

## THE PURSUIT OF LEISURE

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The Sefton coast has been a place of recreation and recuperation since the late eighteenth century, attracting holiday-makers, convalescents, sportsmen and naturalists. Previously the twenty-mile stretch of marginal land between the Mersey and the Ribble was little valued and only thinly populated. High sand dunes bounded the coast to the west and further inland mossy wetlands made travel difficult and sometimes dangerous. The marshes around Martin Mere Lake, stretching from east to west, presented another major hazard and obstruction to travellers, famously parting 'many a man and his mare'.

Although Sefton has only existed as a borough since 1974, the area that it encompasses, broadly speaking from Southport to Bootle, has always been defined by its natural boundaries. Sefton's topography has closely dictated its history, though that may not be so obvious today, now that most of the wetlands have been drained and precisely ordered in the service of modern agriculture. Housing developments have also spread across the borough and where once two or three thousand people lived in scattered settlements, there are now homes for well over a quarter of a million people. Yet Sefton's coast is as changeable and as dynamic as it ever was, and nature is only held in check by the constant operation of pumping stations, the maintenance of a complex system of drainage channels and constant efforts to keep both the sand dunes and the encroaching sea in check.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the growth of major industrial centres like Preston, Wigan and Liverpool, the largely undeveloped sands and mosses of the Sefton coast became increasingly attractive as places of retreat and recreation. With Europe largely out of bounds during the Napoleonic wars, the British seaside had become a fashionable holiday destination for the aristocracy. The growing urban middle-class quickly followed suit, and sleepy little coastal villages like Bootle and Crosby found themselves overrun by holiday-makers, many of them gripped by the national craze for sea-bathing. They became spa towns and weekend resorts for Liverpool's growing population:

*'the middle classes, and the wealthy shopkeepers, have also their Brightons and Margates, in the sea villages of Bootle and Crosby Waterloo'*(1)

By 1855 thousands of day-trippers were visiting Bootle Bay, much to the dismay of contemporary writer Henry Grazebrook:

*'myriads of the unwashed from the purlieus of Liverpool, repair to this spot, and at high water advance boldly into the sea, male and female promiscuously, each supplied with a square of yellow soap.'*(2)

Bootle's tourist invasion was relatively short-lived. The lines of bathing huts and fashionable salt-water baths had to give way to the system of docks, warehouses and working-class housing, expanding ever outwards from Liverpool. One of the few reminders that Bootle was once described as 'the most popular bathing town on the Lancashire coast'(3) is the survival of Bath Street in the area later named Waterloo, now separated from the sea by Princes Dock. The American author Herman Melville described the dock in 1849 as part of 'a chain of immense fortresses',(4) separating the land from the sea.

With a growing, tightly-packed urban population and undeveloped land close by, it was only a matter of time before someone spotted an opportunity for profit. Relatively small, unorganized country leisure pursuits were about to become big business.

In 1836 William Lynn, a pub landlord at The Waterloo Hotel in Liverpool, persuaded the Earl of Sefton to host a hare-coursing event on recently drained farmland near Altcar. Hare-coursing and other blood sports were already popular in the area, with the Ridgway and South Lancashire Coursing Clubs meeting regularly in Southport. Other less organised events, such as bull-baiting, wild-fowling, otter and fox hunts and badger-baiting, were also very popular. Presented as a

spectacle for the masses, the Waterloo Cup became a national institution. It attracted nearly 20,000 visitors a day at the height of its popularity, and on one occasion the winner was presented to Queen Victoria. Lynn also popularised horse racing in the area, leasing land at Aintree from Lord Sefton in 1829 for a flat race meeting known as the Croxteth Stakes. In 1836 Lynn presented his first steeplechase race. Known as the Grand National since 1839, it's now one of the nation's premiere sporting events.

In 1847, a Parliamentary Bill was passed for the construction of the Liverpool, Crosby and Southport railway. With very few physical obstructions other than sand dunes and the River Alt to negotiate, it was built in the remarkable time of just three months. In July 1848 the locomotive 'Sefton' pulled a train from Waterloo to Southport, opening the coast for further development. A connecting line was opened towards Liverpool two years later. The coastal strip of land that had once been described by one of the major landowners as 'an unprofitable waste' was now within easy reach of the industrial towns of Lancashire.

Rather than creating dormitory towns for the working classes of Liverpool and Preston, the landowners of Sefton hoped that the railway would prompt the development of exclusive residential villas, 'in which the 'merchant princes' may spend their leisure hours in some ease and retirement'. Development was slow and surprisingly cautious throughout the 1850s and '60s. It was the spread of a new leisure craze in the 1870s that eventually fuelled the eagerly awaited building boom along the coast.

In *Links Along the Line*, local historian and keen golfer Harry Foster, traced the close connection between the major land-owning families, railway companies and groups of enthusiastic sportsmen who created an unrivalled series of golf clubs stretching from Liverpool to Southport. Property along the coast was in the hands of very few landowners, principally the Blundells of Crosby Hall and the Weld-Blundells of Ince Blundell to the south and the Heskeths and Scarisbricks in the north. All had major share-holdings in the railways, and they were able to dictate the routes of the railway lines through otherwise unproductive sand hills and rabbit warrens. They could also control the size and nature of housing developments and, with the landowners favouring middle-class villas, conditions were ideal for the creation of numerous golf courses along the line of coastal sand dunes.

Links courses, like the earliest Scottish golf courses at Musselburgh and St. Andrews, are found in rough, grassy areas between the land and the sea. Ideally the soil should be sandy and free-draining so that play is possible almost all year round. Scottish businessmen based in Liverpool found the conditions along the north-west coast to be perfect, creating their first course at Hoylake near Liverpool in 1869. Members of the Royal Liverpool club at Hoylake then founded the West Lancashire club at Blundellsands in 1873. The game initially attracted ridicule, with players characterised as 'demented Scotchmen playing old man's hockey', (5) but it thrived among Sefton's professional and business communities, with the number of courses running well into double figures by the early twentieth century.

Today over twenty-five per cent of the surviving dune systems on the Sefton coast are occupied by golf courses. Only about a third of most courses are clipped and trimmed into fairways and putting greens, the remaining land providing a significant amount of protection for rare and endangered species. Over two hundred and twenty plant species, including the Marsh Helleborine, Bee and Pyramidal Orchids, have been recorded at West Lancashire golf course, (6) while important species like Petalwort and rare creatures such as the Natterjack Toads and Sand Lizard thrive at Royal Birkdale.

The coming of the railway also meant a dramatic increase in the number of day-trippers to the coast. Southport had begun to develop as a seaside resort from about 1792, when William Sutton, a pub landlord from Churchtown known as the Old Duke, built a bathing shelter in the sand dunes at South Hawes. Five years later Mrs Walmsley opened a guesthouse called 'Belle Vue', prompting Sutton to open the South Port Hotel in 1798. The hotel was thought to be so remote from Churchtown and the journey by donkey cart over the sand dunes so difficult, that the hotel was known as Duke's Folly. Sutton was very quickly proved right however as the area began to attract inns, lodging houses, assembly rooms and baths over the next decade. Sea bathing was already popular at Churchtown, where the annual 'Big Bathing Sunday' fair attracted people

from up to twenty miles away, many of them arriving on the Leeds and Liverpool canal which brought travellers to Scarisbrick, just over four miles away. The quality of the sand was much better suited to bathing at South Hawes, or Southport as it was known by 1805. It was further away from the relatively muddy Ribble Estuary and the area was repeatedly spoken of as a fashionable resort during the first decade of the nineteenth century.

By 1848 the imminent arrival of the railway in Southport, bringing with it an influx of new residents and day-trippers, was eagerly anticipated by the town's shopkeepers and traders. Canal boats and stagecoaches were about to be superseded, it was said, by a mode of transport 'combining the speed of lightning with the comfort of a chair at your own home'. (7) It was a worrying development however for some of the earlier, wealthier residents who resented the intrusion on their privacy. At first the attractions of visiting the seaside had been relatively staid and genteel. They were listed in an 1848 guide to the town as 'promenading, riding, sailing, botanising, bathing, shopping and lounging in the bazaars and libraries', (8) with local fishermen operating the bathing machines, providing donkey rides and boat trips along the coast. Now large-scale special events and activities were being organised annually to promote tourism and as early as 1835 the Southport Regatta attracted over 5000 visitors. A correspondent to the Southport Visiter objected that the Regatta was:

*'a scheme to collect all the rubbish of the country together ... which will entirely supersede the intent and meaning of this place of retirement and quietness.'* (9)

The American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne stayed in Southport with his family in 1856 and '57, finding it to be more of a noisy tourist trap than a fashionable spa:

*'from morning till night, comes a succession of organ-grinders, playing interminably under your window; and a man with a bassoon, and a monkey... and wandering minstrels, with guitar and voice; and a highland bagpiper, squealing out a tangled skein of discord, together with a highland maid who dances a hornpipe; and Punch and Judy; in a word, we have specimens of all manner of vagrancy that infests England.'* (10)

The popularity of the town continued to grow and by 1880 it was the third most popular resort in Britain, the class war that had characterised its early development continuing to shape its physical layout. J. Ernest Jarratt, Southport's Town Clerk from 1900 to 1930, recorded how, in the 1890s, the hedges surrounding the new Marine Park were thickly planted with the intention 'of hiding from the view of the Promenade the very unsightly donkey run and fairground'. (11) The individual fairground attractions were moved to the southern edge of the Marine Park and eventually brought together as the Pleasureland development in 1922. As the new Town Clerk, Mr Perrins, said in 1933, 'Those who desired the quieter holiday came to Southport'. (12)

We think of the rebranding of towns and resorts as a relatively modern concept but the Sefton coast, and Southport in particular, has consciously refashioned its identity many times in the last 200 years. In the mid-1820s Southport was being described as 'The Montpellier of England'. The French University town was a centre for advanced medical research and there was a very conscious attempt by Southport's councillors and medical professionals to adopt the identity of a health resort, as Margate had done very successfully as early as 1750. By the middle of the nineteenth century Southport was widely known as 'England's Seaside Garden City', because of its many parks, gardens, tree-lined avenues and the town's extensive private gardens. This slogan was still in use on railway posters well into the 1940s and was recently revived along with a new more generic description, 'The Classic Resort'.

As the sea noticeably retreated from Southport in the 1890s, and the beach silted up with sand and sediment dredged from the Ribble and the Mersey, the Corporation focused on the town itself and manmade attractions, adopting the tourist slogan 'Southport for a Holiday in Wintertime'. Fortunino Matania's iconic designs for tourism posters in the late 1920s feature the elegant art deco Garrick theatre, a Venetian regatta on the Marine Lake, the newly opened Sea Bathing Lake and shopping on Lord Street. The streets of Southport also became home to a new breed of wealthy motoring enthusiast at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1903 the Southport Motor Club met for the first time outside the Scarisbrick Arms in their experimental vehicles. A circular racecourse was devised taking in the Promenade and Lord Street but it

eventually proved too disruptive to trade. Racing and speed trials then moved on to the beach at Birkdale and Ainsdale. Henry Segrave famously broke the world land speed record on the beach in 1926, while the marathon 100-mile race in the 1920s attracted up to 100,000 spectators in its heyday. Motor racing on the sands continued to be a major attraction throughout the 1930s with bandleader Billy Cotton winning the 100-mile race in 1937.

The gentler pursuits of bird-watching and walking have come back into fashion in recent years with the establishment of nature reserves at Marshside, Ainsdale and Freshfield, as well as numerous nature trails and coastal walks. The 'greening' of Southport beach is regretted by many as a movement away from the traditional bucket-and-spade image of a seaside resort, though the spread of salt marsh and the formation of new dune systems are changes that can be mitigated or adapted to but not effectively controlled. The arrival of Antony Gormley's sculptural installation *Another Place* at Crosby beach in 2005, one hundred silent, naked figures, set against the backdrop of Bootle docks, the distant Welsh hills, off-shore windmills and passing container ships, offers an eloquent commentary on our continuing relationship with a coastal landscape that we can set a mark upon but never entirely master.

#### Endnotes

1. Granville, A. B. (1841) *The Spas of England and Principal Sea-bathing Places*. London: Henry Colburn, p.18.
2. Grazebrook, H. (1855) *Lights Along the Line*. Liverpool: Edward Howell, p.37.
3. Bailey, F. A. (1955) *A History of Southport*. Southport: Angus Downie, p.32.
4. Melville, H. (1849) *Redburn, His First Voyage*. London: Richard Bentley, p.124.
5. Coyne, B. (2008) *The West Lancashire Golf Club*. Liverpool: Custom Print, p.1.
6. *Ibid*, p.176.
7. Robinson, F. (1848) *A Descriptive History of the Popular Watering-Place of Southport*. London: Arthur Hall & Co, p.49.
8. *Ibid*, p.43.
9. Bailey, F. A. (1955) *A History of Southport*. Southport: Angus Downie, p.163.
10. *Ibid*. p.167.
11. Jarratt, J. E. (1932) *Municipal Recollections: Southport 1900 to 1930*. London, p.11.
12. Bailey, F. A. (1955) *A History of Southport*. Southport: Angus Downie, p.171.