In what ways did Blackpool’s experience of war, both in 1914 and 1945, differ from that of similar resorts on the southern and eastern coasts?

Abstract:

The essay seeks to compare experiences of Blackpool and two other resort areas in wartime. The findings show two fundamental differences in that experience. On the one hand continued occupancy levels and sustained leisure facilities. On the other, continuing but lesser occupation rates and the imminent threat of danger. The essay concludes by summarising the differing features of the three resorts.

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Introduction

Walton (1998) describes War as ‘...almost proverbially the enemy of tourism’ and by implication, of leisure and holidaymaking. The aim of this essay is to challenge this view by comparing experiences of the area centred on Blackpool with two other representative resorts, Scarborough on the East Coast and Brighton & Hove on the South.

It is recognised that holiday resorts were affected both positively and negatively, depending on the precise location and vulnerability to the effects of war and proximity to the fighting. For example, anecdotal, eye-witness accounts describe the beaches at Brighton being mined, with recollections of accidents and the town of Scarborough being bombed with many casualties. Both Brighton and Scarborough were ‘Prohibited Areas’, off limits other than to essential civilian and military personnel. Indeed, the coastline between Berwick and Dorset were treated in the same way.

On the other hand, the massive influx of British and allied troops during the conflicts, though these can hardly be regarded as tourists on a leisure break, in spite of their spending power. Among the millions of men and women were those in training, convalescing or simply refugees fleeing from the riskier areas of Britain and Europe, including young evacuees. In the case of Blackpool and the Fylde coast, many more would come to work in the area either by choice or because they had been transferred from London and other cities at risk. St Annes in particular had several Government Ministries move in to the towns hotels. Indeed, some stayed, National Savings, Work and Pensions amongst them.
During WW1 the developing resorts were able to offer accommodation for large numbers of people and in the South these were taken up mainly by troops arriving at holding and transit camps prior to disembarkation to theatres of war in Northern Europe and beyond. It’s reasonable to suppose that work would preclude making use of any of the resorts’ attractions, other than in any meagre leisure time. Civilian support companies, factories, military hospital and convalescent homes, rail and dock facilities, military depots and ordnance stores, with attendant services all provided employment for large numbers of folk whose leisure time would be spent in resorts.

From 1938 onwards, new opportunities for work were also responsible for influx of workers and for increasing disposable wealth and time in the resorts. The coast of Britain and its resorts were expected to be invaded during WW2 and plans were laid to thwart potential attacks. In June 1940, plans were laid for a series of defences that would deny any enemy landing in England freedom of movement (PRO ref WO 199/1800 in Schofield, 1998). Local tradesmen (including the author’s father) and firms were charged with bringing the plans to life. New factories for war effort, airports, railheads and military and even prisoner of war installations all added to the migration of workers as well as providing work, income and leisure time of local people. All the resorts in question appear to be hives of industry. The population moved from a transient, largely seasonal one, to a more ‘permanent’ or regular one.

For Blackpool, after the initial shock at the declaration of war in 1914 and the resulting confusion as visitors tried to get home, it wasn’t long before it seemed business as usual, with commercial considerations a priority. The influx of 2000 Belgian refugees on the Fylde coast helped fill the vacancies left
by visitors. The arrival of troops took up much of the accommodation slack for the duration of the war, 10,000 troops, many American and colonial at any one time. Moore, (2010, pp194-202) offers a catalogue of and a timeline for the specific and extensive activities in the town at this time.

In spite of train ticket rationing and movement restrictions Lancashire folk, with growing disposable income made their way back to Blackpool. The now familiar visitor attractions included a complete layout in detail, of the trench systems of the Loos and Arras battlefield initially used for training troops and latterly as a visitor attraction, all proceeds to the new military hospital at Squires Gate.

During WW2 Blackpool again managed to balance the loss of traditional holidaymakers and ‘Wakes Weeks’ (Poole, 1985) with a massive influx of upwards of 750,000 RAF recruits alone passing through the town with 45,000 at anyone time (Walton, 1998). Military units, refugees, evacuees, Ministry workers and transferees, Convalescents and Prisoners of war supplemented that number.

The RAF provided the bulk of service population. Whilst Scarborough and Brighton had large operational airfields close by, Blackpool had 5 RAF bases airfields on the door step. 2 involved in building aircraft as well as being operational bases. RAF Squires Gate had its triple role of operations, production and training. That crucial training role brought in large numbers of polish fliers for both training and operations. RAF Warton had 10,000 American fliers and nearby RAF Weeton another 9000 at any one time with 42,000 passing through the Technical Training School based there.
As Walton muses, ‘…Blackpool benefited from its distance from the front line, a unique array of cheap accommodation and extensive stretches of beach that could be used for training purposes’. It also benefited post war by the return of many of those who had been introduced to its delights during the war. Blackpool as usual managed not only to survive, but also to keep its reputation as the premier seaside resort in the UK intact. He goes on to suggest that seven million people passed through the town in the 1920’s. The post war period re-energised entrepreneurial Blackpool.

In Brighton and Hove in World War 1, Indian soldiers, Hospital, 2600 men on memorial, The Royal Pavilion was one of three Indian hospitals in Brighton: the York Place schools were used for the more heavily wounded troops, while the Elm Grove workhouse was renamed the Kitchener Hospital and treated lighter casualties. Kennedy (2010) and Pennington (2010) suggest that the Pavilion became more than a hospital: it became a media spectacle and a source of propaganda in recruiting troops from the sub-continent. The beach used as rifle range The War Illustrated magazine photo’s.

With the threat of invasion along the south coast, much of the coastline and seafront was cordoned off with barbed wire and gun emplacements. Hitler had planned to invade the South coast including Brighton and Hove (Op Sealion) and to take the port of Newhaven to support a landing. Spicer (2005) records ‘…bombing, machine gunning and incendiary attacks became almost daily events’. For the observer, the regular dog fights in the sky would have provided added spectacle if not terror. Properties along the coast were requisitioned for military, mainly naval use. The nearby harbour at Shoreham was taken over as a naval base, later supporting the ‘D’ Day Landings.
On the east coast, the spa town of Scarborough, Blackpool’s competitor for the folk of East Lancs and West Riding, had a difficult time. Early in the war, series of heavy naval bombardments with many casualties along the adjacent coast, and 11 trawlers sunk by a ‘U’ boat in Sept 1916, discouraged the many who had holidayed there before hostilities began. French & Canadian troops billeted both suffering casualties during the bombardments.

WW2 fared no better. Like Brighton and many other resort areas in the South and East, they were classified as ’Prohibited areas’, The harbour was mined, and the town filled with the military of the allies. Proximity to the industrial North East and the docks at Hull supporting them, were targets for the Luftwaffe and for the prospect of invasion.

**Conclusion**

It’s clear that there was a difference in the experience of the South and East coast resorts and Blackpool, in both wars. That difference can be counted mainly in economics and the sources of revenue. In common was the influx of a largely transient population of troops that balanced the loss of the traditional holiday maker. Key to Blackpool was the ingress of so many service personnel into the area.

Squires Gate, to the south of the town is significant in providing the bulk of the population in both world wars. During WW1, before its role as an airfield, the site was used as a 4600 bed military hospital, a military training area and camp.

The RAF provided the principle market for the leisure facilities in WW2.

The difference between Blackpool and the resorts of East and Southern England was that the resident population and visitors to Blackpool continued...
to enjoy some of the pre-war and newly developed leisure facilities. Some as a result the residents and the great migration of troops, evacuees, workers and others and a persistent group of what we would call ‘short break’ visitors from East Lancashire, enabled by high employment and disposable income.

At this stage it is worth noting the lack of readily available information about the detail of what was available in terms of leisure and the size of the populations in the resorts at the time, apart that is regarding Blackpool. This provides ideal opportunity for further research with the local history organisations in the areas.

The author’s mother recollects, as an 18 year old, that the war years in Blackpool, other than seeing friends depart, possibly never to be seen again, were ‘fantastic’. Her vivid memories of wartime Blackpool are ice skating and packed dance halls, lost friends and watching Liverpool burning from the Promenade at St Annes.
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