Transcript of Podcast 034: British Seaside Resorts

[Intro]

JAX: {sings} Oh I do like to be beside the seaside, oh I do like the Skegness {/sings}
Apart from the seagulls. The seagulls are awful, seagulls are basically vultures of chips and ice
cream. How does a seagull even eat ice cream, would be my thing? They take ice-cream off you but
how do they even eat it?

[intro music – jaunty, bouncy]

[Intro standard announcement:
Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a
weekly series looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never
have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Brit with a passion for
offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'why's behind travel itself. So join me as we venture …
beyond the brochure.]

[Music fades. Podcast begins]

Hello :)

One of these days I need to change the intro and the outro again. I've just noticed it says 'weekly'
series. I've made the decision that I can't do it weekly, with the best will in the world it'll never be a
weekly thing, because, well, me. Fortnightly (for Americans and other aliens, that means 'every two
weeks') is better. You'd've thought by now I'd've realised what I'm capable of, but apparently not.

Last week I had an online workshop all around Imposter Syndrome, which was really useful and
interesting; as a creative type and former Gifted Child who takes the view everyone else now finds
things really easy, it seems to be inevitable that it's a well I'd've fallen down, but hopefully I can
start to mitigate for it. I think it'll also help that I'm seeing a therapist every week now because,
well, teenagers will teenage and it's a long time to be holding onto those feelings of angst that have
pretty much defined who I am. Thirty years of hurt, never stopped me dreaming. Not unlike the
English men's national team's football fans.

Against this however, I entered a writing competition too last week.
This is one of those things that I'm always reluctant to do. I know it'll involve me doing a lot of
work, expending a lot of effort, for almost no reward. The knowledge that I won't win, for instance;
indeed the knowledge that there won't be feedback (because the Ts & Cs didn't mention it) so if I
don't win I'll have no idea why, no scope for improvement. But this particular competition … I was
directed to it on Twitter about a month and a half ago, but paid it no heed because the deadline was,
at the time, still a month and a half away; November 30th. It was a travel writing story competition,
up to 5,000 words all about travel – fictional or factual – run by a company I'd never heard of, so
almost as much up my street as you can get. So, on November 30th I sat down and thought: ya know,
I ought to do this. That it was a Monday and I was busy at work for half of it is neither here nor
there. Anyway I made the deadline with five hours to spare so quite early by my standards. I don't
know how I feel about it – possibly I'll forget about having done it until they announce the winners
in mid-January. But I guess at least it's done, and it meant I spent time working my brain rather than
taking my default option of spending five hours on Twitter, the explore tab of Instagram, and …
certain other websites that we won't go into on this podcast. Not again, anyway.

Anyhoo. So it's now December, and it's getting really dark early. Again, you'd think I'd be used to

this, because it happens every year, but the combination of dark-by-half-past-three and the grey, miserable, damp, weather that this time of year brings, means it's not my favourite time of the year. It's not like we even get a proper winter, like places like North America, with its clear skies and deep snowdrifts. I'm not convinced that's preferable because I'm not fond of putting things in the freezer to allow them warm them up, but at least the views would be better.

It's thus the ideal time to talk about the seaside!

[jingle, but not my usual one, although given now I'm starting to use it more, maybe I should give it a more appropriate name]

[Jax and Adam, two of my friends from Kirkby-in-Ashfield, talk about their feelings about the seaside]

Jax: Talk about seaside? We can talk about seaside! What's your favourite seaside?
Adam: Dunno actually. Been to many.
Jax: Pick a favourite one.
Adam: Vancouver.
Jax: (pause) Well aren't you a posh bastard?
(laughter)
Jax: Sticking with the theme of British ...
Adam: Well, you're German.
Jax: (indignant) I've never been out this country, I'll have you know.
(pause)
Jax: Have I? Do I have a passport? It's not important because we're talking about British seasides, right?
Adam: They're not British though because they're going to be importing the sand.
Jax: I ... importing the sand! I like Skeg. Skeg is good! It's ... it's ... trashy in that wonderful car-crash TV kind of way, it's like ...
Adam: I just find most of that fuckin' coast is the same, but you just find better beaches.
Jax: (pause) Yeh, that's true, Huttoft is a nice little private beach just down or up from Skeg. But I like Skegness for the trash. I think, if a seaside doesn't have a massive fuckin' rollercoaster on it, like, literally, right by the fuckin' sea, and a big-ass pier, and a shit-ton of fuckin' seagull-vultures, then is it really a seaside? Is it? Without the woman trying to convince you to buy the fuckin' £7 plastic bucket that you could get from the pound shop so you can make sandcastles? I mean come on, without the arcades making all the fuckin' noise in the world, that the seagulls are desensitised to.
Adam: (indistinct muttering)
Jax: Can you tell that I've got a thing against seagulls?
Adam: Cleethorpes.
Jax: Cleethorpes is nice.
Adam: Is Ingoldmells up there as well?
Jax: Ingoldmells is basically Skegness, let's be honest.
Adam: There's the one in between, it's got a fuckin' holiday park opposite but it's got a nicer beach.
Jax: I don't know.
Adam: I can't think what that fucker's called. I'm sure it begins with S.
Jax: Of course you know about the nicer beaches, you posh bastard, right, listen. We, we, we, over here, right, we like our traditional trashy-ass beaches, okay, where you won't find jellyfish, you won't find life in the sea, you'll find plastic bottles, and condoms.
Adam: And gravel.
Jax: And gravel.
Adam: Yeah.

Jax: And you think you've seen a jellyfish, but it's not, it's actually a plastic bag.

Adam: Sand prawns.

Jax: But.

Adam: From B&M.

Jax: But. We wouldn't have it any other fuckin' way. Most of the sea that you are dipping your toes in is 90% piss and you fuckin' love it. (laughter from Adam) That is the way. That is the British fuckin' way. We'll sit there, in the sun, not havin' any sun tan lotion on because 'we're gonna get ourselves a tan', right, and then we burn, and then we sit in Wetherspoons, peeling, talking about how bad the sun was.

Adam: We won't be sat in Wetherspoons.

Jax: Well, *we* wouldn't be sat in Wetherspoons, no, but the tradition dictates...

Adam: We'd be sat miserable, on a bench, in the rain, with soggy chips.

Jax: And then you pay £25 for a fuckin' bag of soggy chips, that the fuckin' vultures take off you.

Adam: Getting rinsed at the arcades.

Jax: There's always that one where, there's always that mum with the tiny little toddler that needs to pee so she digs a hole in the sand and holds a coat up like a shit sheet so the kid can piss in the sand.

Adam: If it's warm enough, I will dress as a Viking, come out the sea, and say I've come to rape and pillage the land.

Jax: Please don't do that. (laughter) No.

(pause)

Jax: Scarborough's nice though. Scarborough's like a classy...

Adam: Scarborough's got a fuckin' castle.

Jax: It's classy.

Adam: It's got a fuckin' castle.

Jax: It's rather classy.

Adam: Yeh, I know, but...

Jax: Whitby's nice, but Whitby's not really a beach.

Adam: It's got a beach.

(Jax isn't convinced)

Adam: It's still a better beach than fuckin' Skeg though.

Jax: ... Again, I've just gone though the whole trashiness of beach. You have to have the rollercoaster and the fuckin' discarded ice cream and the condom floating in the water.

Adam: But Whitby makes up with it with Goth.

Jax: And and the drunk weirdo. There's always drunk weirdo.

Adam: There's drunk weirdos in Whitby.

Jax: There's always a drunk weirdo, wherever you go. The one that's like stumbling towards the sea and goes 'watch this', and you're just kind of like (gasps) 'somebody's gonna die'.

Adam: I don't think I've been to Robin Hood's Bay though, that's in between Scarborough and Whitby

Jax: I don't know, like – I'm not posh, okay? I had Skeg.

Adam: Scarborough's not fuckin' posh.

Jax: I had Skeg and Ingoldmells, that's all I had.

Adam: Weymouth.

(pause)

Jax: I have actually been to Weymouth and Portsmouth!

Adam: You posh bastard!

Jax: You've just reminded me, I did, yeh, we went on a Haven holiday. Haven holiday parks; they're always beside the sea as well.

Adam: What about, erm ...

Jax: (with derision) and the Butlins.

Adam: ... fuckin' Newquay, where all the surfers go.

Jax: I don't know anything about Newquay; I've never been there.
Adam: There's that, and there's fuckin' King Arthur's Castle, what's that called, Tintagel.
Jax: Okay.
Adam: They have swords there.
Jax: Wonderful.
Adam: There you go. And it's on a cliff-edge. Knackered-ass castle on a cliff-edge.
Jax: I do like a good, I do like a good seaside. We do like to be beside the sea.
Adam: Depends how far afield you want to go, cos obviously that's fuckin' Cornwall. Go to Ireland and go for the 'inch stretch'. That's a good beach.
Jax: (pause) Posh bastard.
(laughter)

That was Jax and Bear, also known as Adam, they're two friends of mine from back in Kirkby-in-Ashfield, talking about their experiences of the British seaside, in quite raw detail. It might help to get a map to track the places they mention, or maybe it won't. We'll come onto many of these places later.

The one they mentioned a lot was Skegness. Also known as Skeg, Skeggy, and Skegvegas. It's one of the prime resorts on the east coast of England, and is pretty much an archetypal stereotype of this kind of town. It is also the reason I decided to do a whole podcast on the concept of seaside resorts.

See, I'd never been there until this year, much to the derision of most of my friends back in Kirkby. At the start of October, faced with the dual prospect of an ongoing pandemic and a new job, I felt I needed to just go away for a couple of days while I still could. Obviously I couldn't flee the country, and the weather wasn't conducive to going overnight hiking, plus I felt the need to see the sea – I'd not been to the coast for pretty much a year, since I was inter-railing around Europe in Autumn 2019 and passed by places like Carnac, Benidorm, and Nice.

Benidorm, yes.

Anyway, I looked on a map and realised this was a perfect time to visit Skegness – not too far away, by the sea, wouldn't be too busy, should be able to get a decent guesthouse. And so it turned out. I had two nights there, and it only really rained on the day I left.

Skegness isn't that big. It has a population of just less than 20,000, which makes it smaller than Kirkby-in-Ashfield. I know I use my obscure hometown as a reference point for a lot of things, but it works that way. If it helps, Skegness has half the population of that other famous seaside resort, Monaco. But Skegness has a better beach, a better funfair, and better cheesecake. Let's give a shout-out to Artisan Coffee Design, on Lumley Road, which are fabulous.

Jax is right, by the way. Despite being a major destination for those in the East Midlands, the beach in the town itself isn't that big (and it's quite grainy), although obviously on my visit it was also pretty empty. There is a decent enough pier that sticks out into the sea, and the funfair is between the promenade and the beach, so you can practically drag sand from the beach onto the big wheel.

The promenade itself is a mixture of bingo halls, amusement arcades, guesthouses, and places to grab food from, and in the height of the summer season would be rammed with people going from one to the other. In the grey Autumnal drizzle, it all felt a little dead, but, I dunno, I prefer it that way.

I had a full morning out at an area called Gibraltar Point, a nature reserve with sandy trails through littoral grasslands and dune environments. A great place for birdwatching – indeed there were

several birding huts scattered throughout the area, but also nice to just get out and breathe the fresh air. It's a few km south of the town and located beyond a golf course.

Because there's always a golf course by the seaside in this country. Indeed in my head the two are inextricably linked; many of the seaside towns I was familiar with as a child, from Southport where I grew up, with nearby Hoylake and Lytham, to Carnoustie in Scotland where we went a couple of times on holiday as a child, seaside resorts often have golf links near them. And on the hike across Great Britain I did last year, we passed by several on the few days we had in Norfolk. In a way it kind of makes sense – an open area of sandy and grassy ground that isn't useful to build on, but part of me does feel it's "a good walk spoiled" as the oft-misattributed quote has it.

But back to Skegness briefly. It struck me, going to a place like that as an adult, that it felt very different to the sort of places I went to as a kid, even though they are essentially the same thing. And I don't know if that's me getting old, or seaside resorts themselves changing. As a kid I used to spend hours in the arcades, playing on the games machines – you have to remember this was the 80s so 'arcade machines' then meant the huge single-person cabinets, each programmed with a different game, of the kinds that would be ported to computers. These days the games are very different; they're either more immersive and often multi-player, or they're more like gambling machines and the arcades feel more like cheap casinos. That's not to say that gambling machines didn't exist when I was younger, only that in this environment they were along the lines of penny pusher (penny-drop) machines where if you timed it right you could win, like, 47 pence, all in copper.

The food is the same though – the same array of deep-fried doughnuts, hot dogs, candy floss (indeed as a kid I had a computer simulation game of a candyfloss stall by the seaside. I think it was designed to each very basic economics. It cheated, obviously. As well as giving an unreasonable expectation of weather forecasts), and of course fish-and-chips, which is indeed best eaten on the beach. The only reason they're soggy is because of the sheer volume of vinegar they're traditionally drenched in. Having the best fish-and-chips is almost a competition, and many resorts around the country fight for this honour – although the ones on the northeast coast of England seem to have the edge; Whitley Bay, South Shields, and of course Whitby.

Someone else who has thoughts about returning to the seaside as an adult is Bea Marshall, creator of the YesParenting movement, who has an additional interesting observation about how it feels to see her children going to the seaside now and comparing to her own experiences.

[Bea Marshall]

{sings} Oh I do like to be beside the seaside, oh I do like to be beside the sea {/sings}
I don't know any more of the words, but I do know the tune! {sings} La la la la, la la la la {/sings}

As kids, we always went to Cornwall on holiday with other families. We would stay in different places, so one family stayed on a caravan park, we used to stay in a cottage. I don't know where the other family stayed, but we would always go to the same beach every day for two weeks, we'd go to Polzeath beach. And back when we were kids, Polzeath was just a very familiar easy lovely place. There was the surf shop, there was the ice-cream van that used to drive along the sand – it's a really long beach. And I have so many memories of those times that the dads used to build these giant sandcastles and come in the sea with us, and the mums would get the picnics ready and make the little beach camp area all nice, and they would always want to be reading and the dads would be doing the stuff with us kids. And I really loved it, and so many fond memories of those Cornwall holidays. And then as we got a bit older we then started going on camping holidays in France, but those Cornwall holidays have always held this really special place in my heart, and I just remember

this long drive to get there and there would be this building excitement as we got closer, and we'd have this competition in the car to see who could see the sea first, and it was just like this anticipation of who was going to go 'I can see the sea' before anyone else. And I remember the surf shop and I used to love to look around at all the different clothes and the surfboards. I wasn't into surfing but I loved all of that. It was amazing.

But I went back about 10 years ago and it just felt so different. It had a completely different vibe to it. It felt somehow classy and really intentional. It wasn't just kind of this place that people just happened to go – it suddenly had bars and coffee shops and hotels, well there was always hotels, there was the hotel we used to go to do a poo for example, but it .. how do I describe it, well it just felt 'showy', and I was like 'well it never was showy'. I just felt really different. As an adult since moving to Yorkshire I've been up to places like Filey and Robin Hoods Bay and Whitby and Scarborough, and going to Scarborough reminds me of when we used to visit one of my mum's best friends from growing up called Marianne. She lived in Brighton. And Scarborough and Brighton although in many ways they couldn't be more different, have these similarities that I love like the arcade games, like the two-penny machines, where you keep thinking that the next two penny you put in will cause all of the others to tumble down and they rarely do. And the joy of putting your five pound note into the coin machine and all of the change pours down into your little pot, and 99 ice creams, and fish and chips by the sea, and I know you shouldn't feed seagulls, but feeding seagulls is something I've done in Scarborough and Filey and Whitby and Cornwall and they're just such simple pleasures but they feel so rich and exciting and magical.

I used to love the rock-pooling and the clambering over the rocks, and the sense of adventure and curiosity. I'm really aware that as a mum having taken my own sons to the Yorkshire coast, to Filey and Scarborough, they don't seem to have the same joy and magic and excitement as I had when I a kid, and maybe even that I have now, and I wonder if that's just to do with how much things have changed nowadays, that our kids have access to so much more than I had, or we had, as kids, and though a lot of my connections with going to these seaside places were the rituals that came with it, so my mum would always make a batch of 'holiday biscuits'. Holiday biscuits was our family's name for 'millionaire's shortbread', but because she made them when we went on holiday they were called 'holiday biscuits', so we'd always know there'd be one holiday biscuit each during the day on the beach.

Other things that I remember as I got a little bit older was taking my towel up into the rocks away from everyone else and taking my book with me and feeling, I mean I wasn't that grown up at all, I was probably about 9 or 10, but taking my book with me and lying there and sunbathing and feeling really grown up in this place that was so familiar and safe to me. And there is just something wonderful about this act of taking your windbreak and your cool-box and your buckets and your spades and your bag of towels and everything else and taking it all down onto the beach and choosing your spot, and if you have a favourite spot trying to get there before anyone else gets your favourite spot, and setting up for the day, and that just being your world for the whole day, and the freedom that the seaside gives you to just be able to go off and play with other kids, and be in the waves or be in the rocks or buried in the sand – the joys of burying my siblings and I in the sand, and the feel of having all the sand packed around my body was amazing, but also hating the feel of the sand in my mouth or kicked in my face, ugh. But so so wonderful, those traditional seaside holidays, and yet it's not really something I've recreated with my children. We have been to the seaside but we certainly haven't done seaside holidays in the way I did them as kids. And it's something I'd love to do but my kids aren't particularly interested.

As I say, I grew up near the sea. My single-figure ages were spent in Liverpool, only a few km from the coast at Crosby, and when I was 12 we moved to Southport, to the suburb of Ainsdale. Although a little more, shall we say, posh and refined than places like Skegness (the football show Match of

The Day once described it was 'geriatric', and indeed that the time I lived there, there were more retirement homes in Ainsdale than pubs. It was, literally, a place where you go to die, like Eastbourne on the south coast, rather than a place where you go to live), it pretty much had the same feel and vibe, just in a slightly more middle-class way.

Southport has a huge pier – the second longest in the country at 1.3km (the longest is at Southend in Essex, a fact I wouldn't have known without researching) - that stretches out across the sand. There was even a tramway that ran along its length, although for cost-cutting reasons now it's been replaced by one of those cheesy tourist toy-road-train things. It's also the oldest iron pier left in the country, having been built in 1860.

The beach at Southport itself is huge, partly because the town lies at a bulge between two river estuaries (the Ribble and the Mersey) so the area has accumulated a lot of sand and silt over the years. The running dark-humour in my childhood was that if global warming caused the sea level to rise, it would flood half the world, but at least you'd be able to see the sea from Southport pier. It's large enough too to have been used as a training and fitness ground, especially for horses – noted Grand National winner Red Rum was a regular visitor to the beach in his heyday – but also for humans. I was in the school cross-country team and we used to regularly go training on the sand dunes at Crosby a few kilometres to the south. I don't know how many of you who are listening are runners, but running on sand is … it's hard. It really stretches and develops your leg muscles. Especially doing star jumps and burpees on 45º sand hills.

The town itself always felt like a veritable throwback to the Victorian era, with iron aprons covering the pavement in front of the shops on a couple of the streets, buildings that have been in place for over a hundred years, and during my childhood it still had a wooden rollercoaster, the largest in Europe it was claimed. Pretty much on the beach, yes. Although it had some amusement arcades, the entertainment tended towards catering for the older crowd – easy-listening singers and cabaret acts were more popular than pop stars here.

South of the town is Formby, an incredibly leafy and well-to-do place most famous for its sand dunes, large pine forest, and red squirrel nature reserve, indeed one of the few places in the country where the red squirrel is allowed to thrive. This is, by the way, where I developed my love for both forests and running; my uncle would drive there to take the dog for a walk through the woods while I'd run home. It's kind of why I feel at home in the woodlands – it was great to be alone in such a natural space, away from the stresses of, well, teenagerhood.

Someone else who also grew up nearby is Sarah, who's known online as The Urban Wanderer. Here she reflects on how it felt to spend childhoods by the sea, and how that affects the way she feels when she goes back.

[SARAH:]

I love seaside towns. I don't know whether it's because I grew up on the Wirral, and we were really lucky to have New Brighton and most of the Welsh seaside towns on our doorstep, but there's something quite special about them, even when I was little though it was strange because I remember the sand being quite black from Cammel Laird, and we never really realised why it was black. It was only as an adult that I noticed that it was probably because of the shipbuilding. And I always remember making up a song about dodging dog-poo while walking down the prom, and the grotty little outdoor activities you could get involved in, there was always some sort of sick from people coming out of the nightclubs, but it didn't really matter, it was kind of a fun and interesting place to be. And as an adult, I love them even more. I don't know what it is about them, their kind of quirkiness, the fact they're a little offbeat and not many people go to them. I think that's part of the

sort of charm of them, and I'm forever heading to places like Blackpool and Rhyl, and even though they're run-down in places, and they don't get looked after as well as they should do, I think that's the exciting bit, because there's always something different to discover, and that garishness that just makes it quite fun, I think it's a nice thing but I'm in sort of this funny place really because I know that a lot of these towns have a high deprivation and they need a lot of care, and it would be nice if they were done up, but at the same time I feel like I wouldn't go any more if they were more popular or polished, because it would have kind of got rid of that cuteness, that 'forgotten eras' as such and it would be too busy, in a way. There's nothing quite like going to Llandudno and walking along the prom in the rain because nobody's there, and it's this special place you can enjoy on your own, and you kind of get to see a different side of it because nobody is there.

Sarah at the end there mentions one of the reputations that seaside resorts have, one of a feeling they're quite run-down, slightly forlorn, derelict places, and you may have got that impression from my talking a bit about Skegness earlier. I'll come onto this point shortly, but firstly I want to talk a bit about where seaside resorts came from, and why they became so popular – I'd argue the two are intrinsically linked.

It was all the Victorians' fault, really. I mean, the power of the sea had been known for millennia; even the Romans had 'second homes' away from the hustle of the larger towns, as a place to go to relax and recuperate – in fact at least three Roman Emperors (Diocletian, Vetranio, and Romulus Augustulus) retired to the seaside in a manner that wouldn't feel out of place nowadays. Most of the others … didn't – indeed Diocletian appears to have been the only one to have done it willingly.

The idea was the combination of the sea air and the less stressful lifestyle was seen as either a rest cure or a way to prolong life. Spa towns, so beloved of more inland areas, served the same function – people would go for holidays there to take the waters and rejuvenate themselves.

Of course, throughout history, and even until pretty much the 19th Century, holidays like this were the preserve of the rich. Because they weren't trading hubs, nor manufacturing or agricultural centres, there was no reason nor even ability for the majority of the population to visit. Even had they been able to, there would have been nowhere for them to stay or eat – this was very much 'holiday home' territory (a factor that still holds true today in many areas). And while both ports and fishing hubs existed, neither were seen as quite 'genteel' enough for the rich looking for a place to rest.

Industrialisation changed everything, as it tended to in other aspects of society. Specifically, a combination of more liberal factory laws (especially after the Great Reform Act of 1832, I did a podcast on that, plug plug, led to a decade of acts that granted workers a small number of rights and freedoms) and advances in technology that led to the creation of cheaper and more efficient transportation. This was the age of the train, and provided a method by which workers could spend their new found leisure time.

This was often still very much work-centric or church-centric, however. While those first railways served as trade links to the industrial towns of the north of England, and the very people who didn't previously have access to their own transport, rail travel was by no means affordable to the masses. Rather, what emerged was what would later be called 'package tours'. Many were provided by the factories themselves, which would often shut down for a week at a time in summer (so called 'wakes weeks') to do proper maintenance. What could they do with a workforce without work, to keep them occupied, happy, and, let's be honest, all in one place so the factory owners knew what they were up to and could keep an eye on them? Oh, look, there's a railway here that we're already using, let's take them all away somewhere. But where? Oh, let's go to the seaside; it's far enough away from here and it's different and fun.

Each factory would close on a different week, so there was always a constant mass of people in the seaside towns, which as a consequence grew quite rapidly. In addition, the towns chosen tended to, obviously, be quite close to where the factory towns were, which led to the feeling that still exists even today of certain resorts being associated with certain areas – Blackpool, one of the largest, grew as it served the many large mill towns in East Lancashire, places like Blackburn, Burnley, and Colne. Skegness, conversely, was the destination of choice of the East Midlands colliery and hosiery towns like Sutton-in-Ashfield, Nottingham, and Ilkeston.

Another group who set up these tours had religious backgrounds. One such example of this is the Victorian entrepreneur and philanthropist Thomas Cook, who took advantage of the then up-and-coming railway network to arrange short trips for the local working population. Although not a Leicester native, he first had the idea to conduct tours after walking to Leicester from Market Harborough (about 15 miles – presumably he also walked back, though it's not recorded if he did it on the same day) for a meeting. The first trip he organised was in 1841 from Leicester to Loughborough (11 miles) – it was so obviously a success that only 10 years later, he was organising over 150,000 people to visit London for the Great Exhibition, and by the 1870s, through his new business venture (Thomas Cook & Son) he was taking people on trips around the world.

Thomas Cook himself was motived by his religion: he was a fervent Baptist and Temperance campaigner, believing that encouraging travel was a way to ensure the workers kept religiously focussed as well as distracting them from the demon drink. One wonders how he'd feel about modern-day package tours under his name – while he'd surely approve of the concept of families from the industrial heartlands being able to take two luxurious weeks in the sun, I'm not sure he'd necessarily approve of the exact scope of the phrase 'all-inclusive' …

He certainly wouldn't have approved of the 'wakes weeks', and although over time the practice stopped, generations of predominantly working class families from industrial towns continued to make the journey to the coast for a week of relaxation. Associated concepts developed – the most notable in the early days was Music Hall, popular across society anyway, but found a particular niche amongst these audiences, and which gave way to the wider concept of of Variety. Musicians, comedians (often both – this was the hunting ground of people like George Formby, Grace Fields, and Max Miller, who were all household names in their time), magicians, dancers, would perform nightly to raucous and half-drunk audiences; basically think of endless episodes of later editions of Britain's Got Talent. The humour tended to be quite base, stereotypical, sometimes subversive – this after all is the home of Punch and Judy shows (because every 6-year-old needs to learn about domestic violence and assaulting policemen), and saucy seaside postcards (because we're all too embarrassed and repressed about sex to talk about it properly so let's assume and imply it behind childish giggles).

The centre of this was often the holiday camp; the much derided but incredibly popular all-inclusive complexes that served as convenient bases for a week's holiday. Functional rather than aesthetic, often containing long mobile home type structures or concrete blocks, scattered around a central entertainment block with a restaurant, games room, swimming pool, bar, and dancefloor, and usually right next to the beach. Very much geared to children and party animals, they were traditionally staffed by what you might term 'holiday reps' whose job it was to ensure everyone was having fun. There were several brands, including Pontins and Butlins, and there was something similar in nearly every resort.

And so it continued until, well, my lifetime, until foreign holidays started to become in reach to the majority of people. No longer were places like Margate and Rhyl exciting; why should we go to places with polluted beaches and constant drizzle, close to home and therefore overly-familiar,

when we have the opportunity to to go exciting places with huge stretches of sand and guaranteed constant sunshine, more interesting food and drink, and the possibility of a holiday fling. No longer satisfied with having a snog from someone from distant Barnsley, now you can practice your schoolchild French and say 'voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir' with no hint of pretension whatsoever. Obviously they'd laugh at you so you get stuck with eating a dodgy Italian. Marbella. Ibiza. Benidorm. Names that oozed exotic, mysterious, unknown. Cheap flights and package holidays made them accessible – indeed cheaper and often easier to get to than some of the traditional British seaside resorts; comfortable, clean, planes get you to the sun in two hours, longer than a crowded, rickety, often delayed, old train. And the people flocked. We even had a TV sitcom about it in the mid-80s, called 'Duty Free'. Filmed in that glorious foreign seaside resort of, er, Leeds, because the budget for 80s TV was quite low.

Admittedly many of these places ended up as weird recreations of the British resorts they replaced. Parts of Benidorm, for instance, are very weird – the cafés serve Full English Breakfasts which you can eat whilst drinking British lagers and watching English football on the TVs, while down the road the cabaret venues and clubs have imported British singers and Australian bar staff. The only indications you're in Spain are the weather, the traffic driving on the right, and some of the shops having Spanish sounding names. You can spend a week in a resort, a hotel, and never venture outside an Anglophone bubble.

Meanwhile, back in Britain, the seaside resorts become shadows of their former selves. These are some of the most derelict, deprived areas of the country, reliant on seasonal workforce, pretty much dead in Winter. They're often not that large places, a bit of a journey from anywhere significant (Skegness in particular suffers from this, as it's over two hours from Nottingham, the nearest major city – the railway is direct but not in any way straight, and almost all the roads are single-carriageway and weave around the country), so firms are less inclined to relocate there, there's less investment and infrastructure given to them. In the year up to June 2020, the average unemployment rate in England was around 3.9% - in Clacton it was 5.8%, Blackpool South (which covers the majority of the town) was 5.9%, the two Thanet constituencies that cover the Kent resorts of Margate, Ramsgate, and Broadstairs were 4.5% and 5.1%. Even Boston & Skegness, which covers a large agricultural area as well as the town itself, was 4.4%.

Many of these places voted for Brexit. Indeed, based on an estimated model, the constituency of Boston & Skegness is regarded as the most Brexit-supporting place in the country at over 75% (the Brexit referendum was reported by local authority; the corresponding authority, East Lindsey, voted 70.7%). Another seaside resort, Clacton, was third at 73%; Castle Point (covering the resort of Canvey island) was also top ten, and places like Cleethorpes and Blackpool also saw over 66% of voters voting to leave the EU. Primarily this would have been a resentment at this lack of government investment, lack of jobs and services, coupled with a feeling that the low-cost of living was driving 'out-of-towners' to buy up the houses and take what few jobs there are.

I need to point out that East Lindsey's' own council stats state that while the proportion of White British in England is 85%, in East Lindsey it is 96.5%. Irish and other White (presumably Poles) push the total White population to 98.4%. Nigel Farage may be many bad things, but it can't be doubted he's a bloody good orator and a master of misdirection.

To be fair, in some of the more affluent seaside resorts, especially in the South West, down Cornwall way, people are indeed buying up housing and using them as second homes, in the Roman manner, and pricing the locals out of the housing market, exacerbating the poverty and deprivation elsewhere in the borough. And, just like in the Roman manner, the people doing this are those who can afford it, the higher classes, who, by the way, are mostly exclusively White British.

However, here may be one of the only plus points to Brexit, although it rather depends on who you are. Leaving the EU means losing freedom of movement. Those cheap Ryanair and Easyjet flights to the Costa Del Sol and the Greek Islands may well become a thing of the past, once you factor in slower immigration procedures, higher insurance costs, mobile roaming charges, and potentially visa admin fees. One of the few places that might stand to benefit from this are these long-forgotten and much-derided British Seaside Resorts. Will we see a return of package holidays to the likes of Torquay, Helensburgh, Barry Island? We had another sitcom back in the 80s called 'Hi De Hi' which was set in a British seaside town's holiday camp at the end of the 50s, and was even then seen as very nostalgic (just the sort of world loved by the Brexiters, I guess); while they still exist they're no longer anywhere near as all-encompassing as they were – are we going to see them return to prominence in some form as people re-discover them?

I realise I'm painting a bit of a dour picture of seaside resorts here. Let's take a couple of more positive examples, starting with a town I've considered one of the most depressing places I've ever been to, precisely because of all this recent history – Rhyl.

Now, the most famous spot in Rhyl was the "Sun Centre"; I'd never been and it's so not my sort of holiday entertainment, but it occupies a firm place in my childhood memories since BBC Radio Merseyside used it as a prize-winning destination. It was really nothing more than a glorified sports and leisure centre, but for working-class families from inner-city Liverpool, it was the closest thing we had to the Med. As you might expect, it lost popularity and the council ran out of money to keep it open in early 2014, demolishing it a couple of years later. However it's now been replaced by a new hotel and, further up the prom, a modern and new leisure and activities centre, called with continuity, SC2.

Rhyl's promenade is lined with weird art installations, mosaics, and sculptures that provide a bit of culture and colour, whilst the beach itself – the main draw for most of the tourists here – is large, sandy, and, by being North-facing rather than the West-facing beaches nearer Liverpool, a little less windy and harsh. Admittedly you get the same view of the windfarms and oilrigs in the Irish Sea, but they're far enough away and no-one's looking at the horizon.

Also in Wales, but at the other end of the country, is Tenby. This is a lovely little seaside town in the far SW, and quite a trek to get to (50 miles or so beyond Swansea even), but I think it's worth the adventure.

The name (which is much longer in Welsh) means '(small) fort of the fish'. There's two things in evidence for this; firstly it's very much still a fishing village, with lots of boats in and around the harbour bringing in fresh seafood every day, much of which are then sold in the pubs, restaurants, and takeaways that exist in both the 'old town' and the suburban sprawl

Secondly, the old town itself, much of which in high season is closed off to vehicles allowing pedestrians to stagger out the pubs with no danger, is surrounded by town walls, dating from the late 12th century when this area was an English enclave surrounded by hostile Welsh homelands.

It was the late Georgian and Victorian eras that saw the modern Tenby emerge, firstly as a spa and then as a recreational town; the colourful houses on the promenades and the popularity of the wide beaches come from this era, and make the town what it is today. Pastel houses and sandy toes, what's not to love.

Another seaside area with pastel buildings, in this case beach huts, are the myriad of seaside towns on the Norfolk coast, like Cromer, Wells, and Sheringham, which I walked through in the first week of my Hike Across Great Britain last year. These huts stand almost on the beach itself, and are

usually used for getting changed into/out of beachwear, storing personal valuables, and, let's be honest cos this is Britain, staying dry and warm out of the wind and rain. You can rent then or buy them outright - and they're surprisingly expensive for what they are: you often need to spend £10-£20k - think of them as being like a new car. Here, very much, it's all about location location location! They're usually really brightly coloured, because presumably it just fits in with the general ambiance. I think it makes an otherwise dull wooden cabin quite appealing.

The largest of them is Hunstanton, noted for its unusual rock formations; indeed the style is named after these very cliffs. My knowledge of geology rivals that of biology, but I can inform you that this is a type section of rock known as the Hunstanton Formation, and it's the primary example of layered limestone rock, laid down around 130 million years ago. Late-period dinosaurs would have seen this and been as equally bemused as I.

The town is mainly known for being a significant resort town though, with beaches, cafés, ice cream, arcades, and mini-golf, so has quite a good tourist base and vibe. Indeed I've been here several times; I used to be involved in a nationwide social organisation and every year we'd have a meetup in a caravan park here. In November, cos it was cheaper.

Someone who knows more about this area, being a local, is Lucy, from AbsolutelyLucy.

[LUCY:]

Growing up in Norfolk I think that I've been spoilt rotten with cute little seaside towns. I think it's a massively underrated part of the country, a lot of people seem to forget it even exists, but that's what makes it so special – it's still got that quaint old seaside charm – and it's never busy, even in the busiest part of summer, it never feels like it's busy as there's so much space for everyone to enjoy themselves.

I love the fact we have so many cute seaside villages and towns. Popular ones include Wells, where they do a lot of crabbing along the harbour there, there's loads of really cute ice-cream shops, and obviously lots of fish and chips. I also really really love Cromer; it's got the old pier there, and it's just so cute, and the actual pubs around there are really nice, and there's lovely restaurants, plus lots of entertainment for kids – there's loads of windsurfing, and lots of outdoor sports, plus all the entertainment, including things like Punch and Judy shows, and even stuff like pantomimes, there's always lots of entertainments going on around the areas.

I think one of my absolute favourites has to be Old Hunstanton. It's the closest one to where I live, and it's just really beautiful and again untouched. Brancaster beach is also really really lovely.

So yeh, I really really recommend if you're hoping to get out and about in 2021 and explore seaside towns, definitely think about visiting Norfolk.

At the start of this pod, you heard from Jax and Adam, and they mentioned a few places in Yorkshire, including Filey and Scarborough. I've surprisingly never been to either, but a third place they mentioned is Whitby. This is a small seaside town on the NE coast of Yorkshire, on the far side of the North York Moors. Its remote location has meant it's never really grown to a sizeable town; its current population's about 13,000.

Whitby's primary industry was fishing, it was a shipbuilding and whaling port until the development of Middlesbrough a little way up the coast; the whalebone arch on the cliff-top is a memorial to this and a symbol of the town itself.

It was also in Whitby that famous explorer, navigator, cartographer, and failed kidnapper James Cook first took sail, as an apprentice on the coal transporters that plied the coast. Following an eventful career that saw him become the first European to reach Australia's East Coast and map much of the Western coast of North America, he died while trying to ransom the King of Hawai'i in return for repairs. A statue of him also stands on the cliffs.

These days Whitby is more known as a quaint holiday resort - typical resort activities like fish/chips, amusement arcades, and boat trips line the promenade, which leads to an expansive beach. Deeper in the town are narrow brick & cobbled lanes with tourist shops selling souvenirs and the local mineral, jet.

Its biggest claim to fame though is its abbey. The ruins date from its disestablishment in around 1540 (one of the many victims of Henry VIII's spat with the Catholic church), but there's been a religious site here since the mid 650s, and apparently it was here that the Kingdom of Northumbria decided to adopt the Roman rather than the Irish (Iona) calculation of Easter - by modern standards a minor note but people had wars over less in those days.

The abbey is the last resting place of a few notables from the period, including a couple of kings of the neighbouring kingdoms of Northumbria and Deira, and a couple of knights who served under the later William the Conqueror.

In the late Victorian times, the ruins provided an inspiration to the author Bram Stoker, who used the Abbey as a background to his novel Dracula - Whitby was where he was said to have landed and the ruined Abbey became his first resting place. This Dracula connection, along with the ruins of the abbey itself and the nearby old church & graveyard, have meant Whitby has become a 'pilgrimage' site for those in the 'goth' subculture - every year there is a whole 'goth' weekend festival here.

Further up the coast is Saltburn-by-the-Sea, another place with a literary connection. The book in question here though is a "Contemporary Female Fiction" novel called 'Secrets' by Freya North, which I thought was really good, but my tastes aren't the same as the average middle-aged man.

Although a small village had existed here for some centuries, serving as a fishing village amongst other, shall we, say, nefarious amphibious trades, the town that exists today was built largely because one member of a local landowning and industrialist family, Henry Pease, had what he called a prophetic vision of a town on the cliff, with much of the surrounding land turning into garden. He was a Quaker, so the chances of this being as a result of illicit substances is quite small. Anyway, the family also owned the local railway company so they extended the line to the spot and built the town, fulfilling the vision. And it is quite a pretty place still, unlike most seaside resorts. The only downside being, of course, for many years there were no pubs in it.

Saltburn has the obligatory beach and pier, but as it's built on a cliff-top it also has something fairly unusual as its main attraction. Replacing a vertical lift in 1884, and operated by a water pump, is a funicular railway. Known as the Saltburn Cliff Lift, or Saltburn Tramway, it's 63m long, 37m high, and runs pretty much directly onto the start of the pier. It's an impressive viewpoint from the top.

Saltburn pier, incidentally, according to Wikipedia, is 208m long, dates from 1869, and is the last surviving pier in Yorkshire.

Even further north, and with a pretty huge beach, is Whitley Bay. It stretches several kilometres South to Tynemouth, and on a warm sunny day it's a nice walk, either on the sands & pebbles itself, or along the promenade. Of course don't forget to stop off at a chip shop along the way (Cullercoats, maybe) for a traditional English chippy lunch.

Whitley Bay is a typical seaside resort; seafront views, amusement arcades, and ice-cream. Apart from a tradition of ice-hockey (were they one of the teams I used to watch on TV as a kid?), and some limited fishing (the bulk of the NE's fishing industry is centred a bit further North in the Northumberland area, around Seahouses), it's very much a place to go on a weekend and laze in the sunshine while children play with a 'bucket and spade'. Off-seafront there are some streets with large Victorian housing, and the old railway station (now part of the Newcastle Metro system) is quite an architectural marvel; it is a town very much of its time.

Someone who knows Whitley Bay pretty well is Emma Dodd, from the blog "BarefootEm" (no relation).

[EMMA:]

It's an interesting topic for me as I've just bought a flat by the sea, which is really really exciting and is something of a return home for me, because I grew up by the sea in a sort of faded-grandeur seaside resort in the North-East of England, and it was a wonderful place to grow up, and I've got lots of really nice memories of it, even though by the time I left it did feel like it was a little bit bedraggled and in need of a little bit of love, but the seaside resort where I grew up has had that love since I left, which is really really nice, so the characteristic Spanish city dome which many of you will know is Whitley Bay, now has had millions of pounds put into it and it really is the focal point of that part of the coast, and it looks fabulous, it's got nice restaurants, and bars in it, and shops, and it's a really lovely place to be, which is really really nice, so that is really wonderful to go back there and visit, and see that it's had the love that it deserves, and I think this year, 2020, with lockdown and Coronavirus, it's been a really interesting one thinking about the British seaside and how it's been an important part of our holidaying history, but everyone's just appreciating what we've got at home these days so much more, which is why for me returning to live by the sea is so important, and obviously as a wild swimmer it's even better, and I'm going to be living somewhere so close to the sea that I'll be able to pop in for a dip at lunchtime. So yeh, the sea is a place I go and I can relax and I can just forget about all of the stresses of everyday life and enjoy just being at one with nature, and even when I swim in the same place, it's different every time, and since I've moved back to the coast I've had a couple of different swims, and the first one, there was some rain out at sea, so it was crowned with a rainbow and that made it really special, and you know, I've swum in the rain, I've swum in the sunshine, I've swum when there's been frost on the ground, and every one is different, but being by the sea is calming and it's just a wonderful experience. So yeh, returning to the sea is a big thing for me, and something I'm really glad I've managed to achieve.

Emma also talks about moving back to the seaside after some time away, and how different it feels. Sarah, The Urban Wanderer, who you heard from earlier, also talks a bit about this.

[SARAH:]

I think ... I wouldn't want to live in a seaside town, for the main reason that I think it would lose its magic, you'd get to know it a bit too much, maybe? And you might see those sides of it that aren't quite as ... I don't know, interesting?, because when you're a visitor you obviously see it from a different perspective, and living inland, in the city of Manchester, it's totally different to a seaside town. We have the grime, we have the garishness, but you don't have that kind of holiday feeling that you get when you go to Blackpool or Southport or any of the other amazing coastal towns, and when I look back at New Brighton, they've been done up recently, and it doesn't really feel the same to me, in my view because I am now a visitor, because I don't live on the Wirral any more, but it just seems too posh, in a way. It doesn't stop me visiting though, and I'm always going to be found pounding the proms and walking down the piers, because there's just the sort of fun about it, and I

like it that way.

Maybe that's the attraction of them; that going there is 'a special trip', a step away from your normal life and a place where all you need to do is relax, chill, and pretend you're a child again. And none of us ever really want to grow old, do we?

[standard section separation jingle]

Well I hope I've made you think a bit about the seaside, and maybe bring back memories or longings for the coast. Next time I'll be possibly still by the seaside, but with a more specific focus – following on from my pod a few episodes ago about beer, I'll be looking at other types of alcohol around the world, from the best spirits and the finest discoveries, to possibly the most unlikely place you might find a tipple.

Until then, wipe your feet on the way out, and if you're feeling off colour, keep on getting better.

[Outro theme tune, same as intro, just a different bit of it]

[Outro voiceover:
Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice. I'm pretty bad at that sort of thing myself, so I'll understand perfectly if you don't.

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Until next week, have safe journeys. Bye for now.]