

The Seaside, Health and the Environment in England and Wales since 1800

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John Hassan sets himself an ambitious task in a book that ‘endeavours to trace humanity’s changing relationships with nature over the last 200 years’ (p. 7). Concentrating on the coast focuses the challenge, especially given that much attention is on more ‘parochial problems’ and ‘local difficulties’ (p. 7). Nevertheless, the scope of the book is impressive if not encyclopaedic. The study investigates environmental, health and socio-economic forces, along with their interaction and impact on the coastline. These aims and approaches are set out in chapter 1 which highlights the multi-disciplinary nature of work on the seaside alongside introductory discussions of the ways of understanding polluted environments and the importance of the beach as a marginal liminal zone. The author stresses the contributions made by geographers in terms of the environmental impacts of tourism development in coastal areas, but in doing so neglects most of the recent contributions by tourism geographers. In addition, the author draws attention to a further aim (p. 14) concerning the paradoxical situation of contemporary coastal resorts. These are viewed by many as in terminal decline yet the recreational use of the coast is as popular as ever, although closer inspection of individual resorts would show strong differences in growth rates depending on the size, location and character of the resort. That such a variation of demand forms part of the threat to such coastal environments is again of significance to the aims of this book.

Following the introduction the author develops his ideas in chronological order within nine chapters. Chapter 2, ‘Georgian origins’, leads the reader through the development of maritime spas and the rise of the picturesque. This is well referenced and contains a reasonable number of detailed examples, although little new is revealed in terms of the history of resort development. The Victorian and Edwardian expansion of resorts and their spreading popularity is detailed in chapter 3, with the author drawing on a number of contemporary guides. It is in this discussion that the reader is informed that the book’s ‘prime interest is with the aquatic environment’ (p. 48). Within this context, details are given of attempts to improve sewerage and drainage systems, but despite these efforts we are told that some ‘improved outfalls did not even ... reach low water mark’ (p. 49). Given the large number of resorts and their different patterns of development the author attempts to highlight these experiences by focusing on three large popular resorts. These are Blackpool, Bournemouth and Aberystwyth, the first two of which already have accounts by historians. Thus, Walton’s work on Blackpool is heavily used by Hassan, as is the study of Bournemouth by Roberts.⁽¹⁾

These enable the author to construct a reasonably detailed account of the activities of the local state in shaping policies towards growth and, more importantly, to improving public health. All three resorts highlight the tensions and stresses between growth and environmental problems, including public health. Hassan concludes that 'there were some common features in the development of all three towns' (p. 69), but also recognises their differences. From the available evidence it appears that Bournemouth 'made serious attempts to conserve and enhance the natural environment' of its coastal areas (p. 69). On the whole all three fell short of solving their environmental problems mainly as a result of 'municipal economism'. But in this respect the seaside town was little different to other urban communities. As the author concludes, the Victorian and Edwardian period of resort development was largely characterised by a resistance to collaboration (p. 71) both within and between neighbouring settlements.

It is mainly in the later chapters that some of the key themes of the book are discussed in more concrete ways. In chapter 4, for example, 'Escape to sun and light', the healthiness of 'the fresh and sunny climate of the coast' (p. 82) is examined. This discussion draws a great deal on the cultural interpretations of contemporary material and also draws from a range of disciplines, including sociology and cultural geography. In introducing this approach at the start of the chapter, there is a need to spend a little more time in highlighting these contributions rather than merely listing them. Nevertheless, the chapter contains some interesting and thought provoking points. For example, Hassan explores and contests some of the previous statements about the avoidance of sun exposure by pointing out that much contemporary literature in the nineteenth century expounded the health-giving benefits of coastal sunshine. In citing 'the deep depressions on ill-health suffered by inhabitants of damp and foggy cities' (p. 85) Hassan highlights that opinion concerned with the role of sunshine in promoting health living. Such benefits eventually became championed through the activities of the British Health Resorts Association (BHRA) established in 1931. This organisation promoted health tourism, although Hassan argues that there was something of an incompatibility between the growing commercialisation of resorts as 'playgrounds' and their role as health resorts. He contends that most seaside resorts were only interested in the idea of the BHRA as a means of extending the summer season. This may be so, but such a view calls for more evidence than presented here. Certainly, the 1930s witnessed the rapid development of open-air pools, with the growth of the lido and the democratisation of such cultures across most coastal resorts. These processes of widening access, commercialisation and corporate activity also corresponded to a period in which some social 'norms' focused on the beach as a 'liminal zone' (p. 103). By introducing such ideas at this point in the chapter, Hassan attempts to draw attention to the conflicts in resorts during the interwar period. He does, however, miss some important studies of the beach as a liminal zone that would add significantly to the detail of his arguments. Of particular note in this context is Ryan's discussion of the beach as a liminal margin along with its 'industrialisation'.⁽²⁾ Hassan draws brief attention at the conclusion of chapter 4 to the rejection of sunbathing with the health scares of melanoma towards the end of the twentieth century. But for many resorts the beach had started to fade in commercial value long before this, as other leisure opportunities were being exploited instead.

Such changes are in part explored by Hassan in chapter 5, which details the rapid growth of seaside holidays during the interwar period. The buoyant nature of demand led to changing patterns of growth and new developments. Of particular importance was the growing suburbanisation of the coastline as holiday camps, hotels and especially bungalows grew outside or along the edges of established resorts. This took place in a period of only limited planning and before the introduction of the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, and produced a mass of unregulated growth, although the 1932 Town and Country Planning Act had, in theory, provided some limited mechanisms for local authorities. This resulted in what Hassan describes as 'the coastline under attack' (p. 112). Such mass popularity and the associated unfettered growth away from the resorts themselves produced a reaction from leading preservationists. Organisations such as the National Trust and the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) sought some form of control. Interest in such issues amongst the middle classes was growing and, as Hassen explains, the Women's Institute, at their annual conference in 1936 'demanded that the coasts of Great Britain should be recognised as a National Asset of growing importance' (p. 116). More effective intervention came via the National Trust which had

started to acquire patches of coastline from the mid 1890s, although progress was slow during the interwar years. Other pressure groups included the CPRE and the Coastal Preservation Committee.

In contrast to concerns about the impact of tourism on the coastal landscape, there was far less attention given to aquatic environments. Perhaps in part this was due to the increasing use of open-air pools for bathing at the expense of the sea. Improvements in public health were also a factor although, as Hassan points out, there was still complacency over the capacity of the marine environment to absorb waste without becoming too polluted. An interesting conclusion to this discussion is provided by a continuation of the changes taking place in the three case study resorts introduced in chapter 4. Indeed, despite Bournemouth's efforts to improve its local environment the town and its surroundings were hit by a typhoid epidemic in 1936.

The conflicts and controversies of the interwar years become somewhat more marked during the so-called 'golden years' of seaside resorts, c.1945 to 1976 (chapter 6). However, visitors to many beaches still encountered polluted environments, and according to Hassan this was mainly caused by 'the continued dependence on the marine disposal of sewage' (p. 136). Even by 1966 just less than 15 per cent of local authorities in England discharged into the sea using full sewage treatment works. Further outbreaks of typhoid in resorts such as Aberystwyth in the 1940s served to highlight problems. This led to exposure of sewage disposal shortcomings by the media and professional bodies. The state responded slowly to such concerns and the lack of any consistent pressure saw such issues drift out of government interest. The local concerns over these issues are highlighted by discussions of reactions in Blackpool and Bournemouth.

If action toward beach pollution continued to be rather ineffective during those 'golden years', the same cannot be said of the threat to the coastal landscape. The potential of the 1947 Act was, however, slow to be recognised or at least put into full operation. As a consequence, 'poorly constructed conservation and coastal planning policies prevailed in the 1950s and 1960s' (p. 161). Part of the problem, which to some extent Hassan does not fully explore, was the incompatibility between the growth of mass tourism and the need for conservation. In many coastal resorts small-scale businesses dominated the local political scene and only saw opportunities for growth if tourism numbers increased and commercial developments of all types were allowed, and any talk of restraining growth was challenged by such groups. By the early 1970s conservation measures were being introduced with the support of the department of environment. Thus, by 1987 some 28 per cent of the coastline in England and Wales had been designated 'Heritage Coasts'. However, as Hassan warns, the extent of some of the non-statutory protection may be inadequate faced with increased commercial pressures.

The main group of responses to the conflicts and threats of the post-war years are considered in chapter 7, which focuses on the activities of the Coastal Anti-Pollution League between 1958 and 1987. As Hassan asserts, this organisation 'has an historical interest in bridging the almost moribund post-war era with a later period of mass environmental activism' (p. 172). The early parts of the chapter discuss the foundation of the Anti-Pollution League, providing the reader with background for understanding its approach and activities. This is a closely argued chapter which rather overwhelms the reader with too much detail; more statements highlighting key activities that would have helped to structure the discussion. This does come rather belatedly in the chapter (p. 187) when consideration is given to the League's impact. What we do learn is that the League faced considerable opposition from organisations such as the British Resorts Association, which recommended its members not help the League to grade beaches, leading to the construction of the so-called 'Golden List'. This was essentially a list of clean beaches in England and Wales which were published at various times by the Coastal Anti-Pollution League. The suspicion of this was deep rooted in British tourism and, if anything, was symptomatic of the lack of foresight shown by the tourism industry during the 1970s and early 1980s. This not only affected attitudes to environmental improvement but stretched to the neglect of the infrastructure of the resorts themselves. Added to this was a shift in the demands of tourists, demands that were being increasingly satisfied from the mass holiday resorts of Spain and other Mediterranean destinations. If there is one main shortcoming of this chapter it is that it fails to place the activities of the League in a broader comprehensive setting of the 'management' of resorts at this

time.

The complexities of environmental interests and associated pressure groups is a theme continued in chapter 8, which considers the environmental awakenings of the 1970s and 1980s. Curiously we are introduced to another objective of the book, 'to trace the evolution of society's attitude towards the coastal environment' (p. 192). To some extent this is a refinement of the aims discussed in the introduction and the reader is left to ponder an ever growing set of aims and objectives. It may have been better to state all of these more explicitly at the start and link them to specific chapters. Whilst this may have smacked of a PhD thesis, it would have helped to contextualise the work, certainly for the student market.

These issues aside, chapter 8 provides a detailed discussion of British society's increasing awareness of environmental issues. This in itself is not new, but Hassan does draw out the implications of such interests within coastal areas. The take-off of environmentalism as a mass movement occurred during the late 1970s into the 1980s, as Hassan attempts to show using evidence of growing memberships of organisations such as the RSPB and Greenpeace. What is lacking from his analysis is a record of the changing public opinion towards the environment as evidenced in various consumer surveys. That these changes occurred during this time also reflects broader changes in consumer culture and society. Many sociologists have drawn attention to the impact of the 'new middle classes' and environmental issues.⁽³⁾ To some extent Hassan fails to engage with these ideas, which is a pity as they have helped to structure debates on the rise of sustainable tourism as a new form of consumption. Indeed, the whole notion of sustainable tourism is ignored by the author, which seems strange given the impact of these ideas and the influence on the management of fragile tourism environments. By adopting a more tourism based framework it could be argued that the author would have a sounder explanatory framework, and it would help focus the debate more fully on coastal resorts. Thus, the discussion on the bathing water directive is very much rooted in the details of legislation at both national and European levels. In this sense the reader finds it hard to agree with Hassan's conclusion to the chapter, which argues that resorts attempted to differentiate the product being offered to tourists by giving greater or lesser attention to environmental protection, mainly because there is little concrete evidence for this assertion within this chapter.

The activities of environmental pressure groups are given detailed attention in chapter 9. This brings the debate into the 1990s and considers the actions and agendas of such groups as Surfers Against Sewage. Such single interest groups stand in contrast to the agendas of the coastal Anti-Pollution League, and Hassan makes an interesting set of comparisons here. The chapter concludes with a rather optimistic view of the role of beach awards and standards, although the author does raise issues of 'the ease with which Seaside Awards can be secured' (p. 235).

The book concludes with a discussion on the environmental challenges and difficulties of sustaining economic growth in seaside resorts. It is at this point that the book exhibits its failure to engage with contemporary debates within tourism studies, especially within the policy arena. For example, there is no recognition given to the role of the national tourist boards in England and Wales in their attempts to understand the problems facing resorts or, more importantly, to find possible management solutions. In this context we are told nothing about the shifting policy initiatives of the English Tourist Board and its now defunct successor the English Tourism Council. Much of the work, though not all, is reflected in the English Tourism Council's report on resorts published in 2001.⁽⁴⁾ This, along with work attempting to develop a set of sustainable tourism indicators, at least put forward a set of ideas about the strategies available to resorts for future development. Finally, it is worth pointing out that with the demise of the English Tourism Council and the disbandment of some regional tourist boards, policy making for seaside resorts is thrown back to a local level with all the potential pitfalls that may bring.

In summary, the book has gaps in its discussions and in some instances it does not always achieve its ambitious aims. However, on the whole it is well written and contains a wealth of detail. In this context it sits well with some of the recent books on seaside resorts. It provides some complementary material to the ideas developed by Walton, especially to his chapter on 'seaside environments'.⁽⁵⁾ It also draws attention, as

does Walton's book, to the relative neglect of the coastal resort within recent debates on tourism. Nevertheless, there is still a shortage of texts exploring the complexities of contemporary British resorts.

Notes

1. J. K. Walton, *Blackpool* (1998); R. Roberts, 'Leasehold estates and municipal enterprise: landowners, local government and the development of Bournemouth c.1850-1914' in ed. D. Canadine, *Patricians, Power and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Towns* (1982).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. C. Ryan, 'Memories of the Beach', in *The Tourist Experience*, ed. C. Ryan (1997; 2nd ed. 2002).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. I. Munt, 'The "other" postmodern tourism: culture travel and the new middle classes', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 11.3 (1994), 101-125; J. Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (1990).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. English Tourism Council, *Sea Changes: Creating World-Class Resorts in England* (2001).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. J. K. Walton, *The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester, 2000).[Back to \(5\)](#)

The author thanks Gareth Shaw for an exhaustive and fair review of the book, and this being the case does not wish to comment further.

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