

Wilvercombe and the seaside resorts of the 1930s

This paper focuses on the fictional seaside resort (or watering place) of Wilvercombe, which features as the setting for Dorothy L Sayers' 1932 novel *Have His Carcase*¹. The paper will provide an overview of the development of Britain's seaside resorts, focusing specifically on the resorts of the 1930s. Detailing the historical development of the resorts will provide a context for the exploration of some of the attributes and attractions of Wilvercombe which are referred to in *Have His Carcase*. Through analysing the history and development of the resorts and considering how and why they changed over time, will provide insight on why exactly Lord Peter Wimsey 'always did hate watering places'².

In *The English Seaside Resort: A Social History 1750-1914*³, John Walton produced a series of figures detailing the development and growth in seaside resorts along the English and Welsh coasts. Circa 1750, Walton notes that there were only 6 embryonic resorts in England: Exmouth, Portsmouth, Brighton, Eastbourne, Dover, Margate, and Scarborough. These emerging resorts were often sited in towns which were established for other reasons, such as the ports of Exmouth or Dover, or the spa town of Scarborough. By the 1801 census, Walton identifies 35 seaside resorts, including 3 along the Welsh coast. By 1851, this number had more than doubled to 71, with a crowding of newly established resorts along England's south coast. Thirty years later, there were 106 seaside resorts in England and Wales, and by 1911, 145 resorts graced the British coastline. By examining the reasons for the growth of seaside resorts, and how they adapted during this time, enables some understanding of Wimsey's 'hatred' for such places.

In *Have His Carcase*, both Wimsey and Harriet Vane mention their distaste for 'watering places' on several occasions. But what exactly is a watering place? The Collins English Dictionary provides numerous definitions, but perhaps the most useful is: 'a health resort near mineral springs, a lake, or the sea, featuring therapeutic baths, water cures, or the like'. One can assume that this is the definition that Wimsey had in mind. As the 17th Duke of Denver, Wimsey, born in 1890, perhaps had family heritage of frequenting such watering places; after all, they had been around for almost 200 years by the 1930s. Another definition for watering place provided by Collins English Dictionary is 'seaside resort', although Wimsey does not use this term. Exploring the subtle differences between 'watering places' and 'seaside resorts' is useful in understanding Wimsey's views.

Watering places

Brodie and Winter⁴ note that during the 18th century visitors to the British coast hailed mostly from the aristocracy and upper classes and were drawn to the seaside for the health-giving properties of sea bathing. Scarborough is rightly proud of its status as Britain's first 'watering place' (or seaside resort). Developing from a spa town, by the 1730s Scarborough was catering for visiting gentry with facilities such as reading rooms and assembly halls. However, Margate also lays claim to be Britain's first watering place, with visitors arriving from London via stagecoach for its sea bathing facilities. Brighton (or Brighthelmstone as it was known in the 1730s) also became renowned for sea bathing, although its bathing

machines, spa, library and assembly rooms only became established in the 1750s after the publication of Dr Richard Russel's *Dissertation on the Use of Sea Water in the Diseases of the Glands*, in which he recommended drinking and bathing in sea water for the cure of swollen lymph glands caused by viruses and infections.

Watering places started to develop as the medical benefits of seawater began to be recognised. In light of Dr Russel's thesis, published in 1753, sea water drinking, and bathing were used in the treatment of a range of diseases and ailments, including rheumatism, leprosy, and gonorrhoea, in addition to tuberculosis. Dr Russel's book sold well and watering places in England began to be developed on the basis of health.

As the popularity of the health benefits associated with sea bathing grew, the middle classes began to be drawn to the seaside from the 1750s onwards. Watering places such as Eastbourne became more established, and as the perceived health benefits became more renowned, new locations on the British coast were being developed to cater for the increasing numbers of middle-class visitors. By the early 19th century new watering places were developing such as Southport, Weston-Super-Mare, Great Yarmouth, and Aberystwyth.

The trend for 'taking the waters' and the health benefits associated with these new watering places became even more popular during the Regency period (1811-20) with George IV's (then the Prince Regent) patronage of Brighton. The Prince Regent had been visiting Brighton since the 1780s for the sea water, to cure his digestive problems. Indeed, George IV was so fond of Brighton that he commissioned the Marine Pavilion, later transformed into the Royal Pavilion, which was completed in 1823. Walton claims that the Prince Regent's patronage of Brighton "gave the fastest-growing resort of the period a distinctive social tone of its own, combining the aristocratic, the opulent and the raffish"⁵.

Seaside resorts

The nobility and upper classes continued to visit British seaside resorts for health reasons until the mid-19th century. However, a number of changes were taking place during this period that broadened the appeal and accessibility of the watering places to the mass market and underpin their transformation into seaside resorts.

Firstly, the British coast was made more accessible to a wider range of social classes with the introduction of the 1844 Railway Regulation Act. This piece of legislation made provisions for all railways to offer third class fares at a cost of no more than 1 penny per mile, and the upgrade of 3rd class travel to include carriages with seating and a roof. The Railway Regulation Act of 1844 vastly increased passenger numbers, and the railways responded accordingly by opening new lines, many of which stretched to the coast. New resorts developed quickly in response to this development, including Lowestoft (connected to the railway in 1847), Rhyl (connected in 1848), and Paignton (1859).

Secondly, there was an increase in leisure time for working people via Wakes Weeks (where factories would close down for a week providing the workers in industrial towns and cities

with a week's unpaid holiday). Leisure time increased further in 1871 with the introduction of the Bank Holidays Act which designated an additional four public holidays in England (Easter Monday, Whit Monday, First Monday in August, and Boxing Day).

These two social changes led to what John Urry⁶ termed 'the democratisation of travel' and noted that until the 1850s travel had "been socially selective...available for a relatively limited elite and was a marker of social status". Additional leisure time and affordable train travel made British seaside resorts accessible to the masses. However, these visitors were less attracted to the resorts for health reasons; instead with their limited funds and time, they sought to be entertained at the seaside.

Perhaps it is the entertainment and pleasure and the behaviour associated with holidays at the resorts which causes Harriet to utter "it's all frightening and disgusting. We'll go home"⁷ at the end of her and Wimsey's stay in Wilvercombe? Indeed, Urry⁸ notes that as the British seaside increasingly became associated with mass tourism "a resort 'hierarchy' developed and certain places were...to be despised and ridiculed...the working-class resorts (were) ...places of inferiority which stood for everything that dominant social groups held to be tasteless, common and vulgar."

As the function of the resorts changed from health to leisure, so the term 'watering place' fell out of common use towards the end of the 19th century. Certainly, by start of the 20th century, 'seaside resort' was the more frequently used term, with 'watering place' being limited to formal legislation (such as the Health Resorts and Watering Places Act of 1936, which itself was 20 years in development due to the outbreak of the First World War). Wimsey referring to Wilvercombe as a watering place perhaps signifies his aristocratic background or his prejudices regarding the resorts, but he was using a term that was largely archaic by the 1930s.

The resorts at the end of the 19th century offered a myriad of different attractions from the health provision of watering places. Piers, which had once been functional structures for landing passengers arriving by sea at the resorts, became sites of entertainment with the addition of theatres and bandstands (for example, Southport pier which had opened in 1860 gained its theatre in 1897). Resort promenades and esplanades gained bandstands, carefully manicured gardens, and shelters in which to relax and take in the sea air.

Ballrooms, theatres and circuses were found at many resorts, with perhaps one of the most spectacular examples being Blackpool Tower Circus which originally opened in 1894, and was redesigned by Frank Matcham in 1899. Like many seaside entertainment palaces of the time, the Tower Circus featured a style of architecture known as Orientalism. From the 1860s Orientalism became a recurring motif, in the architecture of British seaside resorts. Oriental onion domes graced numerous seaside pier pavilions and kiosks and Moorish-inspired interiors featured in iconic seaside entertainment venues. Ferry⁹ notes that "for a long time Western ideas about the Orient were based on an Arabian Nights fantasy of exotic luxury and indolence". The shift in architectural style - from the refined neo-classicism of the Georgian era to the exotic opulence of the late nineteenth century - mirrored the changing function of the resorts themselves.

Visitors to the seaside sought extraordinary experiences, from walking over the waves on seaside piers, to the latest thrill rides, such as Sir Hiram Maxim's Flying Machine, which opened at Blackpool Pleasure Beach in 1904). Even out of season, or when the weather turned sour, visitors to the seaside could still be kept entertained in winter gardens, such as those at Blackpool or Great Yarmouth, or other indoor attractions such as aquaria or pavilions.

Seaside resorts of the 1930s

British resorts and their extraordinary entertainments continued to be popular during the inter-war years, but there were two significant factors that changed the resorts during this time.

Firstly, the 1938 Holidays with Pay Act provided workers with a week's paid holiday, which facilitated week's annual holiday for 15 million people in the UK. This legislation was something that Billy Butlin made the most of, advertising his newly opened holiday camps at the resorts of Skegness, Clacton, and Filey as a week's holiday for a week's wages.

Secondly, as Braggs and Harris¹⁰ note, there were changes in tourism trends, with the fashions for an active lifestyle, outdoor sports, and the popular pastime of sunbathing (prior to this tanned skin had been associated with outdoor labour). In fact, many resorts were promoted with reference to sunny days or sunshine hours. These changing trends resulted in a change in form and function at seaside resorts. The highly ornate attractions and accommodation of the Victorian era were replaced with the clean, modern lines of Art Deco lidos, sun decks, amusement parks, holiday camps, and other new forms of entertainment for resort visitors during this time. For example, Britain's first seaside solarium opened in 1932 at Branksome Chine, Poole and offered visitors year-round sunbathing via the latest sunlamps, while still enjoying the views of the sea.

Alongside the 1930s quest for sunshine and tans, there was also a move towards more active holidays. Walking as a leisure pastime became increasingly popular in the 1930s and was often referred to as the 'hiking craze'. It was estimated that there were over half a million people participating in rambling during this time¹¹, and the coast and seaside resorts were ideal places to undertake such activities. Of course, the 'hiking craze' is reflected in *Have His Carcase*.

Other forms of seaside entertainment also changed to reflect the trends and tastes of the 1930s. Many resorts featured seaside lidos in a modern art deco style, including the Jubilee Pool at Penzance, which opened in 1935. Lidos offered the perfect partnership of swimming and other water-based activities in the sunshine. The 1930s is referred to as the 'golden age' of lidos in Britain, with 169 built during the decade. Of course, the beach remained a popular attraction, but rather than sea bathing for health, visitors to the resorts were now taking a dip for fun and pleasure.

Even resort entertainment venues built during the inter-war period, such as the De La Warr Pavilion at Bexhill, opened in 1935, featured many sun terraces. 1930s seaside theatres,

such as Southport's 1932 Garrick Theatre, featured a modern, streamlined architectural style, as did newly built resort hotels, such as Morecambe's 1933 Midland Hotel, which is renowned for its Art Deco exterior and interior design. And while the popularity of seaside amusement parks continued, they too had a 1930s facelift to reflect modern tastes, with much of Blackpool Pleasure Beach being remodelled in an Art Deco style by Joseph Emberton between 1935-1939. These were very different attractions and accommodation provision from the opulent, ornate and palatial buildings which graced Victorian seaside resorts.

Therefore, by the 1930s, British seaside resorts had changed from refined watering places associated with health, to the opulent seaside resorts of the late 19th century associated with pleasure, entertainment and popular with the masses, to modern resorts which still focussed on entertaining, but were adapting to the new trends for sunshine and active pursuits. It is in this historical context that we can consider the resort of Wilvercombe.

The seaside resort of Wilvercombe

Philip Scowcroft's 1984 paper on *Holidays in the detective fiction of Dorothy L Sayers*¹² and his 1991 work on *Lord Peter and Watering Places*¹³ both indicate that the fictional resort of Wilvercombe is located in North Devon and is geographically similar to Ilfracombe.

Ilfracombe started as a port town on the Bristol Channel and developed as a small resort with the arrival of the railway in the 1870s. However, Ilfracombe never developed as a large resort with associated tourism infrastructure and attractions such as winter gardens. With a population of 10,000, which has remained stable for the last 100 years, Ilfracombe never resembled Wilvercombe in its range of shops, facilities and attractions referred to in *Have His Carcase*. Furthermore, Ilfracombe is referred to in the novel: when referring to police reports on Mr Bright's recent movements, he had arrived in Ilfracombe from London on May 28th where he worked for 4 days before being dismissed for being incompetent and intoxicated¹⁴.

Scowcroft notes that Bournemouth may have inspired many of the characteristics of Wilvercombe. Sayers was familiar with the resort, having given birth to her son John Anthony (Tony) in the Bournemouth suburb of Southbourne in 1924. Scowcroft mused that Wilvercombe was possibly around the size of Torquay (which at the time had a population of 40,000, roughly half the size of Bournemouth which stood at over 80,000). Of course, Torquay is associated with Agatha Christie, so let us assume that Sayers took her inspiration from the more familiar environs of Bournemouth.

Bournemouth's development as a fashionable watering place in the 1830s and 1840s is interesting as it offered not only the opportunity for sea bathing, but also the added benefit of breathing the scent of pine trees, which was reputed to cure respiratory illnesses. During this period, Bournemouth's Lower Gardens (then called 'Westover Pleasure Gardens') featured an 'Invalids' Walk'. This was a pine-lined route from one of Bournemouth's leading spa hotels to the sea. The walk can still be found today in Bournemouth's Lower Gardens,

although it is more appropriately named Pine Walk. *The Bournemouth Song Book*¹⁵, first published in 1929, features the song 'The Invalids' Walk', with the lyrics proclaiming that there are no 'crocks' or 'fossils' to be found walking the route as visitors to Bournemouth are all in rude health and appear 'hefty and strong'. The song highlights the change of name from Invalids' Walk to Pine Walk, and muses that the former title is 'simply a scrap of history', perhaps reflecting the change in the function of such resorts from health to pleasure.

In *Have His Carcase* Harriet didn't look forward to visiting Wilvercombe on her solitary walking tour, perceiving it to have a seasonal population of old ladies and invalids and its subdued attempts at the gay life, which seemed 'a little invalid and old ladyish.'¹⁶ Here, Harriet is noting the change from 'watering place' associated with health (or infirmity), to the seaside resort associated with leisure, pleasure and the 'gay life'. Even in the 1930s (as today) older generations still associated being by the sea and taking the sea air with health benefits.

There are two 'luxury' hotels that feature in *Have His Carcase*: The Resplendent, where Harriet is staying, and the Bellevue, where Wimsey has a suite. There is relatively little detail about the Bellevue hotel. One assumes that Wimsey is staying in a luxury hotel, as befits his status, but it is not the best or largest hotel in Wilvercombe (which is the Resplendent). There is passing reference to Wimsey's suite having a bathroom, a private bedroom (or inner chamber) and a sitting room (in which he interviews Mr Bright). Mr Bright refers to 'going down to the sea- just over there at the end of the town'¹⁷ implying that Wimsey's suite in the Bellevue has a view of Wilvercombe's seafront, but may not be in a central location in the resort.

The Bellevue may have resembled a Victorian hotel such as the Ilfracombe Hotel, which was Ilfracombe's first luxury hotel, opening in 1867. The Ilfracombe Hotel bordered the sea and offered many luxuries to the visitors of the time, including cheaper rooms in the attics to accommodate the guests' personal servants. By the 1880s it featured 210 rooms, and a large indoor heated seawater bathing pool. By 1903 the hotel featured electric lighting.

The Bellevue is referred to as a 'handsome' hotel and must have been relatively large as it has a number of public rooms (as detailed in Wimsey's meeting with Leila Garland)¹⁸. In the meeting Wimsey manoeuvres Leila "into an angle of the lounge behind a palm tree" away from the "incessant drivel of dance tunes" being played by the hotel orchestra from four in the afternoon to ten at night. The lounge at the Ilfracombe Hotel featured a large palm tree at its centre during the early twentieth century. Fred Grey notes that palms often featured in architectural and interior design at the seaside as "an idea and symbol of the exotic and the pleasurable other".¹⁹

Sayers provides more detail about The Resplendent, where Harriet is staying. It is the largest hotel in the town, has a glass porch with hothouse plants, a lofty dome in the reception hall, gilt pilasters and blue plush seating. From this description of the Resplendent's architecture and interior design we can assume that it is possibly an older, Victorian hotel, rather than a modern 1930s hotel such as Morecambe's Midland Hotel.

The Resplendent might have been based on a hotel such as the Bournemouth Highcliff Marriott Hotel, which opened in 1873. The hotel had, and continues to have, extensive grounds, and even features its own esplanade on Bournemouth's West Cliff. Sayers may have been aware of the Highcliff, and other hotels in Bournemouth such as The Royal Exeter Hotel, and they may have inspired Harriet's observation of the Resplendent as "One of those monster seaside palaces which look as though they had been designed by a German manufacturer of children's cardboard toys."²⁰

At the Resplendent Harriet has a single, en-suite room, with a balcony overlooking the sea and the esplanade. It was relatively unusual for Victorian large-scale luxury seaside hotels to have balconies. One of the few that did is the Hilton Brighton Metropole, which was built in 1890 and has 340 bedrooms, with balcony rooms overlooking the sea and Brighton's esplanade (King's Road).

The Resplendent Hotel features two lounges, although in *Have His Carcase* the lounge which is frequented most often is a large lounge where the middle space was cleared for dancing. A select orchestra occupied a platform at one end and small tables were arranged all around the sides of the room. The large lounge might have looked similar to Blackpool Imperial Hotel's Washington Suite. The Imperial Hotel is a 4-star hotel located on the northern promenade in Blackpool, opened in 1867, and has many similarities with the Resplendent. Harriet witnesses the Resplendent's evening entertainment in the large lounge and the patrons of the hotel dancing with the hired professional dancers, and observes that the floor was occupied by a pair of professional dancers giving an exhibition waltz. Long skirts and costumes of the 1870s were in evidence, and even ostrich feathers and fans. Harriet considers the seemingly fake demureness of the women with the thought: "*Autres temps, autres mœurs*" (other times, other customs).²¹ The scene appears old-fashioned and out of place, perhaps more associated with watering places than seaside resorts. Harriet goes on to note that the mock modesty and submissive womanhood of the hotel lounge dancing would be replaced tomorrow, on the tennis court, with short, loose tunic-frocks, revealing the dancers as muscular young women despising all bonds. This vision is much more attuned to the 1930s seaside resort's activities and pastimes.

The Resplendent Hotel also features a Turkish Bath. Such facilities became popular in the UK in the 1870s, and often featured as part of municipal baths or within hydropathic hotels. At the peak of their popularity at the end of the 19th century there were around 400 public Turkish baths in the UK. Unlike saunas, Turkish baths use dry hot air, after which bathers use a cold-water plunge pool with time to relax after their bath. By the 1930s the popularity of Turkish baths was on the wane. The fact that the Resplendent still has a working Turkish Bath would indicate its heritage as a hydropathic hotel, probably built when Wilvercombe was more of a 'watering place' than a seaside resort. Turkish baths had fallen out of fashion after the First World War, and many former hydropathic hotels changed their name (dropping the 'hydro') and converted their Turkish baths for other uses. Sayers would have been familiar with the Mont Dore Sanatorium Hotel which opened in Bournemouth in 1885 and featured a Turkish bath amongst other hydropathic therapies. The hotel closed during

the First World War, and became Bournemouth Town Hall in 1921, and is still used for this purpose today. Blackpool's Imperial Hotel also possessed Turkish baths and a seawater plunge, which opened in the hotel 1901, embracing the trend for hydropathic therapies at the time. Like many Victorian hotels, the Imperial converted its Turkish baths into basement storage sometime before the Second World War. Today, only seven Victorian Turkish baths remain open to the public in the UK.

The final feature of the Resplendent mentioned in *Have His Carcase* is its lift (Harriet meets Mrs Weldon in the lobby and shares the lift with her to her first-floor room). Even in the 1930s, electric automated lifts (as opposed to the older hydraulic lifts) signified a luxury hotel.

There are other types of accommodation in Wilvercombe referred to in *Have His Carcase*. Julian Perkins had been staying in Wilvercombe at the Trust House. Trust Houses Ltd was a British hospitality company with temperance origins dating back to 1900. By the 1920s there were over 100 Trust Houses operating in the UK, and they were renowned for their standards of cleanliness, service, and good food. Trust Houses were very popular in southern England and by the end of the 1930s there were over 200 in operation, expanding rapidly with the rise in motor car ownership. Trust Houses Ltd merged with Forte Holdings Ltd in 1970 to form Trust House Forte, which then owned popular hospitality brands such as Travelodge and Little Chef, both of which were in keeping with the company's heritage. In the 1930s the Avonmouth Hotel in Christchurch (only a few miles from where Sayers stayed in Southbourne) was owned by Trust Houses Ltd and might have been similar to the establishment where Perkins was staying.

Inspector Umpelty also referred to 'Clegg's Temperance Hostel' which was 'generally reckoned to be cheap and comfortable', to which Harriet responded 'I don't care for temperance hostels'²². The first recorded Temperance Hotel was opened in Preston in 1833 by Joseph Liveley, with most towns and resorts having at least one. Vimto, originally 'Vim Tonic', was concocted in 1908 as a healthy alternative to alcohol, and originally sold in temperance hotels and bars.

Later in the story, Harriet moves into Alexis' old room at Mrs Lefranc's boarding house. Boarding houses were usually privately owned family homes where lodgers (rather than guests) could stay for a night or longer. They were highly seasonal in nature, with many closing during the winter months. Between Easter and Whitsun at the end of May, the boarding houses that were open often lodged the migratory workforce who were attracted to work in the resorts (such as Alexis), in order to maintain a steady income.

The landlady, Mrs Lefranc, is described as "an ample personage with brazen hair, who was dressed in a pink wrapper, much-laddered artificial silk stockings and green velvet mules, and wore about her heavily powered neck a string of synthetic-amber beads like pigeons' eggs"²³. John Walton's book *The Blackpool Landlady*²⁴ provides insight into the role of the landlady (it was an occupation dominated by women) and their boarding houses. He notes a 1939 advertisement for a new boarding house which offered one bathroom and two WCs for a nine-bedroomed house with hot and cold water in all bedrooms. During the inter-War

years many landladies preferred to offer their lodgers ‘full board’ as this was more profitable for them. This is reflected in Harriet’s negotiations with Mrs Lefranc – “an inclusive charge of 2 and a half Guineas per week (about £2.60) or 12 shillings (about 60pence) and find yourself” (ie room only)²⁵. Harriet’s stay at Mrs Lefranc’s boarding house would have been a far cry from the Resplendent!

The main entertainment venue referred to in *Have His Carcase* is Wilvercombe’s Winter Gardens. Only the largest resorts, such as Bournemouth, featured winter gardens, which opened in the resort in 1877. Winter gardens at seaside resorts started to appear in the 1870s, inspired by the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the design of the Crystal Palace. Originally winter gardens would have displayed exotic plants, such as palms, and provided a sheltered place to promenade and socialise for resort visitors. However, by the 20th century, winter gardens had adapted to reflect changing visitor tastes and trends, and often featured theatres, ballrooms, and even ice rinks. Bournemouth’s Winter Gardens held its first concert (a military band) in 1893, and two years later Bournemouth’s new Municipal Orchestra was formed, with the Winter Gardens becoming its home from 1895 to 1929. Sayers might not have been aware that Bournemouth’s original glass and iron winter gardens were demolished in 1935. Indeed, by the late 1920s, winter gardens had become unfashionable and were replaced by more modern entertainment buildings. This was the case in Bournemouth, where the Pavilion Theatre opened in 1929, with the Bournemouth Municipal Orchestra transferring to the Pavilion in the same year.

Why did Wimsey hate watering places?

In considering the history and development of British seaside resorts it can be concluded that Wimsey (and to some extent, Harriet) has a rather old-fashioned view of such places. This is evidenced by the use of the term ‘watering places’, already an antiquated phrase in the 1930s, and possibly reflecting a time when such places would have provided facilities for health and relaxation for the wealthy few.

Wimsey’s hatred of such places may be based upon the developments that took place in the resorts during the latter half of the 19th century, when they became accessible to the masses and diversified their offering towards providing pleasure and entertainment, often associated with what was deemed to be lewd, excessive, or deviant behaviour. Moreover, his dislike for watering places may also reflect his own social status and his prejudices against the resorts. Harriet’s own pretensions may facilitate her mirroring of Wimsey’s views.

However, Sayers’ knowledge of the 1930s seaside resort also appears somewhat dated, drawing largely on the facilities and entertainments that might have been found at resorts ten, twenty, or even 30 years earlier. Perhaps if she had visited the modern resorts of the 1930s, Wilvercombe might have been a very different place indeed.

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