

# The renaissance

'The bringing of happiness to the many at a price they can afford' was the Dreamland mission as stated during the opening of the new cinema in 1935. It seems that 75 years down the line, after the rapid demise of the amusement park, and in its current revival, this ethos remains much the same. **Kiki Case** reports on the rebirth of Dreamland.

Ask anyone old enough to have experienced it, what Dreamland meant to Margate and Thanet, and you are guaranteed a nostalgic account of personal experiences, and significant moments in peoples' lives. Dreamland was for many visitors the main reason for visiting the town.

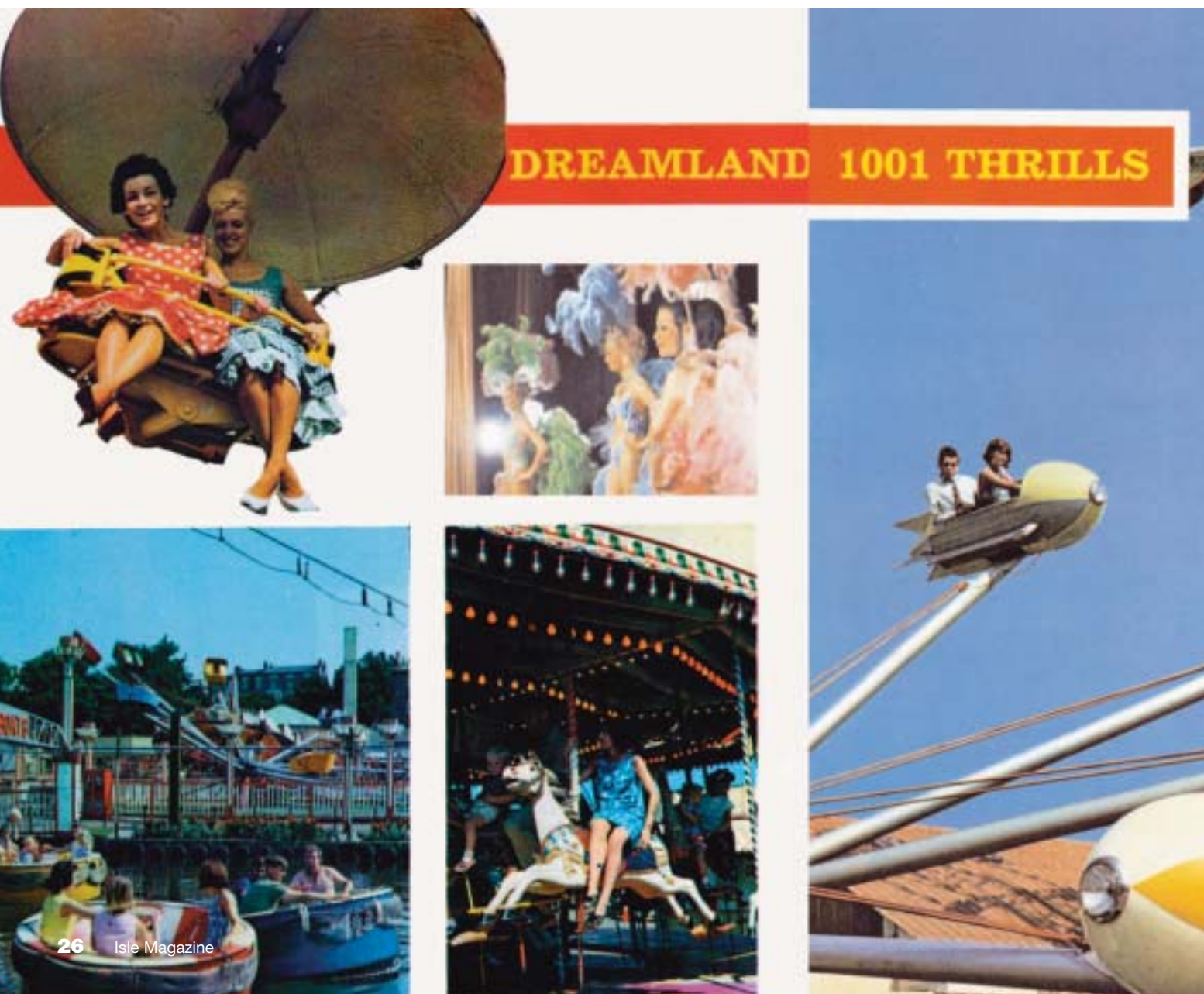
Its rise and fall is also the story of a seaside town – the gradual fall from grace of a once thriving town, where holidaymakers flocked to spend their precious two-week respite from the rat race. Unpredictable weather has always been

the bane of holidays at home, so when the offer of cheap package holidays to the Costas began in the 1970s, the lure of guaranteed sunshine abroad, put the nail in the coffin of our seaside resorts. In comparison, indifferent food, seedy accommodation, and grey skies made the British holiday a thing to be endured rather than enjoyed. The abandoned seaside resorts, with their empty hotels, theatres, piers and promenades, became areas of severe deprivation.

Finally, now that the world has been opened up to us and we have travelled far and

wide, we are beginning to appreciate the beauty around us at home. We are yearning for the nostalgia of holidays beside the British seaside. Resorts are catching up with this and, realising that people are more discerning about what they want, they are modernising and bringing their offering into the 21st century. Government and local councils are committed to regenerating favourite resorts and Margate is undergoing a programme of renewal that promises to reverse its fortunes.

At the core of this are two major projects





# of Dreamland

– the development of Turner Contemporary and the renewal of Dreamland. The aim is to make Margate a hub of artistic creativity and culture, and within that, Dreamland to be the national centre for the preservation and celebration of the heritage and culture of seaside amusement parks and popular seaside entertainment. Margate's heritage as the first English seaside resort, and the site of one of the earliest amusement parks, with possibly the first roller coaster, makes it an ideal location.

The Heritage Lottery Fund and Sea Change have already invested in the £12m project with further Lottery funding anticipated at the end of the year.

It was back in 1874 that circus proprietor George Sanger converted an unused railway station booking hall into a restaurant and ballroom, accommodating his animals on the land behind. By the early 20th century, the site had become a pleasure gardens, and then in 1920, the new owner and marketer of



American rollercoasters, John H Iles, created the Dreamland Amusement Park and introduced the Scenic Railway. Built on site, the huge construction made from Canadian Douglas fir cost around £20,000 then and had a track length of almost one mile, making it the largest of its kind.

The first phase of the Dreamland project will see the Scenic Railway, which is the oldest in the UK, fully restored. It will form the centrepiece of a newly designed amusement park, one that will uniquely pay homage to classic rides, but which will also represent modern fairgrounds. One thing is for certain, says Bob Preedy, the man responsible for sourcing the rides, the new park will have wide appeal, thrilling rides for teenagers as well as a more serene experience – thrilling in a different way – for those whose tolerance of the G-force has either not been developed yet (the young) or has begun to wane (the rest of us).

Bob is always on the lookout for classic rides and has already secured a 1956 Corbiere Wheel, a 1914 Caterpillar, a 1950's Flying Scooters ride, the 1960's Wild Mouse, a Whip and Junior Whip amongst others. He is keeping the full line-up close to his chest, leaving him free to snap up a classic that could turn up at any time, keen to get the best available. After all, Dreamland will be the world's first amusement park to feature classic rides and he wants to ensure it is the best. All the rides are being carefully restored by experts in the field, Carters.

Key to the redevelopment of the amusement park, will be open green spaces, beautifully landscaped, where anyone can sit and soak up the atmosphere. But also important will be the flexibility to use these spaces for live performances. The history of Dreamland will be interpreted through music and design giving the park a multi-sensory feel with a distinctive sense of time and place. Once open the park will feature guest rides each season alongside a changing programme of events and festivals throughout the year.

This phase of the regeneration – the development of the amusement part, the restored façade of the Grade II\* listed cinema building along with the lower ground floor entrance to the park – should open to the public in 2012. Phase two will then see the full restoration of the architecturally significant cinema, the forerunner for the 1930's super-cinemas, and the area around it. The whole project is culture-led – a mix of celebrating 'popular' seaside heritage and youth culture.

Some 15 years after Iles created the amusement park, the Dreamland art deco cinema building was unveiled, seating an audience of 2,200. The dramatic 80ft fin, elegant lettering and neon lighting secured it as an iconic landmark on the seafront, making it an intrinsic part of Margate's cultural, historical and geographical landscape.

Historically, Dreamland and Margate have been witness to significant developments in youth culture. In the 1950s the teenager arrived, and with them the rebellious sub-culture groups that influenced popular music and fashion – the music in this case being rock & roll, adopted by the Teddy Boys. Then in the early sixties, came the Mods, embracing soul music and all things modern, and clashing famously with the Rockers on Margate sands. In the sixties and seventies, Dreamland was welcoming some of the world's most popular entertainers, from Bill Haley and The Shadows to The Rolling Stones, The Who and Status Quo.

The renewed cinema area will offer the area and visitors a new dance and music venue. It will also have cafés and restaurants, an exhibition space and retail units.

With Margate being almost synonymous with the British seaside, the idea is for Dreamland to focus on the popular cultural heritage of the traditional seaside experience, with a particular focus on street youth culture, through a programme of exhibitions, live events and festivals. It will be somewhere where the whole family can have fun beside the seaside. ■

