

Chapter 6: Ramsgate's future

Commented [GF1]: Facing page: Ramsgate sunrise

Note: these comments indicate the choice and positioning preferences for the figures.

Seaside towns must be inspired to regain their pioneering spirit and evolve to meet present day and future challenges

House of Lords Select Committee report on *The Future of Seaside Towns*¹

The decision to create a Heritage Action Zone in Ramsgate in 2017 recognised the challenges that the town faced, but it was also an affirmation of the strong historical foundations and rich natural resources that could underpin its future prosperity. While Ramsgate has a unique character, there are many issues that it shares with other seaside resorts. One contributor to the House of Lords Select Committee report on *The Future of Seaside Towns*, which was published in 2019, stated that the 'seaside towns that have seen the most success in shaking off their negative image ... are those that have identified their own special character and unique selling points.'² By extension it could be argued that the distinctiveness and historic character of seaside resorts has a central role to play in their regeneration.

Challenges

Seaside resorts once enjoyed a near monopoly of British popular tourism, as the shape of the railway network directed people towards well-connected destinations. However, during the second half of the 20th century a combination of the growth of car ownership, years of underinvestment in accommodation and facilities, increased disposable income and affordable package holidays abroad drew people away from Britain's coast. By the 1960s our seaside resorts were being unfavourably, and sometimes unfairly, compared with bright, new and sometimes incomplete Mediterranean resorts. In addition, resorts have faced greater competition for a family's disposable income from leisure activities that could be reached from home, ranging from visits to theme parks and sporting events to pop festivals and trips to heritage sites.

With such a range of options available, the negative public image that became associated with Britain's seaside resorts acted as a deterrent to many families. Newspaper headlines

trumpeted violent seafront clashes between mods and rockers in the 1960s and followed this up with scare stories about benefits claimants, drug hostels and rampant homelessness.

Unfortunately, behind the headlines lie some hard truths. Seaside communities face significant social and economic problems, including high numbers of people with low skills and a higher than average crime rate. Due to the nature of the tourism sector, workers predominantly earn relatively low wages and their limited spending power is exacerbated by the seasonal and casual nature of their employment. The lack of investment in a seaside resort's economy is reflected on the ground in **lingering gap sites**, poorly maintained facilities and the subdivision of houses into unsuitable bedsits, creating Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO). A vicious circle is evident at some resorts in which declining visitor numbers has led to less private and public investment, leading to under-occupied and low-quality accommodation, the closure of entertainment facilities and, inevitably, fewer visitors.

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At the same time, seaside resorts are a magnet for large numbers of affluent people who wish to retire there, leading to the development of contrasting zones of poverty and prosperity. Large numbers of retired people also have an impact on the shape and size of council spending. More money is required to provide the social services that they need and when this is combined with higher spending required to service the facilities that visitors expect, it creates further financial pressures in addition to those faced by all local authorities.

The condition of historic buildings in the centres of resorts is often a direct reflection of the underlying social and economic problems that these towns face. A more statistical picture can be gleaned from interrogating the government's Indices of Multiple Deprivation, a survey carried out every few years.³ This consistently reveals that seaside resorts feature among the most deprived places in England; of 326 local authorities in 2015, Blackpool ranked 4th, Hastings 20th and Great Yarmouth 25th. Thanet, which includes Ramsgate and Margate as well as more prosperous resorts and residential areas, was placed 35th.

When the more detailed figures for smaller geographical areas (the so-called lower layer super output areas or LSOA) are examined, the picture of deprivation and inequality in Ramsgate **appears more polarised**. In Ramsgate, the areas corresponding to the central core of the town, including most of the seafront, are among the 10% most deprived in England. Parts of Newington and Northwood wards to the north west feature in the same category, but parts of Nethercourt, Pegwell and Cliffsend wards to the west, along with the areas towards Broadstairs to the north east, are among the least deprived in England.

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At the beginning of 2019, 10% of shops in Britain's high streets stood empty.⁴ Seaside resorts are prone to relatively high vacancy rates, particularly during the winter months before new businesses refurbish and open for the summer season. A survey carried out in 2018 showed that 16.3% of the shops on Ramsgate's high street were unoccupied, while its equivalent in Margate had a vacancy rate of 26.5%.⁵ Both resorts have acutely felt the commercial challenges resulting from the marked shift to online retailing and the impact of out-of-town shopping centres, particularly the Westwood Cross Shopping Centre, which opened in 2005 in the heart of Thanet. Ramsgate's economic resilience has also been impacted by the loss of local industry and changes in farming practice and in the commercial fishing industry.

Many of Ramsgate's current problems arise from its history as a seaside resort, but it has also had to deal with some loss of identity and autonomy. As a result of local government reorganisation in 1974 the town was incorporated into the newly-created Thanet District Council, with the result that it has had to compete as well as cooperate with nearby Margate and Broadstairs for investment and profile. A lack of consensus in relation to key development and infrastructure sites has hampered progress, particularly the continuing uncertainty over the future of the Port of Ramsgate, Manston Airport and the Pleasurama site (the former Ramsgate Sands railway station).

Opportunities

Underpinning any growth in tourism must be the need to communicate that Ramsgate is a good place to live, a good place to invest and therefore a good place to visit. But how can Ramsgate's seaside economy, built around the traditional summer holiday, reinvent itself to meet the expectations and preferences of 21st century holidaymakers? Today, a family is more likely to visit Ramsgate for a day trip, a short break or a long weekend than spend a long summer holiday there. Successful resorts tend to be those that provide a quality hub for exploring neighbouring resorts and nearby attractions. As well as being a destination in its own right, Ramsgate is well placed for discovering Kent's coastline, including Whitstable, Herne Bay, Margate, Broadstairs, Sandwich Bay and Deal as well as inland attractions that include Canterbury. A stronger hospitality and food offer would encourage more people to use Ramsgate as a base for excursions into the surrounding area.

While the traditional two-week seaside beach family holiday may still be alive and well, but living on the Mediterranean, this does not mean that England's traditional seaside resorts

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should abandon this dimension of their history and character. There is still a great appetite for a day out at the seaside and Ramsgate is particularly well-placed to exploit it since the opening of the high-speed railway line from St Pancras. Londoners, Britain's largest single market, need to become more aware of the charms awaiting them on the Kent coast, and to this end, the railway operator Southeastern actively promotes cheap summer tickets, allowing holidaymakers to reach Ramsgate in just over an hour.

Seaside towns need to be good places to live, study and work as well as places to visit, with a sufficiently broad-based economy to create services, jobs and opportunities for local people. While its resort heritage is an important element of its make-up, Ramsgate has always been more than a holiday destination. Its improved connectivity and attractive housing stock have the potential to attract inward investment and new residents, particularly young families and a growing creative community.

If Ramsgate is to build on its innate strengths, then chief amongst these is its magnificent harbour. Enclosing 19ha of water, it includes the Royal Harbour Marina, which opened in 1976 and now offers 700 moorings for pleasure craft. While it might not always have the sunshine of the Mediterranean, the harbour has the same liveliness and colour as more exotic ports, and it offers an obvious focus for heritage-led development. Increasing public access and improving the connection between the town and the harbour could stimulate Ramsgate's economic development. There is much scope to celebrate Ramsgate's long relationship with the sea, with its stories of fishing, daring rescues and heroism. The unique, but under-used, Smack Boys' Home on the harbour quayside might be converted into a hotel and restaurant, conveying another aspect of the harbour's extraordinary story. Historic ships might be encouraged to dock at Ramsgate, since they serve to spark the imagination and cast light on the town's colourful maritime history.

Ramsgate needs a bold and imaginative approach to its future. Post-war clearance in York Street and Leopold Street, adjoining the harbour and once the site of Ramsgate's earliest settlement, led to unsympathetic and over-scaled developments with blank elevations and unscreened service yards. The regeneration of this area might include a new public square with wide views of the harbour, the sea and ships, improving the connections between the town and its harbour. This new open space might include a maritime museum telling the story of Ramsgate, the North Foreland and the Goodwin Sands.

A few recent developments are notable for having enhanced Ramsgate's historic character and appearance, rather than undermining it. The redevelopment of the former Ramsgate Hospital site, which combines the conversion of listed buildings with low-rise housing, has

created a fine-grained residential community. An infill development of ten houses on a Second World War bomb site in **Liverpool Lawn** is a sympathetic intervention which respects the footprint, scale and materials of the surrounding conservation area. Another bright spot is the **arches** on Military Road which today host a variety of shops and restaurants alongside traditional boat chandlers and workshops. And much media attention has been given to the restoration of the once-derelict Royal Victoria Pavilion and its transformation into the UK's largest branch of JD Wetherspoon when it opened in **2017**.

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Ramsgate is well placed to exploit the growing phenomenon of food tourism, which offers visitors the taste of a place through speciality restaurants, café culture, farmers' markets, food and drink festivals and 'pop-up' events. Ramsgate could host an open-air market selling locally-grown vegetables, beer and wine and celebrating the rich natural resources of the area. This would reconnect the town with its agricultural hinterland. Thanet's climate and the fertility of its land, together with the intensive agricultural methods and the new crops introduced in the 17th and 18th centuries, once created a broad variety of highly prized produce. Hops were once grown in Thanet, as were walnuts, broccoli and asparagus (which still is grown).

Thanet was also famed for the quality of its malting barley. The strong bottled beer Northdown Ale, mentioned in the mid-17th century diary of Samuel Pepys, was brewed in Thanet using water from a well in Holly Lane in modern day Cliftonville and was widely sold in London as a luxury product. Thanet once abounded in breweries, some long established. Until 1968, Ramsgate was home to what was claimed to be England's oldest brewery, Tomson and Wotton.

Ramsgate Harbour has intermittently supported a fishing fleet, with fish being sold on the quay and at purpose-built markets established in 1839 at York Street and in 1880 on the harbour crosswall. Today the fleet is sizable, bringing in sole, skate, plaice, cod and a wide variety of shellfish. Yet little of this catch is sold in Ramsgate. A fish market could be revived as a focal point for residents and visitors, particularly if it was combined with outlets for other local produce and food stalls. And it could supply local restaurants, allowing people to dine in sight of the fishing boats that have delivered the daily catch.

As well as eating the produce of the sea, there are opportunities to celebrate the wonders of the deep, particularly since coastal areas off Ramsgate were designated as marine conservation zones in 2013 and 2019.⁶ This stretch of water is a key part of Britain's history and its unique marine archaeology might spur a nomination proposal for this coastal area to be considered for inscription on UNESCO's World Heritage List. The inclusion in 2001 of the

Dorset and East Devon Coast has conferred world-wide fame and status on the 'Jurassic coast' and has boosted the economy of Lyme Regis, the town most associated with it.

On land, recent developments have reinstated the setting of the landscape around Ramsgate. During the 19th century, Pegwell Bay to the south-west of the town was a celebrated beauty spot. William Dyce's strikingly original painting *Pegwell Bay, Kent – a Recollection of October 5th 1858* portrays the painter's family collecting shells, or fossils, while in the background the chalk strata of the cliff are depicted in minute detail and Donati's Comet can be seen crossing the sky. The tranquillity of this place was marred during the 20th century by the construction of Richborough Power Station in 1962-3 and the Pegwell Bay Hoverport in 1969. The latter closed in 1982, its terminal buildings were demolished and the concrete apron is today returning to nature; the power station was demolished in 2012. The special qualities of Pegwell Bay's landscape and ecosystem is recognised by its inclusion in multiple designations including a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a National Nature Reserve.

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Ramsgate's cliff-top parks, on either side of the town centre, deserve to be celebrated as a gift bestowed on the town by far-sighted citizens and previous council administrations. They form a near-continuous, four mile green swathe which has a high amenity value. Ellington Park, at the back of the town, received a £1.6m Heritage Lottery Fund grant in December 2018. The park sits in the centre of Ramsgate's prime, late 19th century residential suburb and could be the key to its revival. All these open spaces have a major role to play in the wellbeing of residents and visitors.

As well as promoting Ramsgate as a place, there can also be a role for trading on links to famous people associated with the town. Charles Dickens and A W N Pugin could be used to market Ramsgate as a way of indicating that it was, and remains, an absorbing place to visit. Dickens' essay 'The Tuggs's at Ramsgate' is a brilliant evocation of a seaside holiday prior to the arrival of the railways and could be one hook to capture a new audience's imagination.

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Similarly, the restoration of the Houses of Parliament offers an opportunity to highlight the visionary work of its architect, A W N Pugin, in Ramsgate. Twenty years ago, the core of his Catholic community on the West Cliff was at risk and Pugin was a little-known figure in Ramsgate. St Augustine's Church was seldom open to the public, its roof leaked and the electrics were dangerous. Today, the church is now open daily, its interior has been reordered to restore Pugin's original layout and a Heritage Lottery-funded visitor centre was completed in 2017. Pugin's house, The Grange and St Edward's Presbytery have been

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restored by the Landmark Trust to the highest conservation standards, and are available all year round as holiday lets.

In the mid-19th century, Ramsgate gained a reputation as an intellectual 'London-on-Sea', and attracted many cultural and artistic figures. Among these was Sir Moses Montefiore, a key figure in Jewish emancipation (much as Pugin was to Roman Catholicism) who established his own ideal community at Hereson on the east cliff. And although Vincent van Gogh may have only lived briefly in the town, his presence could be used to catch the public's imagination. This deeply talented and troubled artist only ever found positive things to say about Ramsgate.

Conclusion

When, in October 1943, its councillors debated Ramsgate's future, a balance was sought between pressures to reconstruct and a growing desire to preserve the town's special qualities. One councillor commented that 'The characteristics of Ramsgate must be preserved'. When it came to stimulating tourism it was argued that its historic townscape, in all its picturesque irregularity, was not a liability but an asset. 'Ramsgate has got to live by selling holidays', commented another, 'and one thing which people wanted when on holiday was a complete change of surroundings'.⁷

Such wisdom, which was far from universally acknowledged in the middle of the 20th century, could underpin thinking about the town's future. Circumstances may have changed, but striking the balance between preservation/ossification and reconstruction/destruction remains an abiding debate throughout England's historic environment. Ramsgate has a breath-taking setting, a stunning, historic built environment and a highly engaging 'back story'. Challenging national perceptions and raising local expectations are the essential first steps in reviving the town's fortunes. For Ramsgate to be successful, it has to be Ramsgate.

¹ Select Committee on Regenerating Seaside Towns and Communities 2019, 3. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldseaside/320/320.pdf> [accessed 1 August 2019]

² Select Committee on Regenerating Seaside Towns and Communities 2019, 10. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldseaside/320/320.pdf> [accessed 1 August 2019]

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2015> [accessed 21 May 2019]; <http://opendatacommunities.org/def/concept/folders/themes/societal-wellbeing> [accessed 21 May 2019].

⁴ <https://www.retailgazette.co.uk/blog/2019/02/footfall-0-7-january-marking-14th-consecutive-month-decline/> [accessed 22 May 2019].

⁵ <https://www.kentlive.news/news/kent-news/how-thanets-businesses-feel-high-2229516> [accessed 22 May 2019].

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/marine-conservation-zone-designations-in-england> [accessed 22 May 2019].

⁷ *Thanet Advertiser*, 8 October 1943, 1.