
The British seaside is back in vogue with holidaymakers and investors alike: buildings such as the De La Warr pavilion at Bexhill recently restored, frontages as in Hastings renovated, and the challenges of decay generally being tackled as at Skegness where the local authority is to spend £140,000 this summer on regeneration to entice the tourist back. And the seaside has now become academically respectable. Long regarded in academic circles as down market and only fit for an intellectual day trip, sustained and serious interest is now being taken in the heritage, culture and role of the seaside resort. The Open University’s new course on Place and Leisure includes a module on the seaside. This reflects changing and changing attitudes: the seaside interests us all, because we’ve been there, even with varying degrees of pleasure where the British seaside is concerned. The postcard captioned ‘we came away for a change of air, but all we’re getting is a change of rain’ rings all too familiar.

Designing the Seaside is beautifully illustrated, with many of the plates in colour. There are saucy postcards, prints, photographs, paintings and posters, some familiar, others less so. Frith’s mid nineteenth century panorama of Ramsgate Sands is partnered with an early view ofScarborough sands (both of which yield fascinating detail to the magnifying glass). These illustrations form a visual complement to the well-written text, which gives a broad history of the seaside and seabathing from its origins as an upper class medical craze to its present day clientele. The focus is primarily on England, but not exclusively so. That English resorts should feature large is understandable: the seaside was an English innovation exported throughout Europe and to the Empire. It is not surprising that there are frequent references to English resorts – Brighton, Blackpool and Margate, the last with ‘its muddy water, dead dogs, fish guts and filth’. But there is lots of material from the Continent, e.g. Italy and the Fascist colonie movement, North America, the Middle east and Japan, although little from Scotland which is why golf, that northern seaside passion gets no mention.

The calibre of the visual material and its variety is striking but it should not be allowed to overshadow the text, which is deeply informed and fluently written. Gray sets himself a formidable undertaking- to look at how the seaside evolved, how its uses and representations have been changed, in and through its architecture, what part different kinds of consumers played: holiday-makers make the holiday resort. He takes a liberal and welcome definition of architecture; it is not just the grand hotels, pavilions and casinos, piers and theatres, solariums and swimming baths but bathing stations and lidos, amusement parks and roller coasters, bungalows and holiday camps. Piers, their rise and heyday merit a chapter entirely to themselves: there are sad pictures of the West pier at Brighton in decay and then ablaze. Very little escapes Gray’s attention. Even the history of the deckchair – first used on Margate beach in 1898, or so it is asserted, - is disentangled. The bathing machine, and its eventual demise in the 1930s, features as does the beach hut, with its aroma of salt, seaweed and swimming costume. What was provided architecturally and by whom is a key focus – I had not known that Sir George Gilbert Scott amongst his many other commissions had designed the baths at Brighton. Also considered is influenced design, whether fashion, and taste, indigenous and imported style, from the Brighton pavilion onwards. But what was provided was shaped also by what people wanted of their seaside holiday, an aspect which takes Gray into an exploration of consumer expectations and behaviour. Some visitors sought health and relaxation, others music and amusement, or education and entertainment, perhaps even voyeurism or sex. Different age and class groups have differing ideas as to what makes for a good time, and one group’s pleasure was another’s vexation. What you did, how you dressed or undressed, (even Macintosh bathing!) could delight you, but offend authority. The seaside, and this continues yet, is a place of cultural conflict.

Gray’s book is a tonic, to read and enjoy for pleasure. Although there is a degree of overlap, Lukas’ study is rather different in tone. A feature of the seaside mass resorts came to be the amusement park, increasingly shaped by American ideas and technology. But while there is history and anecdote here- there is a nice story of an American entrepreneur promoter who sold authentic beach sand to gullible Mid westerners, – it is heavy on ‘meaning’. For Lukas, the theme parks are not just places of fun and pleasure, but ‘material delivery places in which the ideas of consumer society are instilled in people’. The text is carefully ordered into consideration of the subjects as oasis, land, show, show, brand and machine. He does look at the evolution, the prehistory, design and function, of the theme park from its origins in pleasure gardens and exhibitions. It was a form of mass entertainment developed in the later 19th century America at resorts such as Coney Island. This amusement complex was responsible for the first hot dog (1867), the gravity railway or ‘roller coaster’ (1884) and water ride (Shoot the Shutes) in 1895. By the 1920s there were as many as 2000 such coasters, bungalows and holiday camps. Piers, their rise and heyday took a chapter entirely to themselves: there are sad pictures of the West pier at Brighton in decay and then ablaze. Very little escapes Gray’s attention. Even the history of the deckchair – first used on Margate beach in 1898, or so it is asserted, - is disentangled. The bathing machine, and its eventual demise in the 1930s, features as does the beach hut, with its aroma of salt, seaweed and swimming costume. What was provided architecturally and by whom is a key focus – I had not known that Sir George Gilbert Scott amongst his many other commissions had designed the baths at Brighton. Also considered is influenced design, whether fashion, and taste, indigenous and imported style, from the Brighton pavilion onwards. But what was provided was shaped also by what people wanted of their seaside holiday, an aspect which takes Gray into an exploration of consumer expectations and behaviour. Some visitors sought health and relaxation, others music and amusement, or education and entertainment, perhaps even voyeurism or sex. Different age and class groups have differing ideas as to what makes for a good time, and one group’s pleasure was another’s vexation. What you did, how you dressed or undressed, (even Macintosh bathing!) could delight you, but offend authority. The seaside, and this continues yet, is a place of cultural conflict.

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others around a version of heritage or culture (Dickens’ World in Kent). But what they have in common is they take us out of ourselves. For all their showmanship and gimmickry, thrills and spectacle, they are, or so he argues, essentially therapeutic. In that, the theme park is partner to the seaside resort.

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