

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT
COMMITTEE
COASTAL TOWNS

MARGATE
18 OCTOBER 2006



Save Dreamland Campaign

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A Brief History

1920 Dreamland opens. 86 years on it is still Margate's most popular tourist attraction.

1996 The park is acquired by Mr James Godden. Mr Godden gradually scales down the attraction by removing rides and closing areas of the park.

2002 The Department for Culture, Media and Sport give Dreamland's Scenic Railway Grade II listed status, the first time an amusement park ride had been awarded heritage status. Scenic railway roller coasters were very common in the early part of the 20th century but most were demolished through the second half of the 20th century. The Dreamland Scenic Railway, which opened in 1920, is now the oldest operating roller coaster in the country, and one of only two surviving scenic railway roller coasters. It is undoubtedly a remarkable survival. Its importance to the history of amusement parks, and therefore the cultural heritage of the UK, is immeasurable.

Dec 2002 Mr Godden announces the closure of Dreamland. (Since that time, temporary operators have leased the park at the height of the summer season, utilising less than one third of the site.)

Jan 2003 The Save Dreamland Campaign is formed, headed up by Nick Laister BA (Hons) DipTP MRTPI MIHT MIPI, a planning consultant and a leading authority on the UK theme park industry. The Campaign now has over 14,000 members.

Jan 2003 Until this time Thanet District Council (TDC) was committed to retaining Dreamland but, following representations made by Mr Godden (after the statutory deadline for representations to the Local Plan had expired), the Local Plan Policy is changed to allow Dreamland to be completely redeveloped. This alteration makes a significant impact on the commercial land value of the site.

Jun 2003 TDC appoint a multi-disciplinary team led by Tibbalds Planning & Urban Design Ltd to produce a Masterplan for the central area of Margate. This study is co-funded by Stadium Developments Ltd, the then development partner of the Dreamland site owner. The consultants propose a commercial leisure development (of the type seen in most towns), leisure retailing, a car park, public open space and a public sector sports centre. The option of an upgraded amusement park isn't even listed as an option.

Nov 2003 The Campaign meets with Phillip Miller, owner of Adventure Island in Southend, who confirms that he has offered to buy the park at its full, independently-assessed amusement park market value of £3.25m. The offer was refused. Miller confirms his company would "invest in many

new rides over a rolling 5 year programme to create a family theme park of a similar standard to our Adventure Island at Southend-on-Sea." He expresses a desire to meet with TDC about his plans.

Nov 2003 The Campaign meets with Cllr Ezekiel and Gill Franks, TDC's then Head of Tourism, to advise of Miller's interest. TDC fail to contact Miller.

Apr 2004 The Save Dreamland Campaign gives evidence to the Thanet Local Plan Inquiry.

Mar 2005 The site is sold to the newly-formed Margate Town Centre Regeneration Company (MTCRC), with Mr Godden retaining a 40% share.

Nov 2005 The Inspector's Report into the Thanet Local Plan Inquiry is released. Independent Government inspector Mr Harold Stephens described the Grade II listed Scenic Railway as an "extraordinary building" and said it must be protected. He said the theme park itself should be conserved, which would inevitably "prejudice any proposal to use the site for anything other than an amusement park". He stated that "convincing expert evidence was brought to the Inquiry to show that other prospective leisure operators consider an up-to-date amusement park at Dreamland is an attractive venture". He went on to criticise TDC, stating that their policy "maximises speculative interest in the site and encourages hope values beyond any ordinary expectation". He therefore concluded that the site should remain designated as an amusement park and asked for the original policy to be reinstated and strengthened.

Jan 2006 TDC rejects the recommendations of the independent government inspector, stating: "Policy supports investment in the site as an amusement park and continuation of such use if viable and sustainable." However, it goes on: "If the amusement park is found not to be viable and sustainable then alternative leisure uses will be explored. A residential development may also be appropriate on the site." Interestingly, the Labour Group - who first implemented the change to the Local Plan whilst in power in 2003 - vote in favour of accepting the Inspector's Recommendations, with their leader admitting that "a mistake" was made.

Jun 2006 Representatives from TDC finally visit Phillip Miller at Adventure Island. Miller reiterates his interest in Dreamland and asks the council to facilitate talks with the MTCRC. To date, no meeting has been arranged.

Sept 2006 MTCRC launch their public consultation at www.textmargate.com. They ask for ideas on Margate's town

centre (which Dreamland is not part of). No mention of the park is made.

The Importance Of Dreamland

Dreamland is of major importance to the Thanet tourism economy and is a symbol closely associated with Margate. Margate as a seaside resort relies heavily on the day visitor trade. Even in its current much-reduced and run-down state Dreamland is the biggest single tourist attraction in the town and attracts several hundred thousand people to the town every year.

The redevelopment of the Dreamland site would, in our view, result in a huge reduction in the number of people visiting the town particularly families and would be a fatal blow to Margate's tourism economy.

To investigate whether the continuation of a major amusement park in Margate is a realistic and desirable proposition, we have undertaken a significant amount of research of other seaside parks in the United Kingdom, including visits to many of them. We have researched UK amusement park visitor data to understand the national context for the Dreamland site, its viability, and its likely importance to the town. Here, we have extracted visitor numbers for seaside amusement parks from the most recent edition of 'Visits to Visitor Attractions' (Visit Britain, 2005). Where 2005 figures are unavailable, we have used earlier Visit Britain statistics:

Adventure Island, Southend-on-Sea	1,500,000 (2002)
Blackpool Pleasure Beach, Blackpool (2005)	6,000,000
Clacton Pier, Clacton-on-Sea	1,750,000 (2002)
Dreamland, Margate	680,000 (2002)
Flamingo Family Fun Park, Hastings	900,000 (2002)
Mannings Amusement Park, Felixstowe	250,000 (2005)
Pleasure Beach Great Yarmouth	1,400,000 (2005)

This shows that Dreamland is broadly comparable with other seaside parks, although those parks which are located in larger seaside towns similar to Margate (such as Southend and Great Yarmouth) do attract significantly more visitors. In brief, this can be attributed to a lack of investment and poor marketing of Dreamland.

In recent years it has been proven that amusement parks can be the focus for the regeneration of seaside resorts. Taking an example from the south east region, we have looked into the recent successful regeneration of Southend-on-Sea. This has been based around the expansion and investment in its Adventure Island Amusement Park, a well-established and similar-sized operation to Dreamland. The park, which around 10 years ago attracted 750,000 visitors, now attracts over 1.5 million visitors a year. Surrounding tourism businesses have all responded to this investment by investing in their own facilities. The changes in the overall appearance of Southend's seafront area over the past six or seven years have been marked.

The Save Dreamland Campaign is of the opinion that if the use of the site were to be changed from tourism to leisure and/or retail, then this would represent a huge loss to the town. Tourist attractions by definition draw visitors to a town. Retail and leisure uses normally only serve the local population (although they can provide ancillary facilities for visitors already in a town). It is unlikely that a retail or leisure use can be found for the site that could be a comparable tourism draw to Dreamland.

Dreamland could not only be a viable amusement park, but could actually form the basis of the regeneration of this part of Margate's seafront area. This would act as a balance to the 'cultural quarter', which will be based around the development of the Turner Contemporary and the regeneration of Margate's Old Town. With such a unique and well-known landmark as the Scenic Railway at the centre of the park, Dreamland arguably has more going for it than most other seaside fun parks outside of Blackpool.