Mass Tourism

Introduction

The first example of mass tourism occurred among the industrial working class in Britain. The mass tourist gaze was initiated in the backstreets of the industrial towns and cities in the north of England. This chapter is devoted to examining why this industrial working class came to think that going away for short periods to other places was an appropriate form of social activity. Why did the tourist gaze develop among this industrial working class in the north of England? What revolution in experience, thinking and perception led to such novel and momentous modes of social practice?

The growth of such tourism represents a kind of ‘democratisation’ of travel. We have seen that travel had been enormously socially selective. It had been available for a relatively limited elite and was a marker of social status. But in the second half of the nineteenth century there was an extensive development in Europe of mass travel by train. Status distinctions then came to be drawn between different classes of traveller, but less between those who could and those could not travel. We noted above how 1840 is one of those remarkable moments when the world seems to shift and new patterns of social relations become established. This is when the ‘tourist gaze’, that combining together of the means of collective travel, the desire for travel and the techniques of photographic reproduction, becomes a core component of western modernity.

We consider later how in the twentieth century the car and the aeroplane have further democratised geographical movement. As travel became democratised so extensive distinctions of taste came to be established between the different places to which people travelled, which became markers of social ‘distinction’. The tourist gaze came to have a different importance in one place rather than another. A resort ‘hierarchy’ developed and certain places were viewed as embodiments of mass tourism, to be despised and ridiculed. Major differences of ‘social tone’ were established between otherwise similar places. And some such places, these new working-class resorts, quickly developed as symbols of ‘mass tourism’, as places of inferiority which stood for everything that dominant social classes held to be tasteless, common and vulgar.

Explanations of the tourist gaze, of the discourses which established and sustained mass tourism for the industrial working class in the nineteenth century, tend to be over-general. Such developments are normally explained in terms of ‘nineteenth-century industrialisation’ (Myerscough, 1974). In identifying more precisely those aspects of such industrialisation that were especially important, attention will be paid here to seaside resorts whose development was by no means inevitable. Their growth stemmed from certain features of nineteenth-century industrialisation in Britain and the growth of new modes by which pleasure was organised and structured in a society based upon an emergent, organised and large-scale working class. We examine their development because this was the first mass tourism to occur.

The Growth of the British Seaside Resort

Throughout Europe a number of spa towns developed in the eighteenth century. Their original purpose was medicinal: they provided mineral water used for bathing in and drinking. It is not clear exactly how and why people came to believe in these medicinal properties. The first spa in England appears to have been in Scarborough and dates from 1626 when a Mrs Farrow noticed a spring on the beach (see Hern, 1967: 2–3; Blackburn, 2002). Within a few decades the medical profession began to advocate the desirable effects of taking the waters, or taking the ‘Cure’. Various other spas developed, in Bath, Buxton, Harrogate, Tunbridge Wells
and so on. An amazing range of disorders were supposedly improved by both swallowing the waters and by bathing in them.

Scarborough, though, was distinctive since it was not only a major spa but was also by the sea. A Dr Wittie began to advocate both drinking the sea water and bathing in the sea. During the eighteenth century there was a considerable increase in sea bathing as the developing merchant and professional classes began to believe in its medicinal properties as a general pick-me-up. At that stage it was advocated for adults and there was little association between seascapes and children. Indeed, the point of bathing in the sea was to do one good and this was often done in winter, involving ‘immersion’ and not what is now understood as swimming (Hern, 1967: 21). These dips in the sea were structured and ritualised and prescribed to treat serious medical conditions. Bathing was only to be undertaken ‘after due preparation and advice’ as the historian Gibbon put it (Shields, 1990), and was also normally undertaken naked. The beach was a place of ‘medicine’ rather than ‘pleasure’.

Spa towns remained relatively socially restrictive. Access was only possible for those who could own or rent accommodation in the particular town. Younger summarises how: ‘life in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century watering-places resembled in many ways life on a cruise or in a small winter sports hotel, where the company is small and self-contained, rather than the modern seaside resort, where the individual is submerged in the crowd’ (1973: 14–15).

However, as sea bathing became more popular it was harder for dominant social groups to control access. Conflicts were generated in Scarborough because of its dual function as both spa and resort by the seaside. In 1824 the spa property was fenced off and a toll gate opened so as to exclude the ‘improper classes’ (Hern, 1967: 16). Pimlott summarised the effects of the widespread development of specialised seaside resorts where this social restriction was not possible:

The capacity of the seaside resorts, on the other hand, was unbounded. While social life at the spas was necessarily focussed on the pumproom and the baths, and there was no satisfactory alternative to living in public, the sea coast was large enough to absorb all comers and social homogeneity mattered less. (1947: 55)

One precondition, then, for the rapid growth of seaside resorts in the later eighteenth and especially in the nineteenth centuries was space. Britain possessed an extensive coastline which had few other uses apart from fishing, and which could not be privately controlled since ownership of the shoreline and beach between high and low tide was invested in the Crown (see Thompson, 1981: 14).

The development of these new resorts by the seaside was spectacular. In the first half of the nineteenth century coastal resorts showed faster rates of population increase than that of manufacturing towns: 2.56 per cent per annum compared with 2.38 per cent (Lickorish and Kershaw, 1975: 12). The population of Brighton increased from 7,000 to 65,000 in half a century, partly because the Prince Regent made it fashionable, a portion of the West End was maritimized (Shields, 1990). The population of the 48 leading seaside towns increased by nearly 100,000 between 1861 and 1871; their population had more than doubled by the end of the century. By 1911 55 per cent of people in England and Wales took at least one trip to the seaside and 20 per cent stayed for a longer period each year (Myerscough, 1974: 143).

A complex of conditions produced the rapid growth of this new mass leisure activity and hence of these relatively specialised and unique concentrations of services in particular urban centres, concentrations designed to provide novel and what were at the time amazing objects of the tourist gaze.

First, there was some increase in the economic welfare of substantial parts of the working-class population. The real national income per head quadrupled over the nineteenth century (see Deane and Cole, 1962: 282). This enabled sections of the working class to accumulate savings from one holiday period to the next, given
there were at the time few holidays with pay (Walton, 1981: 252).

In addition, there was rapid urbanisation, with many small towns growing incredibly rapidly. In 1801, 20 per cent of the population lived in towns; by 1901 80 per cent did. This produced extremely high levels of poverty and overcrowding. Moreover, these urban areas possessed almost no public spaces, such as parks or squares (Lash and Urry, 1987: ch. 3). Unlike older towns and cities, a marked degree of residential segregation by class developed. This was crucial for the emergence of the typical resort, which attracted particular social groupings from certain neighbourhoods of emerging industrial towns and cities. The Economist in 1857 summarised the typical urban pattern:

Society is tending more and more to spread into classes – and not merely classes but localised classes, class colonies. … It is the disposition to associate with equals – in some measure with those who have similar practical interests, in still greater measure with those who have similar tastes and culture, most of all with those with whom we judge ourselves on a moral equality, whatever our real standard may be. (20 June 1857: 669; Johnson and Pooley, 1982)

One effect of the economic, demographic and spatial transformation of nineteenth-century towns was to produce self-regulating working-class communities, communities relatively autonomous of either the old or new institutions of the wider society. Such communities were important in developing forms of working-class leisure which were segregated, specialised and institutionalised (Thompson, 1967; Clarke and Critcher, 1985).

The growth of a more organised and routinised pattern of work led to attempts to develop a corresponding rationalisation of leisure: ‘To a large extent this regularisation of the days of leisure came about because of a change in the daily hours of work and in the nature of work’ (Cunningham, 1980: 147). Particularly in the newly emerging industrial workplaces and cities, work came to be organised as a relatively time-bound and space-bound activity, separated off from play, religion and festivity. Over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries work was increasingly valued for its own sake and not merely as a remedy for idleness. Some attempts were made to move from an orientation to task towards an orientation to time (see Thompson, 1967; Lash and Urry 1994: chs 9, 10).

Industrialists attempted to impose a rigorous discipline on their newly constructed workforce (Pollard, 1965). Tough and quite unfamiliar rules of attendance and punctuality were introduced, with various fines and punishments. Campaigns were mounted against drinking, blood sports, bad language and idleness (see Myerscough, 1974: 4–6; Cunningham, 1980: ch. 3 on ‘rational recreation’). Many fairs were abandoned and Saints’ Days and closing days at the Bank of England were dramatically reduced. From the 1860s onwards the idea of civilising the ‘rough’ working class through organised recreation became more widespread among employers, middle-class reformers and the state (see Rojek, 1993: ch. 2). The typical forms of preferred recreation were educational instruction, physical exercise, crafts, musical training and excursions. Country holidays for deprived city children, as well as the camps organised by the burgeoning youth movement (the Boys’ Brigade, Scouts, Jewish Lads’ Brigades and so on) were one element of the social engineering of the working class favoured by the rational recreation movement.

As work became in part rationalised, so the hours of working gradually reduced. Parliament introduced various pieces of protective legislation in the second half of the nineteenth century. Particularly important was the attainment of the half-day holiday, especially on Saturdays (see Cunningham, 1980: ch. 5). Phelps-Brown noted that: ‘The achievement of a work-week not exceeding 54 hours and providing a half-holiday was unique in its time and was celebrated as “la semaine anglaise”’ (1968, 173; Cunningham, 1980: 142–5).

The achievement of longer breaks, of week-long holidays, was pioneered in the north of England and especially in the cotton-textile areas of Lancashire (Walton, 1981, 1983, 1997, 2000). Factory owners began to acknowledge ‘wakes weeks’ as regularised periods of holiday which were in effect traded for much more
regular attendance at work during the rest of the year: ‘The total closure of a mill at a customary holiday was preferable to constant disruption throughout the summer, and there were advantages in channelling holiday observances into certain agreed periods’ (Walton, 1981: 255).

Some employers thus began to view regular holidays as contributing to efficiency. However, the gradual extension of holidays from the mid-nineteenth century onwards mainly resulted from defensive pressure by the workforce itself, particularly the more affluent who saw such practices as ways of developing their own autonomous forms of recreation. The factory inspector Leonard Horner ascribed the survival of holidays to custom rather than to ‘liberality on the part of the masters’ (Walton, 1978: 35). A particularly significant feature of such holidaymaking was that it should be collective. As Walton argues, at wakes week ‘as at Christmas, Easter and Whitsuntide, custom dictated that holidays should be taken en masse and celebrated by the whole community’ (1978: 35). From the 1860s onwards, wakes weeks came mainly to involve trips by the whole neighbourhood to the seaside and away from people's normal places of work and living (Walton and Poole, 1982; Walton, 2000).

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries there was a shift in values connected with the developing Romantic movement. Emphasis was placed upon the intensity of emotion and sensation, on poetic mystery rather than intellectual clarity and on individual hedonistic expression (Feifer, 1985: ch. 5 on the ‘Romantic’ tourist). The high priests of Romanticism were the Shelleys, Byron, Coleridge, Keats and the Wordsworths (Bate, 1991). Romanticism suggested that one could feel emotions towards the natural world and scenery. Individual pleasures were to be derived from appreciating impressive physical sights. Romanticism implied that those living in newly emerging industrial towns would benefit from spending short periods away from them, viewing or experiencing nature. Romanticism not only led to the development of ‘scenic tourism’ and appreciation for magnificent stretches of the coastline. It also encouraged sea bathing. Considering the generally inclement weather and the fact that most bathers were naked since no suitable bathing attire had yet been designed by the early nineteenth century, some considerable development of a belief in the health-giving properties of ‘nature’ must have occurred. Much nineteenth-century tourism was based on the natural phenomenon of the sea and its presumed healthiness (Hern, 1967: ch. 2; Walton, 1983: ch. 2; Sprawson, 1992).

A further precondition for the growth of mass tourism was greatly improved transportation. In the late eighteenth century it took three days to travel from Birmingham to Blackpool. Even the trip from Manchester to Blackpool took a whole day. Only Brighton was reasonably well served by coach. By 1830, 48 coaches a day travelled between London and Brighton and the journey time was reduced to 4½ hours (see Walvin, 1978: 34). But there were two major problems with coach travel. First, many roads were in very poor condition. It was only in the 1830s that the turnpike trusts created a reasonable national network and journey times fell dramatically. Second, coach travel was very expensive, costing something like 2½d. to 3d. a mile. Richard Ayton noted of Blackpool visitors in 1813 that: ‘Most of them come hither in carts, but some will walk in a single day from Manchester, distant more than forty miles’ (Walvin, 1978: 35).

At first, the new railway companies in the 1830s did not realise the economic potential of the mass, low-income passenger market. They concentrated instead on both goods traffic and on transporting prosperous passengers. But Gladstone's Railway Act of 1844, an important piece of legislation, obliged the railway companies to make provision for the ‘labouring classes’ (Walvin, 1978: 37). Even before this, the opening of the railway lines between Preston and Fleetwood in 1840 produced an extraordinary influx of visitors to Fleetwood, many of whom then travelled down the coast to Blackpool. By 1848 over 100,000 trippers left Manchester by train for the coast during Whit week; by 1850 it was over 200,000 (Walvin, 1978: 38). The effect on the social tone of Blackpool in the middle of the century was noted at the time:

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Unless immediate steps are taken, Blackpool as a resort for respectable visitors will be ruined. …
Unless the cheap trains are discontinued or some effective regulation made for the management of the thousands who visit the place, Blackpool property will be depreciated past recovery. (quoted in Walvin, 1978: 38)
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Indeed, the ‘social tone’ of Blackpool appears to have fallen quickly, since 15 years earlier it was said to have been ‘a favourite, salubrious and fashionable resort for “respectable families”’ (Perkin, 1976: 181).

But the role of the railways should not be overemphasised. Generally, the railway companies found that the seasonal nature of the holiday meant it was not particularly profitable. It was only at the end of the century that they really set about promoting travel to different resorts by outlining the most attractive features of each resort (see Richards and MacKenzie, 1986: 174–9). And rarely, as in the case of Silloth in the north-west of England, did the railway companies try to construct a wholly new resort, Silloth, which in fact failed (Walton, 1979).

It has also been argued that railway development accounts for the differences in ‘social tone’ between the rapidly emerging seaside resorts in the mid-nineteenth century. On the face of it, a reasonable explanation of these differences would be that those resorts which were more accessible to the great cities and industrial towns were likely to be more popular and this would drive out visitors with higher social status. Thus Brighton and Southend were more popular and had a lower social tone than Bournemouth and Torquay, which were not in day-tripping range from London (Perkin, 1976: 182).

But such an explanation does not fully work. Scarborough and Skegness were practically the same distance from the West Riding, yet they developed different social tones. Although the railway obviously made a difference, its arrival does not fully explain the marked variations that emerged. Nor, Perkin argues, do the actions of local elites. There were in fact energetic campaigns in most of the places that became working-class resorts (such as Blackpool or Morecambe) to stop the local railway companies from running Sunday day trips because it was thought that the trippers would drive out the wealthier visitors that all resorts wanted to attract. Perkin argues instead that the effect of the local elites on the respective ‘social tones’ of different resorts resulted from how land and buildings were locally owned and controlled. The factor determining each resort’s social tone was the competition for domination of the resort between three fractions of capital: local, large capital, especially owners of the main hotels, concert halls, shops and so on; local, small capital, especially boarding-house keepers, owners of amusement arcades and so on; and large, externally owned, highly capitalised enterprises providing cheap mass entertainment (Perkin, 1976: 185). Particularly important was the prior ownership and control of land in each locality. Perkin shows this in the contrast between Blackpool and Southport, the latter being located nearer to large centres of population and possessing fine wide beaches. Both resorts began with the more or less spontaneous provision of sea-bathing accommodation by local innkeepers, farmers and fishermen. But in Southport land was unenclosed and various squatters who provided sea-bathing facilities soon became tenants of the joint lords of the manor who in turn laid out the spacious and elegant avenue, Lords Street. The landlords also prevented new industrial and much commercial development, with the result that Southport became a resort of large hotels, residential villas, large gardens and retirement homes for cotton magnates and the like (Walton, 1981: 251).

Blackpool, by contrast, began as a community of small freeholders. By 1838 there were only 24 holdings of land in the town over 25 acres and most of these were well away from the seafront. Even the larger holdings on the front were sold off and divided up into plots for seafront boarding houses. Walton notes that no large resort was so dominated by small lodging houses as Blackpool. This was because:

There was no room for a planned, high-class estate to grow up on the landowner's own terms, for Blackpool's small freeholders were understandably more concerned with taking the maximum profit from a cramped parcel of land than with improving the amenities of the resort as a whole. (Walton, 1978: 63)

Land in Blackpool was thus developed at high densities from the first, and few restrictions were placed on developers by landowners, for the fragmented pattern of landownership meant that there was always competition to sell and for building.
As a result, the whole central area became an ill-planned mass of smaller properties, boarding houses, amusement arcades, small shops and the like, with no space for the grand public buildings, broad avenues and gardens found in Southport. Although local small capital attempted to appeal to the rapidly expanding middle-class tourist market, Blackpool did not possess the attractions necessary to appeal to this market, and simultaneously it was proving immensely popular, because of its cheapness, with the industrial working class. This included both trippers and those staying overnight. The numbers of visitors increased greatly during the 1870s and 1880s, by which time, the *Morning Post* declared, in Blackpool ‘more fun could be found, for less money, than anywhere else in the world’ (24 August 1887). Efforts by the Corporation to exclude traders selling cheap goods and services failed, and by the 1890s enough local ratepayers had acquired an interest in catering for the working-class holidaymaker for Blackpool's 'social tone' to be firmly set (Perkin, 1976: 187). The main exception to this pattern was to be found in the area known as the North Shore where the Blackpool Land, Building and Hotel Company acquired control of three-quarters of a mile of seafront and carefully planned a socially select and coherent development (see Walton, 1978: 70–1). During the nineteenth century Southport in fact prospered more than Blackpool, with a larger population even as late as 1901 (Perkin, 1976: 186).

So differences in the social tone of resorts (the ‘resort hierarchy’) are explicable in terms of the intersection between land ownership patterns and scenic attractiveness. Those places which ended up as working-class resorts, or what might be described as ‘manufacturing resorts’ linked into a particular industrial city, were those which generally had highly fragmented land ownership in the mid-nineteenth century and a relatively undesired scenic landscape. Such resorts developed as fairly cheap places to visit, with the resulting tourist infrastructure to cater for a mass working-class market normally derived from a specific industrial town or city. As the market developed, so wealthier holidaymakers went elsewhere looking for superior accommodation, social tone and tourist gaze. Holidaymaking is a form of conspicuous consumption in which status attributions are made on the basis of *where* one has stayed and that depends in part upon what the other people are like who also stay there. The attractiveness of a place and hence its location within a resort hierarchy also depends upon *how many* other people are staying in the same place, and especially how many other people there are like oneself.

There were some interesting differences in the nineteenth century between popular holidaymaking in the south of Britain and the north (Walton, 1981). In the south, day excursions were more popular and they tended to be organised by the railway companies, national interest groups like the National Sunday League, or commercial firms like Thomas Cook (see Farrant, 1987, on the development of south-coast resorts, of ‘London-by-the-Sea’). Thomas Cook was founded in 1841 when Cook chartered a train from Leicester to Loughborough for a temperance meeting (Brendon, 1991). His first pleasure excursion was in 1844 and the ‘package’ included a guide to recommended shops and places of historic interest upon which to ‘gaze’. Cook wrote eloquently of the desirability of mass tourism and the democratisation of travel:

> But it is too late in this day of progress to talk such exclusive nonsense ... railways and steamboats are the results of the common light of science, and are for the people. ... The best of men, and the noblest of minds, rejoice to see the people follow in their foretrod routes of pleasure. (quoted in Feifer, 1985: 168–9)

Interestingly, among those undertaking Cook's 'packages' to the continent, women considerably outnumbered men. In restrictive Victorian Britain Thomas Cook provided a remarkable opportunity for (often single) women to travel unchaperoned around Europe. The immense organisational and sociological significance of Thomas Cook is well summarised by Younger: ‘His originality lay in his methods, his almost infinite capacity for taking trouble, his acute sense of the needs of his clients. ... He invented the now universal coupon system, and by 1864, more than a million passengers had passed through his hands’ (1973: 21; Urry, 2007).

In northern England voluntary associations were important in developing the holiday movement. Pubs, churches and clubs often hired an excursion or holiday train and provided saving schemes for their members.
The proximity of friends, neighbours and local leaders provided security and social control. Large numbers of quite poor people were thereby enabled to go on holiday, spending nights away from home. The pattern was soon established of holidaymakers returning again and again to the same accommodation within the same resort. Blackpool, with its high proportion of Lancashire-born landladies, enjoyed a considerable advantage in this respect. Holiday clubs became common in many places in industrial Lancashire, although they remained a rarity elsewhere. Walton well summarises late nineteenth-century developments in industrial Lancashire:

The factory communities, after early prompting by employers and agencies of self-improvement, thus created their own grassroots system of holiday organisation in the later nineteenth century. Each family was enabled to finance its own holiday without assistance from above. The unique Lancashire holiday system was thus based on working-class solidarity in retaining and extending the customary holidays, and by cooperation and mutual assistance to make the fullest use of them. ... Only in Lancashire ... was a balance struck between the survival of traditional holidays and the discipline of industrial labour. Only here did whole towns go on holiday, and find resorts able to look after their needs. (1978: 39)

This pattern was particularly found in the cotton-textile industry, partly because of the high employment of women. This meant higher family incomes and a greater interest in forms of leisure that were less male-based and more family/household-based (see Walton, 1981: 253). Elsewhere, Walton maintains, ‘too great an attachment to customary holidays and ways of working retarded the development of the working class seaside holiday over much of industrial England’ (1981: 263).

Indeed, this was a period in which many other leisure events came to be organised – there was a plethora of traditions invented between 1870 and 1914, often promoted and rendered sacred by royal patronage. Examples included the Royal Tournament in 1888, the first Varsity match in 1872, the first Henry Wood Promenade Concert in 1895, the Highland Games (first made royal in 1852) and so on. As Rojek argues, in the late Victorian/Edwardian period there was a restructured system of moral regulation, which involved not the denial of pleasures but their cultivation. In this process national spectacles played a key role, most spectacularly through the ‘Trooping the Colour’ on Horse Guards Parade (see Rojek 1993: ch. 2; McCrone, 1998). Participating at least once in these leisure events came to be an important part of the emergent sense of Britishness in the late nineteenth century, a sense increasingly derived from people's leisure activities.

In the inter-war period many developments affected the development of the tourist gaze within Britain. First, there was the growth of car ownership to over two million by 1939, as well as the widespread development of coach travel and the idea of touring the countryside (Light, 1991).

Second, there was the considerable development of air transport, with over 200 million miles flown in 1938. This was partly the result of the systematic encouraging of what Adey terms ‘air-mindedness’ (2006).

Third, various new organisations developed, such as the Cyclists' Touring Club, the Cooperative Holidays Association, Sir Henry Lunn's, the Touring Club of France, the International Union of Official Organizations for Tourist Propaganda, the Youth Hostels Association, the Camping Club of Great Britain and so on.

Fourth, there was the early development of holiday camps, beginning with Joseph Cunningham's Isle of Man camp in 1908 and culminating in Billy Butlin's luxury Skegness camp that opened in 1936 (Ward and Hardy, 1986).

Fifth, there was increasing attraction of travelling by liner and especially of pleasure cruising on what were at the time sumptuous consumption and leisure palaces on the sea (Walton, 2000; Stanley, 2005).

Finally, there was a strong growth of the holidays-with-pay movement, culminating in the Holidays Act of 1938, although much of this only came into effect after 1945 (Walvin, 1978: ch. 6). Sir Walter Citrine, giving evidence to the Select Committee for the Trades Union Congress (TUC), declared that going on holiday “is an increasing
factor in working-class life. I think most people now are appreciating the necessity for a complete change of surroundings’ (quoted in Brunner, 1945: 9).

Overall, Brunner maintained that nevertheless the seaside resort remained the Mecca for the vast majority of British holidaymakers throughout this period. Indeed, she claimed that such resorts are: ‘essentially native to this country, more numerous and more highly specialised in their function as resorts than those of any other land’ (1945: 8). Seaside holidays were still the predominant form of holiday in Britain up to the Second World War and expanded faster than other type of holiday in the inter-war period (see Walvin, 1978: 116–18; Walton, 2000). Thus by the Second World War there was widespread acceptance of the view that going on holiday was good for one, that it was the basis of personal replenishment. Holidays had become almost a marker of citizenship, a right to pleasure. And around that right had developed in Britain an extensive infrastructure providing specialist services, particularly in these resorts. Everyone had become entitled to the pleasures of the ‘tourist gaze’ by the seaside. The next section details how that gaze came to be organised in various resorts, beginning with one ‘working-class resort’, Morecambe, in the top north-west corner of England just south of the Lake District. It will be shown that different resorts came to specialise in providing the tourist gaze and related services to distinct groups in the social hierarchy.

‘Bradford-by-the-Sea’, Beaches and Bungalows

Up to the mid-nineteenth century almost all the largest seaside resorts had been located in the south of England, close to middle-class patrons and sources of finance (King, 1984: 70–4). Only these resorts could attract visitors from a ‘national’ market. Resorts away from the south coast had to rely on a local or regional market. But by the beginning of the twentieth century this had dramatically changed. It was in the north of England, and especially in the Lancashire textile towns, that working-class holidays were pioneered in the late nineteenth century:

It was here that the seaside holiday, as opposed to the day excursion, became a mass experience during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Elsewhere, even in London, the process was slower and patchier. But working-class demand became the most important generator of resort growth in northern England in late Victorian times. (Walton, 1983: 30–1)

A number of major resorts developed in the north of England. By 1911 Blackpool had become the fifth-largest resort in the country while Lytham, Morecambe, Southport and St Anne’s all showed significant population growth. This was therefore a period which ‘saw the swift and emphatic rise of the specialized working-class resort’ (Walton, 1983: 67). Compared with the previous period, the fastest-growing resorts were more widely dispersed throughout Britain.

‘Morecambe … tried to become a select resort and commuter terminus for West Riding business men, but became instead the Yorkshireman’s Blackpool’ (Perkin, 1976: 104; Quick, 1962). A condition essential to the growth of the working-class holiday resort was the strong ties of community found in the industrial centres in the north of England (Walton, 1978: 32). But Morecambe could not compete with Blackpool for the bulk of the holiday trade from Lancashire because Blackpool had established a more substantial tourist infrastructure much earlier. It was considerably nearer the rapidly expanding towns and cities in south and east Lancashire and therefore attracted huge numbers of day-trippers. Once a resort had established a pull over its ‘industrial hinterland’ its position was unlikely to be challenged, since visits to that resort became part of the ‘tradition’ or ‘path dependency’ of holidaymaking. Resorts that developed later, such as Bournemouth or Skegness, were able to do so because they had no obvious or similar rivals close by (Walvin, 1978: 161).

In the case of Morecambe it was clear by the second half of the nineteenth century that it could not compete with Blackpool for Lancashire holidaymakers. The Wigan coal-owner and alderman Ralph Darlington declared to a Commons Committee in 1884 that: ‘Morecambe does not stand in estimation with us as a watering place.
I should say it is not one at all’ (quoted in Grass, 1972: 6). Likewise Thomas Baxter, chairman of the Morecambe Board of Health in 1889, observed that: ‘there was no doubt that Blackpool had always had the pull all over Lancashire’ (Observer, 11 October 1889).

Morecambe’s inability to compete for the Lancashire holiday market, combined with the rail link to the Yorkshire woollen towns, meant that many visitors came from Leeds and Bradford. This was because the connections with Yorkshire extended not only to the holiday trade but also to patterns of migration. Many people from Yorkshire, both workers and employers, came to live in Morecambe, some of whom commuted to Bradford or Halifax daily (Perkin, 1976: 190). The first mayor of the new Corporation, Alderman E. Barnsbee, was a Bradford man who retired to Morecambe. In addition, Morecambe was not the only holiday destination for those living in the West Riding. It had to face considerable competition from the resorts on the east coast, in both Yorkshire and Lincolnshire. Yet it did become increasingly popular. A Daily Telegraph correspondent wrote in 1891: ‘as Margate is to the average Cockney, so is Morecambe to the stalwart and health-loving Yorkshireman. For it is allowed on all sides that Morecambe is true Yorkshire to the backbone. … Yorkshiremen, Yorkshire lads, and Yorkshire lasses have selected to colonise and to popularise this breezy, rainy, wind-swept, and health-giving watering-place’ (quoted in Grass, 1972: 10). Furthermore, in the inter-war period a Lord Mayor of Bradford proclaimed that ‘most of the citizens of Bradford, to say nothing of the children, have enjoyed spending some of their leisure time in this wonderful health resort’ (Visitor, July 1935, Diamond Jubilee Souvenir).

Morecambe, however, did not attract as many middle-class visitors that were hoped for. Partly this was because the town leaders could not prevent the growth of many day-trippers, described by the Lancaster Guardian as a ‘disorderly and riotous mob’ (22 August 1868), and partly because very many relatively small houses (often ‘back houses’) made it impossible to stop the establishment of new boarding houses and small hotels which provided accommodation for less well-off visitors, especially from west Yorkshire. There was a considerable debate between the champions of ‘respectability’, who were organised through the Board of Health until 1894 and the Urban District Council after then, and the providers of ‘mass holiday consumption’, such as the large entertainment companies. In an editorial in 1901, the Visitor supported the latter group on the grounds that in a town with ‘no public band, no public parks, no pier supported from the rates’, they had ‘done their work catering for the visitors admirably this season’ (2 October 1901). As early as the late 1890s the advocates of commercial development had won the day and attempts by the Urban District Council to maintain ‘respectability’ had failed. The Daily Telegraph summed up Morecambe in 1891: ‘It may be that, to the fastidious, rough honest-hearted Morecambe is a little primitive, and slightly tinged with vulgarity. But it is never dull’ (quoted in Perkin, 1976: 191).

In the later years of the century there were a number of developments: a rapid rate of population increase (over 10 per cent per annum); much growth of capital expenditure, especially on major facilities including a revolving tower; and an extensive growth of lodging-house and hotel accommodation (see Denison-Edson, 1967).

But its prosperity was dependent upon the level of prosperity in west Yorkshire. When Bradford, and especially the woollen industry, was doing well, then Morecambe seemed to prosper. As the Observer noted in 1883: ‘when the Bradford trade has been at a low ebb it has not been at all plain sailing for “Bradford-By-The-Sea”’ (25 May). Also, Morecambe remained the prisoner of the railway companies and the quality and quantity of the train services they provided.

In the inter-war period Morecambe was successful, partly because there was an extensive growth of paid holidays for those in work, and partly because most holidays were still taken at the seaside and family-households were transported there by rail and to a lesser extent by coach. Spokesmen from Morecambe advocated that all workers should receive a week’s holiday with pay (Visitor, 22 January 1930). By 1925 there were two holiday camps in Heysham, part of the same borough. Morecambe experienced considerable annual growth in population, 3.8 per cent during the 1930s (Denison-Edson, 1967: 28). The 1930s and 1940s were particularly prosperous, with the town council investing heavily in new objects for the tourist gaze, an example of
how a Conservative council could engage in ‘municipal conservatism’.

We now briefly describe two other resorts by way of comparison: Brighton, on the south coast, and Birchington, in Kent. Each was the first to develop new objects of the tourist gaze at the seaside, Brighton with the first beach devoted to ‘pleasure’ and Birchington with the first bungalow houses.

We already noted the early and extensive development of Brighton during the eighteenth century. The beach was viewed as a site for medical treatment and was regulated by ‘dippers’, the women responsible for immersion (see Shields, 1990: ch. 2). In the mid-nineteenth century this medicalised beach was replaced by a pleasure beach, which Shields characterises as a liminal zone, a built-in escape from the patterns and rhythms of everyday life. Such a zone had a further characteristic, of carnival, as the beach became noisy and crowded, full of unpredictable social mixing, and involving the inversion of social hierarchies and moral codes. In the classic medieval carnival, the grotesque body was counterposed to the disciplined body of propriety and authority; in the nineteenth-century holiday carnival, the grotesque body was shamefully uncovered and open to the gaze of others. Literally, grotesque bodies became increasingly removed from actual view and were gazed upon through commercialised representations, especially the vulgar picture postcard. Shields summarises the carnival of the beach rendered appropriate for pleasure:

It is this foolish, impudent, undisciplined body which is the most poignant symbol of the carnivalesque – the unclosed body of convexities and orifices, intruding onto and into others’ body-space, [which] threatens to escape, transgress, and transcend the circumscriptions of the body. (1990: 95)

Brighton was the first resort in which the beach became constructed as a site for pleasure, for social mixing, for status reversals, for carnival. This is one reason why in the first few decades of the twentieth century Brighton developed a reputation for sexual excess and particularly for the ‘dirty weekend’. This became part of the place-image of Brighton, although the beach no longer so functions as a site of the carnivalesque.

Whereas Brighton’s class associations were with royalty and the aristocracy, the resorts in Kent in the mid-nineteenth century were associated with the new middle class (King, 1984: 72–8). The developing professional middle class increasingly stayed in Cliftonville and Westgate. In the latter, all the roads were private and only detached houses were allowed. The first bungalows in Britain were built in 1869–70 in Westgate and more extensively in Birchington in 1870–3, just next door (King, 1984: 74). Until this development there was no specialist house building by the seaside. Indeed, in the earlier fishing villages houses were often built with their backs to the sea, as at Ravenglass on the edge of the Lake District. The sea was there for fishing, not for gazing on. Nineteenth-century resorts were public places with some distinctive public buildings, such as assembly rooms, promenades, public gardens, dance halls and so on. Residential provision was similar to that found in inland towns and was not distinct.

By contrast, the development of the bungalow as a specialised form of housing by the seaside resulted from the heightened attraction of visiting the seaside not for strictly medical reasons but for the bracing air and fine views; the increasing demand from sections of the middle class for accommodation well away from other people, for being able to gaze at the sea in relative solitude; and the rising popularity of swimming as opposed to dipping and hence the perceived need for semi-private access for the whole family and especially for children. Birchington ideally met these conditions. There were no public facilities, there was an attractive coastline for building, the first bungalows were ‘rural looking’ and offered attractive contrasts with the urban, and tunnels could be built linking each bungalow directly with the beach. In the twentieth century there has been an extensive ‘bungaloid growth’ at the seaside so that in some sense in the twentieth century the bungalow is the English seaside. And as it has become the housing of the lower middle class, so its earlier fashionability and bohemianism evaporated and indeed it became an object of considerable status hostility (see King, 1984: ch. 5). This further brings out how seaside resorts are places of contested social tone and fights over cultural capital.
Conclusion

So we have examined in this chapter the nineteenth-century origins of English seaside resorts. We tried to bring out just how distinct this development was. They were the first places where the rapidly growing industrial working class in Europe would go away for leisure and pleasure, generally with others from the same class neighbourhood. They left behind, if only for a day or a week, industrial towns and cities, places of back-breaking labour, water and airborne pollution, rampant ill-health and a lack of visual stimulation. The resorts offered some remarkable contrasts as the collective tourist gaze took improbable root in these places by the sea. These places came then to be re-made and re-seen as places of visual enticement, places ‘on the margin’ but increasingly central to the growing ‘economy of signs’ of an industrial economy.

The twentieth century then ushered in some striking further transformations of the tourist gaze. Places by the sea emerged all over the world, modelling themselves on these early mass resorts but developing many new features and characteristics to gaze upon, as we examine in the rest of this book. In some cases, these early resorts came to seem dated and very much left-behind in the slow lane, as competition between places to be gazed upon became first nationalised and then internationalised.

- resort
- tourist gaze
- seaside resorts
- holidays
- working class
- bungalows
- tourism

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