Historical Perspectives on Social Identities
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Edited by

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INTRODUCTION: EXAMINING IDENTITIES

Alyson Brown

This collection of work on the theme of identities was the result of a conference held in the spring of 2005 at Edge Hill under the auspices of The Centre for Liverpool and Merseyside Studies (CLAMS). Whilst a significant proportion of the research focused on Liverpool and the North West, the theme of identities was sufficiently broad to entice scholars from diverse and varied fields. This collection, therefore, reflects the range of work presented and discussed at the conference and the multi-layered and multi-faceted nature of identity.

Contributors to the conference examined the concept of identity in Britain through a range of historical perspectives, concerning ourselves primarily with the later modern period. This is not to suggest that identity is a product of modernity but the relevance of, and the struggles around identity have been most overt over the last two to three hundred years.¹ Nineteenth and twentieth century British social, cultural and political change has given rise to pluralist, fragmented and fractured identities in which domestic, class, gender, religious and institutional frameworks have shifted continually. Recently, the July 2005 London bombings have heightened our awareness of fractured religious and cultural identities. Michael Howard, the Conservative Party leader, was reported in an article in The Guardian contrasting values of “decency, tolerance and sense of fair play” which he claimed were embedded in British identity to the “confusing” concept of multiculturalism. On the other hand Will Hutton asked “Do the British even have a shared conception of what our identity is?”² The increasingly contentious nature of identities in the twenty-first century has stimulated extensive interest on the subject by historians and social theorists alike. Recent research into the concept has yielded numerous articles, chapters and books from across the disciplines of history, philosophy, cultural studies, economics and psychology.

Research on identities has often presupposed an individual, a “real inner self” that is “whole” and examined its origins, manifestation and impact. The individual since the eighteenth century has been “cast as the autonomous bearer of rights”, “the basic building block” of political liberalism.³ Of course, within this writers have debated the extent to which individuals are determined by social conventions, material and psychological constrained etc or have a measure of, or absolute, independence and free will. Norbert Elias suggested the “open personality” who
had relative autonomy but is “fundamentally oriented toward and dependent on other people throughout his life”\textsuperscript{4}. Thus, for Elias, expanding social interdependence is one of the pillars of increasing civilisation and progress towards rational, reflective and self-restrained individuals who make up that society.

Postmodern theorists have, however, questioned the very existence of the individual, the subject. The deconstruction of identities by postmodernists has questioned the integrity and usefulness of this concept as a tool for analysis, has challenged the essentialist “notion of an integral, originary and unified identity”\textsuperscript{5}. Among the most important contributions to this field by postmodernist thinking has been the emphasis upon the negotiated and fluid nature of identity, that it is a process rather than a condition, in constant flux rather than static. This highlights that identities are not based in isolated individuals but in relationships. Stuart Hall has agreed with Foucault in his problematising of the self, of the individual, but instead of rejecting the subject, Hall instead advocates a “reconceptualization”, a decentring of the subject in which identities are not unified.

Hall utilises the concept of “identification” which he describes as, “constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation.”\textsuperscript{6} But this identification is never complete, is persistently ambiguous and is consolidated by difference. Indeed, as is illustrated by the chapters in this publication difference, inclusion and exclusion, lie at the heart of identity and identification. Identity can be defined not only as being a part of something but also defined in negative terms as being unlike or apart from something else, some other. To give a specific example, Raphael Samuel highlighted as “an obvious point of contrast” between the 1940s and the 1980s the decline of public spirit. Positively it enshrined “a notion of duty, obligation and sacrifice in the interests of a higher cause” but negatively it stigmatised anyone who diverged from this as “anti-social” and served “as a paradigm for the conduct of everyday life”\textsuperscript{7}.

Crucially, identity and identification are contingent not only on material or physical factors such as housing, occupation and wealth but also on values, ideals and desires such as honesty, community and pleasure. The multiple identities that structure and are structured by the social world have histories, and historical analysis can help us to understand and evaluate them. The meanings attached to language, class, status, gender, race and sexuality for example, are not reborn with each generation they already exist, albeit in a state of constant flux. Whether they change very gradually or rapidly, they shape the lives of individuals, their expectations, opportunities and choices.

Examinations of identities have recognised this fluidity and instability but also a level of contingency in contexts which can be, or appear to be, relatively durable and stable,
“While many argue that an individual is always in the process of being formed… While it is important to recognize that identification is not a simple process, it is also important that ‘identity formation’ through which individuals incorporate certain characteristics and values is a process involving relatively durable attachments, obligations and promises”.

The range and diversity of the chapters in this publication is a testament to the complexity and quality of research on the subject of identity and the importance of identity formation for the development of social groupings, communities and social institutions. John Walton begins with a chapter which discusses the identity of resorts on the North West coast. Coastal resorts were constructed by numerous factors including location and their visitors and became strongly differentiated. Having different “place-myths”; these were towns that affirmed regional and class identities. There were several alternative versions of these towns that existed in parallel, although within a core, dominant identity. The examination of Blackpool especially reveals that while such pleasure resorts in many respects occupied liminal space, they were not without constraints as the workers from whole factories or industrial sectors had their holidays at the same time; rules were bent rather than broken. Blackpool came to epitomise both hedonism and respectability and working class behaviour there reflected, articulated and influenced changing expectations and civilising tendencies.

The theme of local identities is continued with Andrew Walker’s analysis of identity as reflected through dialects. Nostalgia about custom and tradition permeated much of the dialect literature of nineteenth-century Yorkshire and Lancashire, the strength of which melded people to their locality and perhaps contributed to the development of a northern identity based on shared rhythms of work and play. In these sympathetic portrayals of traditional ways of life and the domestic ideal, outsiders were often the subject of humour and even abuse highlighting themes of insider and outsider groups. However, across the nineteenth-century dialect literature became less of a living link within communities and more an attempt to conserve dying cultures that were perceived to be under attack.

James Gregory takes up inclusion and exclusion as strategies in the formation of identities in his analysis of the place of local characters or eccentrics in the nineteenth-century local, regional and national identities. One role of eccentrics was defensive. Some characters could be political radicals and/or wealthy but most were working-class, spoke in dialect and represented the survival of regional and even national identity in the face of a perceived rising cultural homogeneity. Gregory suggests that the identification of some individuals as different or “odd” served to promote a sense of place; that as much as location, “characters” were signifiers of identity, memorials of local characteristics.

In a shift of emphasis in the book to individually constructed identities, Tony Webster observes how John Palmer consciously constructed an identity suited to
operating his agency house in India. John Palmer’s identity as a wealthy, noble, compassionate civic and political leader, based predominantly on the aristocratic mores of his day, brought him tangible commercial advantages and opportunities. However, in the face of an increasingly competitive and unpredictable economic and political context some aspects of this identity, especially his lavishness and tolerance became liabilities and perceived as naïve within the changing business environment of 1820s and 1830s.

A particular professional identity was also crucial to the operation of Richard Viney’s eighteenth-century staymaker business. Lynn Sorge-English discusses the multi-layered and inter-linked commercial and personal identity of a moral, educated and religious man and also of the identities of his clients. In an occupation that required intimate contact with his customers Richard Viney’s high moral conduct was an indispensable aspect of his work and in combination with his education enabled him to cross class and gender boundaries and to meet his customers on a social level. The staymaker and his stays helped to define the identity of his clients as fashionable people, the person and performance individuals presented to the public.

The remaining chapters explore more diverse manifestations of identity, namely political identities, motherhood, disability, race and loss. In his chapter on “Imagined Solidarities”, Roger Spalding highlights the ways in which cultural identities diverge and how class identities are defined, often in a very conscious manner. His work concerns the inter-war period and the ideology and activity of upper middle class socialists whose political beliefs necessitated a re-appraisal of their social identity. On one level the resolution of their political problems is presented as an ability to reconcile themselves to the working class body and its smells!

Angela Davis examines locality and class as well as gender in the context of young mothers in two rural villages in Oxfordshire. Her chapter on the construction of maternal identities 1954-1970 concludes that the women interviewed constructed their identities primarily in terms of their motherhood, although many undertook some kind of paid employment, and despite the 1960s re-evaluation of the theoretical work of Bowlby and Winnicott by feminists. This analysis emphasises the extent to which different facets of social identities overlap but retain a perceived hierarchy of importance to the individual. This element of hierarchy evident within identities is not only self-constructed but is also constructed by others. This process is analysed by Martin Atherton in his research on Britain’s deaf community. Atherton asserts that the deaf community itself has rejected deafness as a disabling factor in their lives and notes that it is the attitude of the hearing majority towards deaf people that is the disabling factor. Rather than living together as a location-based community, deaf people have found ways of coming together and sharing the life and culture of a community. Referring to the period
1945 to 1995, Martin Atherton examines one of these ways; the network of deaf social clubs. Involvement in this network helped many deaf people to accept their deafness as an important part of their identity, that these clubs constructed a form of normality and positive shared experience.

The next chapter concerns the way in which identities are manipulated or unconsidered and the impact of this. Murray Steele contends that until well into the twentieth century the minimising of Liverpool’s role in the slave trade was representative of general attitudes to the city’s black community. According to Steele, this was in part a function of the New Imperialism of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which effectively submerged recognition of the slave trade. It is only in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that this situation has begun to change significantly and the first steps have been made to reintegrate the history of Liverpool’s black community and to recognise the extent to which tension has been a consequence of an alienation from the majority white culture.

The final chapter also focuses on Liverpool. This is an analysis of a tragic event and its aftermath which has had a profound and lasting impact on local identity on Merseyside; the Hillsborough disaster of 1989 in which 95(6) football supporters died. In this chapter, Mike Brennan asserts that condolence books tell us not only about the way people mourn but also about the discursive practices through which the social identities of those who mourn are formed and by which people can work through their emotions. As a kind of “empirical marker” and public forum, condolence books denote linguistic, social and cultural practices around death and the way that it is experienced, marked and understood. In the case of the Hillsborough condolence books, people were not only mourning the victims of the tragedy but also mourned “for the loss of selves and for people and places gone before”.

2 17 August 2005, “Promote British values to stop terror says Howard” and The Guardian “Our Britishness can beat the bombers” 31 July 2005. Also see, for example, The Guardian, “Race and faith post 7/7” 30 July 2005.


RESORTS AND REGIONS: BLACKPOOL, SOUTHPORT, LANCASHIRE AND BEYOND

JOHN WALTON

Seaside resorts might be assumed to be peripheral to regional identity. They are often seen as liminal, "places on the margin", where freedom from the constraints and conventions of everyday life in the liberating atmosphere of the debatable zone where land meets sea enables a shedding of the carapace of custom and the temporary emergence of a more hedonistic self.\(^1\) This conception of the seaside resort immediately despatches this kind of place beyond the external realms of the serious, the workaday and the political. But such assumptions are over-simplified and misleading. If resorts are of any size and complexity they bring people together from different kinds of place, both within and beyond the regional hinterland, and from contrasting class and cultural backgrounds. Like the shopping and entertainment centres of great cities, or the eighteenth-century spas and county towns of the ‘urban renaissance’, or contemporary shopping malls, they are places where people are working at their leisure, conscious of being on display, promenading, preening, flirting and playing the *flaneur*, wanting to demonstrate an appropriate command of resources and to lay claim to that difficult combination of being fashionable and distinctive.\(^2\) They are therefore sites of cultural innovation, exchange and conflict, although they also need enough consensus and control to be able to function as, or contain, spaces of shared enjoyment that stimulate or relax without threatening or challenging.\(^3\) This perception of the resort raises cultural and social questions of obvious general relevance, although it might seem to challenge notions of regional identity rather than to affirm them.

This is also too simple an assumption, and we need to look more closely and directly at relationships between resorts and regions. Can seaside resorts also, despite their physical marginality and the divisive and potentially cosmopolitan, transnational or at least metropolitan aspects highlighted above, be places that affirm regional identities, or act as alternative regional capitals, celebrating the shared characteristics of provinces, counties (in the British usage) or economic regions against the "otherness" of those "elsewheres" that may also be present, especially when resort catchment areas transcend regional or national boundaries? Can different resorts within a region encapsulate different aspects of ascribed regional character, bringing out the internal "otherness" that lies within broader
definitions of regional experience and consciousness (in the neglected formulation of J.D. Marshall), whether the fault-lines follow locality, sub-regional divisions, class or culture?⁴ It is perhaps significant that no British seaside resort (not even Brighton) can lay claim to encapsulating national identity in the way that San Sebastián did (for a time), at least for a Spanish elite, or Ostend did for Belgium (despite its additional and perhaps more important role as international playground), or Manly claimed to do for inter-war Australia.⁵ If resorts do represent or even distil external identities in Britain, those identities are necessarily regional ones.⁶

What, in any case, do we mean by a region in this context? This is a serious problem, especially in Britain, if we want to go beyond administrative lines drawn on maps, or statistically convenient building blocks, and try to delineate shared territorial cultures and characteristics. An approach through the old administrative counties is the most promising line for historians, especially in the light of the etiolated development of regional identities on a broader canvas in Britain, certainly as compared with other European nations, and especially if we assume that the four elements of the United Kingdom are "nations without a (full-blown) state" of their own, as opposed to regions in the usual sense. Even the North, the English region with the strongest discursive identity, is at its most coherent when set stereotypically against an external "other", the metropolitan "south". Moreover, its sub-divisions dissolve as soon as they are carefully interrogated. Even "Northumbria" or "the North-East", despite its black and white regional flag, disintegrates into rival linguistic and cultural enclaves when we look beyond its Geordie heartland, while the imagined "North-West" proves to be largely a discursive construction of the late 1960s onwards, with hardly anyone using that label to talk about any of its incarnations before then.⁶

Regions elsewhere in Britain, and especially in England, are even harder to define; but we cannot manage without the concept, if only as a shorthand way of generating generalisations on a manageable scale below the level of a notional "nation as a whole", providing a jigsaw with few enough pieces to generate internal comparisons that offer some depth of field. So the word will feature in what follows, denoting a geographical entity with some degree of recognition and coherence below the level of the nation-state and above that of the county, but without assuming that British regions can be precisely delineated with universally agreed boundaries or characteristics. This chapter deals with the region as heuristic device and discursive construct, not as an objective reality on the ground and "out there". Rather than grapple with the various configurations of counties and parts of counties that have gone to make up versions of the English "north-west", I shall be treating the (pre-1974) county of Lancashire as if it were a region. Charles Nevin’s recent book on aspects of contemporary Lancashire identity contains a useful map showing how the county has been dismembered and realigned over the last thirty
years or so; and here as elsewhere, in what presents itself as a whimsical piece of journalism based on an admittedly preposterous premise, a valid point is made almost by stealth.\textsuperscript{7} Here as elsewhere, it was the more extensive pre-1974 county, whose territory included Liverpool and Manchester and extended across Morecambe Bay into the southern Lake District, that was the focus of lasting attachment, especially against rival "others"; and this chapter deals with the last two centuries of its existence, when the Industrial Revolution and the Lancashire seaside resort coincided in a symbiotic relationship that has persisted beyond the demise of what had become the "traditional" manufacturing economy itself.

This chapter brings those experiences together, and in so doing challenges assumptions about the peripheral (and, therefore, "beyond the mainstream") nature of the seaside resort itself. The focus of the argument is on the British experience of seaside resorts with largely regional and national catchment areas, in what might still be called "the age of the railway" which lasted up to the 1950s in Britain, before or alongside the issues that were to be raised by the advent of (for example) the seaside university or the language school; and the argument homes in especially on northern England and, within that, on Lancashire and its coastline. At the outset, however, we must emphasize the diversity within the "first industrial county", where the cotton industry was only the most conspicuous identifying marker and was itself divided and sub-divided between spinning and weaving and a diversity of local specialities; where Manchester was more regional capital than industrial town; where coal and chemicals dominated much of the south-west of the county; where contrasts between the small pastoral farms of the Pennine uplands and the broad arable acres of the great estates of the coastal plains remained important; and where Liverpool was genuinely exceptional, an international gateway city and cultural melting-pot in its own right, to a much greater extent than any of the county's seaside resorts, from the slave trade to the "Cunard Yanks" and, of course, beyond.\textsuperscript{8}

Here are some questions that we might consider as we approach the theme of seaside resorts and regional identities in this context, and with special reference to the experience of Lancashire. What do resorts look like in regional terms? Do they express regional architectural styles, for example? Is their scenery "typical" of the region? Where do resorts draw upon for their visitors? How "regional" is their catchment area? Where do their migrants come from, whether as business people, commuters or retired people? What myths of resort development are propagated in their propaganda? To what extent do they actually lay claim to representing or expressing regional identity? How "regional" are their entertainment menus and accommodation offerings? Do they pull regions together, or emphasize divisions within them, or dilute regional identity by bringing people into temporary but telling contact with other customs, attitudes, and ways of life? Are these really
binary oppositions, or should we view their likely resolutions as points on a spectrum or continuum?

Further questions follow from recognition of the fault-lines and complexities that cut across imagined regional identities. Do resorts express class (and other) identities, and conflicts, within regions? Class remains important as a theme, and certainly for the period under review, which was in no sense post-industrial. This point is reinforced by the way in which leisure and tourism became industries with their own workforces, and leisure preferences followed class lines while sometimes crossing them. Gender is a particularly important theme here, too, especially when we consider the distinctive employment history of the cotton industry, and especially the unusual earning power of women, whether as individuals or as contributors to family incomes, in the weaving industry, and the scope for independence and assertiveness that popular culture ascribed to women from this background. The complex, shifting, inescapable category of "respectability" haunts this territory, taking different dominant forms for different social strata and for men and women, but also taking on identities of its own that offered vertical linkages across the class and gender divides, as value systems coalesced around churches, chapels and secular voluntary organizations or leisure and sporting cultures in ways that brought the classes and the sexes together in partial or contextual dissolution of differences that might persist in other settings. In this context religious cultures within Christianity were particularly important as potential fault-lines, especially those between Catholic and Protestant, and (even more so for present purposes) between easy-going nominal Anglicanism and earnest Nonconformity, whether in middle-class puritan guises or in those where a more proletarian Nonconformity met up with the socialism that traced its cultural roots to Ruskin, Morris and even Carpenter, although increasingly from the early twentieth century many such people preferred to avoid the commercialised seaside altogether. The rise of the Co-operative Holidays Association, Holiday Fellowship, Clarion Cycling Clubs, and less formally organised rambling groups (especially those that went out from Manchester into the Derbyshire Peak District), expressed a conscious rejection of the generic Blackpool holiday with its rush to spend time and money on artificial attractions, sensual excitement and intensive industrial entertainment. Ethnicity is a further issue, though of limited salience in this setting before the 1950s. We should note the conspicuous Jewish presence in the larger Lancashire resorts by the early twentieth century, which was highlighted by popular novelists; but we should also acknowledge the (enduringly) limited extent and impact of ethnic diversity among the Lancashire coastal resorts, even as regards the Irish, despite the eventual export of the Liverpool processional cultures of St Patrick's Day and 12 July to Southport.

Without seeking to follow the extensive agenda outlined above in a slavish, mechanical or exhaustive way, we now develop these themes with reference to the
Lancashire coast and especially its two biggest resorts, Blackpool and Southport. We also draw attention to the anomaly that is Morecambe, and muse over whether the Isle of Man and other resorts beyond the county can be regarded as part of an extended "Lancashire" for these purposes.

Lancashire was early in developing a resort system. It was a little behind the metropolitan coastlines of Sussex and Kent, and it was mainly a product of the railway age, from the 1840s and 1850s onwards; but its origins lay in the eighteenth-century stirrings at Blackpool and Southport, and by the late nineteenth century, as some of its resorts began to cater for working-class visitors on an impressive and pioneering scale, its coastline provided something for all social groups and preferences except seekers after international high society or Picturesque solitude. By 1911 its seven main seaside resorts, with varying degrees of specialization (Blackpool, Southport, Lytham St Anne's, Morecambe, Thornton-Cleveleys, Fleetwood and Grange-over-Sands) had accumulated a combined resident population of 184,525, as enumerated at an early spring census. By 1951 this already impressive figure had nearly doubled, to 344,580. Seaside resort Lancashire, imagined as a combined urban entity stretching along the littoral, would have added up to the third largest city in this very heavily urbanised county, behind Manchester and Liverpool. This may be seen as special pleading; but the fluid, volatile nature of resort populations also means that far more Lancastrians would have experienced seaside living as a life-cycle stage, as temporary migrants for the summer season, as holidaymakers (Blackpool laid claim to seven million visitors per annum in the 1930s), or as any or all of these at different times. The Lancashire seaside also attracted very large numbers of migrants and visitors from beyond the county boundary, of course, but there is no doubt that it came to be fully integrated into popular notions of Lancashire identity, not least through media like the music-hall song, dialect and other popular literature, the monologue and, by the inter-war years, radio and regional cinema. By the late nineteenth century there was already widespread awareness of the status gradations between and within resorts; and such awareness extended beyond the county boundary, to other resorts (especially New Brighton, on the Cheshire side of the River Mersey, Douglas on the Isle of Man, and a string of destinations along the North Wales coast) that were busy each summer with Lancashire visitors and contributed to an extended version of the county's extra-territorial spheres of influence and expressions of holiday identity.

Blackpool and Southport dominated this picture. Southport made the early running, primarily as a resort for middle-class Manchester and Liverpool, but Blackpool overtook it in terms of popularity in the 1870s (it could already claim around three million visitors per annum in the early 1890s) and in the early twentieth century as regards resident population: Southport, including recently-annexed Birkdale, still held the lead in 1911 but failed to match the sustained
dynamism maintained by an innovative and resourceful Blackpool during the interwar years. Southport faltered in the development of its "popular" side beyond the smallpox epidemic of 1876 and the retreat of the sea from its extensive shoreline from the early 1880s, which coincided with a great acceleration in the growth of Blackpool's popularity: by the 1930s the latter's visitor numbers stood at three or four times the Southport figure, though the statistics are notoriously "soft". Southport's large landed estates, with their intrusive planning regimes, ensured that pubs would be few and far between and cheap housing hard to find, while providing a favourable environment for respectable Nonconformist commuters and comfortably-off retired people, with an ostentatious scattering of opulent Victorian and Edwardian churches and chapels. 13 Blackpool, on the other hand, was "open", secular and receptive to pleasure seekers of all classes.14 By 1951 its official population, standing at 147,184, had increased more than tenfold over seventy years, while that of Southport lagged behind at 84,039, and had multiplied itself less than fourfold over the same period.

But even these flagship resorts, which it would be so easy to identify with contrasting puritanical and hedonistic incarnations of a notional "Lancashire character", were never monolithic. Blackpool's North and South Shore were always dominated by middle-class respectability, despite the compromising presence of the Pleasure Beach at the southern end of the promenade from the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century, while Southport had its own fairground in the form of "Pleasureland", and kept a working-class presence in its visiting public. Further to the north, Morecambe, which was less of a "Lancashire" resort as such because of its heavy dependence on Leeds, Bradford and other West Yorkshire textile centres, concentrated on a narrower social stratum of skilled, supervisory and clerical workers, with the accent on an orthodox version of respectability, although this did not prevent a good deal of cheerful horseplay from permeating the Mitchell and Kenyon films of holiday crowds at this resort in Edwardian times.15 Morecambe was particularly popular during the inter-war years, overtaking Lytham St Anne's in population terms as it became one of the most dynamic of British resorts; and the other Lancashire seaside resorts fitted into the pattern as respectable venues for middle-class family holidays, with a growing admixture of commuting (especially at Lytham) and retirement (especially at Grange-over-Sands). Apart from Grange, an isolated outpost on Morecambe Bay which like Morecambe itself drew as much on industrial Yorkshire as on Lancashire, the smaller resorts of the Fylde coast remained within Blackpool's orbit in the sense that people could base themselves there while taking what they wanted of the fleshpots and excitements of Blackpool when it suited them, just as Blackpool visitors in search of a quiet day in a less commercial leisure environment could take the tram to one of its doubly suburban satellites and enjoy a rest from the commercial whirl of the larger resort centre.16
The key point is that the Lancashire coast, like those of (especially) North Wales, Kent, Sussex, Essex and the Clyde estuary, developed a genuine resort system between the 1850s and the 1950s: one that catered, somewhere, for all the seaside holiday demands of its catchment area, from the upper middle classes (though not, in Lancashire’s case, the gentry or aristocracy) to those lower-paid or otherwise disadvantaged elements in the working class who could only just afford an irregular day excursion. The mix changed over time as well as varying between destinations, seasonally and by day of the week; and the changes and variations involved geographical origins as well as social standing and cultural preference. The Lancashire coast was unique in the early rise of popular holidaymaking, as part of the rise of the first working-class consumer society in the ‘cotton towns’ of the late nineteenth century (professional football, music-hall, popular musical culture, fish and chips, the Co-op…), and in the dominance of ‘cotton town culture’ in its accents and entertainments, reinforced by the Wakes system whereby whole towns went on holiday in the same weeks, staggered through the summer, from the Bolton holidays at the end of June and Burnley fair in mid-July to Oldham wakes in early September. But this was not the whole story, and the Lancashire coast was reaching out to draw in working-class holidaymakers from the West Riding and the West Midlands by the 1890s, and from across most of Britain by the inter-war years. Blackpool predominated in this regard, while the surviving ‘popular’ side of Southport became more narrowly ‘regional’ in the composition of its crowds; but the other resort systems mentioned above, North Wales apart, were metropolitan rather than provincial in their main catchment areas (if we count Glasgow as a metropolis), and only the later-developing popular side of the Devon resorts could match Blackpool (in particular) for national reach, on a much smaller scale in terms of sheer numbers (even in the 1960s). By the early twentieth century (and even in the 1890s) the Lancashire cotton towns were already exporting some of their more prosperous and adventurous working-class citizens not only to North Wales but as far afield as Devon, as the accents of Rochdale and Oldham could be heard and remarked upon in Torquay and Ilfracombe, while in the 1920s and 1930s they could be found at Ostend and the nearby battlefields, and in 1934 William Holt tracked them across Belgium and France for Manchester’s Daily Dispatch.

By this time, however, each of Lancashire’s own resorts had long developed strongly differentiated identities and "place-myths" of their own, within the overall shared idioms and conventions of the British seaside holiday, but with a distinct set of regional flavours. Blackpool’s was the strongest, but even as it emerged as "working-class regional" or "Lancashire at play" in the late nineteenth century it developed cross-currents and apparent contradictions within this core identity as well as between it and alternative versions of the town. Its visitors worked in coal mining (though this was a later developer in generating holiday demand), engineering, transport and many other industries and services as well as in cotton,
though most working-class Lancastrians from the "cotton towns" would have "been through the mill" with all the associated disciplinary acculturation, and in the predominant "cotton district" most coal miners (for example) lived alongside the mill workers rather than in separate settlements with their own distinctive cultures, as was more often the case south and south-west of Wigan. From the 1870s onwards, as real family incomes rose for most people in the "cotton towns" and investment in popular attractions and cheap accommodation grew in step, Blackpool became the world's first working-class seaside resort, although this was always a dominant rather than an exclusive identity, and the towns rulers were always trying to propel its image up-market. Its chief rival contender, New York's Coney Island, attracted greater numbers of poorer people by the early twentieth century, but these were overwhelmingly day, half-day and evening trippers to the beaches and amusement parks, and Coney Island lacked the stability, infrastructure and permanence that soon became hallmarks of the big Lancashire resort. Late Victorian and Edwardian Blackpool was sometimes likened to an American city for its grid-pattern streets, its rapid growth and openness to down-market development, its air of enterprise, drive and "push", and its eager civic boosting; but these were as much Lancashire as American characteristics in the heyday of the cotton industry, and the predominant image was one of "Lancashire at play". This entailed, as Patrick Joyce argues, something more than just the proletariat: it was a broader slice of "the popular", as the Mitchell and Kenyon films strongly suggest, extending to embrace those of the lower and even the substantial middle classes who put pleasure and fun before the tighter interpretations of respectability, and characterised by the energy, vitality and good humour that accompanied temporary release from workaday constraints, a democratic lack of pretension, a characteristic openness and friendliness (but with a caustic tongue when deemed appropriate), and an openness to the rude and the ribald within the limits that unspoken consensus prescribed, and that were reinforced by the known presence of local authority figures and potentially censorious neighbours in a setting where whole towns went on holiday at once. Notions of liminality and the carnivalesque, the world temporarily turned upside down, thus have to be tempered in the Blackpool setting by awareness of the constraints provided by a regional popular culture which, from perhaps the 1880s up to the 1950s and beyond, never lost sight of the values of workaday respectability that kept the system going. Thus it was that holiday crowds observed factory hours at mealtimes, when the promenade would suddenly empty and the boarding houses and cheap restaurants would fill up with hungry customers.

At the height of the holiday season Blackpool's bustling centre and teeming promenades had an air of the popular and boisterous, like the shoreline itself, with its accommodating sands, lively waves and, sometimes, boisterous breezes. Its red brick terraces, built piecemeal (but on a basic grid pattern) on relatively small
estates to meet the imagined preferences of the lowest common denominator, looked like those of the "cotton towns" writ large, with a couple of extra storeys and, in the summer lodging house districts close to the old railway stations and the promenade, a great multiplication of hidden bedrooms at the back. The famous landladies who ran these establishments were themselves drawn largely from the "cotton towns", many being weavers who had saved enough to try out a small business in a familiar but desirable setting, and they also tended to be represented as larger than life in the jokes and stories of almanacs, dialect sketches and comic postcards. They made their own contribution to the stereotype of the strong and potentially fearsome Lancashire woman, which also made its presence felt in entertainments that transgressed gender boundaries, in sexual innuendo that (most people thought) rarely found physical expression and was almost an escape from it, and in jokes about suffragettes that had a special Lancashire dimension in the Manchester origins of the Pankhursts and in the radical working-class suffrage campaigners of the Edwardian cotton towns. The "homeliness" that was their stock in trade extended its embrace to the temporary extended family of guests that renewed itself week by week during the summer season. The virtuous landlady in Arthur Laycock's morality tale of the Blackpool seaside occupied "Homely House". Blackpool looked like a Lancashire mill town without the chimneys or the clogs, and by the late nineteenth century it reconstituted, serially, substantial samples of the populations of each of them week by week through the summer, in their best clothes but not necessarily on their best behaviour, sampling energetically from a range of entertainments and food outlets that were not unfamiliar in style and content, but more diverse and, at the top end, on a much grander scale than at home. But Blackpool also looked like a Potteries town without the kilns, or a Black Country town without the mines and smoky workshops, and it attracted visitors from across the industrial Midlands and from Yorkshire as well as from its own county, some of whose towns were built in stone rather than brick. Moreover, it was not until the inter-war years that Liverpool and the chemical works and coal mines of south-west Lancashire began to send significant contingents. Blackpool was both more and less than working-class Lancashire at play (and at work, for the same applied to the recruitment of those who serviced the holidaymakers). Indeed, an enduring middle-class presence, coupled with the absence of the poorest strata of the cotton towns as visitors (and even the better-paid families while the children were young and dependant), meant that it catered for both more and less than the working class itself.

Blackpool's achievement was to express and put on display a set of characteristics that many of those who wrote about the county claimed to be salient and distinguishing. Lancastrians proverbially both worked hard and played hard; they were prepared to accumulate through the year to enjoy their hard-earned savings to the full when the time came, over and above any opportunities that might
come their way at an ordinary week-end, whether at the pub or the music-hall, the cinema when that appeared, the football match or the street bookmaker; and the womenfolk were represented as strong and assertive, powerful in and out of the home, strident, independent and taking no prisoners. Commentators from outside the culture were impressed and appalled by turns at the high-pressure way of life that Blackpool magnified and intensified, as a place for letting off steam, releasing accumulated tensions (and, some thought, acting as prophylactic against revolution), and proudly spending a year's holiday savings in a hectic week (at least, so the enduring legend ran). This was a resort primarily for adults—it was beyond the means of working-class families with young children, as the visual evidence confirms – until the 1950s, and the lack of family responsibilities (and escape from the necessary internalised disciplines of the workplace) perhaps helped to promote an atmosphere of childish horseplay. Front stage and back stage, in Goffmann's terms, were more integrated than in most resort settings, and behaviour that would have been frowned upon (and might have led to arrest) in the close-knit small towns of the cotton industry was accepted here as part of the holiday spirit.

But Blackpool was also a disciplined place, and could be seen as a site for the civilization of the working-class holiday crowd, although it responded to the attitudes and expectations that people brought with them as well as moulding them on its own account. Early working-class invasions using the new trains in the late 1840s and early 1850s generated moral panics about assertive behaviour, noise, nudity on the beach, and the ill-treatment of donkeys, and provided an important impetus to establishing formal local government institutions. But here Blackpool was at one with its Lancashire hinterland, as more general unease about working-class behaviour in public places also prompted new initiatives in policing and the provision of "counter-attractions" in places like Bolton. The much faster-flowing tide of working-class visitors from the 1870s, on a larger scale, provoked further critical comment about inappropriate attire (mufflers, clogs, shawls) and behaviour (smoking clay pipes, spitting, shouting, horseplay, litter and again the inevitable cruelty to donkeys). Within a decade, however, the focus was shifting from criticism to praise, for the orderly and acceptable presentation of the collective working-class self as it now appeared even to potentially censorious Nonconformist observers. This transition was associated with the rising living standards that enabled working-class Lancastrians to buy "best clothes" for holiday wear, as is evident in the Mitchell and Kenyon films of the early twentieth century, not least by contrast with representations of the workaday streets of Rochdale or Oldham. The sense of occasion (and need to look after expensive purchases) that accompanied the wearing of such garb might well have led in itself to the modification of public behaviour, but contemporaries offered plenty of alternative or additional explanations for the perceived transition, from the self-discipline inculcated by compulsory schooling to the tighter disciplinary codes of workplaces.
in which trade unionism itself set great store by respectable demeanour. Here, and enduringly (until the post-war generation), Blackpool reflected, articulated and influenced the changing expectations about the presentation of self, approximating to a version of the "civilising process" of Norbert Elias, that marked the behaviour of (to use another value-laden phrase) the mature industrial working class. This was not a purely Lancashire phenomenon, but just as rising living standards and disciplined saving for unpaid seaside holidays were first in evidence here, so Blackpool might be thought to distil and embody in concentrated form a set of recognisably Lancashire (or at least "cotton Lancashire") social characteristics.  

So Blackpool came to epitomise both the hedonistic and the respectable elements of working-class industrial Lancashire. Its rulers, whose approach to the provision of municipal services and amenities was in tune with the active, interventionist civic traditions of the Victorian industrial towns of Lancashire (but also of, for example, Birmingham and Leeds), took pride in its orderliness, while winking at amiable infractions that would not have been tolerated elsewhere; and they tacitly went along with its growing reputation as a "seaside sex capital", while professing alarm when any specific investigations were undertaken, as with Mass-Observation's prurient but rather bathetic findings in the late 1930s. The rules of everyday conduct were relaxed and bent rather than being subverted or broken; and the journalist Graham Turner, writing as late as the 1960s, argued that Blackpool was at bottom a puritanical place, with the prevailing atmosphere of innuendo a smokescreen for a normative culture of repression and self-control.  

If we direct our gaze away from the seething popular crowds around the Tower and "Golden Mile", and look towards the urban periphery where new municipal investment was directed during the 1920s and 1930s (promenade extensions, Stanley Park, South Shore swimming baths. North Shore gardens...), we see a much more middle-class (though still open and permeable) version of Blackpool that approximates it more closely to the mainstream middle-class family experience of the British seaside in the railway age. Here, the Lancashire element was diluted: Anthony Burgess commented of the 1930s that, "A lot of Blackpool's residents had posh accents, as though they were carpetbaggers from the south". The other resorts of the Lancashire system were much closer to that norm, inflected as they were by local peculiarities as well as broader regional influences. In some ways the nearest
approximation to Blackpool in its guise as Lancashire playground was probably the Isle of Man, and especially the capital Douglas. This Manx setting was doubly liminal by virtue of being on an island as well as by the sea, reached by boat from Liverpool or Fleetwood (but also from Glasgow). Its reputation was more bound up with dancing and the open air, with young couples and early holiday camps, as the poor in time and money were filtered out by the sea voyage. Here a (mainly) Lancastrian playground was grafted on to a strong local culture which was busily inventing and reinventing traditions in defence against the influx of commercial culture on the mainland, a kind of negotiated globalization in miniature, although there was no saving the living language. But this was a much more artificial, external tourism imposition than was the case at Blackpool, which was itself in Lancashire and whose original agricultural population had been tiny. Here and in North Wales, where Rhyl and other resorts also had an incarnation as Lancashire resorts beyond the county and linguistic and other cultural issues, including Sabbatarianism, were very much alive, there were cultural tensions that were absent from a Blackpool whose population was already, by the 1870s, dominated by migrants from inland Lancashire. Much closer to Lancashire in geographical terms was New Brighton, on the Cheshire side of the Mersey a ferry crossing away from Liverpool. Here was Liverpool's Coney Island, a day and half-day playground with a wider Lancashire hinterland for its boarding-houses until catastrophic decline set in during the 1960s, again in parallel with Coney. New Brighton had its own Tower, which was actually higher than Blackpool's and also built in the 1890s, but was unable to sustain it for more than a single generation, as the countervailing drive to Merseyside suburbanity won out against the trippers and longer-stay visitors. My grandfather, when a platelayer in north Derbyshire with access to privilege tickets on the London, Midland and Scottish Railway around 1930, used to take his family to New Brighton and Blackpool in alternate years; but this is a reminder that, here too, Blackpool was one among several options. And Liverpool was, of course, a very different version of Lancashire from the "cotton towns", with its own exceptional migration flows, economy and cultures. Scousers were not industrial Lancastrians: they never built up the holiday traditions of the textile district; and it showed.

In a sense, Southport, with its Liverpool as well as cotton Lancashire commuter population and its easy image as the polar opposite to Blackpool, may have been closer to it as an emblem of regional identity than any of these extra-territorial rivals. Its dominant "social tone" and reputation were overwhelmingly middle-class, and, whether Nonconformist or Church of England, it took its religion seriously in ways that Blackpool could not claim to match. Where Blackpool had magnificent pleasure palaces and an abundance of pubs, it had imposing (and expensively endowed) churches and chapels. It was increasingly a residential suburb and place of genteel retirement for Lancashire industrialists, perhaps more
so than Liverpool merchants, who were often tempted southwards and westwards. It did anticipate Blackpool's inter-war move towards up-market municipal investment by two generations and more, with its Victorian parks and marine lakes. It was planned from almost its earliest beginnings, by two contrasting landowning families who achieved similar results by different routes. Blackpool, by contrast, was a testament to the limitations of the free market, and could never have laid claim to Southport's preferred label of "seaside garden city". Southport's publicity had always put health and improvement ahead of pleasure and entertainment. On this basis, Southport could claim to represent an alternative Lancashire, that of the sober, serious, frock-coated, Nonconformist, prosperous entrepreneur and businessman (and this was a much more "masculine" society in its dominant representation than that of Blackpool), who enjoyed his profits here while his employees spent their annual savings so liberally at Blackpool, although his family were also perfectly capable of shopping in their own expensive style on elegant Lord Street. But, and predictably, this contrast (or complementarity) is too simple.

On the one hand Blackpool, in its official publicity material, also routinely prioritised health and outdoor exercise, the promenade ahead of the pleasure palace, eagerly laying claim to its own version of Southport's regional middle-class mantle, and promoting it assiduously, as we have seen, on its planned urban fringes; while Southport had its own, more family-oriented fairground to set alongside Blackpool's Pleasure Beach, in the form of Pleasureland, which became part of the municipality's leisure portfolio alongside more obviously up-market offerings. Southport also had its working-class trippers, though they were drawn more from Wigan, Bolton and Manchester than from the weaving towns that formed the traditional core of Blackpool's constituency. Moreover, it had its own enclave of boarding houses for the working-class holiday market, tucked away between the shopping Mecca of Lord Street and the municipal Marine Lakes; and it had its working-class suburbs, on the "wrong side of the tracks" or tucked away at a discreet distance, to house necessary but unsavoury services and those who operated them. None of these cross-currents invalidates the overarching idea that Blackpool and Southport represented contrasting sides of a distinctive "Lancashire character", the free-spending frivolous popular and the serious religious entrepreneurial; but they draw attention to the overlaps between the resort experiences, which underline that the tempting stereotypes are not the whole story.

It was Blackpool, however, that really became identified as the resort par excellence of the Lancashire working class at play: a popular regional identity that was much more persuasive, if not convincing, than the middle-class version. This was enduringly more convincing than the alternative representations of Blackpool as a more broadly Northern resort, an energetic opposite pole to the languor of the metropolitan South, or as representing a national working-class or popular leisure identity from, say, the 1930s onwards. In both ostensible guises it had too many
rivals to hold the field convincingly, for its towering lead in visitor numbers owed a
great deal to the sheer quantity and spending power of its core visiting public, the
four and a half million Lancastrians on its doorstep who came to form a loyal
market of multiple repeat visitors. It was never the resort for the whole of
Lancashire, and nor was it ever exclusively a Lancashire resort. As Burgess put it,
"The town was for Lancashire, but it constituted a sort of extraterritorial enclave."
But it was, for example, where Frank Randle, whose humour did not travel beyond
the county, was always most at home, and the dominant accents on its streets were
those of whichever Lancashire towns held their Wakes in that particular week.38
From these and other perspectives, Blackpool was Lancashire at play; and as such
it distilled the essence of something that deserves to be represented as Lancashire
identity, however we might wish to qualify and complicate that initial, but
revealing, bold statement. What was to happen after the 1950s to complicate
matters further is, of course, another story.

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3 J.K. Walton, “Policing the Alameda”, in S. Gunn and R.J. Morris (eds.), Identities in Space
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5 J.K. Walton, “Tourism and Politics in Elite Beach Resorts: San Sebastián and Ostend,
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