

Fairgrounds for debate: celebrating the heritage of amusement parks

Michelle Stratton

Have you ever enjoyed a ride on a water chute, loop the loop, or dodgems? If you have, you probably haven't been on a listed rollercoaster, not yet anyway. Only two rides in the UK are listed, but while this year's conference was running, English Heritage was assessing the rides at Blackpool Pleasure Beach. More may receive protection if amusement parks around Britain continue to close and have their rides sold off or destroyed. Challenging traditional notions of the content and nature of the historic environment, this session set out to explore the history, heritage and future of amusement parks.

Recognition of the amusement park's historical significance arose through the growth of tourism history, which led to a widening appreciation of the economic and cultural significance of the seaside in British society and beyond. In this type of international academic field cross-comparative research is necessary. **John Walton** demonstrated this in his opening paper. He traced the development of different amusement parks in international settings, situating the phenomenon in a global context.

Josie Kane gave an overview of the emergence of amusement parks in Britain at the turn of the 20th century. She examined their meaning, highlighting how a modern experience of mass pleasure came to be defined, commodified and made acceptable by their architecture and technology in the early 1900s. However, from the 1930s competition from other entertainment sectors and criticism from social reformers marked the beginning of a change in their fortunes.

The Festival of Britain, in 1951, was a controversial celebration of modernity and consumerism. It was the last event of its kind for some time. Battersea Park Funfair formed part of this exhibition and outlived it by two decades. The legacy of this prototype theme park, now partly forgotten, was



Southport's Funland.
Photograph: Peter Hinton

explored by **Ian Trowell**. Using a variety of materials, Ian paid particular attention to the park's heritage, technology and theory of space. His case study reminds us that many parks flourished at the urban core as well as the coastal periphery, despite the latter's connotations of excitement and escape.

Anya Chapman's paper used interview data from employees and customers to investigate amusement park culture at Southport's Pleasureland. Continuing with a comparison of the tangible and intangible elements of the amusement park, Anya reviewed issues affecting the operation and regeneration of this type of attraction, including the community, tourism infrastructure and growing disillusionment with modernity and its cultural associations.

Further consideration was given to the durability of these tourist products in the paper by **Nick Laister** – planner, developer and the creative force behind the world's first heritage amusement park at Dreamland, Margate. After reviewing the causes behind multiple park closures (including Dreamland in 2002), Nick gave an in-depth account of the challenges faced by the project and the support being gained from the DCMS and HLF.

Amusement parks occupy a liminal space, but this session demonstrated that their study should not. The topic is engendering interest across academic and professional spheres, and the session explored the fields of industrial, technological, social, and cultural history. Discussion identified the potential for oral history projects along with other areas for future research, including: innovation, design, aesthetics, business and family history. It seems that amusement park heritage is not divorced from traditional notions of heritage after all. The future of amusement parks will require 'constant change and dynamism', a maxim that holds true for how we conceive of, and protect our heritage in general. **Jason Wood** is planning to bring the session papers together for publication, which will make a valuable contribution to the literature on amusement park heritage.

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IN DREAMLAND



Jason Wood

The Dreamland site has been a leisure venue for over 140 years and today is home to the iconic Scenic Railway built in 1919-20 – the oldest surviving roller coaster in the UK and the third oldest of its type in the world. It was also the first amusement park ride to be listed (Grade II in 2002, and currently being considered for upgrading to II*).

The impetus behind the project is the unprecedented rate of closures of amusement parks in the UK, and consequently the increasing number of historic rides under threat of destruction. Some 15 traditional seaside amusement parks and inland theme parks have shut down since 1999, with more closures expected in the coming years. At those parks that remain, major changes are being planned which will further erode what heritage survives. These losses and changes are not without controversy. In Southport, for example, popular concern for the Pleasureland amusement park led to public protests but ultimately failed attempts at heritage designation to prevent disposal of a rare Cyclone roller coaster built in 1937.

The closures of amusement parks have not been due to lack of demand – quite the opposite. Dreamland, in its heyday, attracted 2m visitors annually, and Blackpool Pleasure Beach until recently regularly topped the list of the UK's free attractions, with 5.5m visitors in 2007. During the property boom of the late 1990s land increased in value and the owners of amusement parks were encouraged to sell for housing and retail development. The irony is that many of these sites are now derelict because the firms that bought them have gone bust.

Proposals to create the world's first heritage amusement park were initially put forward in April 2007 by the Dreamland Trust. Nick Laister, Chair of the Trust and instrumental in securing the listing of the Scenic Railway, first set out the case in a preliminary report on the availability of genuine historic rides and an assessment of space requirements. Based on this, a masterplan for the site adjacent to the Scenic Railway was drawn up; the latest version, launched in March 2009, being by architects Levitt Bernstein and the internationally renowned amusement park designer Jean-Marc Toussaint. This masterplan details the size, shape and indicative layout of the proposed nine-acre park. In the meantime the Trust has already started to acquire



Brooklands Racers
(Margate Museum)

Jason Wood's session at this year's conference focussed on the heritage of amusement parks. In this article he describes a unique and exciting project to create the world's first heritage amusement park in Margate.

In October 2006 Blackpool Pleasure Beach put up for sale its 1935 American-built Turtle Chase ride cars. 'Buy your own piece of history on Ebay now' read the advertisement on the Pleasure Beach website. The cars sold for the ridiculously low price of £155, and prompted a hasty trip to Blackpool armed with camera and accompanied by my bewildered daughter complaining that 'no-one goes on holiday to see historic rides that don't work'. She had a point. But it got me thinking. Perhaps people would go on holiday to a place where historic rides *did* work.

Fast forward one year. I am not alone in my thinking. Nick Laister, a leading authority on the UK theme park industry, has a plan. His concept, on paper at least, is simple. Acquire a representative sample of classic rides from closed or soon-to-be-closed amusement parks; restore and re-erect them in a single location; and create the world's first heritage amusement park dedicated to preserving and operating historic rides. And the place where this dream will come true is, appropriately enough, Dreamland – the former amusement park in the seaside resort of Margate.



Scenic Railway rollercoaster (Margate Museum)

several historic rides from Pleasureland in Southport, Ocean Beach in Rhyl and Blackpool Pleasure Beach. Some of these rides are the last surviving examples of their type in the UK.

An agreement has been reached that sees 51% of the entire site being transferred to the Dreamland Trust, together with £4m of developer funding as part of planning permission for the redevelopment of the remaining 49%. A further £3.7m has been secured from the Sea Change programme, with significant contributions also from the Heritage Lottery Fund and others. Phase 1 of the project, including most of the heritage amusement park, is scheduled to be completed by Easter 2012.

Belatedly, I should declare an interest. I am a native of Blackpool and had a seasonal job as a 'blagger' or 'barker' on one of the concession stalls at the Pleasure Beach from the age of 14. (Some of my colleagues maintain that I haven't stopped blagging or barking since.) But leaving aside my childhood attachment to the endearing character and cacophony of technology that is Blackpool's

amusement park, I saw the conference session in Southport celebrating the heritage of fairgrounds, like the one on seaside resorts in Torquay last year, as evidence of the further stimulation of the overlap between archaeology and popular culture. And in this quest I start from the premise that tourism, as an industry, must have an industrial archaeology. Amusement parks are no different from other kinds of expressions of industrial archaeology and are just as significant as related forms of entertainment architecture dedicated to the provision of leisure and enjoyment, such as theatres and cinemas, which on the whole receive greater recognition and statutory designation. There are, I contend, fair grounds for debate, and perhaps fair grounds for listing.

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Further reading:

Jason Wood, 'From port to resort: art, heritage and identity in the regeneration of Margate', in Peter Borsary and John K Walton (eds), *Resorts and ports: European seaside towns since 1700* (Bristol: Channel View, forthcoming 2010).

www.dreamlandmargate.com



Scenic Railway rollercoaster warning sign (Jason Wood)

Publicity posters (from Dreamland Remembered by Nick Evans)

