

The beach 19th century



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'The seaside was never a place of escape — it has always been a place with its own strict codes of behaviour.' Do you agree? What is meant by a code of behaviour? This is a question that can be applied to the way we act and present ourselves in every environment and situation that we find ourselves in daily. What may be socially acceptable to one group may well be frowned upon or even vilified by others. Our behaviour within society has almost certainly changed from generation to generation and a good indicator for this has been the perceived behaviour and appearance when on holiday by the seaside. The way the British and European populace has dress for the beach has been dictated by two main factors, our class back ground and generation timelines. When trips to the beach for recreation reasons were first undertaken it was very much only the middle and upper classes within society who could afford to do so. It was therefore the elite members of the populace that set the standards of behaviour and bearing that were to be expected. As we will see later, it was only when the working and lowers classes began to undertake trips to seaside resorts, that these standards were to be compromised. Class has also been a good indicator of the attire that one wears. During the late 19th century all classes of society used the way they presented at the beach to achieve two main aims: to feel special and also to impress their friends and strangers (Place and Leisure p. 133). People would certainly use their class status and therefore dress to impress. Upper and middle classes appeared too overdressed and they could afford to do so. The working or lower classes could afford to be less choosy and often wore their best working or Sunday clothes. It was therefore possible to see many forms of dress on the main promenade and the beach itself. William Porters 1965 guide to Blackpool points out that all walks of life can be seen

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walking, sitting, reclining and riding ' in every variety of costume along the sands and parade above' (Place and Leisure p133). We clearly then have firm evidence that in the later stages of the 19th century that there was an expected form of dress, set by the higher classes within society, that all visitors were expected to conform to. This can be almost compared to as a form of uniform as uniformity was the least expected. We can clearly see evidence of the formal types of dress codes in the several of the paintings and pictures contained in the resources Illustration Booklet provide for the course. Let's first of all look at the painting by Edouard Manet (Plate 4. 4. 16 p. 113). The image that he has created perfectly displays the attitude of late 19th beach wear. The females in the painting are almost dressed for a formal occasion. The children are in no way less dressed and give the impression that their attire is more akin to Sunday school than a day of fun at the beach. There is an obvious lack of flesh on display which is in line with the prudish nature of adults during that era. They have in no way compromised what they wear to accommodate the weather conditions. There is no thought of removing clothes to cool down but an obvious use of paroles by both male and females to keep the heat of the sun at bay. If we then move on to the black and white photographs taken by an unknown photographer of the crowds at Margate beach (Plate 4. 4. 23 p. 120) and the picture taken by Rischgitz of the donkeys and crowds on Blackpool beach (Plate 4. 4. 24 p. 121) we seen no compromise in their clothing in the 30 years beyond Manet painting. There are some signs that there is a degree of cultural divergence in the two pictures, what we assume as the north/south divide today. There is a more middle class feel to the Margate picture, the cut of their clothes is better and the activity, watching a band perform, is more formal than the

activities a Blackpool. Both pictures have also been taken at the height of the industrial revolution, a time when the north of England was filled with “dark satanic mills” and the working classes were actively encouraged to “escape the clogs, smoke and grime” (Figure 4. 17 p. 152) of the industrial towns and cities and spend their newly found wealth in resorts such as Blackpool. Working class families now had money to spend and the means to travel around the country. During the inter and post Second World War periods there was a clear shift towards a more informal dress code at the beach. The seaside was still a place to dress to impress but there was much more flesh now on show as can be clearly seen by the 3 generations of a working class family (Figure 4. 8 p. 135, Place and Leisure) posing on the beach. There was still a degree of formality with many who took to the beach and as with the grandfather figure in the picture; some habits are hard to break. Why was there this shift in the way we dressed, especially post war? The social standing of woman in society could very well have a direct influence on this. Women over the age of 30 got the right to vote in 1918 and they went on to receive equal voting rights to men in 1928 (Dalal, 2010, p. 95 and p. 98). Roles undertaken by women during the war (Drifte, 2011) gave them a degree of liberation and their own voice. We can see clear evidence of the new culture of women’s beach wear in Shanklin on the Isle of Wight in 1926 (Figure 4. 12 p. 141) during the inter war period and the beach models in 1955 (Figure 4. 14 p. 143) post Second World War. The exposed expanses of flesh are in stark contrast to what people had seen before but it is obvious that the women present are merely conforming to the beach dress code of the time. Music has often influenced our view of the seaside. The Beach Boys certainly gave the impression that a fun time could

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be had and the Who are often associated with blood and violence. How then have two differing styles of music have an influence on our perceived behaviour of what it is like to go to the beach? The Beach boys While we have seen how music creates an idyllic atmosphere, behaviour at the beach cannot just be judged by the way in which we dress and present ourselves. The period during the 1960's saw seaside resorts not just a place to get away from it all, but as weekend and bank holiday battlegrounds. Influenced by differing musical cultures, Mods and Rockers would descend, mainly into southern seaside resorts, to dispel the idea that holiday destinations were solely for fun and relaxation. Fashion, social standing and drugs were all part of the tribalism mix that " smeared the traditional postcard scene with violence and blood" (Daily Express, 19th May 1964) on the beaches of Margate and Brighton. The impact of the violent clashes had a deep a far reaching impact on British society. Who wanted to sit enjoying the sun and ice-cream only to be disturbed by rampaging young British men whose main disagreement was whether the Who or Elvis produced the better rock music? Mods and Rockers had no respect for the traditions of the seaside and the government of the time came down hard on the offenders (On this Day 18th May BBC News Website) with many receiving lengthy prison sentences. The question remains how two different factions could be driven to violence over there choice of music and clothes and whether this violent turn of events would be the new standard of behaviour that was to be expected on our visits to the seaside. In conclusion then we can see that the seaside was a place to escape your normal daily routine and an opportunity that was afforded only to middle and upper classes. They abided by a code of conduct that dictated both dress and behaviour. Over the years and with the ability of

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the lower class to experience the joy the seaside resorts, this code of conduct has been eroded to the standards that we see today.