

A delicate balancing act lies ahead for the Northwest's coastal towns.

Words Steve Connor. Photograph Jan Chlebik.

# CRITICAL COASTLINES

It was the Swinging Sixties. Millions of us flocked to our coastal resorts to indulge in a heady cocktail of comedy hats, candy floss and B&B fry-ups. Business was booming in Blackpool and Morecambe as three quarters of the British public chose to spend their domestic holidays by the sea. In the Northwest's other coastal towns such as Barrow or Birkenhead shipbuilding, offshore operations and heavy engineering kept local economies afloat.

Fast-forward to the nineties and things had changed, dramatically. The percentage of domestic holidays spent by the coast had been slashed from 75% to just 20%. As low-cost carriers whisked cost-conscious holidaymakers off to Mediterranean destinations, the traditional tourism market for our coastal towns imploded.

Take a stroll down the promenade today, and you'll see an ageing clientele spending little and returning less. In their place, the more hard-pushed hotels and B&Bs are taking in hard-luck cases from the social services, adding areas of 'multi-deprivation' to the challenge facing the region's coastal towns. Beyond the resorts, the areas relying on industry - and in particular our shipyards - have fared no better.

As the new century - the new millennium - takes shape, a major challenge confronts the region: how to create a fresh and prosperous future for the coastal towns of England's Northwest.

On Morecambe seafront, expectant eyes look to the art deco splendour of the Midland Hotel for a sign of new beginnings. Having passed through a series of owners, the Grade II building has just been bought by those doyens of regeneration, Urban Splash. "I have known the building for years and watched its gradual decline with sadness," said Urban Splash chairman, Tom Bloxham. "When I heard that the latest restoration scheme had fallen through I decided to buy the building. It is a fantastic building, I hope we will be able to restore it back as a hotel and restaurant, but it will be very difficult, expensive and will no doubt take several years."

The Midland Hotel's renaissance will rely in no small part on the wider action plan for renewal in Morecambe. Its strategic objectives include a need to change perceptions, broaden the resort's appeal, achieve a year-round tourism business and develop a 'niche' approach to marketing Morecambe as a 'spa' resort and 'eco' tourism destination. Specific actions will include major redevelopments for the promenade and the Victoria Pavilion as well as campaigns for better shopping, better service and better food.

A short hop south, past Cleveleys and Fleetwood, and Blackpool is developing similarly bold plans for its rebirth. Boasting some significant assets but facing major challenges including some areas of severe deprivation, Blackpool Borough Council has unveiled a £1 billion initiative to establish the town as a 'world class' resort for the twenty-first century. The town's new 20 year masterplan will, it is hoped, create more than 20,000 jobs and usher in a major programme of regeneration. There will be plans to revive landmarks such as the promenade and Pleasure Beach and to introduce new attractions such as a new entertainment complex, four casino hotels and a new conference facility.

The town has also been given its own 'tourism tsar', Peter Moore, who has overseen the success of major attractions like Centre Parcs and Alton Towers.

Moore stresses quality and modernity as he sets out his vision for Blackpool's future. "Like virtually every British resort, it has become a prisoner of the past," he says. "It is constrained by infrastructure that is tired - by unfettered expansion over decades and by lack of investment and innovation. But, critically, in Blackpool's case, this harsh reality has been recognised and we have begun to diagnose realistically and understand the causes of this deterioration. A route to recovery is being actively sought."

That route to recovery does not rely exclusively on tourism or the previously-touted transformation of the town into a new 'Las Vegas'. The masterplan embraces social change, environmental conservation and a need to build a Blackpool that is also a good place to live and work, as well as visit.

These broader aims - that see tourism as just one part of the solution - are reflected in the Northwest Development Agency's report 'A New Vision for Northwest Coastal Resorts'. The report spells out the case for a broad economic renaissance that plays on the strengths of individual locations. The vision positions Grange-over-Sands, for example, as a 'classic resort'; it plays on Morecambe as a 'beautiful place'; Fleetwood and Cleveleys as centres for retail and shopping; Southport as a stylish, sophisticated, upmarket destination.

Laurence Rose, chair of the Northwest Coastal Forum, thinks this broader, more holistic approach could well hold the key to success. "Tourism itself will not be the answer," he says. "These towns have to be interesting and pleasant places to live and work. If we can pull that off then maybe the tourism will come back, but first let's look at the quality of the housing stock, at business opportunities, and the natural environment."

As the revival of coastal towns is masterplanned and debated, one theme does recur time and again: the natural environment. From improvements in the quality of bathing waters - the subject of a major new programme soon to be launched by the Mersey Basin Campaign and the Environment Agency - to climate change, sea level rise and the push for more renewable energy, environmental issues are an omnipresent pressure point and opportunity for the Northwest coast and its towns. On Merseyside, the Mersey Waterfront Park will see sustainable regeneration fused with economic development, including a new 'eco-visitor centre' at Southport and a coastal reservation at Speke Garston. For Birkenhead, Barrow and Workington, a raft of new, clean energy offshore wind farms could hold the key to new jobs through manufacturing, construction and servicing of wind turbines in the Irish Sea.

And that's the balancing act that may well hold the key to any long-lasting prosperity. A coastal renaissance will rely squarely on the conservation of sensitive environments, a savvy approach to business growth and a quality-led rejuvenation of our cultural assets. The heyday of 'Kiss Me Quick' may have passed - we have to strive now for something more stylish, and more sustainable.

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