

Coasters at the Coast

What are the key components of a British seaside resort? Many consider the beach with its donkey rides, Punch and Judy shows, beach huts and deckchairs as fundamental to the seaside. Others would think of bracing walks along the promenade, visits to amusement arcades or watching a show at the pier theatre. But this image would be incomplete without the seaside funfair and its roller coasters and helter-skelters; the soundtrack of laughter, music and shrieks of delight; the smell of candy floss, hotdogs and doughnuts. Nevertheless, an increasing number of British seaside resorts now have a gaping hole on their seafronts where their funfairs and amusement parks used to be. This rash of closures inevitably raises questions about the future of the coasters, Ferris wheels and carousels that remain at the coast.

Many of the funfairs at British seaside resorts developed from gypsy stalls, menageries and sideshows. Improvements in technology in the early 20th century allowed the development of rides such as flying machines, switchback railways and water chutes. The majority of these embryonic funfairs looked westwards to the great amusement parks such as Coney Island for their inspiration. Coney Island's Luna Park, Dreamland, and Steeplechase Park were at the forefront of ride development, and by the early 1900s rides such as Hotchkiss Bicycle Railroads, American Carousels, Helter-Skelters, and Brooklyn Cake Walks had appeared at resorts such as Blackpool and Southport. The Pleasure Beach at Blackpool developed rapidly, and by the onset of the First World War it featured innovative rides such as the River Caves, the Witching Waves (an early dodgem ride), and the Velvet and Switchback roller coasters.

Nevertheless, it was during the inter-war years that funfair and ride development began apace. During the 1920s and 1930s a number of iconic roller coasters towered over coastal resorts: The Scenic Railway at Dreamland, Margate (1920); the Big Dipper at Blackpool Pleasure Beach (1923); the Roller Coaster/ Scenic Railway at Great Yarmouth (1932); and the Cyclone at Southport Pleasureland (1937). The growth of the 'woody' (wooden roller coaster) again mirrored developments in the USA, where Coney Island had opened its iconic Cyclone coaster in 1927. These funfairs were symbols of modernity and cutting-edge technology in addition to providing fun and excitement. Nowhere was this more evident than at Blackpool Pleasure Beach, where Joseph Emberton remodelled the park in an

International/Modernist style. Iconic rides and structures from this period include the Funhouse building (1934); the Grand National dual-track Möbius Loop coaster (1935); and the Pleasure Beach Casino (1940) which is now Grade II listed.

By the eve of the Second World War it is estimated that there were more than sixty funfairs and amusement parks at the British coast. They consisted of a variety of rides based on four main themes: roller coasters; water rides (such as water chutes); spin rides (which included helter-skelters, dodgems, Ferris wheels, and carousels); and dark rides (such as ghost trains). Although the outbreak of war meant that many of the fairgrounds were requisitioned by the military (for example Southport's Pleasureland was used in the manufacturing of aeroplane parts), by the late 1950s most were as popular as they had been in the 1930s. However, this was not to last, and the funfairs began to struggle as the popularity of the seaside resorts in which they were located waned from the 1970s onwards. Additionally, the seaside funfairs faced stiff competition from the new inland theme parks such as Alton Towers which developed its thrill rides during the late 1970s.

Today approximately 32 funfairs and amusement parks remain open at the British coast. Some are relatively small, such as those at Barry Island, Bridlington, or Clacton. Some are marketed as theme parks, such as Paultons Family Theme Park in the New Forest, or Oakwood near Tenby in Wales. Of course the well-established Pleasure Beaches at Blackpool and Great Yarmouth remain perennially popular with visitors.

Nevertheless, the number of seaside funfairs and their iconic rides has significantly declined in recent years, with over 15 parks closing since 1998. Established fairgrounds such as Frontierland in Morecambe; Spanish City in Whitley Bay; Ocean Beach in Rhyl; and Rotunda Amusement Park in Folkestone have closed their gates for the final time during this period. The reasons for the closure and subsequent demolition of these funfairs are manifold. Families are their main customers, but this market declined in the UK during the early 2000s due to demographic change. Secondly, the resorts in which the funfairs are located have suffered from declining popularity as holiday destinations. The majority of funfairs closed before the recent resurgence of the seaside resort and the rise of the 'staycation'. It also goes without saying that the seaside funfairs are seasonal and weather dependent which can severely limit return on investment and profit margins for their owners. In addition there has been significant investment in inland theme parks such as Alton Towers, Drayton Manor and

Chessington World of Adventures. With the globalisation of the Disney theme parks, and increasing experience of such parks, many people would prefer to visit clean, modern, safe and standardised theme parks rather than the seemingly old-fashioned funfairs. Another issue that has been detrimental to the funfairs has been the rise in insurance premiums and the increase in 'compensation culture'. Moreover health and safety legislation means that many funfair owners find it impossible to make significant investment in their attractions to comply with the legislation. Last, but not least, many of the now demolished funfairs were situated in prime, sea-front locations, often using large areas of land. Until the 2007 property crash, developers had been keen to purchase this land for housing, retail and office space and were making offers that the funfair owners could not refuse.

One of the most shocking closures in recent years was the sudden demise of Pleasureland in Southport. This was a significant funfair that featured the iconic Charles Paige Cyclone roller coaster alongside one of the few remaining bowl slide style helter-skelters. The park also hosted modern classics such as the suspended, looping Vekoma coaster (which had been branded 'The Traumatizer') and a 'blast-off' tower ride branded 'Ice Blast'. Pleasureland was closed by its owners, Blackpool Pleasure Beach, in September 2006. The Traumatizer was quickly dismantled and re-erected at the Pleasure Beach under its new moniker 'InFUSION'. However, it was the ad-hoc and rapid demolition of the 1937 Cyclone coaster that caused the most outrage. As workers with chainsaws set about the iconic coaster locals launched campaigns to get listed status for the Cyclone, while protesters chained themselves to the track of the ride. However, the Cyclone's reprieve was not to be and by November 2006 the silhouette of Southport's resortscape was changed forever.

With so many historic rides lost during the early 2000s there are now only a handful of iconic woodies remaining at the British coast: Five coasters at Blackpool Pleasure Beach (The Big Dipper, Blue Flyer, Grand National, Nickelodeon Streak, and Wild Mouse), and the Roller Coaster/ Scenic Railway at Great Yarmouth.

However, all is not lost. In 2002 Britain's oldest surviving roller coaster, the Scenic Railway at Margate's Dreamland was granted Grade II listed status (upgraded to II* in 2011). Unfortunately, Dreamland was suffering from a lack of investment, and in 2005 its owner decided to close the park and sell the land to Margate Town Centre Regeneration Company for a reported £20 million. By early 2006 it was agreed that most of the site would be

redeveloped into housing and retail facilities. However, there was a problem: in the middle of the site was the Scenic Railway, and any redevelopment of the site would have to incorporate the iconic coaster. By 2007 the 'Save Dreamland Campaign' group had developed their own vision for Dreamland: as the world's first Heritage Amusement Park. Although there was a set-back in 2008 when a quarter of the Scenic Railway was destroyed by fire, the Save Dreamland Campaign, and subsequently the Dreamland Trust, have been successful in attracting public support and public funding, including Lottery Heritage Funding. In addition, many of the heritage amusement park rides are already in situ at the Dreamland site as the Trust purchased many of the iconic rides from Southport's Pleasureland (such as the Caterpillar, Ghost Train, River Caves, Wild Mouse rollercoaster, and Fun House rides) and parts of rides from Rhyl's Ocean Beach when they closed. If everything goes to plan, then the Dreamland Heritage Amusement Park, featuring not only Margate's, but also Southport and Rhyl's funfair heritage, should open in 2014.

Whilst the Dreamland Trust are to be commended for saving so many iconic rides, many coaster enthusiasts and architectural historians remain concerned about the vintage coasters at other funfairs. Indeed, in 2010 English Heritage visited Blackpool Pleasure Beach in order to assess the park's iconic rides. However, the Pleasure Beach objected, claiming that listed status would impose restrictions on modification of the rides. At the end of the day, Blackpool Pleasure Beach is not a heritage amusement park, and the modern, hi-tech nature of such places would be lost to preservation and conservation. Nevertheless, these funfairs and their rides are a core part of the identity of British seaside resorts – something that apartments, office blocks, and supermarkets could never provide.

Dr Anya Chapman is a Senior Lecturer in Tourism Management at Bournemouth University. Her research interests and publications focus on fairgrounds, piers, and amusement arcades at British seaside resorts.