **we** believe, reflects a hierarchy of professional values that has regarded ‘popular culture’ as frivolous, trivial and beneath the notice of serious scholarship, which rubbed off on, and was reinforced by, the assumed priorities of the academic Research Assessment Exercise at British universities (at least in older-established disciplines), and of heritage organisations in government and the voluntary sector, leading to a lack of coherent policy, organisation and documentation in these and related areas. The media have reinforced existing prejudices by denying the legitimacy of serious research on ‘trivial’ subjects and trivialising them in turn when commenting on developments.

We propose to explore these forces at work by examining British sports venues and seaside resorts of the late 19th and 20th centuries, and especially the controversies over the proposal for a World Heritage Site bid for Blackpool, the world’s first working-class

seaside resort. As an archaeologist and heritage consultant, **Jason Wood** first approached these themes from a conservation management perspective with an emphasis on historic ‘sportscares’ – the history and cultural geography of sports buildings and places. Latterly **he has** developed an interest in the rapidly developing fields of public history and public understanding of the past, and **is** especially interested in promoting programmes that offer a more inclusive reach in terms of community participation. Of especial interest here is revealing how sports venues and landscapes are valued as emblematic of aspiration and achievement, and understanding the intense sense of identity and of place which they convey in popular culture. Exploring people’s emotional and subjective attachment to these cherished locations, and the different ways in which this attachment is expressed, constitute the most pertinent and most challenging components of this research.<sup>8</sup> As a professor of social history with a long-established international interest in the history of seaside resorts and tourism, John Walton’s interest in heritage grew out of engagement in debates about the roots of current problems in British seaside resorts, the present situation and the possible ways forward, with special reference to the use of history and heritage in promoting and inspiring seaside regeneration. He has also developed an interest in industrial museums and in the uses of ‘local heroes’ for heritage tourism purposes, with research projects on the North of England Open Air Museum at Beamish and the development of a heritage trail themed around the explorer Captain James Cook in North Yorkshire.<sup>9</sup> We are both currently acting as consultants on the campaign to achieve World Heritage Site status for Blackpool.

The development of sport and seaside holidays (indeed that of tourism more generally) opens out strong and distinctive themes in modern British history. Sport, in particular – especially Association football – has developed a lively historiography in recent years, but for the most part this has failed to make an impact on the concerns of a very conservative ‘mainstream’ of the historical profession through syllabi and overall interpretations of the course of British history.<sup>10</sup> This is regrettable and distorting, because sport and the seaside holiday constitute two of the most successful and influential British cultural exports on the global stage, which should be part and parcel of the standard narratives of industry, empire and the first globalisation, but have actually been devalued, trivialised and, where not ignored altogether, left on the margins. This applies emphatically to their heritage as well as to their history.

Britain’s sporting and seaside heritage is a finite and irreplaceable resource, but despite its distinctiveness and authenticity decades of under-appreciation and lack of protection have taken their toll, resulting in loss of or damage to some famous and popular landmarks. But it seems we are still not learning the lessons from the past or responding adequately to the changing perceptions of such heritage. Controversial closure and disposal of historic sports and seaside buildings **and places** by public and private bodies continues today – to raise revenue, reduce expenditure or comply with health and safety standards – and with too little regard for their heritage value. This has led to increased planning casework, political interest or interference and media representation (often misrepresentation), but also to a growing number of public protests and demonstrations. It is arguable that the heritage sector has responded inadequately, belatedly and inconsistently.

Until recently the words ‘sport’ or ‘seaside’ were rarely associated with the word ‘heritage’, but this is slowly beginning to change with widening recognition of the economic and cultural importance of sport and the seaside in British society and beyond. The **history and heritage** of sports venues and seaside resorts is now attracting attention for the positive contribution **they** can make towards regeneration and quality of life. To capitalise on this, we need to give proper recognition to historic sports and seaside places (not just individual buildings) and raise the benchmark for heritage management of these unique environments by finding new ways to protect and enhance them **and by mobilising people’s affection for their rediscovery, nostalgia and authenticity**. In this respect proper mapping and characterisation will be essential to ensure that their value and significance permeates through to generate effective policies so that spatial 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. When considering redevelopment we also need to encourage more imaginative thinking in trying to make the best and most enjoyable use of existing assets alongside doing innovative or state-of-the-art things. **History and heritage should be seen as assets, not as brakes** on future development; nor **should regeneration be perceived** as a slap in the face for **historic places**. **History and heritage offer new and exciting ways of promoting and inspiring regeneration at British sports venues and seaside resorts. They are key drivers to be woven into the tapestry of development, contributing to the place-shaping agenda and combining renewal and innovation with an appeal to tradition and identity. Without history and heritage the relationship between place and identity is severed. We cannot unwind the past but we can use it to shape the future.** Having said this we have to be realistic. We should not expect to preserve everything. Some **buildings and places** will have to be let go. The question then becomes one of how best to memorialise those **valued** things we have lost or will lose; **how to mark and celebrate the tangible and intangible heritage of the recent past. In short,** achieving a balanced approach to the wide range of values and benefits that flow from such assets requires more than understanding and respecting special historical, architectural and landscape significance. It must also include celebration of customs, traditions, routines and practices that people associate with such places, **recognising the importance of such places as conduits for public memory, and** actively promoting forward-looking strategies that are sensitive to the richness of sports and seaside history and its personalities.

We turn now to discuss the Lancashire seaside resort of Blackpool, on the Irish Sea coast of north-west England, and its bid to become a World Heritage Site. In previous papers we have demonstrated that Blackpool has no credible challenger for the title of world’s first working-class seaside resort.<sup>11</sup> The town pioneered popular tourism in the nineteenth century, and today constitutes a unique cultural landscape – a living, evolving expression of the archaeology of the popular seaside holiday and entertainment industry – which retains a core identity and ambience and an impressive array of surviving architectures and built environments dedicated to the provision of leisure and enjoyment.

Initial reaction to the proposed bid when first announced by Blackpool Council 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*, writing 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?’<sup>12</sup> 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’.<sup>13</sup> 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 (**Figure 3**). Much of the reporting was stereo-typical and tongue-in-cheek as we had come to expect, though this time the *Daily Mail* was more positive.<sup>14</sup> The ‘You and Yours’ BBC Radio 4 programme even commissioned a poem by Ian McMillan called ‘**Heritage Me Quick!**’<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> This was not surprising, 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 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**. Many respondents considered the idea a joke, referring to the town as ‘cheap and tacky’, ‘dirty’, ‘horrid’, ‘sleazy and nasty’, ‘a dump’, ‘a cess-pit’, ‘shabby and unpleasant’ and ‘a miserable, grotty place’ with ‘about as much appeal as waiting for a bus in a thunderstorm’. Very few were prepared to look beyond ‘rusting piers’ and ‘drunken stag and hen parties’. ‘Anyone not from these shores visiting the place would question our national sanity that this question is even being discussed’ thought Nige from Gloucestershire. ‘Blackpool, World Heritage Site? – about as much chance as Bush and Blair being nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize’ added Mr Nye of Slough. Mr Long from Tonbridge in Kent was typical of many – ‘First “working-class resort”? What a pompous title. Liverpool and Blackpool are not in the same category as the Great Wall of China. World Heritage status is becoming seriously devalued’. ‘Angry of Mayfair’ and others also made unfavourable comparisons with the Great Wall, while Mike of London was prepared to concede there might be a case as ‘most of the accommodation in Blackpool is prehistoric’. Mr Barker, from nearby Lytham, thought ‘the question should not be “Should Blackpool become a World Heritage Site?”, but rather “Should Blackpool be demolished and started again?”’ ‘Blackpool is like a smelly old arthritic ridden dog that needs putting out of its misery’ concluded RS, also from Lancashire. Alternatives for World Heritage Site status included the Millennium Dome, **the motorway intersection known as Spaghetti Junction**, the 1960s Arndale Centre in the small Yorkshire town of Shipley (a classic example of characterless retail



architecture from that decade), a wind turbine near Reading, and a concrete elephant by the A30 [trunk road](#) in Camberley ‘made out of bits of sewer pipe’.

Finally, an extraordinarily aggressive and ignorant article by the ‘humorist’ Giles Coren appeared in *The Times*.<sup>17</sup> 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’.

The Blackpool World Heritage Site bid and the controversy surrounding it serve as an illustration of the changing perceptions of, and conflicts around, the heritage of the recent past in the British setting. The purpose of this paper has been to stretch established categories and challenge received assumptions about the content and nature of ‘heritage’, with particular reference to sports venues and seaside resorts. In seeking to open out debate in this context and further provoke the overlap between heritage studies and popular culture, key areas for further exploration will need to focus on such questions as spirit of place; loss and change; memory and meaning; authenticity and nostalgia; and regeneration and sustainability.

## References

- Coren, G. 2006. Shhh! You are entering Blackpool. *The Times*, 12 August 2006.
- DCMS, 2002. *People and places: social inclusion policy for the built and historic environment*. London: Department for Culture, Media and Sport.
- English Heritage, 2006. *Heritage counts: the state of England’s historic environment*. London: English Heritage.
- Hayden, D. 1995. *The power of place: urban landscapes as urban history*. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press.
- Lees-Milne, J. 1992. *People and places: country house donors and the National Trust*. London: John Murray.
- Mahoney, J. 2006. Blackpool eighth wonder of the world. *Daily Star*, 3 March 2006.
- Nevin, C. 2006. The third leader: the other tower. *The Independent*, 3 March 2006.
- Walton, J. K. and Wood, J. 2006. World heritage seaside. *British Archaeology* 90: 10-15.
- Walton, J. K. and Wood, J. Forthcoming [Boulogne paper awaiting French translation – have emailed Yves for reference](#)

Wheldon, J. 2006. Blackpool could join Pyramids and Great Wall as a World Heritage Site. *Daily Mail*, 10 August 2006.

Wood, J. 2005a. Talking sport or talking balls? Realising the value of sports heritage. In: *Understanding the workplace: a research framework for Industrial Archaeology in Britain*, eds. D. Gwyn and M. Palmer. *Industrial Archaeology Review* 27 (1): 137-44.

Wood, J. 2005b. Olympic opportunity: realizing the value of sports heritage for tourism in the UK. *Journal of Sport Tourism* 10 (4): 307-21.

## Figure captions

### Figures 1 and 2

The Sands development at Scarborough's North Bay, involving the loss of an art deco lido and café against the advice of an independent urban design analysis report, is an instance of insensitive intervention being presented as best practice on the basis of the financial management of the project rather than the quality of the outcome.

### Figure 3

Front cover of the *British Archaeology* magazine featuring our article on Blackpool's ambition for World Heritage Site status. The bi-monthly magazine is designed as a vehicle for communicating current archaeological concerns to a non-academic audience.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For this theme, see the historian and architect Dolores Hayden's account of the role that place plays in the production of history, heritage and memory in the American historic urban landscape (Hayden, 1995). For the publications and projects of the charitable organisation Common Ground, see [www.commonground.org.uk](http://www.commonground.org.uk)

<sup>2</sup> See [www.neweconomics.org/gen/clonetown.aspx](http://www.neweconomics.org/gen/clonetown.aspx)

<sup>3</sup> On the theme of communities and heritage and getting people involved with improving the local environment, see for example DCMS, 2002 and English Heritage, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> The colloquium formed part of the University of Leicester Department of Museum Studies' research cluster 'Valuing Historic Environments: Concepts, Instrumentalisations and Effects'. See [www.le.ac.uk/ms/contactus/valhistenvir.html](http://www.le.ac.uk/ms/contactus/valhistenvir.html)

<sup>5</sup> The first programme, *Father to the Man*, of the BBC 2 TV series, *Jonathan Meades: Abroad Again*, broadcast 9 May 2007, explored how places can affect people's lives. See [www.jonathanmeades.com](http://www.jonathanmeades.com)

<sup>6</sup> James Lees-Milne became Country Houses Secretary of the National Trust in 1936. See for example, Lees-Milne, 1992 and [www.jamesleesmilne.com](http://www.jamesleesmilne.com)

<sup>7</sup> George Ritzer, *The Globalization of Nothing* (Thousand Oaks, Cal.: Pine Forge Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup>

See for example, the agenda-setting paper on realising the value of sports heritage based partly on the results of an English Heritage pilot study in Manchester in the run up to the 2002 Commonwealth Games (Wood, 2005a) and preliminary ideas for sports heritage tourism projects for Britain's forthcoming Cultural Olympiad (Wood, 2005b).

<sup>9</sup> See most recently G. Cross and John K. Walton, *The Playful Crowd: Pleasure Places in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> But see, for example, Dave Russell, *Football and the English* (Preston: Carnegie Publishing, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> For earlier discussion, see Walton and Wood, 2006 and forthcoming.

<sup>12</sup> Nevin, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Mahoney, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Wheldon, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Broadcast 11 August 2006. See [www.ian-mcmillan.co.uk](http://www.ian-mcmillan.co.uk)

<sup>16</sup> See [newsforums.bbc.co.uk/nol/thread.jspa?threadID=3181&&&edition=1&ttl=20070612201322](http://newsforums.bbc.co.uk/nol/thread.jspa?threadID=3181&&&edition=1&ttl=20070612201322)

<sup>17</sup> Coren, 2006.