

Last Night of the Fair: Heritage, Resort Identity and the Closure of Southport's Pleasureland

Anya Chapman and Duncan Light

Introduction

Southport - a resort in North West England, 17 miles north of Liverpool – has long been preoccupied with issues of social tone. In particular the resort has always imagined itself as being a select and refined place and has never enthusiastically embraced mass tourism (and the associated popular entertainments). Consequently the town has long had an uneasy relationship with its amusement park, Pleasureland. Yet, from its opening in 1922 Pleasureland became a well-established landmark within Southport. It was universally known, widely visited, despised by some in the town, but held in considerable affection by others. Indeed, many people in Southport regarded Pleasureland as a part of the town's heritage. However, this was an 'unofficial heritage'¹. It did not enjoy any official recognition or formal protection but it was a site that had meaning and significance for (some of) the local community and it was important within the personal biographies and memories of many in the town and surrounding region.

In this chapter we explore Southport's ambivalent relationship with Pleasureland. We begin by examining the early growth of the amusement park, its establishment as a local landmark, and the circumstances of its sudden closure in 2006. The chapter then considers reactions to its closure, focussing on the responses of both the local community and the local authority. While many in the town were deeply saddened at the closure of the town's amusement park, the local authority regarded this as an opportunity to redevelop the site in accordance with a broader project to rebrand Southport as a refined and sophisticated 'Classic Resort'. Ultimately these plans came to nothing so that a new funfair was established on the former Pleasureland site. But the local authority still aspires to a landmark development of the site and regards an amusement park as incompatible with plans to gentrify the resort.

The Rise and Fall of Southport's Pleasureland

Southport is one of England's earliest coastal resorts, having started to grow in the late 18th century. From the outset the resort was intended to be a select place for the affluent to live, take holidays and retire to. Since two families owned most of the land in and around the town they were able to control and regulate the nature of the resort's development.² As such the town was carefully laid out with wide tree-lined boulevards, parks and gardens, and large houses and villas. However the arrival of the railways thwarted the aspirations towards refinement and gentility. In 1850 the town was connected by rail to Liverpool; a direct line to Manchester opened in 1862; a line to Preston opened in 1882; and in 1884 a second line arrived from Liverpool. Southport was now easily accessible from the neighbouring cities (particularly Liverpool and Manchester) and consequently the number of visitors to the town increased rapidly. In 1866 alone 800,000 people arrived in the resort by train.³

¹ Rodney Harrison, "What is heritage?" in *Understanding the Politics of Heritage*, ed. Rodney Harrison (Manchester: Manchester University Press/Open University, 2010), 8-9; Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches*, (London: Routledge, 2013), 15.

² John K Walton, *Wonderlands by the Waves: A History of the Seaside Resorts of Lancashire* (Preston: Lancashire County Books, 1992), 33

³ Frank Bamford, *Back to the Sea: The True Story of Southport* (Southport: Frank Bamford, 2001), 29.

Nevertheless, Southport continued to imagine itself as being a more refined type of resort in which mass tourism was tolerated rather than encouraged.

Given the type of resort that its landowners wished to create there was, unsurprisingly, an initial resistance to catering for popular amusements for visitors.⁴ Nevertheless an informal collection of sideshows and stalls gathered on the promenade at the top of Neville Street. The retreat of the sea in the second half of the 19th century gave the town corporation the opportunity to remodel the resort using reclaimed land on the foreshore (which was owned by the corporation). This area was allocated for public recreation and the provision of facilities that were appropriate to Southport's aspirations towards gentility. A new marine lake was created between 1887 and 1895, along with a new road (Marine Drive) which established a new promenade almost half a mile seaward of the original promenade (1835-8). The side-shows were pushed to a new site on reclaimed land at the southern end of the town and, by the 1890s, a ramshackle and haphazard fairground had become established.⁵ This fairground was a popular attraction for visitors to the town and quickly gained a reputation for the disorderly behaviour and spirit of the carnivalesque which characterised seaside holidays.⁶ The presence of the fairground – and particularly its proximity to Lord Street (the town's genteel central boulevard), the winter gardens and one of the town's railway stations – caused some disquiet among the town's residents and middle class visitors. However, while “those with political power and influence wanted to keep the town as genteel as possible, there was a conflict of interest with those catering for the demands of the holiday trade”.⁷ Consequently the local council allowed the fairground to remain. It was renamed ‘White City’ in 1911, seemingly in an attempt to give it a form of respectability and appears to have been accepted by the town's residents.⁸

This uneasy truce continued until the end of 1912, when the council decided to undertake further improvements to Southport's foreshore and promenade. Consequently the White City was moved to a new site further seaward. Stephenson's Guide to Southport, published in 1913 indicated how successful the landscaping and ‘improvement’ of the amusement park had been: “former visitors to Southport will remember the old Fair Ground, which consisted of dilapidated wooden shanties, Aunt Sallies, coconut shies and so forth. All this rubbish has been cleared away, and what is fittingly termed ‘The White City’ put in its place”.⁹ The White City was closed during the First World War and, in 1922, was moved again to a new site on reclaimed land by the new promenade. It reopened under a new name: Pleasureland.

The new Pleasureland site indicates the continued involvement of the local authority in the planning of Southport's development in a way that was unlike many other resorts. In particular, the influence of modernist urban planning – particularly the application of land use zoning – is apparent. The new Pleasureland site was larger than that of the White City but it was also spatially set apart from the rest of the town, and particularly the original promenade and Lord Street. The site was clearly bounded, by the seafront to the west, a railway line and sand dunes to the south, the Marine Lake and Kings Gardens to the east, and Princes Park to the north. It was also partially enclosed by a white wall on the landward side in which an elegant clock tower gate was added in 1926. Pleasureland was now effectively a mono-functional enclavic space¹⁰ where carnivalesque behaviour was carefully contained so as not to disrupt the social tone of the resort as a whole. The local authority had devised

⁴ John K Walton, “The demand for working-class seaside holidays in Victorian England.” *Economic History Review*, 34, no. 2 (1981): 251.

⁵ Stephen Copnall, *Pleasureland Memories: A History of Southport's Amusement Park* (St Albans: Skelter Publishing, 2005), 11.

⁶ See for example: Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1991), 93-4; John K Walton, *The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 18-19.

⁷ Copnall, *Pleasureland Memories*, 13.

⁸ Copnall, *Pleasureland Memories*, 21,22.

⁹ Cited in Copnall, *Pleasureland Memories*, 21.

¹⁰ Tim Edensor, *Tourists at the Taj: Performance and Meaning at a Symbolic Site* (London: Routledge, 1998), 45-6.

a compromise to permit and regulate the town's amusement park in a way that was acceptable to the town's residents and appropriate to the ambience and image of the wider resort.

Pleasureland proved to be a very successful amusement park. During the 1920s and 1930s the park expanded and new rides were added including, in 1937, an iconic wooden roller-coaster, the Cyclone. It was also profitable for the local authority.¹¹ The site was mothballed for most of the Second World War, but Pleasureland subsequently reopened and regained some of its former popularity during the 1950s and 1960s. However, when British seaside resorts began lose patronage from the late-1960s onwards, Southport was badly affected since, unlike Blackpool, the resort did not have a loyal, returning working-class market to depend upon. By the 1970s Pleasureland was badly in need of investment which the local authority was now unable to provide. Moreover the local government reorganisation of 1974 had seen the county borough of Southport abolished and absorbed into Sefton Borough Council which covered a large part of the northern suburbs of Liverpool. For various reasons the new council was unable to invest in Pleasureland. Consequently, in 1981 Blackpool Pleasure Beach Company (BPB) leased the site (which included many tenanted rides and attractions) from Sefton Council. The new owners undertook to develop the park and introduced a number of new rides. However it took BPB until 2004 to acquire the entire site since almost half of the attractions and rides were still owned by tenants.

During the late 1990s Southport was involved in numerous projects intended to revive and regenerate the resort. These included building new hotels, conference facilities, an indoor water park, the refurbishment of the pier, and the building of a new sea wall and associated retail and leisure park. In this context Blackpool Pleasure Beach undertook a major programme of investment in Pleasureland. A new brand, 'Amusement Park on the Sands', was created¹² and the park underwent a process of landscaping and theming from 1997. In particular there was an attempt to transform Pleasureland into a form of theme park. The theming was loosely based on Morocco so that Pleasureland now featured attractions such as the 'Casablanca Entertainment Centre' and rides such as 'The Lost Dinosaurs of the Sahara', 'Abdullah's Dilemma', 'The Marrakech Express', 'The Desert Rescue' and 'King Solomon's Mines'. The park also introduced a mascot by the name of 'Ali-Ba Bear'. This was a late 20th century example of the Orientalism that had long pervaded seaside architecture.¹³ Not everything, however, was themed and in 1999 a suspended, looping roller-coaster called 'The Traumatizer' was installed at a cost of £5 million.

These efforts to rebrand Pleasureland as a theme park were only partially successful. The physical fabric of the site had certainly been transformed through landscaping, the themed environment, and through branded merchandise, catering outlets and rides. However the long-established carnivalesque culture of the fairground persisted. Pleasureland was a place for unrestrained enjoyment. Like the joyful but disorderly and sometimes violent crowd which characterised Blackpool Pleasure Beach in the post-War decades,¹⁴ incidents of violence and aggression amongst customers and staff continued to occur at Pleasureland. Similarly, intoxication, illicit sexual encounters and the use of lewd or inappropriate behaviour and language was commonplace among both customers and employees. There was, then, a clash of cultures between the sanitised, commodified and regulated theme park, and the disorder, brashness and elation of the seaside fairground. Not for nothing did many local residents (and the park's regular customers) continue to refer to the attraction as 'the fair'.

Moreover, throughout its history Pleasureland had been an open park. It was therefore a "democratic, accessible space"¹⁵ that was easy to enter. Consequently, Pleasureland was used in a wide range of ways by a broad range of people, many of whom were not customers. For example, local people

¹¹ Copnall, *Pleasureland Memories*, 39.

¹² *Ibid* 81.

¹³ Fred Gray, *Designing the Seaside: Architecture, Society and Nature* (London: Reaktion, 2006) 91-106.

¹⁴ John K Walton, *Riding on Rainbows: Blackpool Pleasure Beach and its Place in British Popular Culture* (St Albans: Skelter Publishing, 2007), 134-5

¹⁵ Walton, *Riding on Rainbows*, 121.

would wander through the park to walk their dogs. Children gathered there (particularly during school holidays) not to use the rides but to make mischief. Young people used the park as a place to meet, pick up girls, engage in under-age drinking (with alcohol that they had brought with them) or take recreational drugs. Others went there intent on theft (through breaking into machines) or in search of a fight, particularly on so-called “scally Sundays”. And some went just to gaze upon everything else that was taking place. In other words, many of Pleasureland’s consumers used the site for a wide range of recreational activities which generated no revenue for the park. Even some of the ‘legitimate’ customers went there with the intention of spending as little as possible.

As Table 1 indicates, Pleasureland was a very popular attraction, attracting more than 2 million visitors, and was consistently one of the top five free attractions in England. Its only competitor in the theme park market was nearby Blackpool Pleasure Beach.

Table 1: Visitor Numbers at Pleasureland and Blackpool Pleasure Beach

Year	Pleasureland	Blackpool Pleasure Beach
1991	2 million*	6.5 million*
1992	2 million*	6.5 million*
1993	2 million*	6.75 million*
1994	2 million*	6.75 million*
1995	2 million*	7.3 million*
1996	2 million*	7.5 million*
1997	2.1 million*	7.8 million*
1998	2.1 million*	7.1 million*
1999	2.5million*	7.2 million*
2000	2.6 million*	6.8 million
2001	2 million*	6.5 million
2002	2 million*	6.2 million
2003	2.1 million*	6.2 million
2004	2.1 million*	6.2 million
2005	0.5 million	6.0 million
2006	No data	5.73 million
2007	-	5.5 million

* Estimate

Sources: Hanna 1992, 1993, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000; Moffat Centre for Travel and Tourism Business Development 2001; Visit Britain 2004, 2006, 2008.

Further investments totalling £2 million were made at Pleasureland in 2004.¹⁶ However, in June 2004 Geoffrey Thompson, the managing director of both Blackpool Pleasure Beach and Pleasureland suddenly died and his daughter took over both companies. Local fears that she did not share her father’s commitment to Pleasureland appeared to be borne out when in September 2004 Pleasureland introduced a £2 entry charge, effectively becoming a ‘closed’ park. As Table 1 shows there was a dramatic drop in visitor numbers the following year.

¹⁶ BBC News “Historic amusement park to close”, 5 September 2006. Accessed on 16 November 2013, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/merseyside/5318344.stm>

On Tuesday 5 September 2006 Pleasureland suddenly closed. There had been no prior indication that closure was imminent. A press statement¹⁷ claimed that the park had proved unsustainable with none of the recent investments generating a return on capital. It also pointed to competition from publicly-funded and lottery-funded attractions and from Sunday shopping and sporting events. In the following months the park's assets were removed or demolished and the speed at which this was organised led many Southport residents to speculate that the closure had been planned for some time. Some of the more popular rides were moved to Blackpool Pleasure Beach, while others were sold to other theme parks. Some of the original rides were also sold to the Dreamland heritage amusement park in Margate. However, in a move which came as a shock to local people the 'Cyclone' was demolished in November 2006. There were calls by Southport residents for intervention by the local authority. However, while the Cyclone had previously been considered for listing by English Heritage, its unlisted status meant that there was no breach of planning regulations and the local authority was unable to take any action.¹⁸ By all accounts the site was left in a near derelict condition (and local people speculated that the former owners had sought to ensure that it could not be used as a fairground or amusement park by a rival operator). As a result Sefton Council needed to spend £350,000 to make the site safe.¹⁹

Reactions to Pleasureland's Closure 1: The Local Community

The closure of Pleasureland came as a considerable shock to the people of Southport. To explore the local community's response we have examined forum postings on a popular local website (www.southportgb.com). Obviously, like any internet forum, these have to be used with care since they reveal the views only of forum users and do not constitute a strictly representative cross-section of local opinion. Nevertheless they can be used to give a broad indication of how the town reacted to the demise of Pleasureland.²⁰

Many of the initial reactions were of shock or sorrow. For example, one poster stated: "It felt as if my guts had been ripped out when I heard this news. I just can't believe it". Another stated: "I am totally devastated at this news – and it seems that the majority of posters share the despair I'm feeling". Similarly: "If somebody had told me that Pleasureland was closing I'd have thought it was an April Fool. But it's happened! It's just amazing! What a shame, I am absolutely gutted". Some reactions were even stronger: "I'm not ashamed to say that I actually cried. Maybe it's an over-reaction to some but it's my childhood being taken apart, something which said Southport to me... What's there here to be proud of any more?". These responses indicate that at least a section of the Southport population cherished Pleasureland and they point to the distress that some felt on hearing of its closure. However such responses were not universal. One forum user stated dismissively: "There's more to Southport than Pleasureland. We should be more positive and focus on what Southport has got and what it can offer in the future". Another said simply: "I did like it but it was always a bit tacky". Another

¹⁷ <http://www.southportreporter.com/256/pleasureland-press-release.bmp>, accessed on 16 November 2013

¹⁸ Minutes of the Southport Area Committee (of Sefton Council), 4 October 2006. Accessed 16 November 2013, <http://modgov.sefton.gov.uk/moderngov/Data/Southport%20Area%20Committee/20061101/Agenda/Item%2002.pdf>

¹⁹ Jo Kelly, "Bid to settle row over damage at Pleasureland out of court", *Southport Visitor*, December 22 2008, accessed 27 November 2011, <http://www.southportvisiter.co.uk/southport-news/southport-southport-news/2008/12/22/bid-to-settle-row-over-damage-at-pleasureland-out-of-court-101022-22514825/>

²⁰ Using postings on web forums raises certain ethical issues. In the analysis that follows we have followed the guidelines of the British Psychological Society (*Ethics Guidelines for Internet-Mediated Research*, Leicester: British Psychological Society, 2013, downloaded from: <http://www.bps.org.uk> on 21 November 2013). The SouthportGB forums are open and public (although registration is needed to search or post to them). No vulnerable groups were identified among the posters and there was little prospect of harm coming to any of them through our use of their posts. In accordance with the BPS guidelines we have not given the online identities of forum users nor the url from which quotes were taken. Furthermore, all quotes in the following section have been slightly altered or paraphrased so that they cannot be identified by search engines.

contributor effectively summed up Southport's ambivalence towards Pleasureland by stating: "People want theme parks not fairgrounds. People have been complaining about Pleasureland for years, saying it's over-priced and run down. Those people got their wish on September 5th".

Many users of the forum stressed their happy memories of visits to Pleasureland, particularly as children. One user stated simply: "All my wonderful childhood memories, all gone in the blink of an eye". Another recalled their childhood experiences: "I used to love going to the fairground. My parents didn't have the money for us to go on many of the rides but we had great fun walking around and pestering people for the odd 10 pence so that we could have a go at something or other. It feels like that's the end of my happy childhood memories". Another reminisced: "I'm devastated. It really was part of my childhood. I used to come to Southport many times when I was a child. My parents preferred it to Blackpool. After a day on the beach the highlight of the day was a trip to Pleasureland for a few hours – so long as we'd behaved ourselves! And I've taken my kids to the fair many times". In this context, Pleasureland can be identified as a material reference point within personal biographies. It is a site which anchored memories of living in – or visiting – Southport and for this reason many felt a strong emotional attachment to the park.

A number of the forum posts are of interest for the way in which they use the term 'heritage' to speak of Pleasureland. There is a long-standing reluctance in Britain to consider the architecture and structures of seaside resorts in terms of heritage. Underpinning this approach is a set of ideas which Smith²¹ has termed the 'authorised heritage discourse'. This attributes value to that which is material (and often monumental), aesthetically pleasing, authentic, associated with social elites, and significant in some way for national history and identity. Moreover this discourse privileges the roles of experts and professional knowledge in defining and regulating the way in which societies think about heritage. Such a discourse prioritises particular understandings of what heritage is and subdues or marginalises alternative constructions of heritage.²² As a result the historic buildings of seaside resorts have long been ignored by 'official' heritage institutions. Such buildings were little valued in terms of age or aesthetics and, as sites associated with mass, popular entertainment, have been dismissed as banal or insignificant.

But while Britain's heritage institutions and agencies may be indifferent to the heritage of fairgrounds and amusement parks, many of Southport's residents explicitly considered Pleasureland in such terms. For example one forum user stated directly: "They don't have any right to destroy our heritage". Another poster felt even more strongly: "I feel like I want to padlock myself to it and go on a hunger strike. Let's all start a protest at this. The people of Southport saved the pier – why can't we do the same for Pleasureland. We shouldn't accept this lying down. It's a big part of our heritage". Another argued: "It's a monument that's too precious... for it just to be disregarded" and here the use of the term 'monument' gives Pleasureland an equal status with other, more traditional forms of heritage. There was particular outrage at the demolition of the Cyclone roller-coaster. In particular a number of posters identified it as a local landmark that in some way symbolised the town itself. One argued: "Cyclone has been a dominant part of the Southport skyline for almost 70 years. It will be sorely missed". Another person was more explicit about the Cyclone as a local symbol: "Heaven knows I am hardly sentimental about the town I grew up in but I could never imagine that the Cyclone – of all things – would go. More than any other landmark or building in the town it says 'Southport' to me". Similarly: "I really understand the pain that people feel having seen the Cyclone ripped apart like that. It was Southport. And it had a place in our hearts".

Pleasureland – and the Cyclone in particular – illustrates how historic structures can be important for grounding senses of place and identity at the local scale.²³ Such structures can become common points

²¹ Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, (London: Routledge, 2006), 29-33.

²² Laurajane Smith and Emma Waterton. "'The envy of the world?': Intangible heritage in England" in *Intangible Heritage*, ed. Laurajane Smith and Natsuko Akagawa (London: Routledge, 2009), 291.

²³ Brian Graham, G.J. Ashworth and J.E. Tunbridge, *A Geography of Heritage: Power, Culture and Economy*, (London: Arnold, 2000), 204-207.

of reference and identification around which community cohesion is built.²⁴ They can also be landmarks that are significant and meaningful in symbolising a community itself. Pleasureland, then, can be identified as a form of ‘unofficial’ heritage²⁵, something that does not receive recognition by the state and other authorising institutions of heritage (such as the National Trust) but which, nevertheless, is important within local-level and popular relationships with the past. A similar example of a local, unofficial heritage in a seaside resort is the case of the herring fishing industry in Great Yarmouth. Watson²⁶ notes that this industry was regarded as a relatively unimportant part of the town’s economy by historians but, nevertheless was deeply rooted in the collective memory of the town and was identified by local people as a key element of the town’s heritage that they wished to see interpreted in a local museum. Yet all heritages are contested and dissonant²⁷ and in this context the value attached to Pleasureland (and the Cyclone) was not universally shared. For example, one forum post sought to put things into perspective: “It [the Cyclone] is a bloody roller-coaster, not Westminster Abbey”. Another poster was dismissive: “it’s a dilapidated old eyesore that should be knocked down”.

A number of forum posts took a broader perspective, fretting over the implications of the closure of Pleasureland for the future of Southport itself. In particular, some people worried that the town could not survive without a high-profile attraction such as an amusement park. This view was summed up by one post: “Now that Pleasureland’s closed what does Southport have left to offer visitors? A coastal resort that doesn’t have an amusement park? It’s disgraceful”. Similarly: “what sort of a resort is it with no sea and no fairground? I’m shocked at the news today”. Others were concerned that Pleasureland was a landmark that had given Southport something different. One argued that: “without Pleasureland we’re becoming like every other...seaside town”, while another questioned “what reason have families got to come Southport now? Nothing”. But again, not all views were negative. Some comments argued that Pleasureland could not have been an appropriate anchor for a modern resort. One user stated: “What we need are up-to-date facilities that will encourage people to come here for conferences and high-quality events. They would create more jobs than were lost at Pleasureland, they’d also bring money into Southport. We should be more positive. When times change we should adapt to the changing market”.

There were undoubtedly many people in Southport who did not mourn the closure of Pleasureland. Nevertheless, the posts on the local internet forum do indicate that Pleasureland (and the Cyclone) was regarded with considerable affection by a part of the Southport population. In addition there was recognition of its importance for the town, both as a visual landmark, and as a symbol of local heritage and identity. More broadly there was also recognition of the economic importance of Pleasureland and its role as a ‘marker’²⁸ of a seaside resort. However, despite the local popularity of the park, subsequent events suggested that the local authority placed much less value on Pleasureland and regarded its closure as an opportunity (rather than a threat) for the town.

Reactions to Pleasureland’s Closure 2: The Local Authority

In order to understand Sefton Council’s response to the closure of Pleasureland it is necessary to consider the broader context of regeneration initiatives in Southport. In 2003 the Northwest

²⁴ Esteban Ruiz Ballesteros and Macarena Hernández Ramírez, “Identity and community—Reflections on the development of mining heritage tourism in Southern Spain”, *Tourism Management* 28, (2007): 680.

²⁵ Harrison, “What is heritage?” 8-9; Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches*, 15.

²⁶ Sheila Watson, “History museums, community identities and sense of place” in *Museum Revolutions: How Museums Change and are Changing*, ed. Simon J. Knell, Suzanne MacLeod and Sheila Watson (London: Routledge, 2007), 163-168.

²⁷ Smith and Waterton, “Envy of the world?”, 294-295.

²⁸ Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class (Revised Edition)* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), 41.

Development Agency (a government funded body with responsibility for promoting economic growth and regeneration in North West England) had published a report entitled *A New Vision for Northwest Coastal Resorts*.²⁹ This focused on a long term strategy for the regeneration of resorts in the region. The report argued that tourism was unlikely to be the future driver of the local economy in such places (with the possible exception of Blackpool). Instead, the priority should be to transform these resorts into attractive places in which to live and work which would, in turn, attract visitors. The report was blunt about the need to remove “the obsolete and unsightly trappings of the old tourism”³⁰ but without destroying the sense of place of these resorts.

The report produced visions for a number of resorts in North West England that could form the basis for rebranding and regeneration strategies. For example, Morecambe’s vision was “beautiful place”; Fleetwood’s was “UK Capital of Value”, and Blackpool’s was “Europe’s No.1 Resort”. However the report noted that Southport at that time had an unclear brand (due to the contrast between the elegance of Lord Street and the “bucket and spade” offer of the seafront). It therefore proposed a new vision centred on “style and sophistication”.³¹ The report noted the Southport was a relatively prosperous local/regional centre and retained a reputation as a genteel place. It proposed to build on these strengths by developing a brand based around upmarket shopping, centred on an improved Lord Street.

The report also proposed the hallmark of the ‘Classic Resort’.³² This was to be a clear and recognisable brand that, above all, was characterised by quality and “quiet sophistication”.³³ It argued that such places would preserve a sense of the traditional seaside holiday but attached to high quality for high-value consumers. It identified five core components of a ‘Classic Resort’: a promenade and beach with sea views; traditional attractions (including funfairs and parks); a range of accommodation for visitors; wet weather facilities for entertainment and relaxing; and leisure swimming areas (including open air bathing). It also proposed that Classic Resorts would be characterised by respect for the historic and environmental heritage of the resort; a high quality built and natural environment; quality shopping; quality hotels; quality food and beverage; and a programme of cultural activities. What is significant about the *New Vision for Northwest Coastal Resorts* report is that it envisioned a place for Pleasureland in projects to rebrand Southport as a Classic Resort. A SWOT analysis of Southport identified the amusement park as one of the town’s strengths (particularly since traditional seaside entertainment was identified as a core component of the Classic Resort). In this sense, the report explicitly identified Pleasureland as a part of the resort’s heritage. It suggested that the park could be improved and extended but also argued that Pleasureland should reposition itself in order to target a higher-value audience (in a similar way to Alton Towers).³⁴

Sefton Council was clearly attracted to the idea of the ‘Classic Resort’. After consulting with local stakeholders it commissioned a report (from the same consultants who had authored *A New Vision for Northwest Seaside Resorts*), to define what ‘Classic Resort’ status would mean for Southport. The report³⁵ reiterated that Southport had an unclear brand and it recommended that the town should abandon the remaining trappings of ‘bucket and spade’ tourism and develop a coherent destination brand image based on quality that would appeal to an affluent audience. This would enable Southport

²⁹ Northwest Development Agency, *A New Vision for Northwest Coastal Resorts*, (Warrington: Northwest Development Agency, 2003), accessed 25 November 2013, http://www.coastalcommunities.co.uk/library/published_research/A_new_vision_for_Northwest_coastal_resorts.pdf

³⁰ Northwest Development Agency, *New Vision*, 4.

³¹ *Ibid*, 66

³² *Ibid*, 29.

³³ *Ibid*, 30.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 67,68

³⁵ Locum Destination Consulting, *Southport Classic Resort Brand Study* (Haywards Heath: Locum Destination Consulting, 2004), accessed 21 November 2013, <http://modgov.sefton.gov.uk/moderngov/Data/Cabinet%20Member%20-%20Regeneration/20040616/Agenda/Appendix%2004A.pdf>

to define itself as “*the Classic Resort*”. The architectural heritage of the Victorian seaside resort was identified as an integral component of this new brand and the report argued that “Southport’s past is vital to its future as a Classic Resort”.³⁶ While the principle central shopping area (Lord Street) was central to such a brand, some regeneration and smartening of the seafront was necessary. Once again, Pleasureland was identified as one of the resort’s strengths but the report called for extension and improvement to the amusement park.

We cannot know for certain how Blackpool Pleasure Beach (the owners of Pleasureland) reacted to these reports. The Classic Resort vision for Southport required major investments in Pleasureland which its owners probably could not afford. In any case, an up-market theme park was not, at that time, a part of Blackpool Pleasure Beach’s portfolio. On the other hand the introduction of an admission charge in 2005 may have been a first attempt to rebrand Pleasureland (and might have been intended to generate revenue to enable this to happen). The admission charge almost immediately changed the visitor profile of the theme park and had the effect of excluding the types of visitor (and associated ways of behaving) that were not consistent with the vision of a new, gentrified Pleasureland.

In 2006 the Southport Partnership produced a pamphlet³⁷ intended for the residents of Southport which explained the Classic Resort concept and set out how Southport was intending to achieve it. The document reiterates the importance of preserving the spirit of the traditional English coastal resort. There are references to Southport’s “elegant seafront” and resources such as the pier, Marine Lake and gardens. However, Pleasureland (and indeed any reference to an amusement park on the seafront) was now conspicuously absent from the future vision for the town. While the tradition of popular entertainment was regarded by many as part of Southport’s heritage, this was a heritage that the local authority appeared to consider as incompatible with the Classic Resort concept. Moreover, the intangible heritage of the fairground – the anarchic and disorderly behaviour characteristic of the carnivalesque – was actively dissonant with the quiet sophistication envisaged of a Classic Resort.

Following the closure of Pleasureland in September 2006 and the subsequent removal or demolition of the rides, the abandoned 25 acre site was an unwanted eyesore in an aspiring Classic Resort. Sefton Council re-acquired the site in April 2007 by purchasing the lease from Blackpool Pleasure Beach for £7.25million.³⁸ This created an opportunity for a major re-development of the site in a way that accorded with the Classic Resort vision and which would complement other planned investments in the town.³⁹ However in preference to leaving the site empty in the short term Sefton Council issued an 18 month license to a company called Dreamstorm to operate a fairground and consequently ‘New Pleasureland’ opened in July 2007. Dreamstorm were apparently eager to invest in redeveloping the site as a major amusement park. However, the local authority had other plans that they regarded as more in keeping with an aspiring Classic Resort.

In March 2008 Sefton Council announced that Urban Splash (a Manchester-based company with a distinguished record in regenerating industrial and Victorian buildings) had been chosen to redevelop the Pleasureland site. The proposed ‘Southport Marine Park’ would include a landmark atrium which would house a winter garden (inspired by the Eden Project in Cornwall), heated outdoor pool, new hotels and visitor accommodation, and an expanded Marine Lake. The £80 million investment was

³⁶ *Ibid* 23.

³⁷ The Southport Partnership, *Aspiring to be England’s Classic Resort* (Southport: The Southport Partnership, undated)

³⁸ David Bartlett, “Plans to transform Southport Pleasureland abandoned”, *Liverpool Echo* 9 February 2012, accessed 25 November 2013, <http://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/plans-transform-southport-pleasureland-abandoned-3352285>

³⁹ “Development plan for fairground”, BBC News, accessed 25 November 2013, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/merseyside/6529461.stm>

described as a “reinvention of the seaside resort”⁴⁰ that would transform the recreational opportunities of the waterfront zone as well as creating an attraction of regional significance. Such a high-quality, eco-friendly attraction was entirely in keeping with the vision of a Classic Resort but also marked a decisive rejection of the fairground (and its associated culture) that had sat uneasily with Southport’s new aspirations. The proposal was met with mixed opinions in Southport: many welcomed it, but others regretted that the funfair would not be able to stay on the site.

In the event Southport Marine Park was never built since, as a result of the global recession of 2008-9, funding for the project could not be secured. The project was formally abandoned in early 2012.⁴¹ A spokesman for Sefton Council stated that the council remained committed to exploring possibilities for a long-term redevelopment of the site but had no funding to make any investments itself.⁴² New Pleasureland had remained on the site during the 2008-12 period on a series of short term leases. The owner (Norman Wallis) was able to introduce new rides and attractions and carried out environmental improvements but the uncertainty about the future of the site deterred major investments. However, once the Southport Marine Park project was abandoned Sefton Council, offered Wallis a five year lease (with talk of future rolling contracts). Certainly in the medium term there is little likelihood of any major development on the New Pleasureland site, so that Southport will continue to have a fairground on the seafront.

While the local authority appears to regard New Pleasureland as ‘better than nothing’, the debates on the SouthportGB forum indicate that local people are supportive of it. One poster stated: “OK so it’s not great, it’s not Alton Towers or Blackpool Pleasure Beach. But it’s not bad either. You can see that a lot of effort and work has been made to improve it from the wasteland that it used to be”. Some clearly feel that a funfair or amusement park is crucial to the town’s identity and economy as a seaside resort. One poster stated “Southport must have a fairground. People should get behind it...it can do nothing but good for our town” while another argued that “Southport needs a family-orientated funfair”. There also appears to be considerable local support for the funfair’s owner who is regarded as an entrepreneur who is prepared to invest in the future of New Pleasureland (in contrast to the previous owners). One forum post states: “I’m genuinely delighted that someone has worked tirelessly to make something new out of the mess left by the previous fairground owners”. Another argued “It’s been a difficult job for Norman Wallis but over the past 3 years he has turned the place around...it was fantastic to see so many visitors having fun at the fairground on a glorious Bank Holiday”. Wallis himself has continued to argue that Southport needs an amusement park.⁴³ In particular he has argued that such a resource is entirely consistent with Southport’s aspirations to Classic Resort status, claiming “what is a classic resort without rides and attractions?”. He also argues that it brings a type of visitor – families – that are appropriate for a Classic Resort.

Nevertheless, an amusement park does not feature in the local authority’s long-term vision for Southport. Sefton Council’s draft local plan for the 2015-30 period⁴⁴ continues to allocate the New

⁴⁰ “Urban splash scoops bid for £80 million ‘classic resort’”, *Liverpool Daily Post* 21 March 2008, accessed 25 November 2013, <http://www.liverpooldailypost.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/urban-splash-scoops-bid-80m-5515265>

⁴¹ David Bartlett, “£80m plan for Southport’s Pleasureland abandoned”, *Liverpool Daily Post*, 20 Feb 2012, accessed 25 November 2013, <http://www.liverpooldailypost.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/80m-plan-southports-pleasureland-abandoned-5440172>

⁴² Katie Oakes, “New Southport Pleasureland here to stay after £80m transformation plans fall through”, *Southport Visitor*, 9 Feb 2012, accessed 25 November 2013, <http://www.southportvisiter.co.uk/southport-news/southport-southport-news/2012/02/09/new-southport-pleasureland-here-to-stay-after-80m-transformation-plans-fall-through-101022-30292946/2/>

⁴³ Joe Thomas, “Southport Pleasureland’s owner Norman Wallis talks about the resort’s future”, *Liverpool Echo* 21 March 2013, accessed 27 November 2013, <http://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/southport-pleasurelands-owner-norman-wallis-3010391>

⁴⁴ Sefton Council, *A Draft Plan for Sefton, Preferred Option July 2013*, (Southport: Sefton Council, 2013), accessed 27 November 2013, <http://www.sefton.gov.uk/pdf/Chapter%208%20Sustainable%20Growth%20and%20Regeneration.pdf>

Pleasureland site to a major new tourism development that will be developed as a public-private partnership as circumstances permit. In particular, the plan talks of “a significant opportunity to deliver high quality development of a scale that enhances Southport’s role as a regional tourism destination”. There is also an emphasis on quality design and high quality landscaping of the new development. An amusement park is firmly excluded from Southport’s push to achieve Classic Resort status and New Pleasureland is unlikely to have a long term future on its current site.

Conclusion

The case of Pleasureland illustrates differing conceptions of heritage in a seaside resort. For local planners and policy-makers, Pleasureland represents an unwanted heritage. The amusement park is associated with a form of holiday-making – the traditional ‘bucket and spade’ seaside holiday - which is now regarded as obsolete. It is also associated with a type of visitor – mass tourists - that has long been at odds with Southport’s self-image (and is certainly discordant with the aspirations to gentrify the town). And the spirit of the carnival which characterises the amusement park - a part of the intangible heritage of the fairground – is firmly at odds with the ‘quiet sophistication’ envisaged of a Classic Resort. As a resource catering for mass popular entertainment, Pleasureland did not fit with the local authority’s aspirations to rebrand Southport.

However there were – and are - both internal and external audiences for Pleasureland. Visitors from outside the town – the external audience – accounted for the majority of Pleasureland’s customers (and were probably responsible for most of the disorderly behaviour that took place there). But Pleasureland also had an ‘internal’ audience – the people of Southport. While many local residents were indifferent to the amusement park and rarely, if ever, visited it, many others in the town had strong emotional connections with Pleasureland, grounded in their own nostalgic memories of visiting. Pleasureland was a valued local landmark and an emblem of Southport’s traditions as a seaside resort. For many it was a form of unofficial, popular heritage that was important for grounding local senses of place, past and community. Without doubt Sefton Council has Southport’s long-term interests at heart but its regeneration initiatives (which involve erasing the traces of the town’s amusement park) do not recognise the significance of Pleasureland for many Southport residents.

A key question, then, is: can there be a place for an amusement park in a Classic Resort? Put another way, is an amusement park incompatible in principle with the brand of a Classic Resort? On one hand, an amusement park is a well-established part of the heritage of the English seaside resort and is, therefore, entirely in keeping with a Classic Resort (as the current operator of New Pleasureland has argued). But on the other hand, an amusement park is not regarded as the type of high-quality product for a resort seeking to rebrand around style and sophistication. A more acceptable alternative might be a theme park – a ‘destination park’ in its own right - targeted at a high-quality family audience (like Alton Towers or Thorpe Park). Certainly the original Northwest Development Agency report that proposed the Classic Resort hallmark brand envisaged a place for an improved ‘theme park’ in Southport. But this is unlikely to be a realistic prospect. There is already a destination park – Blackpool Pleasure Beach – near to Southport and, as Table 1 shows, its visitor numbers show a long-term decline. Moreover, one of the North West’s major theme parks – Camelot, a site located close to the M6 motorway and easily accessible from Liverpool and Manchester – closed at the end of 2012 due to falling visitor numbers. The market for destination parks is uncertain and given the necessary investment it is unlikely that any large entertainment company would take the risk of building one in Southport. In short, then, the town’s choice is between a traditional amusement park (like New Pleasureland) or something entirely different, and the local authority has chosen the latter option. Many people – both Southport residents and visitors - will regret that, as the town achieves Classic Resort status in coming years, an iconic part of the heritage of the seaside resort will be notable by its absence.

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