

**Modernism, postmodernism and the decline of British seaside resorts as long  
holiday destinations: a case study of Rhyl, North Wales**

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# **Modernism, postmodernism and the decline of British seaside resorts as long holiday destinations: a case study of Rhyl, North Wales**

## **Abstract**

This paper premises that late twentieth century changes to culture impacted upon the demand for and supply of the constituent tourism resources of British seaside resorts in such a way as to facilitate their decline as mass market, long holiday destinations. It begins by reviewing the current state of knowledge pertaining to seaside resort development, noting the tendency to present this as an evolutionary process and the corresponding emphasis placed on competition and resource depletion as reasons for decline, factors that are synonymous with the consolidation, stagnation and post-stagnation phases of the tourist area life cycle. Accordingly, it contends that academics have been slow to engage with the root causes underpinning the diminished popularity of traditional tourist destinations, notably the recent and revolutionary transformations associated with economic restructuring and, especially, cultural change. Using a case study of Rhyl, a traditional cold-water resort on the North Wales coast, the paper demonstrates the influence of the latter by associating significant and unfavourable modifications to (and attitudes towards) the resort's built environment since the 1960s with characteristics salient to the emergent cultural formation of postmodernism, and its predecessor modernism, as explained in a review of relevant literature. The social theory used to inform this analysis, and the empirical evidence of Rhyl's decline presented in the paper, together represent an attempt to move beyond simplistic notions of a resort lifecycle.

**Keywords:** cultural change, modernism, postmodernism, Rhyl, seaside resort decline, tourist area life cycle

## **Introduction**

The seminal contributions of Gilbert (1939) Pimlott (1947), Walvin (1978), Walton (1983) and Travis (1993) are among a number of works dealing with the historical development of the British seaside resort, that is, as a holiday destination principally, though not exclusively, for the working classes of nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain. They do much to promote an understanding of how the ‘extraordinary’ physical attributes of the coastal environment (i.e. the beach, the sea, the clean air, the surrounding topography, the indigenous flora and fauna) were complemented by a succession of high-capacity, formulaic and, for their time, cutting-edge man-made facilities (e.g. piers, promenades, fairgrounds, ballrooms, gardens and the like), to create a setting conducive to ‘rational recreation’ a discourse originating in the Victorian era that promoted physical, mental and spiritual invigoration through wholesome and constructive amusement, whilst affording some scope for inverting accepted codes of conduct (c.f. Shields 1990, on the beach as a liminal zone). Until recently, and the publication of Shaw and Williams (1997), Morgan and Pritchard (1999) and Walton (2000), the scope and significance of the above-named works were not matched by the literature pertaining to the late twentieth century period, where the emphasis switched from growth and prosperity to decline and attempted rejuvenation. Indeed, with one or two exceptions (see below), there has been a tendency amongst those few academics that have engaged with this area to focus upon the most obvious reasons for the diminishing fortunes of these traditional cold-water destinations (principally competition and resource depletion) and ground such explanations within the framework of Butler’s (1980) tourist area life cycle, as exemplified by Cooper (1990, 1997), Goodall (1992) and Agarwal (1997a). This ascribes a certain

inevitability to resort decline that overlooks the prospect of those circumstances underpinning it being revolutionary, not evolutionary, in nature (Butler 1994). Such works, in turn, do little to tackle the *root causes* particular to this phenomenon, not least recent and wholesale changes to the British public's way of life (a possibility first mooted by Urry 1990).

Hence, the research reported in this paper aims to deal with something of a 'blind spot' in the continually expanding body of knowledge pertaining to seaside resort decline and rejuvenation that emanates from the preoccupation of previous works with lifecycles as a means of explaining the rise and fall of traditional tourist places, thereby exaggerating the significance of destination-specific factors. It is, however, by no means the first to refocus attention on the wider circumstances in which resorts exist and compete. For example, Agarwal (2002: 48) considers the relevance of the restructuring thesis, and the corresponding transition from Fordist to post-Fordist forms of production and consumption, to the causes and consequences of decline and the strategies that seek to address it, concluding that 'decline is the outcome of [the] interaction of internal and external forces; the latter intensify the competitiveness of market conditions, while the former diminishes the competitiveness of a destination'. Similarly, Gordon and Goodall (2000) borrow from the 'localities' tradition in relating the role of agglomeration and clustering processes within the tourism industry to the recent shift in much tourist activity away from specialised resorts in Britain, as mitigated by local labour market and governance issues. The tourist area life cycle features prominently in both works, although they are to be commended for using the model as a companion to a more sophisticated analysis of the macro and micro structures that account for variations in trajectories of resort development, post-

stagnation. However, each is guilty of an implicit economic determinism that is the hallmark of much human geography, and which overstates the significance of 'material' processes operating within society at the expense of the 'immaterial' concerns of culture and cultural change. Indeed, as Urry (1997: 103) argues, explanations based upon the existence of a resort lifecycle and/or competition from other tourist places invariably fail to 'sufficiently interrogate changes in fashion, style and taste which have transformed British social life in the past few decades'.

Correspondingly, the paper observes the premise underlying Gordon and Goodall's (2000: 290) manifesto for a 'research agenda on the interaction between tourism as an economic activity and the character of places in which this activity is or has been significant', namely that much is to be gained by applying theoretical and empirical insights drawn from more 'mainstream' sub-disciplines of human geography to studies of tourism, but *not* their prescription as to which particular geographies should provide those insights (i.e. economic and urban). Rather, it is inspired by recent developments in cultural geography, specifically the notion of landscape as 'text' (embodying the 'ideas, practices, and contexts constituting the culture which created it', Ley 1985: 419; see also Urry 1994 on a complementary agenda for tourism research), albeit without taking up the ideas of humanism that underpin the so-called 'cultural turn'. It seeks to demonstrate how late twentieth century changes to culture or, more specifically, the transition from modernism to postmodernism as dominant cultural formations or experiences, impacted upon the demand for and supply of the constituent tourism resources of British seaside resorts in such a way as to facilitate their decline as mass market, long holiday (i.e. 4+ nights) destinations. In doing so, the paper responds to Davis's (2001: 127) call for a more socio-theoretical approach

to tourism research, in which he suggests that '[p]ost-modern social theories provide researchers with a framework for understanding the mechanisms that are occurring in, and shaping, tourism landscapes'.

The review element of the paper is split into two sections, the first detailing the accepted causes and consequences of resort decline and the second reinterpreting the recent history of the British seaside resort as a product of the dynamic relationship between cultural change and tourist practices (see Urry 1994). This is followed by a case study of Rhyl, a traditional and highly typical 'sun and fun' destination on the North Wales coast. Here, the intention is to provide some empirical evidence of resort decline, in the absence of reliable longitudinal data on the volume and value of tourism within any one British seaside destination, by identifying significant and unfavourable modifications to the resort's built environment over the course of the late twentieth century (notably in respect of land use, cover and value). Furthermore, explanations for these modifications will consider the relevance of characteristics salient to the emergent cultural formation of postmodernism, and its predecessor modernism, thereby respecting Cooke's (1987) assertion that 'it is impossible to understand universal processes [e.g. cultural change] without appreciating small scale local changes, given the inevitable spatiality of social life' (cited in Agarwal 1997b: 139). At this juncture, it should be noted that the choice of case study would be an irrelevance if places simply emulated these 'universal processes', as the same patterns would be replicated in each and every potential candidate. However, changes to culture *per se* articulate with, and are articulated via, indigenous social structures thereby manifesting themselves in ways unique to the place in question, but which can be attributed to the same 'generative mechanisms' (after Bhaskar 1978, 1979) as

changes noted in other places (see Massey 1984 and Cooke 1989 on localities and restructuring). When taken to its logical conclusion, this may even mark the distinction between success and failure, as suggested by Shaw and Williams (1997: 13):

The reason why one resort prospers and another is in crisis is due to the complex interaction of global and national shifts in culture and the economics of the tourism industry, and the way that these interact with the local dimensions of culture, class images, the built environment created by previous rounds of investment, and the capacity of both the local state and private investors to adapt to change.

### **The decline of the British seaside resort as a long holiday destination**

Between 1979 and 1988, visitor nights spent at British seaside resorts declined by 39 million, or 27 per cent (Wales Tourist Board 1992). Of the various reasons advanced by works such as Middleton (1989) and Cooper (1997) for this relatively swift and unexpected trend, the following are cited with the greatest frequency:

- the emergence of competition from overseas resorts offering virtually guaranteed sunshine, facilitated by the development of jet aircraft thereby reducing journey times and the widespread availability of easy-to-book and comparatively inexpensive package holidays that are organised, distributed and aggressively promoted by vertically-integrated tourism operations;



- the growing range of alternative places to visit within Britain itself (e.g. urban areas, the countryside, theme parks and holiday villages), which have captured much of the recent growth in short breaks (1-3 nights), this being associated with an increase in car ownership and the accompanying prospect of multi-centre holidays incorporating destinations far removed from rail/bus termini;
- the deteriorating quality, not to mention unsuitability, of resort amenities and infrastructures that were built for the 1880s, not 1980s;
- a ‘loss of tourism function’, especially with regards to the closure of unprofitable visitor attractions and a reduction in serviced accommodation stock (as hotels and guest houses are converted to other uses or abandoned altogether); and
- a negative place image.

Pertinently, it is debatable as to whether the above are causes of resort decline or mere symptoms. Either way, they are bound up in simple, yet compelling, cause and effect relationships that occupy a surface ontology, which much of the debate on the contemporary condition of traditional cold-water resorts has failed to penetrate. One might detect in this assertion a realist philosophy (as outlined by Collier 1994 and May 2001), a concern for underlying structures of relevance that exist without necessarily being known to us.

It should be added that some resorts have fared better than others (as acknowledged in the introduction to this paper), prompting Walton (2000) to question whether the British seaside, as least as an ‘institution’, has declined at all. That said, theorists have identified several characteristics common to all resorts as places that leave them susceptible to the above, principally *seasonality*, *spatial fixity* and *peripherality*. In the

first instance, all but the smallest and most foolhardy of potential investors have been put off by the likelihood of slim returns on their capital during the off season, although resort businesses have experienced some success in enhancing these through differential pricing (Seaton and Bennett 1996), the recruitment of labour on temporary contracts (Ball 1989) and a variety of other measures aimed at ‘spreading the season’ (see Baum and Lundtorp 2001). At least in the past, a few profitable summer months would have sustained a resort through a lean winter. Now people are free to spend their annual vacation and their money elsewhere, suggesting a second problem. Whereas the supply of tourist experiences tends to be fixed to particular places and slow to respond to changing economic and socio-cultural conditions, the demand for them is most certainly not (Hall and Page 2002; Shaw and Williams 2002). The growing taste for more exotic, remote and unspoilt destinations (initially patronised by wealthier tourists who are later emulated, and consequently displaced, by lower-order market segments), together with the means of reaching them, has led to the relocation of the pleasure periphery (‘the tourist belt which surrounds the great industrialized zones of the world’, Turner and Ash 1975: 11-2) away from the cold waters and capricious climate of north-west Europe. Ironically, resorts share many of the characteristics of peripheral places (with the possible exception of those adjacent to large urban centres, which to varying degrees have been subsumed into the core), notably an underdeveloped manufacturing base and a monostructured local economy, their distance from the main areas of economic production and consumption making the distribution of goods and services costly, thus deterring entrepreneurial interest and closing-off certain opportunities for diversification (see Botterill *et al.* 2000).

Much has been done with regards to rehabilitating and repositioning traditional resorts through various product- and market-oriented initiatives (see Agarwal 2002: 45 for some destination-specific examples), whilst beach boredom and concerns over the link between exposure to the sun and skin cancer threaten to challenge the British appetite for short-haul 'summer sun' holidays (Curtis 1997). However, even allowing for the above, the majority of seaside resorts in Britain have struggled to recapture all but a relatively small proportion of lost trade, suggesting that the future of these destinations lies not (solely) with tourism but with industrial and commercial activities that complement their physical and human resource bases (Baum 1998), although this is not an easy decision for any resort to take, as recognised by Cooper (1997).

### **Implications of late twentieth century cultural change**

If we are to understand the process of cultural change and its relevance to the decline of the seaside resort, it is first necessary to explain (insofar as it is possible) what is meant by 'culture'. Adding substance to his claim that culture is one of the 'two or three most complicated words in the English language', Williams (1983: 87, 90) suggests that there is not one, but three, suitable applications of the term:

1. as *high culture*, where only those objects or events deemed to be of sufficient taste or distinction are recognised;
2. as a given society's *way of life*, which encompasses the traditions, practices and values of its constituent members, regardless of their status; and

3. as that part of society concerned with the *production, circulation and exchange of meaning* (as expressed through signs, texts and discourse).

By way of simplification, Barker (2000: 383) provides a useful definition of culture that excludes the first (thus reflecting contemporary cultural studies' preoccupation with ordinary, rather than elite, concerns) and amalgamates the second and the third, namely: '[t]he production and exchange of meanings, or signifying practices, which form that which is distinctive about a way of life'. Unless prefixed by the word 'high', all references to culture in this paper should be understood accordingly.

The relationship between culture and the economy is problematic but worth elaborating. One approach is to view culture as the symbolic expression of material economic processes (e.g. the profit motive and class relations). Similarly, social analysts have used culture to account for, or excuse, those variations that remain after 'rational' economic explanations have run their course (Duncan and Ley 1993: 12). The counter-approach considers the economy to be determined by culture (e.g. the economic dependency of the nations of the Indian Subcontinent and Latin America upon the British and North American tastes for tea and coffee). Either way, to treat both as separate entities: one dominant, one subordinate; is unhelpful. Rather, we should be concerned with how they interact (Crang 1998: 6-7).

Although far from uncontested, there is a growing consensus that Western society has witnessed a profound and far-reaching cultural transformation, rooted in the post-war 'baby boom' and the economic difficulties that followed the oil crisis of 1973/74, and leading to the restructuring of many of its texts and practices. As regards the

nomenclature, ‘modernity’ and ‘postmodernity’ are terms that are commonly used to refer to the historical periods either side of this transformation (although there are problems in conceptualising such a ‘clean break’, see Ritzer and Liska 1997), whereas ‘modernism’ and ‘postmodernism’ are taken to be the cultural formations, artistic and architectural styles, and philosophical and epistemological positions, which prevailed during these periods (Barker 2000: 130-1). Suffice to say, definitions of postmodernism regularly play on its contrast with modernism which, as a cultural formation or experience, is said to have been shaped by the four institutions of modernity (as identified by Giddens 1990), namely *industrialism* (the transformation of the natural into the man-made), *surveillance* (the control of information flows and social supervision), *capitalism* (a form of production predicated on private ownership and the pursuit of profit by extracting surplus value from workers) and *military power* (the emergence of the nation-state). The resultant ‘structure of feeling’ (Williams 1981) is not an easy one to conceptualise, for there are two aspects to modernism, one displaying ‘an optimistic faith in the power of science, rationality and industry to transform our world for the better’ and the other beset by ‘change, ambiguity, doubt, risk, uncertainty and fragmentation’ (Barker 2000: 134, 387), prompting Berman (1982: 15) to offer this highly pertinent insight:

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and our world – and at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.

In his analysis of postmodern culture and the repositioning of tourist practices, Urry (1994) identifies five key processes (based upon the earlier work of Harvey 1989), which may be paraphrased as follows. Firstly, there has been the substitution of a culture of *writing and substance* with one of *image and surface meaning*, mainly due to the ‘mediatization’ of the material and symbolic aspects of any given way of life and the relative ease by which they may be mechanically and electronically reproduced so as to be gazed upon by others. Secondly, there has been a transformation of time, from the orderly and regulatory mechanism of clock-time (e.g. ‘the working week’, ‘time as money’) to the compression of spatially and temporally diverse events into the ‘here and now’ (as in the case of rolling news programmes or surfing the Internet). Otherwise known as *instantaneous time*, this is responsible for a number of latter day products, such as fast food, late availability holidays and cable television. Thirdly, *consumption and play* are increasingly relevant to the formation of social identity, instead of the once-dominant influences of occupation and the home, leading to increasingly flexible, fragmented, transient and dissident identities with less established and routine patterns of (travel) behaviour. Fourthly, production and consumption within developed economies has become *post-Fordist* in character, as a shift in employment from manufacturing to service and information industries (i.e. the rise of the service classes), has seen the dissipation of associated work and leisure practices (these being essentially communal in nature), the partial rejection of ‘inflexible’ and ‘inauthentic’ products developed for mass publics, an improved standard of living in and attitude towards the former manufacturing towns and cities, and the nostalgic veneration of traditional working life inspired by a sense of loss. Finally, there is a resistance to the globalising and homogenising effects of modernity through *localisation*, which has seen a growing interest in (past) place(s), as

demonstrated by the preservation of indigenous urban heritage and the popularity of certain sections of the countryside as a place to visit (Urry 1990). Indeed, in an era of footloose capital, localities are forced to differentiate themselves from one another, usually by making symbolic associations with events, institutions and figures from popular history and culture (e.g. the branding of Hastings and its immediate environs as '1066 Country'). These five processes are, in turn, underpinned by two fundamental social trends, namely the de-differentiation of distinct spheres of social life under postmodernism (e.g. work, leisure, class and gender identities, high and popular culture, the past and the present, etc; see Lash and Urry 1987 and Lash 1990), and the development of global capitalism to such an extent that the distinction between the economy and culture is lost, so that signs are no longer simply 'symbolic expressions' but also 'expressive symbols' used in the marketing and exchange of commodities (Gottdiener 1995: 27).

Although these are rather abstract developments, they have some very real and serious consequences for tourism in general (e.g. the penchant for international travel amongst the image- and status-conscious service classes, brought closer to home and within budget by time-space compression) and the British seaside resort specifically (e.g. by signalling the end of its monopoly of domestic tourism flows). With regards to the latter, the shift from *blue-collar* to *white-collar* employment, and the associated weakening of 'group' (i.e. that which identifies one social class from another) and 'grid' (the system of classification, particular to each social class, that associates certain times and spaces with certain activities and experiences, some 'good', some 'bad'), has profound implications for a place that was designed in the main to appeal to the proletariat, as a panacea for the oppressive conditions of the urban industrial

environment (Urry 1990). To the ‘new petty bourgeoisie’, as Bourdieu (1984) calls them, the British seaside is ‘tasteless’ and ‘common’, as are allied consumables such as fish and chips (notwithstanding the occasional trade-off, e.g. cream teas are sold in abundance at the seaside, yet find favour because they can ‘be successfully annexed to the “countryside tradition” and thereby discussed with enthusiasm rather than embarrassment’, Voase 1995: 70). In addition, the unique character of the seaside resort (a product of geographic location and the novel manner in which pleasure was experienced) has been compromised, not only because of *overt* environmental degradation, which itself is problematic since consumption is becoming more influenced by aesthetics than reason, but also due to the use of new (analogue and, increasingly, digital) technologies to reconstruct its most popular features in other places that are repositioning themselves as visitor destinations. This can be seen with the Center Parcs Holiday Villages found throughout the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Belgium and France, essentially a collection of holiday villas dispersed around a large subtropical water feature encased in a plastic dome, which regulates the air temperature at a constant 84°F. Paradoxically, these developments are located in otherwise temperate, evergreen areas, usually some distance from the coast (Lavery 1990; Faché 1995). In any case, there is little left of contemporary social life that is extraordinary, marked as it is by an increasingly ‘nomadic’ quality, since we have been desensitised by exposure to a deluge of previously unfamiliar information, sights and experiences (c.f. Urry 2001 on virtual and corporeal mobilities). Finally, the collective forces that marshalled popular culture, including mass tourism, have become less influential. Through commodification, which has also increased the number of alternative sights for the tourist, culture has lost much of its ideological purpose as it now celebrates capitalism instead of attempting to disguise it (Storey



1993). Resorts are very much the product of an earlier capitalist era, their development as working class tourist destinations owing much to the desire on the part of industrialists, government and the church to improve the efficiency of labour and civilise the ‘unruly’ rank and file, through the provision of paid leave and excursions. Related to this is the breakdown of the strict spatial and temporal regime that governed the seaside holiday (as demonstrated by the holiday camps with their wake-up calls, set meal times, and entertainment programmes, not to mention the insistence upon Saturdays as the arrival or departure day for campers *en masse*), such a system being incompatible with the postmodern tourist’s desire for freedom, choice and playfulness (see Ward and Hardy 1986 on the mechanics and eventual decline of the holiday camp, and Feifer 1985 for a discussion of the ‘post-tourist’). Significantly, these preferences can be traced back to the emergence of youth culture in the 1960s, galvanised by unprecedented affluence and resentment for the austerity of previous generations, and revealed in many acts of self-expression (the ‘beach battles’ between rival gangs of youths during much of the 1970s and 1980s constituting an extreme, but relevant, example).

### **The Rhyl Case Study**

Rhyl is one of several purpose-built coastal resorts in North Wales, located just east of where the River Clwyd meets the Irish Sea (Figure 1). With a resident population of around 24,000 it is comparable to medium-sized resorts in England such as Weymouth and Bognor Regis, but is the largest of its kind in Wales. The proximity of Rhyl to the heavily populated and industrialised regions of Lancashire, Merseyside and the West Midlands helps to explain its reputation as a popular ‘3S’ (i.e. sun, sea

and sand) resort, which originated in the years following the opening of the Chester to Holyhead Railway in 1848 (see Morgan and Pritchard 1999 on the correlation between a resort's accessibility by rail and its social tone; also Fletcher 1993 on the significance of simultaneous local developments in land ownership and tenure). By the 1960s, and Rhyl's alleged 'heyday', successive rounds of capital investment and dis-investment had left the resort with a varied, but ageing, collection of municipally-owned visitor attractions that were contingent upon the presence of sunshine and an appetite for live entertainment (Figure 2). Several of these were removed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, having been deemed unsafe or obsolete (e.g. the Victoria Pier and the Pavilion Theatre), whilst others survived into the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. the Open Air Swimming Pool and the Royal Floral Hall), by virtue of being re-conditioned and/or re-branded as new attractions. They were replaced with the likes of the Sun Centre, a wet-weather facility comprising irregularly-shaped bathing pools with simulated waves and tropical heat, the Rhyl Library, Museum and Arts Complex, a celebration of the resort's past with a representation of the old pier and displays of seaside paraphernalia, and the Children's Village, a collection of novelty retail units similar in architecture to the 'fantasy' structures found in most theme parks (Figure 3). In common with many of Rhyl's present-day attractions, the aforementioned examples were part-financed not by the private sector, but by grant aid offered by the European Union and other agencies for the purpose of promoting regional development (a somewhat pertinent indicator of the resort's fall from grace as a holiday destination, further corroborated by the significant proportion of residents aged 16+ who were unemployed, 13.6 per cent, or economically inactive, 48.9 per cent, at the time of the 1991 census of population, Denbighshire County Council 2003). To this end, these attractions comprised a major element of an ambitious resort

regeneration programme co-ordinated by a highly proactive local authority, Rhuddlan Borough Council, between the years of 1974 and 1996 that was praised as a model of best practice (Association of District Councils 1988, 1993), but which has failed to arrest the downturn in Rhyl's fortunes as evidenced by a parallel contraction in its stock of serviced accommodation. In the six years to 1995, this experienced a 36 per cent reduction from an already diminished base of 2,890 bedspaces operated, in the main, by small to medium sized enterprises with neither the capital to invest in their respective products nor the expertise and economies of scale enjoyed by 'big business' (see Stallibrass 1980 on Scarborough, and Shaw *et al.* 1987 on resorts in Cornwall). Indeed, of the 18 separate properties along Rhyl's West Parade that functioned as tourist accommodation at the start of the 1977 season, only 4 remained open for this purpose as of April 2000. The remainder had been converted to a variety of uses that were largely incompatible with the resort's mission of attracting staying visitors such as retirement homes and temporary housing for the homeless and unemployed (the latter tendency earning Rhyl the unwelcome epithet of 'Costa del Dole', MacFarlane 1996) or, worse still, left vacant and in some cases derelict (a fate that has befallen other users of land in and around the resort, Figure 4).

Although the prevailing tendency is one of decline, there are variations to be noted in the recent fortunes of the sectors that make up Rhyl's tourism economy. Data that may be used to substantiate this is available in the public domain, in the form of rateable value statistics. To explain, all non-domestic property in England and Wales has a rateable value, which broadly represents the annual rent a given 'hereditament' (defined as a piece of real, inheritable or taxable property on which rates may be charged) could be let for on the open market as governed by factors such as use,

location, age, facilities and services, quality, and floorspace. A rateable value is attached to each hereditament by the Valuation Office Agency (VOA), and is recalculated once every five years (most recently in 2000 and, prior to that, in 1995) to take account of any change in circumstances that might affect it (note that the owner may contest a proposed alteration in value, with appeals being referred to tribunal where agreement cannot be reached). This exercise is conducted with a view to calculating the rates bill for each hereditament, which is determined by applying a multiplier (fixed on an annual basis by the UK Government and currently standing at 45.60 pence in the pound) to the rateable value. The rating lists for 1990, 1995 and 2000 are available online, and are organised by number/name of hereditament, street name, town, property use code/description, effective date and, of course, rateable value (which reflects annual rents as of the 1st April 1988, 1993 and 1998, respectively). This data was downloaded for those streets (which are named in Figure 2) that were considered to comprise Rhyl's recreational business district (RBD), as distinct from its central business district (CBD), in correspondence with Barrett's (1958) schematic model of a seaside resort (subsequently elaborated by Pearce 1995 and Williams 1998). It was then used to establish the number and mean rateable value of hereditaments within given land use categories that broadly corresponded to the classificatory system adopted by the VOA, an exercise that was repeated for each rating list. Finally, a Retail Price Index conversion factor was applied to the 1990, 1995 and 2000 means in order to allow for the effects of inflation and permit a like-for-like comparison (at April 1988, hereafter referred to as 'constant', prices). The results, and supporting information, may be found in Table 1.

As a general ‘rule of thumb’, one would expect the mean rateable value of hereditaments within a given land use category to fall in line with depreciation, once inflation is factored in (economic cycles notwithstanding). However, capital investments in a particular category that are large in scale (e.g. the construction of a flagship attraction) or scope (e.g. grant aid for property improvements) can be expected to lead to an increase in mean rateable value at constant prices. Conversely, a reduction in the number of hereditaments from one list to the next can generate a similar effect or, at least, offset a decrease in mean rateable value. Accordingly, the ‘licensed trade’, ‘miscellaneous commercial’ and ‘serviced accommodation’ categories all witnessed an increase in mean rateable value at constant prices during the early 1990s before falling back, although the last of these increases could be put down to the loss of no less than ten hereditaments between the publication of the 1990 and 1995 lists. In contrast, the mean rateable value of the ‘commercial leisure’ and ‘catering’ categories decreased slowly at first and then more rapidly, whilst the values for the ‘retail’ and ‘self-catering accommodation’ categories fell at a relatively consistent rate throughout the decade. The most pronounced reductions were reserved for the ‘office’, ‘other’ and, especially, the ‘municipal leisure’ categories, all of which recovered to varying degrees by the time of the 2000 revaluation. At the extremes, the ‘licensed trade’ category was the only one to experience an increase in mean rateable value at constant prices, from the 1990 to the 2000 (re)valuations, whereas the ‘municipal leisure’ category was the only one to experience a decrease in mean rateable value at *current* prices, between the two lists in question (although this is not inconceivable in a category with so few hereditaments and a relatively high mean rateable value to begin with).

Given the above-mentioned difficulties, it is little wonder that in the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (National Assembly for Wales 2000), of the eight hundred and sixty five electoral divisions in Wales, Rhyl West was the most deprived, Rhyl South West the forty-ninth, Rhyl East the two hundred and thirty fifth, Rhyl South the four hundred and sixteenth and Rhyl South East the four hundred and thirtieth. Unfortunately, although an analogous index exists for England, the two indices cannot be used to compare Welsh electoral divisions with English wards as they were arrived at in a slightly different manner, hence like-for-like comparisons between resorts in Wales and England are not possible. Suffice to say, similar levels of deprivation are apparent in many English seaside resorts, including those that are deemed to have been more successful in maintaining their market share or diversifying their economies (e.g. Bournemouth and Brighton).

Even in less blighted parts of Rhyl (notably the town centre and along the seafront to its east), there is little left to distinguish the erstwhile ‘Holiday Playground of North Wales’ from the towns and cities in which its visitors live, due to initiatives such as the construction of the White Rose Shopping Centre and the pedestrianisation of High Street in the 1980s, the result being to render the resort’s central business district virtually indiscernible from any indoor or outdoor shopping precinct in metropolitan Britain. Although the standardisation of town centres has occurred almost everywhere, these developments are significant because, firstly, they consistently feature as markers of the ‘new’ Rhyl in the resort’s annual municipal brochure, which is targeted at those planning a long holiday or short break in the resort as opposed to day trippers wishing to indulge in some ‘retail therapy’ and, secondly, they are

precedents for a trend that threatens to spill over into Rhyl's recreational business district, with the redevelopment of sections of the promenade.

Recognition of the role played by culture and cultural change in reshaping a given resort's landscape, and the manner in which it is perceived by would-be visitors, allows us to understand why the resort in question might have declined as a long holiday destination. For instance, the removal in the early 1970s of Rhyl's Victoria Pier and Pavilion Theatre, allegedly on cost and safety grounds, was symptomatic of a modernist apathy towards 'outdated' Victorian and Edwardian tourism plant and practices that, in turn, reflected the prevailing 'forward-thinking' mood of the nation at that time, whereby progress was valued above sentiment for the past. This ideology runs counter to postmodernism's proclivity for nostalgia (as criticised by Hewison 1987), and robbed the resort of its two 'signature' attractions before a heightened historical consciousness during the 1980s and 1990s inspired the preservation and reuse of several less spectacular structures of a similar heritage (e.g. the Town Hall). Postmodern tendencies may also be witnessed in the design of the visitor attractions that replaced those lost to modernisation, most notably with regards to the simulation (after Baudrillard 1983) of exotic, historical and mythical places, as with the aforementioned Sun Centre, Rhyl Library, Museum and Arts Complex, and Children's Village. With the exception of the last-named attraction, and the neighbouring Events Arena, these were among a majority of latter-day attractions that were designed to be enjoyed in wet weather, reflecting the privatisation of leisure space under postmodernity and a corresponding reduction in the appeal of public facilities such as the former Open Air Swimming Pool and Pavilion Gardens (after Rojek 1995). Furthermore, such simulacra are products of technological advances that

aid the reproduction of previously unique or extraordinary phenomena, thereby emptying them of all that is original and rendering them susceptible to further reproduction and accelerated obsolescence (postmodernism as cultural exhaustion). This was certainly the case with the Sun Centre, a supposedly groundbreaking attempt to 'bring the seaside inside', the formula for which was inspired by a similar development in Whitley Bay and subsequently applied not only in other resorts but, crucially, in developments 'closer to home' (e.g. many suburban leisure centres built during the 1980s and 1990s incorporated flumes and wave machines on a par with those 'first seen' in Rhyl). Similarly, the putative postmodern landscape of Disneyland, with its 'emphasis on image and façade; the juxtaposition of different styles and symbols from different places and times; and a need for the viewer (tourist) to suspend reality and enter the "hyper-real" world' (Davis 2001: 126-7), could be seen as a precedent for the Children's Village. This attraction, in itself, is interesting given the difficulties experienced by the local authority as landlord in letting out the retail units that comprise a large proportion of the development (Jones 1999), thus bringing into question its potential in securing a sustainable competitive advantage for the resort. However, its continued existence, and that of the under-utilised Events Arena, bears further witness to the postmodern condition, whereby such additions to the landscape are valued for their spectacular appearance over and above considerations of function or utility, in stark contrast to the situation that prevailed with the Pavilion Theatre which was demolished in spite of its extraordinary architecture (the centrepiece of which was a huge, illuminated dome flanked by terraces picked out in locally-quarried red and yellow brick).



There are relevant indicators of cultural change other than the coming and going of visitor attractions, not least the closure of several hotels, guest houses and holiday camps in and around Rhyl and a commensurate increase in the size of caravan parks and the number of budget motels about the resort's periphery. We might interpret this as a product of the tourist's desire for greater flexibility and freedom in his or her travel arrangements (also facilitated by private motorization, see Gordon and Goodall 2000) and an emerging resistance to authority as embodied in personalities such as the reputedly uncompromising seaside landlady (see Walton 1978), qualities that have been attributed to postmodernism by others (e.g. Jameson 1984; Kaplan 1987) and which, apart from explaining the corresponding demand for self-catering over serviced accommodation, account for the reshaping of the resort landscape to provide for more playful rather than rational forms of recreation (e.g. the expansion in amusement arcades and the removal of amenities designed to encourage communion with nature and the sea in particular). Land cover, as well as use, is also significant. Earlier adaptations to Rhyl's built environment in the name of 'modernisation', such as the removal of chimneys, bay windows, porches and other original features from some of its oldest properties and the construction of architecturally unremarkable apartments and office blocks, have invariably impaired the ambience of the resort. The policy response to this (on the part of the local authority in conjunction with the Welsh Development Agency and the Wales Tourist Board) has been to make available guidance and grant aid with a view to supporting the restoration of vernacular built form and, in turn, reasserting a distinctive sense of place – an inherently postmodern response (i.e. localisation) to a modern phenomenon (i.e. globalisation).

From the above analysis, three tentative conclusions may be drawn as to why late twentieth century cultural change precipitated the decline of Rhyl as a long holiday destination, encompassing:

1. unfavourable modifications to the resort's built environment wrought under modernism (e.g. the demolition of attractions that were deemed to be at odds with a 'modern' and 'progressive' resort, such as the Victoria Pier and Pavilion Theatre);
2. an ambivalence, under postmodernism, towards certain elements of the resort landscape surviving from the modern era (e.g. the closure of guest houses and holiday camps arising from widespread dissatisfaction with such establishments on account of their association with inflexible, producer-oriented (i.e. Fordist) forms of tourism; the abandonment of the resort's beach and botanical gardens, linked to the proliferation of alternative liminal spaces for an increasingly playful population such as clubs and discotheques and the scepticism reserved for settings and practices prescribed as conducive to the renewal of body, mind and spirit by 'elders and betters' of an earlier generation); and
3. the, perhaps congenital, failure of characteristically postmodern measures to rehabilitate the resort product, given their obsession with 'image' (e.g. the development of spectacular yet easy-to-reproduce attractions with seemingly shorter lifecycles, such as the Sun Centre; the preoccupation of the local state with preserving the façades of seafront buildings, even though several of these remain chronically under-utilised thanks, in part, to restrictive land use policies designed to safeguard tourist accommodation).

Of course, the influence of culture and of cultural change is mediated via the actions of those who produce and consume (in this instance) the Rhyl experience, whose behaviour may resist, as well as embrace, broader circumstances. The decisions they make, vis-à-vis those made by producers and consumers of other resort experiences, explain why some resorts are better equipped than others to survive well into the twenty-first century. This is an appropriate point to briefly acknowledge the significance of local politics and tourism policy in Rhyl in helping, inadvertently, to bring about the above outcomes. For instance, Rhuddlan Borough Council's strategy of pump-priming visitor attractions targeted at families in socio-economic groups C2DE could be said in hindsight to be ill-founded, given the concurrent reduction in the number of Britons employed in manual occupations and the ensuing distaste for amenities and services developed for the pleasure of the proletariat. Likewise, its attempt to re-engineer the image of Rhyl by investing heavily in comprehensive and highly conceptual redevelopment projects such as the Children's Village and Events Arena has done little to address either the declining utility associated with gazing upon and immersion in the sea or, more importantly, the various manifestations of social exclusion that continue to deter visitors from staying in the resort (e.g. long-term unemployment, poor quality housing, a high incidence of crime, etc). Significantly, it is noticeable how certain other resorts' responses to a decline in the long holiday market appear to be more in keeping with the cultural changes discussed earlier in the paper (e.g. Brighton's diversification into the high technology and creative industries, and Morecambe's promotion of marine ecotourism, specifically in relation to wildfowl and wading birds), with the possibility of this working to their advantage.

There are, naturally, limitations to the conclusions that may be drawn from submitting changes to a particular resort landscape as evidence of the transition from modernity to postmodernity. The claim that we have ‘left the modern age or entered a post-modern world’ (Ritzer and Liska 1997: 96) is a contested one, and is further complicated by the acceptance that certain aspects of coastal tourism, which we might deem to be emblematic of culture under postmodernity, predate that very epoch:

Much tourist activity has been thoroughly anti-auratic...based on mechanical and electronic reproduction...on popular pleasures, on an anti-elitism with little separation of art from social life...[involving]...not contemplation but high levels of audience participation...[with]...much emphasis on pastiche, or what others might call kitsch (Urry 1990: 86-7).

This is not as anomalous as it might first seem, for there are certain instances in which ‘tourist practices lead cultural changes and provide a good index of...future transformations’ (Urry 1994: 233). Indeed, tourism can prefigure culture because it ‘has left the confines of resorts and...has changed the sort of world we live in and how we live in it’ (Franklin 2003: 10), this dissolving of ‘tourism’s specificity’ (Urry 1995: 148) being a symptom *par excellence* of de-differentiation (as discussed earlier). In addition, such nuances make sense if we accept the realist notion of ‘counter-phenomenality’, that knowledge of deep structures may not just go beyond, and not just explain, but also contradict appearances (Collier 1994). Accordingly, when analysed over an extended period of time, the landscape of Rhyl (or any resort for that matter) may yield evidence of developments that could be interpreted as inconsistent with the dominant cultural formation of the day. Hence, we should think

of the causal relations that reveal themselves in changes on the ground as ‘tendencies’, thus avoiding recourse to absolutism.

That said, and for the sake of expediency, hermeneutic endeavours of this nature are inclined: (a) to sacrifice breadth for depth, with the attendant risk of overemphasising the persuasiveness of cultural change at the expense of other factors (e.g. the designation of an attraction as ‘life-expired’ may have as much to do with the perishability of the materials used in its construction, exposed as they are to excessive abrasion and corrosion, as it does with culturally-contingent estimates of its ‘diminished’ attractiveness); and (b) to characterise modernism and postmodernism as polar opposites or mutual exclusives, which might be construed as unhelpful since certain aspects of the latter are felt to represent an elaboration of the former, rather than a contradiction (this may be why Bauman 2000 prefers the term ‘liquid modernity’ to postmodernity). Strictly circumscribing phenomena in this manner also invites the criticism that what gets labelled as ‘modern’ or ‘postmodern’ rests on the arbitrary judgement of the analyst, thus foregoing a more subtle reading of the resort landscape. Of course, merely acknowledging this does not insulate the paper from such a critique, but it must be emphasised that its findings are grounded in the theoretical constructs as presented in the literature and, of course, remain open to refutation in light of further information.

Finally, the approach adopted here necessitates a number of compromises. For instance, no matter how appropriate the case study in question might be, there will always be aspects of the relationship between resort decline and cultural change that are played out elsewhere, and through a medium other than the built environment. In

addition, restricting the analysis to a single resort precludes ‘theoretically grounded comparative studies across a range of localities which are or have been involved in the [tourism] industry’ (Gordon and Goodall 2000: 290). Such an undertaking would certainly assist in further isolating those place-specific factors that moderate fundamental processes such as economic restructuring and cultural change, and would be consistent with the emphasis postmodernists place on local uniqueness (Davis 2001). For example, variations in social tone between resorts are thought to be instrumental in determining the severity of impact attributable to the transformations described above, a factor that might explain the comparative prosperity of Rhyl’s sister resort Llandudno, located some 20 miles along the coast, which remains the more distinguished of the two (and, therefore, of greater appeal to the service classes) on account of its relative remoteness in relation to source markets (the so-called ‘friction of distance’).

## **Conclusions**

This paper has sought to explain the decline of cold-water resorts *as long holiday destinations* (an important qualification) by making reference to recent and revolutionary transformations in Western capitalist societies and their concomitant ways of life. As such, its contribution to knowledge transcends the British seaside by suggesting a theoretical framework that might also be employed in understanding the changing fortunes of traditional tourist places elsewhere in north-west Europe and beyond (local and national contingencies permitting). Furthermore, it has demonstrated how the built environment of a resort can act as a convenient medium through which we might view the outcomes arising from the interaction between late

twentieth century cultural change and social structures indigenous to the place in question. It also supplements the earlier work of Butler (1980) on resort lifecycles by using readily available supply- as opposed to demand-side indicators of development, such as land use and rateable value data, to establish the post-stagnation trajectories of the sectors that make up a resort's local economy, thereby circumventing the conceptual difficulties arising from the general lack of information pertaining to trips, nights and expenditure at the local level that might be used to calibrate the tourist area life cycle with an individual resort, and the failure of the model to distinguish between constituent tourism products in terms of their respective fortunes. Ironically, the paper problematises the notion of resort development as an evolutionary process, for reasons that by now will be familiar to the reader!

Little has been said, up to this point, of the rationale for choosing Rhyl as a case study, beyond asserting its representativeness. This was partly informed by a concern for the apparent propensity to read 'English' for 'British' in studies of resort decline, with the result that resorts in Wales tend to be overlooked. The significance of this extends far beyond a desire to redress such an imbalance, for Morgan (1998) suggests that Welsh resorts are bucking the trend for Britain as a whole and retaining market share whilst their counterparts in England are not, although on this criteria Rhyl would appear to be more 'Anglo' than 'Celtic' in nature. Indeed, such is the severity of the resort's decline that it might, along with former British holiday destinations such as New Brighton and Barry Island, constitute a precedent for the 'end of tourism', at least in a localised sense, thus underscoring its credentials as a unit of analysis for a study such as this.

To conclude, in demonstrating the link between cultural change generally, the passage from modernism to postmodernism specifically and the diminished popularity of British seaside destinations, via a review of the relevant literature and the application of textual analysis to the tourist landscape of Rhyl, the paper has exhibited realist tendencies, that is, a willingness to ‘dig deeper’ in order to unearth hitherto neglected root causes (these being ‘circumstantial’ rather than ‘deterministic’). Philosophy aside, its findings are offered in the spirit of provoking further engagement with the causes and consequences of cold-water resort decline, an ongoing project that should remain central to the sub-discipline.



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