

# How Washed-Up UK Resorts Can Turn the Tide

## Revitalising Sink Estate-on-Sea



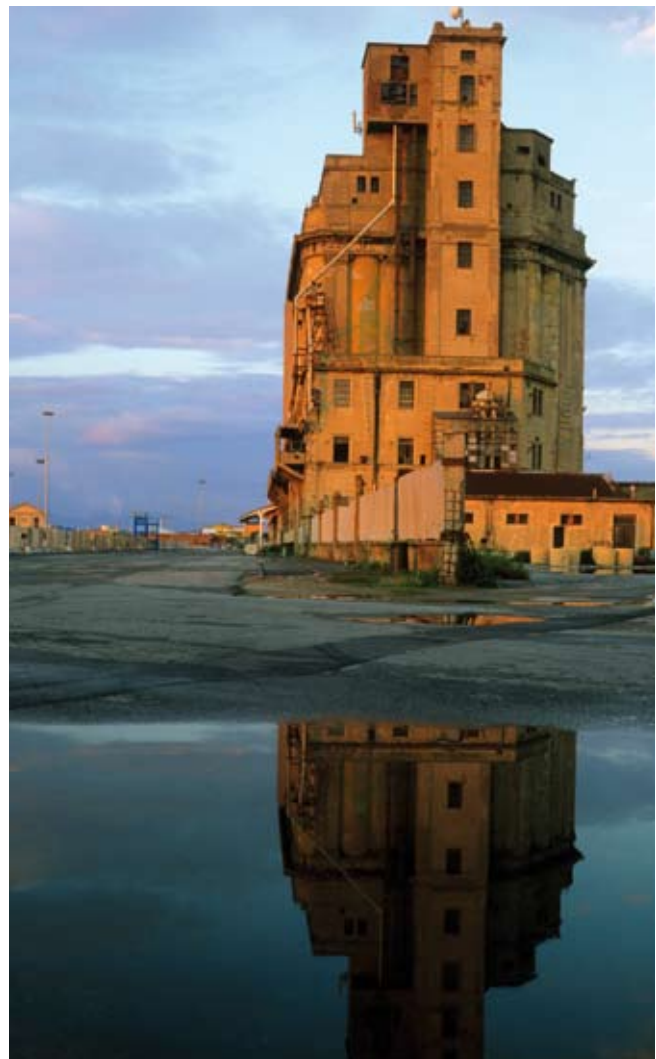
Locum's David Geddes has advised various UK resort towns on how they should go about regenerating themselves, including Southport, where he developed a new positioning as "England's Classic Resort" that has helped spark a dramatic revival.

David thought that this article, written by Jonathan Guthrie and which originally appeared in the Financial Times, captures perfectly the mix of profound challenge and "new dawn" optimism that is found in the North West's three main resorts.

The full horror of Blackpool's decline dawned on me during a visit last year. I had hoped to stay in a friendly, family-run B&B. I wound up in a decaying dosshouse whose despairing owner was sliding into poverty. Walking to my conference in the morning I passed boarded-up shops and lodgings priced to lure the benefits-dependent. Could this really be "Britain's Favourite Resort"? It felt more like Sink Estate-on-Sea.

Twitter articles have recently been popping up in the Sunday travel supplements about the reinvention of UK coastal resorts. Their words paint alluring pictures of Justins and Lucindas frolicking in Whitby waves or scoffing oysters in Whitstable. But there are still many seaside towns where it would be wrong to send people as a punishment for burglary, let alone for a relaxing weekend. This is a shame. At its best, the British seaside is tremendous, offering great beaches, homespun family fun and inspiringly loopy architecture. It is a treasure that needs tough love.

Economics and global warming could help drive some tourists back to the seaside. If oil prices stay high, as many analysts predict, package holiday prices should rise. Climate change could, meanwhile, improve British weather. The corollary would be summers in the Mediterranean too hot for anyone who has not undergone desert survival training in the French Foreign Legion.



# “ a renascent seaside resort needs buzzy buildings, imaginative leaders and a niche ”

It is unlikely British seaside tourism will ever regain its postwar peaks – economies of scale in airline travel have ensured that. Since the 1980s, the number of seaside visits has fallen from 32m a year to about 25m, with day trips and weekend stays replacing two-week breaks. Resorts need to think competitively, as struggling businesses would, to grab a share of, for example, any revival overspilling the fleshpots of the West Country. What is the formula for turning round a dying resort? I took a spin up the Lancashire coast to find out.

First stop was Southport, a pretty seaside town just west of Liverpool that illustrates one necessary quality for resurrectionists: sheer bloody-mindedness. In the late 1990s the council wanted to demolish the pier, the structure that defined Southport as a resort. An action group screamed and drummed its heels until the plan was dropped. Funds for renovation materialised. Two developments in a maritime style are now going up by the refurbished pier, one of them a smart hotel.

Another important asset Southport has is a tight-knit group of local business people that works closely with fixers on the council. “There’s a little mafia that decides what happens,” said Adam Urbanowski, president of the Southport Hotels Association. Southport’s benign *cosa nostra* picked two niches: golfing breaks and business tourism. “We’re bucking the national trend,” said Mr Urbanowski, sipping tea in the breakfast room of his guesthouse. Visitor numbers have risen 10 per cent in five years.

Just up the coast, Blackpool is headed the other way. The number of visitors has halved to about 10m a year since the 1980s. It is still the UK’s biggest resort, but also the most deprived. The town is also home to Britain’s most popular visitor attraction, Blackpool Pleasure Beach, whose managing director, Amanda Thompson, told me: “Blackpool still has a great appeal, but it has run down to a nasty, dilapidated state.” She blamed council inertia, the apathy of some business people and, inevitably, the government’s decision to deny the resort a super casino.



Blackpool has been kicked in the teeth twice by the perfidious London establishment. The Lottery Commission turned down a bid for £25m to build attractions on new sea defences. Ms Thompson said Gordon Brown had not replied to letters from her about the town’s problems. Maybe Blackpool is too northern and working class for New Labour, like an arriviste’s embarrassing Nan.

Further north, Morecambe boasts dereliction that makes Blackpool look like Monte Carlo. Demonstrating the failure of public art as an economic panacea, a titivated promenade faces an abandoned theme park and a vandalised church. More positively, the Midland Hotel, a gorgeous white Cunard liner of a building, has just reopened at a cost of £11m, much of it from Mancunian developer Tom Bloxham. The hotel is fully booked for every weekend well into October. The resort now has a chance of returning from the dead.

To reduce my findings to three crude bullet points, a renascent seaside resort needs

- buzzy buildings,
- imaginative leaders
- and a niche.

How might this apply to Blackpool? The construction project should be a smart new home for the Museum of the Performing Arts, which the V&A is considering relocating. The leader could be Doug Garrett, the fast-talking boss of ReBlackpool, a new regeneration body. The niche strategy should be a focus on live entertainment, as advocated by Ms Thompson. Blackpool should despatch a deputation of carnies, drag queens and Lancashire comedians to London forthwith. They should hang around Downing Street until a red-faced premier promises them regeneration funding simply to go away.

The resort, like many others, must also recognise that it has more tatty, underused tourist accommodation than there will ever be demand for. The Blackpool Hotel and Guest House Association reckons the town could comfortably shed a third of its 72,000 beds. Otherwise the canker of decay from dying businesses will infect healthy ones too. In a rational world, you would send in bulldozers.

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