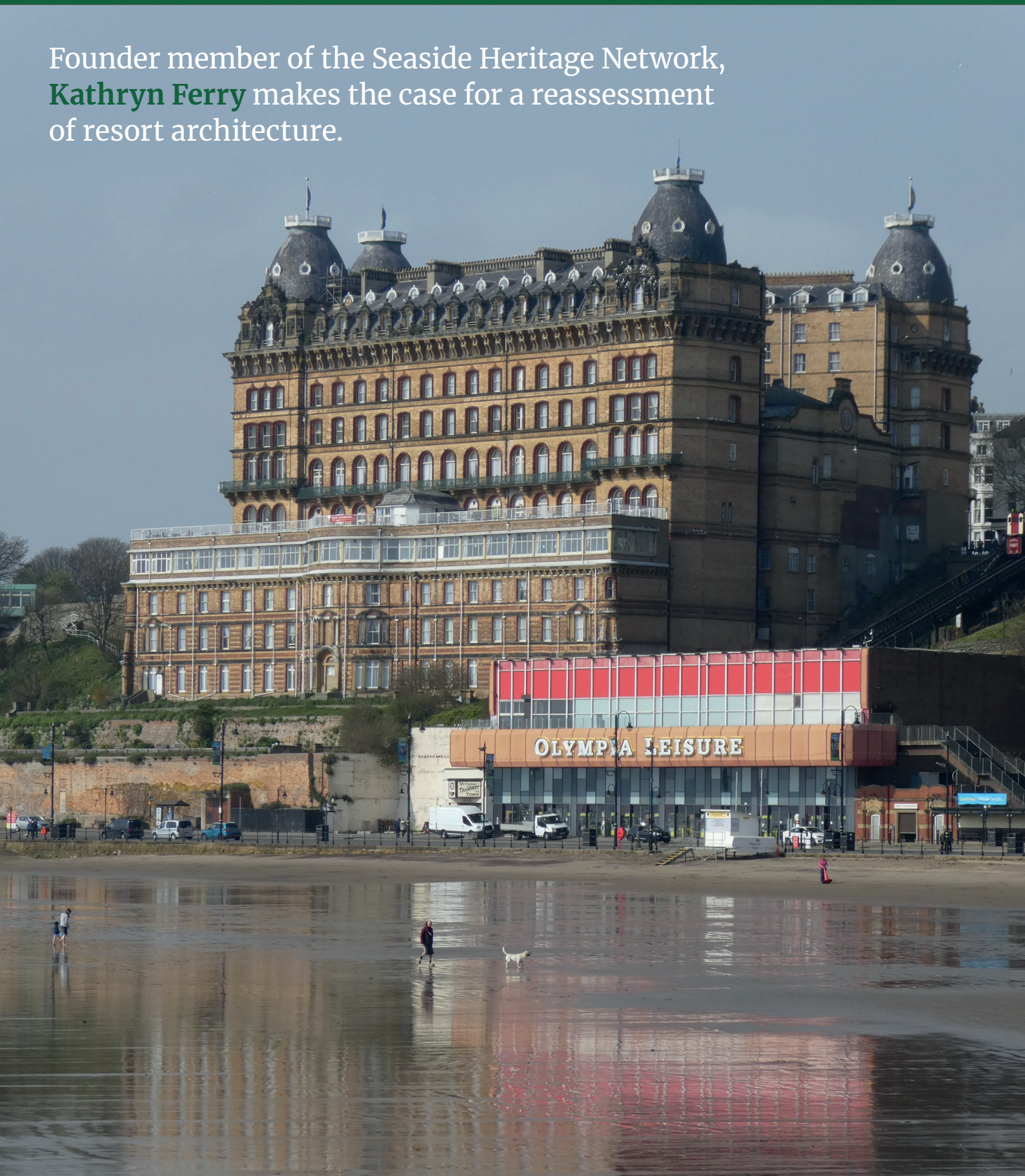
Recognising seaside heritage

Founder member of the Seaside Heritage Network, **Kathryn Ferry** makes the case for a reassessment of resort architecture.



Domestic tourism developed into a huge industry through the 19th and 20th centuries, yet its architectural legacy at the British seaside is both under-appreciated and under-protected. Decades of effort to promote and save the multifarious sites linked to our industrial past have demonstrated the importance of moving beyond traditional visions of heritage; it is now time to apply that lesson to the places where generations of working people let down their hair on their annual holiday. Britain invented the seaside resort, with Scarborough laying claim to being the world's first, so we have a uniquely long and varied seaside heritage in this country. Far from promoting it, however, we often seem to be ashamed of it and that needs to change if we want deprived coastal communities to take pride in where they live.

The initial burst of resort creation came in the 18th century when existing towns like Margate, Brighton and Weymouth saw the economic potential of catering for wealthy people enjoying the latest health craze of dipping in the sea. After 1830, the coming of the railways supercharged resort expansion as people from all classes were able to take trips to the coast. Seaside heritage, then, is the heritage of the first sites of mass tourism and mass popular entertainment. By the end of the Victorian period, distinct building types dedicated to holiday pleasures could be found all around the coast; among them were piers, winter gardens, towers and grand hotels. Alongside these consciously impressive structures, a wealth of smaller amenities served the pleasure-seeking crowds, for instance, bandstands, ornamental clocks, shelters and beach huts. All of these became crucial to making the seafront a wholly distinctive place: take them away and that sense of place would be fundamentally altered.

In the 20th century visitor numbers to the seaside continued to rise and interwar competition between resorts, combined with an emerging fashion for sunbathing, witnessed exciting new forms of architectural expression. The internationally important De La Warr Pavilion, designed by Erich Mendelsohn and Serge Chermayeff at Bexhill-on-Sea, opened in 1935. The era also saw the expansion of amusement parks like Blackpool Pleasure Beach and Dreamland at Margate, as well as the construction of numerous salt-water lidos, large blocks of apartments modelled on ocean liners, holiday camps, bungalow estates and beach chalets. While Britons flocked back to the beach after 1945, the statistical peak of visitor numbers did not actually happen until the 1970s. By that time, the social demographic of holidaymakers had changed. Those who could afford it bought foreign package deals with guaranteed sunshine and as the old-fashioned, bucket-and-spade resort fell out of favour, journalists were quick to announce the death of the British seaside. In many places it became a self-fulfilling prophecy as buildings linked to the heyday of the seaside holiday fell out of use and were demolished.



The fact that this chronology of rise and fall is relatively recent presents a serious obstacle when it comes to the guidelines for statutory listing. Buildings that date from after 1850 have to meet higher thresholds of significance and completeness. A comparison between two of our best-known resorts shows the impact this has in ascribing value to seaside heritage. Brighton is a substantial Georgian and Regency city that can boast 1,223 listed buildings for a population





LEFT: The Grade II* Grand Hotel by Cuthbert Broderick has been a Scarborough landmark since 1867. Though most resorts once had hotels on this scale, many have been demolished or converted to flats. (All images by Kathryn Ferry unless stated)

TOP: Only a tiny proportion of the seaside holiday camps built between the wars survive. Despite being the oldest in the country, these 1932 chalets at Brighstone on the Isle of Wight were turned down for listing.

MIDDLE: Victorian seaside accommodation was defined by long terraces of boarding houses. In a different location these properties in Bridlington would be highly desirable.

BOTTOM: The 1910 Winter Gardens at Cliftonville, Margate closed in 2022 due to loss of revenue during the pandemic. Thanet Council, who own the building, are seeking a long-term plan for restoration and reuse. (Amber Butchart)







TOP: The Brighton Hippodrome opened briefly to the public in summer 2022 as developers and campaigners tried to break the stalemate with the council and continue restoration work.

MIDDLE: Birnbeck Pier at Weston-super-Mare closed to the public in 1994. Following decades of dereliction, funding was finally secured by North Somerset Council in 2023 to begin its restoration journey. (Paul Blakemore)

BOTTOM: Southport Pier is the second longest in the country. Faced with a huge repair bill, Sefton Council were forced to close it in 2022 and there is currently no schedule for its reopening. (Matt Dodd)

of 276,300. Blackpool is half as big with 141,000 residents but it has a mere 56 listed buildings because, in part, its peak of development happened either side of 1900. So, whereas alterations to a large Regency house on Brighton seafront would not necessarily disqualify it from listing, a similar Victorian or Edwardian house in Blackpool is unlikely to meet the legal requirements. Ephemeral seaside structures are even harder to protect; proof that Felixstowe had the earliest beach huts in the country, dating from the 1880s, could not save them and Brighstone Holiday Camp on the Isle of Wight was turned down for listing, despite its being the most complete example of this 1930s holiday phenomenon to survive anywhere.

Listing on its own cannot solve the issue of reuse if a building has lost its original purpose. Around the coast there are many disused entertainment venues; the Grade II listed Kursaal at Southend and Winter Gardens at Cliftonville in Margate are both boarded up. At Torquay, locals are fighting to save the Grade II art nouveau Pavilion from dereliction while the 'Reopen the Regent' campaign is battling to get Deal's unlisted seafront cinema back into community use. On the positive side, funding has finally been secured to restore Great Yarmouth's Grade II* iron and glass Winter Gardens, the incredible Frank Matcham plaster dome of Brighton's II* Hippodrome has been stabilised as part of an ongoing project and work has resumed on the multi-million pound transformation of Rothesay Pavilion, Scotland's Grade A modernist masterpiece designed by James Carrick in 1938.

Across the nation's 63 surviving pleasure piers the picture is mixed. During the 1970s and 80s, it was campaigns to stop demolition of Clevedon Pier in Somerset and the West Pier in Brighton that started to change opinions about their potential value as heritage assets. It is now 30 years since the last pier demolitions at Ventnor and Shanklin on the Isle of Wight. Yet maintenance costs are predictably high and funding streams are limited. With 20 piers in local authority ownership and increasing pressure on council spending, this can be problematic. Southport's Grade II listed pier had to close over safety concerns in 2022 and a repair bill of £13 million is beyond what Sefton Council can currently afford. At Deal, the concrete legs of the post-war pier are showing signs of deterioration and Dover District Council has already spent £600,000 on remedial work with the prospect of more being needed. For the 34 piers run by commercial operators, there is little hope of substantial subsidy even though they are understood to be core attractions. Research conducted for Blackpool Council in 2020 concluded that the town's three piers contribute £15.83 million to the visitor economy every year. In 2023 Blackpool North Pier celebrated its 160th anniversary but storm surges caused by climate



change could leave the earliest surviving pier by Victorian supremo Eugenius Birch in real jeopardy. At least there is finally good news for Birch's most at-risk pier; North Somerset Council have taken ownership of the Grade II* Birnbeck Pier at Weston-super-Mare and secured funding to begin bringing it back from the brink.

Until now there has been no national body fighting for our unique seaside heritage. In 2022 a new Seaside Heritage Network was established with the aim of connecting people around the coast, sharing best practice and celebrating everything that makes the British seaside great. Despite the lockdown trend for staycations, it is telling that national news stories still tend to focus on the negatives; though sewage spills and inexcusable levels of social deprivation are pressing challenges that must be addressed, hearing about them does not make you want to go to the seaside. Our historic resorts need interest from new visitors and so the Seaside Heritage Network wants to help balance the narrative. For that reason, we launched our Bucket and Spade List and asked for members of the public to vote for their favourite seaside experiences. The top three were Saltburn Cliff Tramway, Blackpool Tower and Morecambe Winter Gardens, all beloved by their local communities. The ongoing restoration of the Grade II* Morecambe Winter Gardens is such a beacon that the 45 strong team of people responsible for pushing it forward have received a King's Award for Voluntary Service.

Perceptions about the British seaside are changing and recognising the rich heritage of our pleasure resorts can hopefully be a force for wider change in places that have been overlooked for too long. So, if you have a nomination for this year's Bucket and Spade List, please let us know at seasideheritage.org.uk.

For more information see 'The neglected heritage of the English seaside holiday', in *Coastal Studies and Society*, by Duncan Light and Anya Chapman. https://doi.org/10.1177/26349817211070456



TOP: The fibrous plaster ceiling of Morecambe Winter Gardens, which opened as the 'Albert Hall of the North' in 1897. As part of their fundraising efforts, local volunteers from the Preservation Trust run regular behind-the-scenes tours. (Damian Rose)

BELOW: One of five 1960s shelters at Rhos-on-Sea, Conwy, put forward for listing after they were threatened with demolition in 2022. Each has a different design of concrete panels.