

# The last resort?



**Does Blackpool have more in common with Preston or with Brighton? Gordon Marsden, MP for Blackpool South since 1997 – and president of the British Resorts Association, is certain that he knows. Writing in a personal capacity, Marsden outlines his vision for the future**

'One size fits all' is a motto you apply at your peril to seaside and coastal resorts in this country. Size, location, history, even their geology (some flat and sandy, a family's beach dream, some with the flint and chalk that gives dramatic outcrops and reflected light, some vertiginously craggy, carving out picturesque harbours tinting the waters almost an Aegean blue) combine to caution against simplistic solutions to sustain their vitality.

That said, there are a range of commonalities. Seaside towns separated by hundreds of miles often have far more in common with each other than with neighbouring towns only twenty miles inland. Too often these commonalities have been ignored by governments and policymakers – and indeed by the towns themselves in nervous competition with each other for a share of the declining bucket and spade holiday. Yet they are real and offer pointers as to how to regenerate the British seaside.

I've often used Dean Acheson's famous comment on Britain post-Suez - 'lost an empire and not yet

found a role' - to describe the challenge facing seaside towns. While their traditional one or two week family market has gone abroad, there remain 18 million seaside holidays still taken every year in England. Local authorities and all those involved in seaside tourism have been battling against decayed infrastructure – fading Edwardian and Victorian grandeur, a legacy of poor building stock, stubbornly high pockets of unemployment, exacerbated by seasonal working patterns with low wages.

Too many mean streets of multiple deprivation nestle behind seafront glitz which itself has worn thin for the daytrip/short break market on which seaside economies increasingly depend. Those mean streets exhibit levels of disadvantage that mirror many inner-city problems. In addition an overall skewed demography (with older people often seeking a better climate and lifestyle in retirement – and the young, seeking a start on the ladder in tourism jobs but often with few skills) places demands on seaside towns that government





*The Beach in Lytham St Annes*

funding formulas have barely begun to recognise. At the other end of the age range the transience of young families with children puts strain on services: some schools in central Blackpool have turnovers of 40 per cent on their roll per year.

Mental health, drug and alcohol abuse problems can loom large in areas of seaside towns where B&Bs no longer able to keep going as holiday lets have decayed into often unlicensed houses in multiple occupation. These issues are not new. In 1990, just after I had become a Parliamentary candidate in Blackpool I made a visit that brought starkly home the human realities of seaside decay - to a run down bedsit where needles lay in the gutter only yards away from a child's tricycle.

Seaside towns have been fighting back. A recent survey by Sheffield Hallam University indicates a surprising resilience in creating new employment and continuing to attract new residents. The scale of the challenge is nevertheless indicated by the fact that in 1996

eight of the 20 worst deteriorating districts in the Index of Local Deprivation were coastal towns. Yet the prosperous fringe of seaside towns can even out the statistic and pepperpot deprivation has meant they have often missed out on Government or EU funding. With their fiscal base uncertain and fragile, it is difficult for seaside town halls to allocate the investment in tourism and regeneration needed.

These complex problems need solutions that don't sit snugly in any one Government department. That is why the backbench group of seaside MPs which I chair has worked

hard on ministers, civil servants and policy makers to see the connections. Earlier this year we produced Supporting Seaside Towns which advocates a Seaside Regeneration Taskforce and Trust modelled on the Coalfields initiative. Such a Trust would monitor and champion seaside regeneration - sharing best practice, avoiding duplication and boosting the multiplier effect.

Funding progress is being made - witness the seaside towns, which





St Ives' Tate in Cornwall

now get Single Regeneration Budget and EU money. Beefed up with the launch of VisitBritain, the Department of Culture Media and Sport's funding organisations are beginning to pump prime infrastructure initiatives such as the Heritage Lottery Fund grants helping to revitalise the parks and gardens of the seaside experience. The Treasury team recently hosted an all-party seminar for MPs from seaside towns aimed at identifying their key problems. And Regional Development Agencies are emerging as key players, co-ordinating seaside regeneration tourism activity.

Regeneration does not mean all seaside towns doing the same thing:

Blackpool's proposed resort casinos would not be a solution for the West Country Riviera. But raising standards of service, accommodation and food – sharpened by overseas experiences and lifestyle media. Much of Cornwall's tourism success in the past 2-3 years has hinged on these – aided by generous Objective One funding from the EU and high-profile initiatives such as the Eden project.

But it's also crucial to yoke seaside tourism to the inland attractions of heritage historic sites and countryside that virtually all coastal towns have within an hour and a half's travel time. For seaside economies to sustain the bed nights of their hotels and B&B's they

have to think and link more imaginatively; promoting themselves as touring bases and setting aside bunker mentality in tourism promotion.

By definition seaside towns are peripheral, but the abysmal lack of vision shown by the Strategic Rail Authority in their latest network cuts and failure to develop a strategy for improving coastal rail links to main population centres threatens to entrench isolation. We simply cannot expect the road network to take all the strain; transport ministers need urgently to knock some heads together.

In an age which often shows a preference for 'YearZero' formulas, it is worth remembering that we do not always

have to reinvent the wheel. Our seaside towns built their prosperity via municipal enlightenment working with dynamic local entrepreneurs and by bold initiatives underpinned by strong planning. Those were real Victorian values, partnerships which stood them in good stead and can do so again for us today. Good design is a key element in the equation. The welcome launch this summer of a joint initiative – Shifting Sands – from English Heritage and the Commission for the Built Environment – pointing to good practice in current seaside regeneration projects, also reminds us of past achievements.





*Bournemouth Seafront*

What was essential then and now to seaside success was individual vision and nerves. Without the leap of faith that Alderman Bickerstaffe took in persuading Blackpool's town council at the turn of the 20th century to buy shares in its Tower when a rough patch struck, it might today be just a memory instead of the town's proud iconic symbol. And Bexhill on Sea's marvellous 1930's sea front Modernist pavilion would never have come about without the robustness of local politician and landowner Lord de la Warr in standing firmly by its designers, Chermayeff and Mendelsohn, against parochialism and xenophobia (the latter orchestrated in part as we now know by Mosley's British Union of Fascists). Regeneration and good design should be Siamese twins, rallying the excellent against the mediocre in our seaside towns. It is making the connections – past, present and future – that will play the critical role in sustaining the British seaside as a place of delight and invigoration for visitors and residents alike in the 21st century.

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