'Our Pier': Leisure activities and local communities at the British seaside

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'Our Pier': Leisure activities and local communities at the British seaside

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The seaside resort has long held a distinctive position within the history of British leisure. Its peculiar physicality whereby the natural landscape of sea and sand combines with distinctive architectural elements, such as pavilions and piers, has accommodated many and varied leisure activities across the years. However, to date, the majority of research on British coastal resorts considers these activities solely in connection with tourism. Using a combination of contextual archival research, participant observations, semi-structured interviews and oral history narratives, this article attempts a deliberate shift in focus where the leisure activities of a young local population are brought to the fore in the history of British seaside entertainment and, in particular, their experiences of pleasure piers in the post-war era. The article also explores the potential for the concept of the 'community pier' in terms of nurturing seaside leisure cultures in the present and future.

Keywords: seaside resorts, pleasure piers, youth culture, leisure spaces, popular culture

Introduction

The seaside resort has long held a distinctive position within the history of British

leisure. Its peculiar physicality whereby the natural landscape of sea and sand (or stone

or shingle) combines with distinctive architectural elements, such as pavilions and piers,

has accommodated many and varied leisure activities across the years. These extend

from the health practices of the Regency era through the Victorian interest in popular

entertainments to the hedonistic pleasures pursued in the early decades of the twentieth

century—including the 'dirty weekend' of the inter-war years onwards—and, then, the

later rebellious actions of a post-war British youth (Shields, 1991). As such, the British

seaside resort provides a clear illustration of Sam Elkington and Sean Gammon's

introductory statement to their work on landscapes of leisure, namely that '[l]eisure

patterns are necessarily spatial; their spatial structures settings for certain activities to

take place' (2015, p. 1). The untroubled popular understanding of the seaside resort as a

site in which a quiet, therapeutic beach stroll can sit alongside the lively performance of

a Pierrot troupe or the thrills of an illicit sexual encounter also makes manifest that

'place'—as defined by lived human experience—is fluid and flexible. This non-

essentialist conceptualization of place, championed by cultural geographers such as

Doreen Massey (1994, 2005), has certainly been taken up by social and cultural

historians, including John Walton (2000) and Fred Gray (2006), when considering the

British seaside resort's survival into the late twentieth century and beyond.[1] Some of the

key dynamics of the seaside include the combination of the tame and the wild (Corbin,

1994) as well as the familiar or mundane and 'the other' or spectacular. These concur

perhaps most patently in the phenomenon that is the pleasure pier.

However, the positive connections between the British seaside resort's

flexibility and its durability are typically considered through the lens of tourism. The

assorted leisure activities sketched above primarily relate to a visiting population—

whether the long-standing tourist, week-long holidaymaker or fleeting night-time

visitor. This is understandable: British seaside resorts responded and contributed to the

rise of mass tourism in the nineteenth century with newly-built railways—fast,

convenient and ever cheaper—ensuring that the natural and cultural delights of the

seaside were now available to all.[2] Moreover, the strength of this association has

resulted in a particular kind of 'nostalgia-fuelled heritage tourism' that many of today's

surviving resorts rely upon as they battle decline and deterioration—'a valuable lifeline'

according to David Jarratt and Sean Gammon (2016, p. 123). But the narrow scholarly

focus on tourism and holiday culture means that the ways in which the British seaside

resort's local population have contributed to its identity and, indeed, resilience as a

leisure space are often side-lined. Attempts to offer an understanding of seaside leisure

that acknowledges and draws attention to the lives of the local community are sporadic

at best.[3] Recent work by Nicolas Whybrow who has considered the role of the arts in

regeneration work in urban areas and specifically 'a reconstituted identity' (2016, p.

671) for Folkestone, a port town in south-east England, offers one example while Anya

Chapman and Duncan Light's consideration of how employees in the tourism industry

in a northern England resort 'respond to, and negotiate, the behaviour (and

misbehaviour) of tourists who are enjoying a period of liberation and release from the

strictures of everyday life' (2017, p. 183) offers another.[4] This article seeks to further

develop this move towards an understanding of the seaside in which the local

population's perspective is given due attention. To do this, it will show how the

favoured youth cultural activities of residents have been particularly influential in

sealing the seaside resort's position in histories of modern British leisure, with a

particular focus on post-war events that occurred on (and around) pleasure piers.

        The overall research questions we have worked with revolve around how

different groups in the community experience and engage (or disengage) with the local

pier; and what the challenges and opportunities for contemporary pleasure piers are, as

at once living heritage sites, commercial seaside amusement venues and municipal

leisure and entertainment environments. Working in collaboration with two community

partners—The Hastings Pier and The Clevedon Pier and Heritage Trust—has allowed

the research team unique insight into the many ways the local seaside communities have

affiliation and attachments to their respective piers. More than just wanting to showcase

their (popular) cultural heritage to tourists, the community partners participating in this

project were interested in understanding the significance of the pier as a leisure space to

various local groups across the decades and, concurrently, thinking through ways in

which to engage today's under-represented users, such as young adults. In the next

section, we will discuss some of the diverse methods and methodologies we have

employed in this research in order to explore what connects seaside resort communities

with their heritage. Focusing on the lived experiences of the local youths who looked

forward to letting loose on a Friday night during the 1950s and 60s emerging seaside

youth culture, the article offers a critique of 'taken for granted' notions about what

constitutes seaside heritage. The article then goes on to situate the case studies

historically before discussing leisure activities of the local population, drawing on oral

history narratives that illustrate both the cultural significance and everydayness of it all.

'Ownership' both in terms of a financial transaction and that which comes with strong

emotional attachment—'ownership through living' (Crouch, 2015, p. 15)—emerges as a

strong theme in this research and is explored in greater detail towards the later stages of

the article, as we further contemplate the pleasure pier's potential appeal as a

community leisure space in coastal resorts today.

The concept of the 'community pier' is key to this aspect of the research, with

Hastings Pier offering an exemplary case study given its decision to launch a

community share fundraising scheme in 2013 and subsequent adoption of 'the people's

pier' epithet.[5] Community ownership enterprises are often regarded as an outcome of an

existing community's collective effort and ability to rally around a common interest.

Our research takes a different view by considering how communities connect and

emerge through community ownership and related processes such as collective action to

recall, restore and develop their leisure spaces, which includes mediating their histories.

Such processes involve both connections and disassociation and may be understood as

community-making processes in themselves.

As we write up this research, we are aware that this has become a particularly urgent line of inquiry with regard to Hastings Pier following its sale in June 2018 by administrators to an individual private owner, entrepreneur Abid Gulzar. It is a development that requires reflection on some of the vulnerabilities of community funding models often driven by grassroots involvement and the challenges of delivering on both a heritage preservation plan and a sustainable commercial operation in line with the realities of a seaside economy. The pier's ambition to contribute to the cultural regeneration of the area goes beyond that of a traditional heritage preservation society, evident in its entrepreneurial outlook and desire to enrich local life. But, despite a grassroots movement engendered by civic pride and strong support from the local community, this community pier's offer in terms of leisure activities and experiences of value to local audiences has not been able to respond fully to expectations. It is indicative of the uneasy shifts in pier culture more generally, which seem to oscillate between the outdated or purely nostalgic on the one hand and the very progressive on the other (as exemplified by Hasting Pier's radically modern and prize-winning architecture[6]). While the complexities of regeneration are not the central concern of this article, they feed into some of the distinct instances of leisure culture emerging from or evolving around seaside piers that we wish to discuss. This is important because we think a better understanding of a local population's perspective may help future developments of seaside resorts to regain relevance to their respective communities.

Researching local leisure lives

Seaside popular entertainment and leisure culture are under-researched areas, as noted by John Walton and Jason Wood (2009) who refer to the 'shortage of credibility' (p.

121) afforded to the recording, preservation and historical recognition of the importance

of popular seaside entertainment, and Howard Hughes (2011) who refers to research

about historical seaside entertainment as being 'incidental' (p. 83). As a contribution to

this much-needed area then, this study brings together both contemporary and

historically situated case studies. We note that researching the *cultural* history of

seaside piers has value in itself, particularly as the vast majority of literature on British

leisure piers focuses on their architectural and engineering history.

In this article we combine historical contextual archival research with participant

observations, semi-structured interviews and oral history narratives (Ritchie, 2014). The

oral history narratives were collected via interviews with members of the local

community in Clevedon, Somerset (summer, 2015) following a targeted call for

individuals who had grown-up in the area in the post-war era.[7] Oral history allows us to

link the individual narrative, the micro level of history, with the cultural, historical

context (macro level) (Leavy, 2011, p. 5). By allowing for narratives of lived

experiences to be part of the research process, we attempt to avoid a top-down

perspective by making our 'investigative starting point the memories of groups or

individuals and to ask how these might be related to the wider culture' (Radstone, 2000,

pp. 11–12). This is particularly important in relation to researching British seaside

culture and history, as it is a history dominated by the tourist perspective and

holidaymakers as the 'major consumers of the seaside' (Gray, 2006, p. 12). The social

knowledge produced in this research process is less about discovering unknown

histories and more about a deliberate *shift of focus* onto the experiences of the young

local population in the history of seaside entertainment, though we remain mindful of

the potential problems of romanticizing the past. It also represents a move away from an

overwriting of the lived experiences of the coast with dominant narratives of quaintness and placidness as the main associations with seaside culture (see Pearson, 2005 as one example).

At Hastings, Sussex, we similarly sought to engage local residents who could recall the seaside youth culture of decades past. Here, though, we adapted our approach to take account of the fact that at the point of data collection (summer, 2015), the pier was not yet open to the public following years of restoration, and the sustained lack of access to the space might affect response numbers and depth of discussion. To mitigate these issues, we conducted secondary data analysis on a set of individual interviews (n. 37) previously collected by Archie Lauchlan, a member of the larger project team, for the purpose of researching a documentary.[8] We also collaborated with the community partner to design outreach activities such as an immersive silent disco event to take place on (and below) the nearly repaired structure, exclusively featuring music from the pier's long and impressive repertoire of gigs and dance nights (Image 1). This allowed our participants to mobilize memories that subsequently fuelled a roundtable discussion where we interrogated their connection to the pier. [9] We also attended various events on the pier once it had opened (from spring 2016 onwards) to obtain vox pop style short interviews with relevant audiences and conduct participant observations. The balance between planned discussion, capturing mainly music enthusiasts, and spontaneous interviews, capturing a broader spectrum of views, serves to ensure a productive comparative analysis with the work undertaken at Clevedon while acknowledging Hastings' persistent sense of local distinctiveness.[10]

[INSERT IMAGE 1 HERE. (SILENT DISCO). CAPTION:]

Image 1. Some of the silent disco participants at Hastings Pier venture under the pier. Image supplied by Olu Jenzen.

Our methodological flexibility and eclecticism resonate with Les Roberts's (2016, 2018) observations regarding work in the developing fields of spatial humanities and spatial anthropology, in particular that which seeks to 'deep map' locations in order to better understand the human processes and interrelations that are integral to their formation. In the adoption of a multi-modal approach we are not simply advocating that researchers 'make-do' with available resources but, rather, anticipate 'tackling situations, in however much detail and nuance they may assert, require or happen' (Crouch, 2018) drawing upon a team's interdisciplinary make-up and differing skill-set as required. While Roberts outlines some of the negative responses to the concept of the 'researcher-as-bricoleur' (2018) we suggest that the complexity of leisure space—as, indeed, all space with its fissures and contradictions—makes clear the necessity for open, multifaceted and adaptable research methods. For us, the oral history approach used in combination with other forms of historical, ethnographic and cultural studies research has allowed for cultural tensions to emerge and yields a deeper and richer texture to the research in that it often straddles official and unofficial heritage discourses permitting the intricacy of the mundane to surface.

Case studies: The pleasure pier, the community pier

By the end of the nineteenth century, piers had become integral to the British seaside resort with the country once boasting over 100, most of them centred on the English and Welsh coasts. Often constructed as little more than wooden jetties to serve as landing stages for passenger steamers, these distinctive coastal structures quickly developed to facilitate and encourage a whole host of leisure pursuits from relaxed promenading over

the sea, through the daring acrobatics of pier-head dives, to recreational fishing. Further

development of piers as an amenity for leisure resulted in ornate pavilions and other

covered entertainment venues being built on the piers' wooden slats. These additions

signalled the arrival of the pleasure pier proper, as described by Walton: a

'promenading area and a place of assignation, with its distinctive architecture of eclectic

frivolity and its musical, comic and dramatic entertainments' (2000, p. 94). Although

almost half of these piers are now lost (according to the National Piers Society) and

others—like Birnbeck Pier in Weston-super-Mare in Somerset—are derelict and closed,

the remaining piers continue to offer a defining structural component for the British

seaside resort and a focal point for its leisure activities.

As the photographer Simon Roberts's comprehensive survey of these

architectural curiosities in his exhibition and book *Pierdom* (2013) attests, the pier's

unusual make-up is a potent visual referent for the admiration and decline of seaside

resorts. While we do not deny that these predominantly Victorian structures offer a clear

manifestation of the 'arrival' of mass tourism via industrialization, we are keen to

emphasize the plurality of meaning that resides in these spaces. As Massey (1994) has

explored, places are complex in their specificity which is not 'some long internalised

history' but, rather, 'a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving

together at a particular locus' (p. 127). The intersection of trajectories that piers offer is

no doubt intensified due to the liminal nature of the structures, both geographically and

culturally. Stretching out into the sea, often with an intricate sub-deck structure of stilts

and rods, they offer us a different visual perspective on the towns to which they belong,

looking back at a slant, and a sense of being 'at sea'—suspended from life on shore.

The distinctive material and spatial characteristics have also shaped developments in

pier culture since Victorian times, with the earlier physical leisure pursuit of

promenading increasingly giving way to popular cultural consumption that encompasses

a heterogeneous mix of entertainment genres and styles (Hughes & Benn, 1998). These

include popular performance acts (drawing on a longer history of circus and sideshow

exhibitions), music performances and dancing, shops and food outlets, optical

entertainments and amusement machines as well as the more substantial and capitalized

offering of theatres, ballrooms and resident funfairs.

The above broad overview of pier entertainment that emerged in the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries makes it clear that piers are a central part of

seaside leisure history, though local variations in pier culture should not be overlooked

(Bull & Hayler, 2009; Purce, 2017). In some cases, as with Blackpool in north-west

England and Brighton on the south coast, they have been thoroughly commercialized,

achieving economies of scale, and appear more or less fully integrated into an ever

adaptable, mainstream popular culture with roots in working-class entertainment. These

piers thus fuel the development of resorts, as 'spectacular sites of consumption that need

[…] to be both produced and reproduced' (Gray, 2006, p. 45). In other cases, piers have

progressed along the lines of a heritagization of popular culture (see, for example,

Roberts, 2014), promoting such seaside heritage as a new form of leisure activity with

new demands and commercial opportunities for providing a nostalgic version of pre-war

popular entertainment. The heritage experience as a new form of leisure activity has

largely been taken up by piers with particularly intricate architectural work, such as the

spider-legged Grade 1 listed Clevedon Pier.[11] This response to market demand aligns

with a broader programme of seaside regeneration efforts, as 'increasingly, culture is

being used as a tool or catalyst for regeneration initiatives' (Smith, 2004, p. 20).

However, it needs noting that the heritage experience, as leisure consumption, is often

heavily curated. It foregrounds particular narratives of British seaside history so, though

keen to display some of the curiosities of its cultural past, it rarely recognizes the piers'

continuous history up to the present day and neglects to attribute the role of the pier in

the lives of the people in the local area. It also means a degree of 'sanitation' of the long

and enduring alternative—or illicit—leisure culture associated with piers and the

seaside. In this research then, we begin to redress this issue by foregrounding local

youth culture and by engaging with post-war popular culture, though we acknowledge

that the experiences of certain sections of the community remain under-explored in our

research, not least those of the black and minority ethnic population.[12]

We have focused our attention on two seaside towns that have embraced the

label 'community pier' in recent years due to the sustained support from the local

population. Residents have celebrated and ensured the survival of their local piers in

spite of the continued popularity of holidays abroad and the detrimental effects of sea,

storms and fire. Hastings Pier in Sussex, on England's south coast, and Clevedon Pier

on the north coast of Somerset have undergone physical repair and improvements and

continue to operate thanks to community intervention in the form of grassroots

campaigning and community ownership funding models. Working in collaboration with

the pier organizations as project partners, we have conducted research around a set of

themes relating to this notion of a 'community pier', including investigating the value of

the pier to the local community, its function as a community 'hub', issues of access and

outreach, and more specifically how and if the piers have used their popular cultural

heritage to engage particular audiences and overcome negative associations with

dereliction and declining and stifled leisure forms.

Our two case studies, Clevedon Pier and Hastings Pier, were originally built as

passenger terminals to serve pleasure steamers. In this respect the two bare distinct

similarities; where they differ is that Hastings was conceived purely as a pleasure pier,

complete with extravagant 2,000-seat pavilion, whereas Clevedon's pier, although not

without its diversions in its earlier years, would have to wait almost 50 years for its

distinctly less elegant and far smaller pleasure 'pavilion'. At Clevedon, bands—most

probably brass, military or wind bands—were regularly advertised as playing on the

pier during public holidays and on summer evenings from the 1890s onwards. That

Hastings Pier was to be a place of entertainment was more clearly stated from the

outset. A year after its opening on 5 August 1872 pier-head entertainment included

George Grossmith, a prominent one-man cabaret show, which helped achieve audiences

of 'some thousands' (*The Era*, 1974, 20 September). In the same year, the Pier

Company also reported that 482,000 tickets had been sold, attributing much of that

success to their having a 'good band' (*Hastings and St Leonards Observer*, 1873, 6

September).

The enthusiasm for pier-head theatres, pavilions and concert rooms lasted well

into the twentieth century, with their popularity reaching its peak in the inter-war years.

At Clevedon, the pier's 'pavilion' was erected as best we can tell in 1912 or 1913

during another rebuild of the pier-head. But, unlike Hastings Pier with its Eugenius

Birch-designed extravagance (Image 2), Clevedon's version was a small, plain and

incongruous hut wedged between two existing shelters; it is best described as

resembling a Second World War-era Nissen Hut (Image 3). Nevertheless, the new

building would appear to have benefited from the general enthusiasm for such spaces,

and between 1921 and 1931 the local newspapers carried annual notices of applications

made for temporary music and dancing licenses. Although such notices stop in the

1930s, these dates lie on the very edge of living memory. For example, one 97-year old

interviewee on the BBC's 2017 *Inside Out West* feature on Clevedon Pier remembers

ballroom dancing in the pavilion aged 18, which extends the dance hall era of

Clevedon's pavilion well into that decade (BBC One, 2017, 11 September). This is a

part of the pier's heritage that has been under-represented in its more recent marketing,

which has heavily emphasized a genteel Victorian image and focused on the pier's

original architecture and status as the only surviving Grade 1 listed pier in the country.

Yet, youthful dancing was a core part of the narratives collected from locals which

underscores the importance of understanding the seaside from the local population's

perspective.

[INSERT IMAGE 2 HERE (Interior of Hastings Pier pavilion). CAPTION:]

Image 2. Interior of Hastings Pier pavilion ca. 1905. Image courtesy of The East Sussex

Libraries.

[INSERT IMAGE 3 HERE (Clevedon pier showing the pavilion). CAPTION:]

Image 3. Clevedon Pier head and pavilion. Imaged courtesy of Clevedon Pier and Heritage

Trust community archive.

Hastings Pier's first pavilion burned down in 1917, but was rebuilt in 1922, and

other than during the Second World War—when seaside piers were closed or turned

into military defences—the concerts, dances and variety shows continued into the

1960s, by which time cheap foreign holidays were clearly having a detrimental effect on

the British seaside holiday and resort. The time, however, coincides with a new era for

pier-head entertainment, with pop, and rock 'n' roll having a significant impact on local

youth culture. The differences in scale at our two case studies are, not surprisingly,

marked. At Hastings Pier, live gigs began in the mid-1950s, but the next two decades

were a veritable 'golden era' as a who's-who of 1960s and 70s artists filled the theatre:

The Hollies, Tom Jones, The Kinks, Jimi Hendrix, The Rolling Stones, The Who, Pink

Floyd, The Clash and The Sex Pistols. At Clevedon, the town's youth had to settle for a

20-disc jukebox. The mechanical music arrived around 1958 after the then pier master

Bernard Faraway had seen one in place at nearby Weston-super-Mare's Grand Pier.

Anecdotally, the first jukebox was thrown into the sea one night during an argument but

it was replaced with a much grander 200-disc BAL-AMi box in polished chrome and

pink illuminated plastic. The jukebox music entertainment at the end of the pier

attracted mainly the town's teenagers who, at the time, would have been barred from

entering public houses. It is this emerging youth culture we will turn to next.

The pier and emerging youth culture

As Walton (2000) notes, by the 1930s piers have 'ceased to be fashionable' (p. 106),

and, although the rise in domestic holidaying due to the war partially brought visitors

back to the British seaside, seaside culture after the war was significantly changed. The

fact that the seaside towns and their entertainment no longer had the mass appeal they

once had did not stifle the importance of piers and other seafront establishments to local

communities, however. One aspect to explain this incongruity is the role of piers as a

focal point around which 1950s and 60s youth leisure cultures developed. As narrated

by one of the project participants, Mary, who grew up in Clevedon, the pier was very

attractive to the local youth. She describes how her teenage years,[13] having just left

school, routinely involved hanging out with friends at one of the seafront establishments

and then going onto the pier for evening entertainment: 'We used to go into Fortes [a

cafe on the seafront] first for a coffee, a little crowd of us, […] and then we would

always go on the pier. And dance and have a wonderful evening' (Mary, interview, August, 2015). Similarly, another participant, Jenny, remembers going on the pier several days a week: 'We used to just live on there, every evening we would go down. And, well, just loved it! Just paid our admission, I don't think it cost us any more money. We may have had a Coke out of a Coke machine or something but that was about it' (Jenny, interview, August, 2015).[14] These narratives illustrate that the social practices of the everyday determine and shape the seaside as a leisure space and should not just be understood as a construct of and for tourists. Derek's comment about the familiar group of people at the dance hall similarly shows how it was the local youth that regularly came to enjoy themselves on the pier and how it was predominantly conceptualized as a social space: 'we knew everyone who was on here… they were from Clevedon and you knew everyone … and yes there used to be quite a crowd on here' (Derek, interview, August, 2015).

[INSERT IMAGE 4 HERE (Clevedon pier pavilion interior). CAPTION:

Image 4. Teenage girls photographed inside Clevedon Pier pavilion ca. 1961–1962. Digital image donated to Clevedon Pier and Heritage Trust community archive by participant.

We can note that it is the introduction of the jukebox, and the renewed opportunity for dancing that it brought on the pier, that facilitated the formation of an entirely new, local youth leisure culture based on popular music. Dancing on the pier was established as a more regular event and one that had a whole culture emerging around it:

My friends and I who had not long left school, I think about 1958… 59 to 60 …we heard there was this wonderful thing at the end of the pier called a jukebox. And this sounded… we must go and see this [laughs] so we went to the end of the pier to see this

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wonderful jukebox … to the strings of Elvis Presley of course [giggles] and we were

allowed to dance in a little pavilion at the end of the pier … we were allowed to dance

which we did do and there was a little counter to sell coffee and cake, that sort of

thing… (Mary, interview, August, 2015).

This memory is influenced by the popular narrative of youth entertainment in post-war

Britain, but it narrates the fusion of the 'wild' American music and the sometimes-tame

setting of public seaside spaces, which are domesticated through design practices.

Public spaces like these were particularly important to young women as they enabled

them to socialize outside the home and 'express a cultural identity' (Osgerby, 1998). It

is interesting to note here Mary's choice of words: 'we were *allowed* to dance', which

indicates that this new youth culture emerged out of a past that had a sense of parental

or societal restrictions associated with it. Increasingly young people were beginning to

realize that they needed to 'discover and to "own" places of enjoyment and retreat

where they ha[d] the freedom to relax and pursue "leisure" in the old meaning of the

word' (Abbott-Chapman & Robertson, 2015, p. 125). Mary's phrasing also suggests a

developing awareness amongst the youths that certain spaces were more

accommodating of their social interactions and play. The space at the end of the pier

facilitated dancing in a way that the seaside cafes did not, in this instance. While music

and dancing were central to the site's attraction, the accompanying atmosphere and the

marking of the environment as a youth space (for example, through the centrality of the

jukebox and pinball machines) was thus also a huge part of its appeal to Clevedon's

teenage residents. As another research participant, Derek, confirms when admitting to

not being much of a dancer: 'I never danced, but I used to go down [to the dance hall on

the pier] with my friends, we used to go down just to be in amongst there and sit in a

little recess and just watch everything—watch the world go by really. […] watching the

girls and boys dance.' (Derek, interview, August, 2015). In this way, the pier served the

town's youth population in much the same manner as parks, plazas or squares continue

to do in the UK's non-coastal areas, offering them a space distinct from the home or

work (or education) environment where they could congregate, intermingle and have

fun (see also Abbott-Chapman & Robertson, 2015).

Mary's description of the simple pavilion at the end of the Clevedon Pier that

served as the dance hall indicates that the lived experience and the culture built up

around the music and dancing over time were the main draw for the town's youth. This

was not a grand dance palace to pull in the tourists but it was functional. Mary describes

how the jukebox was a novelty at one point but soon became a whole way of life for

them. To an extent this leisure time revolved around the consumption of popular music

but, also, the routine of going out to these youth-focused spaces with friends. Previous

key studies of jukebox culture, perhaps most famously Richard Hoggart's work (1957),

have been both detached and negative in tone. As David Fowler (2008) comments,

Hoggart 'saw no good at all in the British teenager's interest in American popular music

[…] chiefly heard away from parents in the milk bars and coffee bars of provincial and

southern England' (p. 116). But, of course, the carving out of a youth space was the

whole point.

The interviewees above also comment on how the local culture formed because

it was accessible in terms of being affordable to young people. As Fowler (2008) notes,

it was during the inter-war years that the 'teenage consumer' (p. 115) emerged. And

then, in the post-war period, the American popular music industry established itself in

the British consumer market which fuelled particular formations and expressions of

youth culture. As teenagers, our interviewees would have had some disposable funds,

although not a lot, and the entertainment on the pier and hanging out in the cafes on the

seafront was relatively inexpensive: admission to the pier was 6*d*. It should be noted

though that for a commercial leisure culture, the drive for profitability was not very

strong. Derek comments: 'I wonder why the proprietor [of The Express cafe on the

seafront] allowed us to stay because we didn't spend any money really' (Derek,

interview, August, 2015). These findings point to the distinctly small-scale but steady

leisure economy of the modest seaside resort like Clevedon and, also, to the value of the

seafront establishments to the local youth.

As public youth spaces, seaside piers are simultaneously providers of

commercial youth leisure consumption and the spaces youth informally create

themselves by occupying them in a more organic or sporadic yet social way, and not

infrequently there are tensions around prescribed, proscribed and non-legitimate uses of

the space. Unsurprisingly then, some of the youth cultural experiences that occurred in

the post-war era were confrontational. The clashes between 'Mods' and 'Rockers' that

took place across several seaside resorts, like Brighton, Hastings and Margate, in the

1960s, and caused a moral panic in polite society, have shaped subsequent notions of

seaside culture in the south of England. Public opinion about these clashes was mainly

based on sensationalist journalistic reporting, as written about in Stanley Cohen's

seminal *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1973) and immortalized in the film

Quadrophenia (Roddam, 1979). These clashes were often simply spats between local

groups of youth. Altercations also occurred in small-scale but recurring challenges

between groups of youths about the claim to 'their' local pier. Our Clevedon

interviewees remember the 'Weston boys' from neighbouring seaside town Weston-

super-Mare causing trouble and minor vandalism, such as smashing lights down at the

pier. Norman narrates about his own experiences of the 'Weston boys' coming to

Clevedon:

> Well you know we were all down there—all—there were loads on that night. We were
>
> all told that the Weston boys were coming to sort the Clevedon boys out. And that's
>
> when somebody came running down the pier and said: the Weston boys are at the other
>
> end! […] but when we got to the end the police had locked all the gates up and chained
>
> them up and we couldn't get off. To get at them. And they ushered the Weston boys out
>
> of Clevedon. (Norman, interview, August, 2015).

This was very different from the clashes that gained media attention and resulted in the

allocation of extra police forces to coastal towns to clamp down on what was seen as

youth delinquency and disruption. Referring to these particular mass events, Fowler

(2008) writes, 'the Mod culture of the seaside resorts […] was hardly a culture at all' (p.

136) by which he means they were very temporary and loose gatherings. The vast

majority of the large numbers of youth that came together in clashes in Clacton,

Bournemouth, Hastings, Brighton, Margate and elsewhere, were not from these areas.

Unlike the rivalling local youth described above by our interviewees, they were

transient visitors travelling to the coast for the weekend and only coming into contact

with each other on this occasion. Also, each clash reported by the press involved almost

exclusively different people (Fowler, 2008, p. 138). The narratives collected from

Clevedon residents, who spent their teenage years on the pier and in the adjacent coffee

shops in the 1950s and 60s, show not only the significance these leisure spaces have had

to the local youth but also illustrate a very distinct local culture that was about *them*

rather than the visitors or tourists.

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Indeed, to various degrees the interviewees who spent their teenage years on the

pier in the 1950s and 60s felt they were part of something new that erupted in the

otherwise very quiet and genteel seaside resort. The following statement about

Clevedon Pier from Norman emphasizes this: '… it was rock 'n' roll! You can say that

that pier was just rock 'n' roll' (Norman, interview, August, 2015). Sartorially, youth

also marked themselves out as making their own culture, different from their parent's

generation, but not necessarily fitting the neat categories of youth fashion styles that

have been fixed in time from today's perspective looking back. Norman, again,

describes his dress style as emerging from the Ted era, and on a typical night out he

would wear: '[a] long jacket, black drainpipe trousers, tight, and beetle crushers', but

noting that he was not really part of Teddy boy culture: '[We were] not really Teds as

such then. Teds, really, were going out' (Norman, interview, August, 2015). The

mediation of teen styles in the 1950s and 60s no doubt contributed significantly to their

development and popularization. However, the flux between local seaside youth

cultures, such as those discussed here, and the commercially more important cities also

shaped the style and look of youth cultures. As described by interviewees in Archie

Lauchlan's documentary *Re: A Pier* (2016) about Hastings Pier, because of youth's

increased mobility there was a lot of going back and forth between London and

Hastings (and other seaside towns in the south-east, such as Eastbourne) and influences

were not one-directional. Influences, in terms of leisure, fashion and music were

brought back to the metropolis as well. Fashion entrepreneur Lloyd Johnston, for

example, describes growing up in early 1960s Hastings where he observed the

'hangover' from the trad jazz scene before embracing the local Mod style that led him

into London's clothing industry, first with a place in Kensington Market and, later, with a successful shop on the King's Road.

Lauchlan's research for his documentary repeatedly reveals how important Hastings Pier was to the development of local teens' sense of self and community via its vibrant music scene. The film gives a valuable insight into the significance of its former pier ballroom as a major music venue for a period of time that stretches beyond its rock 'n' roll heydays all the way up to the 1990s when it became a key venue for the UK's emerging rave scene. Alongside interviews with musicians and figures from the music industry, his discussions with locals who grew up in the coastal town paint a vivid picture of lived memories that include attending The Rolling Stones' concert in 1964—and seeing the band members smuggled to and from the pier in the back of an ambulance—and unexpectedly bumping into The Kinks' frontman Ray Davies at a cigarette machine post-show. As journalist David Quantick acknowledges in the film, it was 'extraordinary' that these big names played Hastings regularly 'when loads of major cities in Britain never saw these bands—and that's because Hastings was part of the ballroom scene circuit which was really […] the first rock circuit'. He continues, 'if you lived in Hastings you were seeing the best bands. It's unique. No other seaside town occupied such an important position in the history of British live music, and it's because of the pier'. Hastings thus challenges the easy assumption that all British seaside towns had a similar post-war entertainment offer (cf. Bull & Hayler, 2009)—a seasonal one that primarily served a visiting population—and, instead, stands out because it ensured its local audience was catered for all year round.

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It is notable, however, that the then youth population not only valued the pier for

hosting big names but also its commitment to inclusionary programming that

championed local bands up until its closure in 2007. For example, Lauchlan's research

includes an interview with Dave Carter who reveals that local band Factory was just as

much of a draw for him as The Spencer Davis Group whom they supported in 1973.

The significance of the pier's role in developing the local music scene is a theme that

also emerges in the roundtable discussion that followed our silent disco event in late

summer 2015. With a view to triggering strong memories about seaside leisure activity

in the post-war era, our compiled track listing focused solely on the most famous artists

that had performed on the pier—Jimi Hendrix, T-Rex, The Sex Pistols, Madness and so

on—but the participants voiced disappointment that local bands had been neglected.

This suggests that more localized music experiences and band interactions are equally

important to understanding the development of Hastings' music scene and its place

within the town's history of youth culture. These issues are precisely articulated when

the participants talk about their vision for the pier as a revived live music venue. One,

for example, states that the present-day live music scene should continue to draw from

the town's historical model: 'Every band, big band, generally had a local band for

support' (Group interview, September, 2015). Another participant expands with the

emphatic statement, 'That's a real Hastings thing' (ibid.), which tells us that the

interviewed local community see the history and position of the town as exceptional

within the UK live music scene not least because of this sustained emphasis on local

talent. This distinction complicates the above explanation that Hastings was 'unique'

due to its impressive accommodation of established and celebrated performers and,

rather, suggests that the town's uniqueness lies with how its many music venues—

including the pier's former ballroom—have long engaged its more immediate audience

by involving home-grown artists and promoting their spaces as a fundamental part of

the town's social fabric. The focus group's vocal approval on this point with its telling

employment of the word '*real*' also hints at how the Hastings locals feel that they

possess a true understanding of the town, one that is unavailable to outsiders no matter

how frequently they visit.

Youth ownership and a sense of belonging

In his consideration of how leisure identities are negotiated in place, David Crouch

(2015) asserts that '[s]pace where leisure is done can feel "belonged" through how we

express and feel' (p. 15). Drawing on the work of Andrew Radley (1995) and John

Wylie (2009), he continues that this 'ownership through living' is built upon multi-

sensual experiences where 'immanence and possibility draw practice and possibility of

spacetimes into remembering, presence, absence and loss' (Crouch, 2015, p. 15). His

reflections resonate with the collated oral history narratives of this research in that our

local interviewees frequently produced accounts of their youthful activities at the

seaside in terms of a haptic encounter centralizing upon the notion of a playful

navigation of space and, concordantly, a negotiation of their teenage leisure identity. At

Clevedon, for example, one interviewee vividly recalled how the pier planks proved

problematic for the high heels she wore to the 1960s dances (Jenny, interview, August,

2015), while at Hastings the roundtable discussion produced a lively recollection about

how the 1970s ballroom crowd would often stamp their feet to encourage an encore

from whoever was performing. An explanation of this communal performative act

unfolded as follows:

Participant One: […] everybody who was stamping their feet for an encore was doing it

in unison.

Various: Yeah [followed by murmurs of agreement]

Participant Two: Which was scary wasn't it?

Various: [Laughter]

Participant One: […] on the pier we were all doing it in rhythm, and so it was […] it was

quite something (Group interview, September, 2015).

Such accounts of togetherness are key to understanding the history of leisure at the

seaside, and the local residents' continued attachment to public areas, such as the pier,

that were particularly significant in facilitating their youthful pursuits and sense of

community. They emphasize how the interviewees' younger selves embraced the

peculiarities of the space and engaged in the arranged and improvised seaside

entertainment with all their senses, giving rise to embodied experiences that instilled a

deep sense of ownership which has not been lost over the decades. Formed by *living* in

the space, this kind of youth ownership can thus account for the financial commitment

many residents happily made as adults when they engaged in Clevedon and Hastings

Piers' community share schemes. As our vox pop interviews with Hastings Pier

shareholders in 2016 corroborate, the decision to take part in such schemes is fuelled by

'memories of what [the space] used to be' (Stephen, interview, May, 2016). Affective

engagement as a driver in such action is also evident on the public Facebook group

'Bands we have seen on Hastings Pier' (www.facebook.com/groups/196962362327/)

created around the time of the restoration. Here a nostalgic discourse dominates.

Members share memories, photos and memorabilia such as recordings and press

clippings. There is a fan hierarchy in place (Roberts & Cohen, 2014), dictated by a first-

hand lived experience of bands on the pier and specialized knowledge about the local

music scene that authenticates participants' attachment to the pier's cultural scene.

Members also fantasize about what the future pier could be like as a music venue—

expressed in comments such as: 'So is there going to be a ballroom on the new pier?

Wouldn't it be great to see some really big names come to Hastings?' Another

commentator muses that 'if Adele came to perform on the pier it would probably sink

due to the size of the audience'. This is said in the tone of everyday banter, for sure, but

also constitutes an example of aspirational imaginings for their local pier. In these

exchanges, the former pier is cast as something that gave the town an attractive image

but, also, as a more democratic venture serving a local audience whereas the plans for

the restored pier's design and amenities are perceived as excluding locals. This small

window on a wide-ranging and multilayered debate illustrates that a venture like a

community pier brings with it an array of ambiguous relationships and competing

agendas that reflect 'inequalities of resources and power' (Cairns, 2003) both culturally

and socioeconomically. However, it also shows the ways in which popular cultural

heritage can connect and engender communities.

The enthusiastic and, admittedly, romanticized recollections of past popular

music events at Clevedon and Hastings not only reveal how attachments to these seaside

resorts first formed for many locals, however. They also suggest how certain public

spaces encourage young individuals to connect with each other, forming a positive

sense of local community that includes an appreciation for collective leisure time. For

teenagers this may begin with performative group gestures, such as stomping in unison

at a gig, but it can be seen to develop into actions and interactions that demonstrate civic

responsibility and pride. Beyond recent engagement in the Hastings Pier's community

share scheme, the roundtable discussion revealed other ways in which the participants

have previously articulated their sense of belonging to a community and, accordingly, a

collective leisure identity. One key example occurs when the group discussed the pier's

former bar, the Gritti Palace.

Participant Five: The Gritti Palace was a huge part of my experience.

Participant Two: That was…

Various: [murmurs of agreement]

Participant Two: …that was a community. You know, the kind of, 150 people you got

                                the night it closed [in 2006] showed you that, didn't it? It was amazing.

                                (Group interview, September, 2015).

From one perspective, it is questionable how this highly nostalgic return to a sense of

past collectivity can be generative of a 'community pier' movement today. It suggests

that the locals' current togetherness is structured in terms of the loss of a communal

leisure space, rather than in its construction. However, the rhetoric on display here is

commonplace in diverse grassroots efforts; it is about generating the idea of an

otherwise dispersed critical mass coming together to challenge the generally dismissive

attitude to the value of the place. At Clevedon, the much smaller pier might not attract a

crowd of this size to their events, whether the jukebox dances of the past or the

'Summer Serenades' of the present (https://clevedonpier.co.uk/event/summer-

serenades-8-weeks-live-music/), but the importance of local community and collective

agency with regard to the town's leisure offer remains. Moreover, it too can be traced

back to the residents' teenage years on the pier when attendees at the 1960s dances had

to take joint responsibility for ensuring a constant supply of change for the coin-

operated jukebox.

For both our case study resorts then, leisure that centres around popular cultural activities on piers has clearly been significant in developing the local populations' sense of civic engagement from their teenage years onwards and facilitated an exciting post-war youth social scene outside the UK's major cities. Yet, as the Hastings roundtable discussion evidences, lively pier entertainment still sits alongside the more obvious everyday pleasures of the seaside resort. For one participant, the Gritti Bar on Hastings Pier was as much about a good place where 'you can watch the sun go down' as it was about music and drinking (Group interview, September, 2016). Another participant mentioned that the pier, in its 'community' manifestation, should be a space for more routine interactions: 'part of your daily life […] well maybe not daily life […] but, you know, […] to be able to come down and sit in a deck chair with a cup of tea' (Group interview, September, 2016). These diverse and opposing leisure activities return us to Corbin's theorization of the seaside's allure which, in part, relies upon the synthesis of the wild, always present in the unpredictable sea, and the tame achieved in part through aestheticizing the natural elements. The comments underscore that while piers have often been a focal point for the more spirited element of youth leisure and instrumental in solidifying the local population's sense of belonging, their function as social spaces for the quieter pleasures afforded by the seaside still requires protection as further development plans for these coastal resorts, and others like them, progress.

Concluding remarks

This article aimed to shift focus onto the leisure history and popular cultural heritage of local populations in British seaside resorts. We have deliberately sought to let a multitude of voices and sources do the work of narrating—both critically and fondly— what the entertainment and wider leisure culture of the seaside mean to local

communities. There is, of course, vast diversity, complexity and competing perspectives

in such accounts. Nevertheless, it is possible to conclude that seaside culture is not

simply a ready-made product available exclusively for tourist or visitor consumption.

Seaside leisure culture is produced and, also, consumed by 'locals'. Specific post-war

seaside youth cultures have been a focus in our research helping us understand how

coastal towns continue to survive in today's increasingly atomized world, which

includes recognition of how they pull heavily on the emotionally (as well as physically)

attached local community for support. In the different discussions, affectionate

memories and animated exchanges about seaside youth leisure in decades past goes

some way to explaining why so many residents have offered financial support to their

struggling areas, via the community pier ownership model, and, indeed, been so keen to

partake in this research. But, in light of the continued difficulties that British seaside

towns face today, and especially the migration of later generations who are not tied by

this rich history of youth entertainment, more research into how to sustain a strong local

identity and seaside culture is required. We advocate that better understanding of what

entertainments appealed in the past is one step forward to helping nurture the leisure

cultures of the seaside in the present and future.

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[1] This is a field dominated by a focus on British seaside history and architecture but Fred Gray's

work takes an international perspective with valuable detailed points about pier culture and

seaside entertainment in several North American resorts. Other work that seeks to broaden the

traditional focus includes Towner and Wall (1991), which takes in both European and North

American histories when framing seaside resorts from a leisure history perspective, and

Demars (1979), which is critical when thinking on how influential British seaside culture has

been on the North American seaside.

[2] At the start of the nineteenth century only Gravesend and Margate could be argued to have

provided seaside resorts for the middling-, let alone the working-, classes (Whyman, 1981) but

the development of the railways mid-century carried those lower down the social ladder in

ever increasing numbers (Walton, 1983; Walvin, 1978).

[3] We note that the dominance of the tourism perspective within leisure studies is not exclusive to seaside culture. The editors addressed this very issue in their call for articles for this special issue of *Leisure/Loisir*.

[4] See also our previously published work on seaside screenings for local audiences (Brydon & Jenzen, 2018).

[5] About 3,000 shareholders invested in the project and two thirds of these were local to Hastings (communityshares.co.uk/hastings-pier-charity/).

[6] Hastings Pier won the RIBA Stirling Prize in 2017.

[7] The call was put out via various local news outlets and attracted participants born in the 1940s and early 1950s. The recordings are now held in the Clevedon Pier and Heritage Trust community archive.

[8] The larger project entitled 'The People's Pier: The popular culture of pleasure piers and cultural regeneration through community heritage' ran in 2015–2016.

[9] Not all the participants in the Hastings roundtable discussion provided a name, so comments from this part of the research are typically referenced as 'Group interview'. However, in breaking down some of the discussion for further analysis we have had to resort to giving the unnamed participants numbers.

[10] From 2015 the town's brand has been 'Famously Hastings'.

[11] Listed structures are protected by law. They are monitored by Historic England, a public body predominantly funded by the British government's Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

[12] For an examination of the experiences of black and minority ethnic communities at the seaside and how racial exclusion operates in coastal resorts see Daniel Burdsey's research (2011, 2016). His work includes a consideration of how leisure activities and entertainment at the seaside 'promote exoticized orientalist representations of the ethnic or racial Other' (2011, p. 543), reinforced by and reinforcing the tourist gaze, combined with nostalgic representation of whiteness.
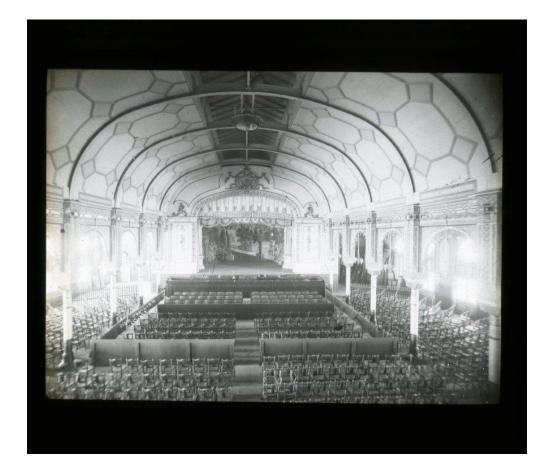
[13] Another interview with Norman also clearly situates the leisure time spent on the pier as a

teenage activity: 'The main age of us from there was 14 'til like 'til about 18 and then you was

in the pub or something like that' (Norman, interview, August, 2015).

[14] Although vending machines have a longer history, Coca-Cola machines were only introduced

to the market in the early 1960s. Regardless of the type of vending, the interviewee's comment

underscores that it was a very modest outfit and, for the purposes of our argument, that it was

affordable to young people.

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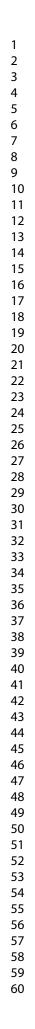5
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330x295mm (72 x 72 DPI)

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187x162mm (120 x 120 DPI)

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133x87mm (300 x 300 DPI)

87x89mm (300 x 300 DPI)