

POPULAR PLAYGROUNDS: BLACKPOOL AND CONEY ISLAND, c. 1880-1970i

John K. Walton

There are two rival claimants for the status of world's first working-class seaside resort, each of which was intimately associated with landscapes of modernity and crowded humanity: Blackpool, the popular resort of the Lancashire 'cotton towns', and Coney Island, that of New York.ⁱⁱ A third possible contender is Atlantic City, the resort for Philadelphia, New Jersey and subsequently a large area of the industrial north-east of the United States; but the 400 boarding-houses that catered for the 'lower middle and lower class' end of the market here in 1900 fell far short of Blackpool's census figure of 2,642 at the same time. And Atlantic City at the turn of the century could not yet match Coney Island's sheer visibility and vitality: the latter, of course, attracted a steady stream of comment from literary and political visitors to New York, as a satellite sight of the great gateway city.ⁱⁱⁱ Coney Island's most recent historian recognises Blackpool as the New York resort's most obvious parallel and competitor, even though he places it on the wrong side of England (the North Sea coast) and assumes that many of its visitors came from Liverpool (a perception that pre-empts the many potential parallels that also exist between Coney Island and the Mersey estuary resort of New Brighton, whose collapse in the 1960s and 1970s marched in step with that of Coney Island).^{iv} What follows is an exercise in comparative history, examining the parallels and contrasts between Blackpool and Coney Island in the formative and transitional years before the First World War, and assessing their rival claims to pioneer status as the world's first working-class seaside resort. This is a story of difference as well as of parallel lives, and what really stands out is the need to explain why Blackpool and its Pleasure Beach continued to flourish through the second half of the twentieth century, while Coney Island was already losing fairgrounds to residential development before the First World War and quickly became a shadow of its former self from the 1950s, almost losing its identity from the mid-1960s as much of the old resort area fell into decline and dereliction.

From the end of the nineteenth century onwards it was Blackpool and Coney Island, above all, that became the two most emblematic symbols of 'mass entertainment', popular escapist pleasures and the playful crowd in the early twentieth century: the first great popular playgrounds for the industrial working class in the modern world. Although the working classes at play never completely dominated their beaches, streets and fairgrounds, they quickly came to provide the images that overrode all others, and they became indelibly associated with crowded, noisy, vulgar, unbuttoned, uninhibited enjoyment, for better or worse. They epitomised carnival, saturnalia, the temporary triumph of the periphery over the core, the world turned upside down, the suspension of dignity and inhibitions, the temporary reversal of the civilising process, the reign of gluttony, extravagance and licentiousness, the celebration of the 'collective gaze', rather than the 'romantic gaze', the direction of

that gaze at the 'freak' and the sport of nature, the sharing of pleasures communally, and the process of joyful participation in the crowd at play as an end in itself, at once a surrendering and a celebration of self.^v Contemporaries from outside their prevailing cultures might claim that they were fundamentally lonely places, alienating and fostering the anomie of the outsider; but the alternative rhetoric that stressed their structured sociability probably carries greater conviction.^{vi}

These were also prominent among the sites of the first great permanent amusement parks, with rides generating physical excitement and appealing to fantasy and wonderment: Blackpool's Pleasure Beach, and the evocative Coney Island trio of Luna Park, Steeplechase and Dreamland. Their place-myths



Dreamland Tower, Coney Island, 1905

conjure up concepts like popular modernity, mass consumption, and the idea of the 'leisure industries', as well as Urry's notion of the 'collective gaze'.^{vii} But both places also laid self-justificatory claim to the provision of 'rational recreations', in Coney Island's case coming out of the United States' exhibition and world's fair tradition, which Blackpool also borrowed from its European guise, mediated through London's Olympia, Earl's Court and the White City, while also drawing on the heritage of fairground and music-hall exhibitions.^{viii} The main focus of this article is to develop a transatlantic comparison between these aspects of the two great popular resorts, looking at their significance in relation to Lancashire and New York at the turn of the twentieth century, when they vied with each other as symbols of progress, prosperity and the power of popular consumption. In addition, we shall tease out some explanations for the greater longevity and vitality of Blackpool and its Pleasure Beach through the twentieth century, while Coney Island as a popular amusement centre went into steep and seemingly irrecoverable decline after the Second World War.^{ix}

In outline, Blackpool and Coney Island had developed almost in step as resort districts during the nineteenth century, with Coney Island a pace behind until the rhythm of development quickened in the 1880s and 1890s. Blackpool's origins as a resort lay in the later eighteenth century, whereas Coney Island began to cater for visitors around 1820. The New York resort was catching up rapidly, with the provision of amenities for middle-class visitors in the middle decades of the nineteenth century: it was not until 1864 that a steam railway arrived, eighteen years after Blackpool; but big steamboats had been operating from New York since the 1840s, and by 1880 five steam railways served Coney Island, compared with Blackpool's two, although the latter fed visitors in over longer distances and from a wider range of places of origin. But Blackpool as a popular resort for the working classes of Manchester and (especially) the Lancashire 'cotton towns' began earlier than Coney Island, and even when the latter overtook it in terms of sheer weight of visitor numbers in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century there were important qualitative differences to set against the brute statistics. Calculations based on passenger train arrivals suggest that Blackpool was already attracting 1.3 million visitors a year in the early 1870s, rising to just under two million in the early 1890s, almost three million at the turn of the century and nearly four million on the eve of the First World War.^x Coney Island's popularity grew much more explosively even than this, and it experienced substantial growth in

1880s and for a full week in Edwardian times. Those (mainly middle-class) Coney Island visitors who did stay for longer periods, and did not use the relatively small number of hotels, occupied the 'hundreds of summer bungalows whose occupants doubled the island's population during the summer months' by the mid-twentieth century, but generated less employment than Blackpool's thousands of landladies.^{xiii} This helps to explain why Coney Island's off-season population grew more slowly than Blackpool's, although it was a close-run thing. Blackpool's inhabitants quadrupled in numbers to more than 47,000 between 1881 and 1901, reaching the 100,000 mark in 1931, while Coney Island, which also had around 12,000 residents in 1880, increased its resident population to around 75,000 by the 1920s and 100,000 in the late 1930s. Whether Coney Island's population included more commuters than that of Blackpool remains a moot point.^{xiv} But in any case the sheer density and exuberance of Coney Island's entertainment district, together with the employment generated by the bath-houses and other arrangements for the changing and storage of clothes which were not needed under Blackpool's bathing regime, helped to counterbalance the limited development of the accommodation industry in the New York resort.^{xv}

Both Blackpool and Coney Island needed appropriate attractions to persuade the punters to spend their hard-earned money here rather than at home, however cheap and straightforward the transport links might be. The Lancashire cotton towns had their own popular entertainments, from pubs and music-halls to public parks, supplemented by fairgrounds at the local holidays, while New York had a well-developed popular entertainment infrastructure, supplemented by picnic grounds on the urban fringe.^{xvi} In both resorts, syndicates and companies were already offering an array of entertainments from the 1860s and 1870s. Blackpool's North and Central Piers, which opened in 1863 and 1868 (as the South Jetty) respectively, soon passed from being promenades and landing-stages to providing dancing, music and a variety of entertainments, as did the Iron Piers that opened at Coney Island's popular West Brighton beach in 1879 and 1881. Blackpool's Raikes Hall Pleasure Gardens, half a mile inland, offered dancing, fireworks, scenic tableaux and (unofficially) prostitutes from the early 1870s, while during that decade its Aquarium and Winter Gardens added to the more decorous attractions for a middle-class public that was still important, and the origins of the future 'Golden Mile' of stalls and sideshows, shooting-galleries, alternative therapists and much else besides, began to coalesce on the debatable land between high and low water mark on the beach between the piers. Coney Island in these years similarly offered a mixture of the self-consciously reputable, the raffish and the downright sleazy: in the late 1870s and early 1880s it acquired (among other things) a Seaside Aquarium, a Lilliputian Opera Company performing in the Midget's Palace, and a tremendous array of sideshows, freak shows, steam swings and carousels, together with fast food outlets. This saturnalia was concentrated especially into the area around the Centennial Observatory tower, brought in from the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1878: a juxtaposition that underlined Coney Island's enduringly uneasy relationship between the sensational, the prurient, the educational and the patriotic. Whether, as Immerso suggests, Coney Island after 1875 became 'something entirely original and quite distinctly American' raises interesting



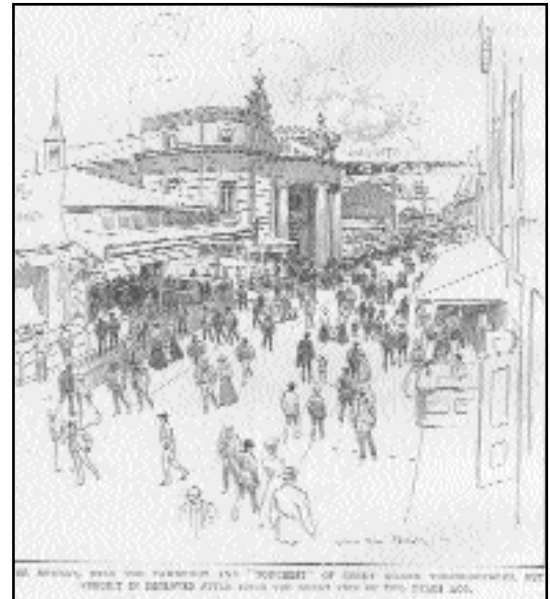
Blackpool's Pleasure Beach during the First World War

hotels, bath-houses and entertainment facilities in the late 1870s; and both Coney's West Brighton and Blackpool's South Beach were making the transition to working-class domination during the 1880s, with a great proliferation of cheap, popular amusements and food and drink outlets aimed at (as *Harper's Weekly* said of Coney Island in 1889), 'The great mass of the toilers of the city – not the poorest, but the struggling many.'^{xi} The exact timing of the process remains a matter of definition and emphasis, and much of Coney Island laid claim to being an elite resort at the beginning of the twentieth century, when horse-racing still flourished and helped to attract the well-heeled to opulent hotels.^{xii} Democracy soon came to dominate, and by 1910 Coney Island had left Blackpool far behind in terms of sheer visitor numbers, laying claim to twenty million visitors per annum; but the overwhelming majority of them were day-trippers, in contrast to Blackpool where many working-class visitors were already staying for several days together in the

questions: exactly how it differed at this stage from Blackpool, which was laying claim to a quintessentially northern industrial working-class Englishness from about the same time, would be difficult to tease out.^{xvii}

Both resorts continued to attract middle-class as well as more plebeian patronage, and both divided their markets geographically within the larger whole. While Blackpool's North Shore, under the aegis of a land development company, was being constructed as a quiet middle-class area from the 1860s onwards, so the much bigger estates at Brighton and Manhattan Beaches, to the east of plebeian West Brighton, were providing ostentatiously luxurious hotels with military bands, picnic pavilions and firework displays.^{xviii} The amenities provided for an opulent and pleasure-loving metropolitan middle class, at one time including no fewer than three racecourses, far outshone what Blackpool had to offer to its more sedate 'respectable' market at this time: its own horse races on the beach were long gone. Nor did the relatively innocent offerings of its Uncle Tom's Cabin, a pub with beer-garden, dancing and primitive fairground rides, perched on an erosion-threatened cliff-top site just north of the town boundary, or the similar attractions of various 'strawberry gardens' on the rural fringes, or the gypsy fortune-tellers on the southern sand-dunes, hold a candle to the prostitution, pugilism and general lawlessness of the area beyond Manhattan Beach, which came to be known as Norton's Point, until it was cleaned up from the 1880s and transformed into residential respectability towards the turn of the century. But Blackpool, like Coney Island, developed a raffish central area, close to the piers and the busiest railway station, from the 1870s onwards; although the front gardens of the terraced houses of South Beach, which began to accommodate steam roundabouts, cheapjacks and freak shows in the late nineteenth century, were both more visible on their promenade site and less challenging to mainstream susceptibilities than the casino, girlie shows and brothels of Coney Island's Bowery.^{xix}

The 1890s, however, saw Blackpool's leisure capitalists, drawing extensively on London money for the first time, creating substantially-built and enduring leisure complexes in the town centre, with the emblematic Tower (opened in 1894), more than two hundred feet higher than Coney Island's Centennial Tower, gathering together a circus, a zoo, an enormous and ornate ballroom, variety theatre, roof gardens and exhibitions in a sturdy brick building under the high girders, while the Alhambra sought to rival it with a similar mix on an adjacent sea-front site at the end of the decade, and the Winter Gardens was already moving firmly down-market at the end of the 1880s.^{xx} Despite the big hotels of the 1870s, the Seaside Aquarium of 1877 with its zoo and freak shows, the immediate success of La Marcus Thompson's original switchback railway of 1884 (which soon spawned a host of imitators and innovations to increase the speed and excitement of the rides), and the tremendous proliferation of sideshows, vaudeville and cheap eating-places, Coney Island's leisure entrepreneurs did not match these huge late-Victorian undertakings. Blackpool's late-Victorian 'pleasure palaces' were built to last (in brick rather than wood, plaster and 'staff', Coney Island's characteristic cheap composite building material that proved highly vulnerable to fire) and aimed at what was already an established popular (and mainly working-class) market with a familiar set of



The Bowery, Coney Island, rebuilt after the fire of 1903

characteristics and preferences, to which Blackpool managements soon became accustomed. Where Blackpool's enduring symbol was the Tower, the solid brick and steel product of a limited company with extensive popular shareholding, and a symbol of local determination in the face of metropolitan chicanery, Coney Island's external identity became bound up from the turn of the century with the more exciting and ephemeral new phenomenon of the amusement park. There was always much more to the place, not least the huge and ever-growing crowds that thronged the beach, but it was Steeplechase, Luna Park and Dreamland that dominated the making of the Coney Island image. Blackpool followed close behind; but the Pleasure Beach, which became established at the resort's southern extremity from the turn of the century, took much longer to become in some sense emblematic of its resort, while developing more solid business virtues. It came to symbolise Blackpool's capacity for survival and reinvention, in contrast with a Coney Island story in which the downfall of the parks, and especially Steeplechase as last survivor of the original trio, became tightly entwined with the decline of the resort as a whole.^{xxi}

The seaside amusement park, as pioneered by Paul Boyton at Sea Lion Park, Coney Island, in 1895 and developed two years later through George Tilyou's long-lived Steeplechase, was a distinctive phenomenon, building on and pulling together existing technologies of pleasure in a new setting. It depended on and made use of the traditions of the travelling fairground and circus, with their nineteenth-century additions and sophistications; the novel (and transatlantic) genre of the travelling 'Wild West Show' of the later nineteenth century; the exhibitions of panoramas and dioramas that already represented 'other' landscapes and cultures to urban audiences; the fairground amusement areas of the exhibitions and World's Fairs of the same period, especially the controlled and sanitised Midway of the Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893; the developing fascination exerted by the zoo and aquarium; and the new technology of the roller-coaster, growing out of the European idea of the 'Russian mountain' and more directly from the exploita-

tion of old mine railway inclines for tourist purposes at Mauch Chunk since 1870, and bearing fruit in La Marcus Thompson's Coney Island switchback of 1884, to which steam power had been applied a year later. The first scenic railway, as such, had been inaugurated in Atlantic City in 1886, the culmination of this rapid cycle of innovation, joining the steam roundabout or carousel which had been developed in England from the early 1860s, manufactured at Coney Island since 1876, and was already an established pleasure and problem at Blackpool in the 1880s.^{xxii} What was new about the developments of the mid-1890s at Coney Island was the grouping of such attractions on a single site, to cater for reliable flows of visitors from an accessible conurbation. The Pleasure Beach followed soon afterwards; and significantly the leading figures in its development, J.W. Outhwaite and (especially and enduringly) W.G. Bean, had strong connections with the American amusement machine and amusement park industry. Albert Ellis, a locally based phrenologist and stall-owner on the emergent central 'Golden Mile', was another early fairground speculator among the southern sand-dunes, but it may be significant that he did not last the distance.^{xxiii}

These were not theme parks, in the sense defined by Lawson and Baud-Bovy for the World Tourism Organization in 1977, with 'one dominant theme ... projected as the basic attraction', founded on 'escapism, nostalgia, respite from boredom, an opportunity to re-live the 'good old days', to escape into another world of fantasy, to experience the excitement of the jungle, of foreign places and strange adventures.'^{xxiv} The parks at Coney Island and Blackpool traded in several of these promised experiences, but in an eclectic and opportunistic way, without any of the pretensions to organising around a theme that became identified with Disneyland in California, which was not established until 1955. Nor were they aimed at 'the family as a unit': their target public was adult, across a broad spectrum from the young to the middle-aged, and from those who could just afford an annual day-trip to the curious middle-classes for whom the crowd itself was an essential part of the spectacle.^{xxv}



The Human Toboggan Slide, Coney Island, 1908

The key features of the amusement park in this United States setting were the setting aside of a controlled and enclosed zone, with development under the supervision of a single impresario or management team, which levied an entrance charge to keep out the impoverished and visibly disreputable, and imposed its

own controls of behaviour, setting limits to the liminal and the carnivalesque in the interests of maximising potential visiting publics, protecting personal security and guarding against unacceptable shocks to consensus values, a process in which the banning of alcohol from the premises was of central importance.^{xxvi} German-style lager was the essential lubricant of leisure at Coney's West Brighton, but it was forbidden at Steeplechase, except in the celebratory aftermath of the repeal of Prohibition.^{xxvii} In order to maximise the potential paying public, and to keep on the right side of local authorities, management had to sustain a rhetoric of respectability and even education through self-improvement, and the need to make such a rhetoric sustainable itself placed limits on what was on offer and on what constituted acceptable behaviour. In the long run, such limits proved to be both more constraining and, perhaps, more sustaining at Blackpool's Pleasure Beach (despite, or perhaps because of, the lack of an entrance fee to the grounds) than at Coney Island.

Neither resort stood alone, of course. Each operated in an increasingly competitive environment, even when we single out these particularly distinctive aspects of them for comparison. Among the Pleasure Beach's direct competitors in Britain was Manchester's long-established Belle Vue, which offered commercial sport, brass band contests, dancing, extensive catering facilities and a zoo, as well as roller-coasters, fantasy rides and fairground amusements, while before long there were direct regional competitors at Morecambe and Southport. There was also Alton Towers on the edge of the Staffordshire Potteries, and seaside locations came to include Dreamland at Margate, White City at Whitley Bay, the Kursaal at Southend, and Porthcawl's own Coney Beach, borrowing an aura of New York glamour to cater for miners and metalworkers from South Wales.^{xxviii} Coney Island had regional rivals in New York State and on the New Jersey shore from the beginning, and the theme-park map of the United States soon became complex and elaborate, with tramway companies setting up such attractions at the end of their routes to stimulate week-end business, and more ambitious provision eventually tilting to the south as California and Florida, with their attractive climates, became more accessible.^{xxix} But during the first half of the twentieth century the images of Blackpool and Coney Island conveyed a special sense of magic, liberation, carnival, escape, and a telling mix of disreputable pleasures ('seeing the Elephant', an early (1884) hotel and entertainment centre at Coney Island, passed into the language as a metaphor for excess, especially of a sexual kind, even though the ailing Elephant itself was destroyed by fire, already at the end of its attractive powers, in 1896) and communal fun that posed problems for entrepreneurs and local governments.^{xxx}

These were liminal spaces, at the blurred and contested boundary between land and sea, where established rules of conduct, dress and demeanour might be relaxed or suspended, the everyday constraints of urban and industrial discipline lifted, and escape could be celebrated through carnivalesque behaviour: the undignified disarrangement of clothing; the forging of temporary alliances with new acquaintances of unknown provenance; the development or public display of intimacy; the enjoyment of license to shriek and shout; the consumption of sticky or greasy food in the open air without benefit of cutlery



Bawdy humor at Blackpool

(that key element in the 'civilising process'); and the celebration of everyday and unthreatening vices as the common currency of the holiday.^{xxxii} Not that such liberations were the sole preserve of the seaside amusement park; they were merely more pronounced, systematic and visible in this setting than in other leisure or holiday environments. And, as argued above, these looking-glass worlds could never countenance the complete removal of all restraint and control; they had to have rules of their own (not least in exacting payment), they remained accountable to local police authorities who might be especially responsive to 'moral panics' from vociferous and well-connected guardians of civic respectability, and in any case those who enjoyed them brought their own internal constraints with them, reinforced by knowledge of what would or would not be acceptable to those around them (who might include workmates and neighbours, incorporating the policing mechanisms of disapproving gossip). The boundaries of consensually-acceptable behaviour had been temporarily re-drawn, and the usual communal rules relaxed, but the results fell a long way short of 'anything goes'.^{xxxiii}

The boundaries were drawn differently at the two resorts, however, and the development of Blackpool's Pleasure Beach and the Coney Island amusement parks was neither as simple nor as revolutionary as it might be made to look, as we shall see. The transatlantic comparisons produce complex results. The Pleasure Beach was much less central to Blackpool's core identity as a resort than were Steeplechase, Dreamland and Luna Park to Coney Island's developing place-myth, although even twentieth-century Coney offered plenty of other pleasures and its beach could be even more crowded than Blackpool's, especially on a hot summer Sunday. The Pleasure Beach was, indeed, literally peripheral, just beyond the southern edge of the built-up area and the terminus of the promenade tramway.^{xxxiii} Where Coney Island's amusement parks were close to the rail terminals and the most popular beach areas, the Pleasure Beach took visitors away from the central area where the Tower, the Winter Gardens and other 'pleasure palaces' like the Alhambra (later the Palace) congregated. Bean, who emerged as its dominant business figure and 'front man', drew the fire of established entertainment interests like the Bickerstaffes of the Tower Company accordingly. As a peripheral upstart pitted against public companies with large bodies of shareholders, many of whom were local, heavy and confident investment in stout

buildings constructed to last, and a strong political base, the Pleasure Beach had to defend itself at an early stage if it were to survive and prosper. This made it strong. The requirements laid down by an interventionist municipal government, that it evict the gipsy fortune-tellers who had originally occupied the site and upgrade its buildings to meet relatively demanding regulations, enhanced its respectability and conferred an air of permanence on it; and Bean's successful campaign for election to the Council for the local ward also provided democratic legitimacy within Blackpool. As a major contributor to the town's municipal tramway revenues and the profits of its electricity works, moreover, the Pleasure Beach soon became too important a contributor to the local authority's economy to be readily open to challenge.^{xxxiv}

The Pleasure Beach's concern for 'respectability' of a distinctive northern provincial kind matched the dominant preferences of its visiting public, and it is significant that it did not provide the more 'extreme' forms of fantasy entertainment in which the Coney Island amusement parks traded. There were no epic trips to the Moon, Midget Cities, displays of babies in incubators, reconstructions of flood disasters or dramatic daily rescues from tenement fires, or (above all) still more epic depictions of the Creation or journeys to Hell at Blackpool: this was a more prosaic and a more uniformly religious visiting constituency, with widespread Nonconformist susceptibilities which rarely extended to obsessive abstemiousness or Sunday observance, but still had to be treated with caution. The Pleasure Beach had its exciting rides, its roller coasters, water chutes and scenic railways, its helter-skelter and Joy Wheel, all enhancing intimacy between the sexes that could be continued or resumed in the dance halls and shows during the evening. War (even the American Civil War, through the surprisingly long-lived Monitor and Merrimac battle show, one of many direct imports from the United States), historical fantasy, journeys through scenic splendours and imperial spectacle were all acceptable; but the Pleasure Beach was less challenging or 'in your face' than Steeplechase, Luna Park or even self-consciously respectable (and short-lived, despite its kitsch magnificence) Dreamland, which had specialised in the Biblical spectacles before being itself consumed in an inferno that attracted its own huge crowds of spectators from central New York.^{xxxv} As, from a very early stage, the only operation of its kind in Blackpool, the Pleasure Beach lacked the sort of competition that might have persuaded it to take risks by opting for potentially controversial sensationalism. The more challenging kind of Coney Island show had its Blackpool counterparts in the stalls of the Golden Mile, but on a much smaller scale (matching the similar sideshows in the warren of narrow streets behind the Coney Island beaches, even after the realignment on a more generous scale that accompanied the building of the Boardwalk), aiming at more limited markets and with less for the proprietors to lose.^{xxxvi}

There was, of course, much more to Coney Island than the great amusement parks, and it probably attracted its most enormous crowds on hot summer Sundays in the 1940s and 1950s, when their heyday was over. The biggest crowd ever was probably the two and a half million who were said to have assembled for an Army Air Corps firework show and air display on 3 July 1947. Crowds of well over a million were not

unusual, and half a million was commonplace.^{xxxvii} Blackpool would have done well to reach a fifth of that number at any point in its history. By that time, however, the emphasis had shifted from the amusement parks to the beach, although the fast food outlets (especially Nathan's, which is still a carefully-maintained outpost of prosperity among the ruins), sideshows and other back-street attractions still had plenty of customers, and Steeplechase had recently erected the last of its outstanding rides, the Parachute Jump from the New York World's Fair of 1939-40. The opening of the new Boardwalk in 1923, which



Nathan's has been selling hot dogs on the same spot in Coney Island since 1917. It is now a franchise

expanded the beach area, realigned the sea front, reclaimed it from fragmented private property ownership (which had never been an issue at Blackpool, at least since the opening of the Promenade in 1870, despite the notoriously sub-divided nature of its own property ownership), and provided the first continuous maritime promenade, gave a further impetus to a post-war decade of feverish speculation and investment in new rides, new theatres and real estate, despite Prohibition, which bit deeper into Coney Island's raucous character than it did at Atlantic City, where its writ seems hardly to have run. But rising visitor numbers were not matched by spending power and when the Depression bit, the free attractions of the beach, rendered more accessible by the Boardwalk, outweighed the commercial delights of the shore for an ever-increasing proportion of the visitors. The expanding provision of cheap subways after their arrival in 1920 had made Coney Island accessible to all but the very poorest tenement dwellers, and its beach became a cool relief from the stuffy heat of crowded, bug-ridden apartments. The numbers were astonishing, the beaches were crowded beyond belief on the great public holidays, but the spending power of many of these subway refugees from the tenements was minimal, as even the stallholders complained. As Michael Immerso remarked, the return of legalised alcohol in 1933, when Steeplechase served free beer to all its adult customers, did not provide the expected boost. 'The Depression ultimately cost Coney at least half its attractions and changed it forever... it became synonymous with the cheapest forms of amusement and with very large crowds.' Even in the depths of the 1930s depression, this could not be said of Blackpool, and its visitors were a very different proposition.^{xxxviii}



Blackpool Pleasure Beach revived with new architecture in the 1930

The contrasts between the visiting publics, and between prevailing attitudes to investment in popular pleasures, help to explain the contrast between Blackpool's resilience and longevity as a successful popular resort, which incorporated an increasingly visible and respectable role for a Pleasure Beach that continued to invest in new rides and attractions throughout the inter-war years and was prepared to go up-market in architecturally-innovative and confidently-expensive ways, especially in the 1930s and above all with the work of Joseph Emberton just before the Second World War, and a Coney Island that in some senses had already reached its peak as an amusement capital by the First World War. It had already lost one of its most impressive amusement parks as early as 1911; but Dreamland had already suffered one bankruptcy before the fire consumed it, and four years earlier the proprietor George C. Tilyou's response to a similar fire at Steeplechase had been to rebuild and reopen in full by the start of the next season. Luna Park struggled through bankruptcy, increasing dilapidation and a hand-to-mouth existence through the depression of the 1930s, and making one last throw of the dice by taking a clutch of new rides from the World's Fair, only to be itself consumed by fire in 1944.^{xxxix} This vulnerability to fire reflected a culture of ephemeral showiness, rather than the durable solidity that characterised Blackpool, not excepting the Pleasure Beach, whose Moorish 'Casino' of 1913 defied conventional demolition techniques when it was replaced by today's Art Deco construction in 1937.^{xl} Significantly, it was Steeplechase, which remained in the same family ownership and sustained a continuity in its attractions that contrasted with the feverish search for innovation and replacement that marked its rivals, that outlived almost all of the traditional American amusement parks and kept going until the end of the 1964 season. Its fate was sealed when Frank S. Tilyou, the family member who wanted to modernise Steeplechase, died in May of that year, and the remaining family members decided to sell the site to a developer. When Fred Tramp, the purchaser, demolished the park in

1966 before the city could give it protected status, its disappearance symbolised and accelerated Coney Island's already precipitous decline, which did not bottom out until the early 1980s.^{xlii} At this point the Pleasure Beach, which had survived a potential crisis of transfer between generations when W.G. Bean died prematurely in 1929 and his son-in-law Leonard Thompson successfully stepped into the breach, was continuing to innovate after a quiet post-war decade, while retaining the old favourites to which visitors returned. During the three years on either side of Steeplechase's demise, and in complete defiance of American trends, the Pleasure Beach installed the Cableway, Paratrooper, Alice in Wonderland, Magic Mountain, Calypso/Ski Jump, Monorail and Log Flume; and the subsequent rhythm of innovations was unabated.^{xliii} The contrast was not just a matter of fairs, construction methods, entrepreneurial skills and dynasties: it was also about visiting publics, wider resort environments and political systems.

There is no doubt that Blackpool's visiting public was far more stable, more homogeneous and, already at the turn of the century, more tradition-bound than that of Coney Island. It was firmly grounded in the working and lower middle classes of the textile-manufacturing districts of Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire, and when it extended its catchment area to Sheffield, the West Midlands and parts of the East Midlands in the early twentieth century, and then became a genuinely national resort in the inter-war years, it still recruited from industrial towns with strong, stable neighbourhood associational cultures and traditions of regular, disciplined, well-paid work and relatively high family incomes. The Depression forced some people to lower their aspirations, and kept most of the unemployed away altogether, but the important point is that Blackpool was essentially a resort for industrial workers and (increasingly) their families, almost all of whom travelled between 25 and 150 miles to reach their destination, and large numbers of whom came for a week after saving through the rest of the year to afford the visit. These visitors were overwhelmingly white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, with a small leavening of Catholics of Irish or Italian descent and even smaller numbers drawn from other ethnic minorities. This picture did not even begin to change until the end of the twentieth century.^{xliiii}

So Blackpool was an ethnically and culturally homogeneous resort, whose visitors came predominantly from the better-off strata of the working class, and from towns whose systems of shared holiday weeks ensured that the crowd was anything but anonymous and was likely to contain relatives, neighbours, workmates and minor authority figures. There was no hint of the melting pot about Blackpool; and very few of its visitors came from the metropolitan and seaport environments of places like London and Liverpool that bore a closer resemblance to New York. Coney Island was very different. From an early stage it drew in wave after successive wave of new migrants, at that expansive period in American history at which the Statue of Liberty was erected: there were (among others) British, Irish, Italians, Germans, Scandinavians, Greeks, Eastern Europeans, and Russians. Many of the latter, especially, were Jewish, to complicate further an ethnic and religious mix that extended from Episcopalians and other Protestant groups through Roman Catholics, Greek, Russian and other Orthodox persuasions and various sects. Those from Russia and Central Europe who had

no sea-bathing traditions of their own were drawn to Coney's rides, stalls and beaches and quickly learned the conventions of this aspect of what it was to be American.^{xliv} The different groups tended to gravitate to bathhouses and sections of the beach that they made their own, just as residential Coney Island had its Italian and Jewish neighbourhoods. Joseph Heller, who grew up there in the 1930s, remembered that by that time 'McLaughlin Baths ... drew its patrons from the Scandinavian, mainly Norwegian, and Irish populations in Bay Ridge, an area distinguished for a brawling toughness and the predictable anti-Semitism then generally common in America among groups that were not Jewish'. There was sometimes mockery, and occasionally fights sparked.^{xlv} For Charles Denson, each numbered 'bay' along the shoreline had its distinctive neighbourhood and ethnic character, and 'visiting another bay was like visiting another country'.^{xlvi} There were also African Americans, in small but growing numbers, adding a dimension that was completely absent from Blackpool until the Second World War. They congregated on the beach near the Municipal Baths (built in 1911), were welcomed at Steeplechase (apart from the bathing pool), and were very noticeable among the entertainers.^{xlvii} The beach might be territorial, but the streets and amusement parks brought together all groups that could afford their services, and this was potentially a tenser and less biddable crowd than the Blackpool ones. Immerso argues that rather than a melting pot, this 'multi-ethnic canvas' was 'variegated. Its colors, smells and sounds did not blend or meld together, they collided and recompounded'. But, in apparent contradiction, '[t]he crowd with its immense numbers assumed an identity that, in the end, trumped ethnicity or neighborhood loyalty by imposing a common identity more closely linked to class'.^{xlviii} Much the same might be said of Blackpool, except that there was less to divide, apart from the eternal rivalry between Lancashire and Yorkshire; but Coney's was, increasingly, a poorer and much more heterogeneous visiting public than Blackpool's, and it displayed less continuity or consumer loyalty, although there was of course an extensive core of multiple repeat visitors. Above all, there was much less purchasing power per capita, which is why Nathan's five-cent hot dogs did so well out of very small profits and enormous turnover; but there was also a much greater variety of fast food on offer, from knishes to salt water taffy.^{xlix} The crucial differences, which undoubtedly contributed to the longevity and resilience of Blackpool's popularity, were that visitors to the Lancashire resort, although less numerous, travelled longer distances, stayed longer, had much more in common with each other and had more to spend.

The contrasting political systems in which Blackpool and Coney Island were embedded and with which they were articulated were even more important to their contrasting fortunes. From 1876 Blackpool was a freestanding municipal corporation, and its council was very active in operating a range of utilities (gas, electricity, tramways), imposing minimum business standards (not always consistently where builders exerted political influence), spending heavily on promenades, sea defences and (from the 1920s onwards) parks, gardens and outdoor sports, and getting involved in town planning in the inter-war years in ways that posed no threat to the holiday industry, apart from some inconvenience to the Pleasure Beach when roads were driven through it in the 1920s. To a large extent, indeed, the town was run for the benefit of the holiday and related trades such as

building and alcohol retailing. The Corporation's concern to assist the holiday industry extended to supporting advertising campaigns out of local taxation from 1879 onwards, and making sustained attempts to extend the season which found success through the annual autumn electrical illuminations in 1912-14 and then again, after the end of post-war electricity supply restrictions, from 1925 onwards. At Coney Island spectacular electric lighting displays were the preserve of the amusement parks; at Blackpool in September and October the Corporation outshone everyone. In 1887 Blackpool was able to establish its own police force, and after 1899 the local bench of magistrates tried minor cases. The town depended on its railway companies and on the Fylde Water Company, and contentious municipal initiatives had to gain parliamentary approval; but to a very large extent Blackpool was free to go its own way. The majority of the Corporation soon came to terms with the popular holiday industry and devoted their energies to promoting it, setting up a 'municipal capitalist' regime in which local government tried to provide the best possible environment for the holiday industry to flourish. This regime continued until the post-war attacks from the centre on local government autonomy that gathered momentum in the last quarter of the twentieth century.ⁱ Aspects of local government were not always above suspicion. Freemasonry was a strong influence, and at the turn of the century 'rings' of local councillors were involved in buying key estates and selling them back to the Corporation at inflated prices. From time to time questions were raised about the influence of the drink interest on the Watch Committee, or about close relationships between councillors and officials to their possible mutual benefit; but full-scale scandals were rare and transitory, although their incidence increased after the Second World War. On the whole, Blackpool's local government had the power to be, and was, a strong and sustained positive influence on the town's development. This gave Blackpool a significant advantage over Coney Island.ⁱⁱ

Victorian Blackpool had a reputation in the British media for being an unplanned, almost anarchic resort, the product of divided landownership and limited controls on development.ⁱⁱⁱ This was nothing to what went on at Coney Island. The resort grew up as part of the rural township of Gravesend, and in the late 1860s and early 1870s the offices of constable and commissioner of common lands fell under the control of town surveyor William Stillwell, who was responsible for selling off two-thirds of the island to speculators at a fraction of its value, and of John Y. McKane, who sold off the common lands, dunes and beaches equally cheaply to cronies with development plans, taking a cut from them in the process. McKane metamorphosed into a full-scale local dictator, rigging elections and intimidating opponents. He organised the water supply and laid out streets for development, but used the police force he set up in 1881 as a private army to enforce a regime of systematic bribery and corruption. Soon after he was finally imprisoned after an election fraud scandal, Gravesend was annexed to the city of Brooklyn, which in turn became part of Greater New York in 1898.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ This meant that, for better and worse, Coney Island had lost all hope of controlling its own destiny.

The New York takeover inaugurated a long saga of intervention in the affairs of Coney Island from without: it was almost as if Blackpool was being governed from Manchester. It soon

became apparent that McKane had left a legacy of uncertainty about the legitimacy of property rights, which generated a major lawsuit in 1912 over the ownership of most of the built-up area. He had also been responsible for selling off areas of beach and shoreline to which Gravesend township did not have title, and the local authority did not even own the ostensibly public streets. Under the new regime both the New York government and the local business interests who began to organise in the early twentieth century sought 'to raise the moral tone of Coney Island and do away with low dives and places where rowdiness prevails', as the Coney Island Taxpayers' Alliance of 1910 put it. A start had been made by rebuilding the Bowery area, Coney Island's bigger and raunchier version of the 'Golden Mile', in a more planned and permanent way after the destructive fire of 1903; but from 1910 onwards New York began to intervene in a systematic way, pushing for a public boardwalk and the establishment of a public park and launching a successful lawsuit to buy back seashore land for public access, while planning the suppression of many small and disreputable places of amusement. An earnest note of intent was the Municipal Bathhouse of 1911, Coney Island's first public amenity. The



The Coney Island board walk

organised property-owners fought against this expropriation, and lost; and the opening of the new Boardwalk in 1923, modelled overtly on that of Atlantic City which was coeval with Blackpool's Promenade of 1870, symbolised the new era of planning and relative corporate respectability.^{liv}

Coney's old heart continued to beat raucously despite these interventions, and reformers in City Hall remained dissatisfied with the enduring importance of mechanical pleasures and catchpenny amusements. A powerful cleansing, moralising, improving, rationalising frame of mind became incarnate in Robert Moses, whose hatred of Coney Island's fairgrounds, freak shows and drinking dens became legendary. Moses took office on the Parks Commissions of New York and Long Island in 1924 and became New York City Parks Commissioner, alongside several other roles, in 1934. He was a towering, dictatorial and controversial figure in New York politics for over thirty years, although he never held elected office. From the late 1920s onwards he promoted new beach parks to compete with Coney Island, and after his empire was extended to its beaches and sea-front in 1938 he intervened systematically in the resort itself, trying to get rid of the existing amusements and replace

them with parks and housing projects, while clamping down on all kinds of behaviour that might engender litter and noise or threaten public morality. His policies played a large and increasing part in the decline of Coney Island as a popular amusement resort from the 1940s onwards, and the diversion of car-borne demand to new 'family' resorts, while Coney Island was bypassed, creamed off the best-paying visitors and left the throngs who came by subway. After Moses was finally ousted by Nelson Rockefeller in 1958, his legacy made it easier for a coalition of 'slum clearance' advocates and real estate developers to encompass the destruction of much of the 'old' Coney Island in the 1960s, and turn what was left into something approaching a genuine slum, especially when the racial tensions of mid-1960s New York and the rise of a new kind of drug-fuelled youth gangsterism and vandalism removed the necessary sense of security from the place.^{iv}

With all its faults, Blackpool's local government served its survival and systematic reinvention as a popular amusement centre much more effectively than did that of Coney Island. Blackpool had nothing to match the corrupt regime of McKane, nor the systematic and unsympathetic external intervention of the Moses era (to say nothing of the problems presented by Prohibition). The intermittent indications of municipal corruption in Blackpool pale into insignificance beside the Coney Island evidence of racketeering and damaging property speculation. When Blackpool adopted a policy of parks, planning and promenade extension in the inter-war years, it did so without prejudice to existing activities and attractions; and this included



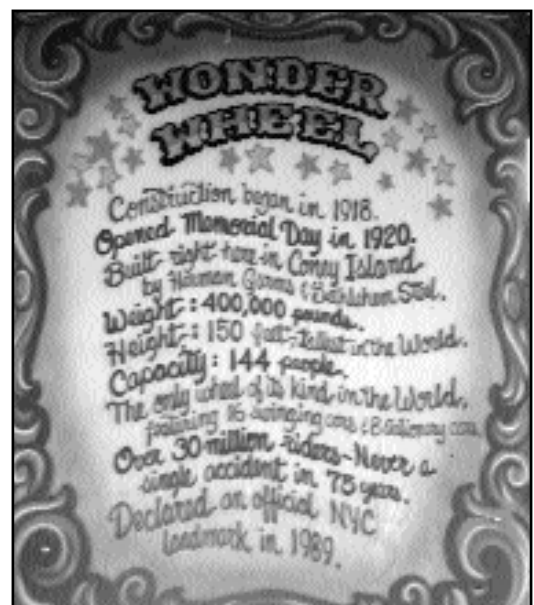
Contemporary Pleasure Beach, Blackpool

the Pleasure Beach. It was also able to adapt to the rise of mass road transport, which came later in Britain than in the United States, rather than having to compete with it. The problems of drugs, dilapidation and the discarding of old assets reached a peak twenty years later in Blackpool than at Coney Island, and have never bitten as deep. New investment and reinvention have continued, not least through a Pleasure Beach that has not only survived but also prospered. But Blackpool may well be able to learn from some of the ways in which its transatlantic contemporary has tried to climb back out of the abyss in recent years.



The Wonder Wheel and Astroland, Coney Island, 2004

There remains some scope for debate on whether Blackpool or Coney Island was the world's first working-class seaside pleasure resort. If we require our 'working class' to be industrial in the sense of working in factories and mines as opposed to workshops and offices, and if we require our 'resort' to be somewhere to stay for a few days rather than a few hours, then Blackpool takes the palm. Coney Island's crowds were more numerous, from an early stage; but they were also more ephemeral and volatile. This helps to explain why Blackpool has endured more strongly and securely, despite its continuing vicissitudes. As this discussion makes clear, however, this comparative story has many strands, twists and turns, and there is ample scope for continuing debate.



Notes

ⁱ This article is a product of a joint book project on *The Playful Crowd* for Columbia University Press, New York, and the author, while taking sole responsibility for this text, wishes to acknowledge the indispensable contribution of his collaborator, Professor Gary Cross of Penn State University, to the development of the argument. Thanks are also due to Ted Lightbown for information and help regarding Blackpool Pleasure Beach: he is not responsible for any errors that may have crept into this article.

ⁱⁱ For Blackpool, see J.K. Walton, *Blackpool* (Keele, 1998); *idem.*, *The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester, 2000); Helen Meller, *European Cities 1890-1930s* (Chichester, 2001), chap. 5; P. Bennett, *A Century of Fun* (Blackpool, 1996), for the Pleasure Beach. For Coney Island, see most recently M. Immerso, *Coney Island: The People's Playground* (Piscataway, NJ., 2002); C. Denson, *Coney Island Lost and Found* (Berkeley, Cal., 2002); and also J.F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million* (New York, 1978).

ⁱⁱⁱ N. Johnson, *Boardwalk Empire* (Medford, NJ., 2002), chap. 2; J.K. Walton, 'The Blackpool landlady revisited', *Manchester Region History Review*, 8 (1994), p. 27, Table 4.

^{iv} Immerso, *Coney Island*, p. 4; J.A. Samuels, 'Research to help plan the future of a seaside resort', in S. Riley (ed.), *Proceedings of the 12th Marketing Theory Seminar* (Lancaster, 1974), pp. 63-77.

^v R. Shields, *Places on the Margin* (London, 1991); T. Bennett, C. Mercer and J. Woollacott (eds.), *Popular Culture and Social Relations* (Milton Keynes, 1986); J. Urry, *Consuming Places* (London, 1995); G. Cross (ed.), *Worktowners at Blackpool* (London, 1990); R. Adams, *Sideshow USA* (Chicago, 2001).

^{vi} This will be discussed in G. Cross and J.K. Walton, *The Playful Crowd* (New York, forthcoming 2004), chap. 3.

^{vii} J. Urry, 'Cultural change and the seaside resort', in G. Shaw and A. Williams (eds.), *The Rise and Fall of British Coastal Resorts* (London, 1997), pp. 102-13. There were additional short-lived amusement parks in both resorts in the early twentieth century: Brighton Park at Coney Island (Immerso, *Coney Island*, pp. 74-6) and Blackpool New Fair Ground on the Starr Estate (T. Lightbown, 'Blackpool Pleasure Beach: its buildings and rides', Blackpool Pleasure Beach Archives, by courtesy of the author.)

^{viii} J.E. Findling, *Chicago's Great World's Fairs* (Manchester, 1994), p. 28; P. Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas* (Manchester, 1988), p. 90; R. Poole, *Popular Leisure and the Music Hall in Nineteenth-century Bolton* (Lancaster, 1982).

^{ix} See especially Denson, *Coney Island Lost and Found*, who also discusses attempts to revive Coney Island after 1980; and H. Stein, *Coney Island* (New York, 1998).

^x J.K. Walton, 'The Social Development of Blackpool, 1788-1914' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Lancaster, 1974), p. 263.

^{xi} Immerso, *Coney Island*, pp. 41-2.

^{xii} For debate on whether 'working-class' or 'popular' is the more appropriate label for the participants in these developments, P. Joyce, *Visions of the People* (Cambridge, 1991).

^{xiii} Immerso, *Coney Island*, p. 167; Denson, *Coney Island*, p. 41; Walton, 'Blackpool landlady revisited'.

^{xiv} Comparisons are complicated by the fact that Coney Island was not a separate local government district: Immerso, *Coney Island*, p. 127; Denson, *Coney Island*, p. 65; J.K. Walton and C. O'Neill, 'Numbering the holidaymakers', *Local Historian* 23 (1993), pp. 205-16.

^{xv} Immerso, *Coney Island*, pp. 125, 154-5; J.K. Walton, 'Consuming the beach', in S. Baranowski and E. Furlough (eds.), *Being Elsewhere* (Ann Arbor, 2002), pp. 280-94.

^{xvi} Poole, *Popular Leisure*; P. Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England* (London, 1978).

^{xvii} Walton, 'Social Development', pp. 306-19; Immerso, *Coney Island*, p. 29.

^{xviii} J.K. Walton, 'Residential amenity, respectable morality and the rise of the entertainment industry: the case of Blackpool, 1860-1914', *Literature and History*, 1 (1975), pp. 62-78; Denson, *Coney Island*, p. 40.

^{xix} For this and what follows, Walton, 'Social Development', chaps. 1, 6, 8; Immerso, *Coney Island*, chaps. 2-4.

^{xx} J.K. Walton, 'The remaking of a popular resort: Blackpool Tower and the boom of the 1890s', *Local Historian*, 24 (1994), pp. 194-205.

^{xxi} Denson, *Coney Island*, Parts 2 and 3.

^{xxii} Immerso, *Coney Island*, chap. 5; Vanessa Toulmin (ed.), *Pleasurelands* (Sheffield: National Fairground Archive, exhibition catalogue, 2003); *idem.*, 'The history of fairground rides', <http://www.shef.ac.uk/nfa/history/rides/index.php>.

^{xxiii} Bennett, *Century of Fun*, chap. 1.

^{xxiv} F. Lawson and M. Baud-Bovy, *Tourism and Recreation Development: A Handbook of Physical Planning* (London, 1977), p. 107.

^{xxv} Urry, *Consuming Places*.

^{xxvi} Immerso, *Coney Island*, p. 78.

^{xxvii} *Ibid.*, p. 42.

^{xxviii} Michael J. Fisher, *Alton Towers: A Gothic Wonderland* (Stafford, 1999); J. Crown and F. Rhodes, *Belle Vue* (Stroud, 1999); N. Evans, *Dreamland Remembered* (Margate, 2003); E. Hollerton, *Whitley Bay* (Stroud, 1999); K. Crowe, *Kursaal Memories* (Southend, 2003).

^{xxix} S.F. Mills, *The American Landscape* (Keele, 1997), chap. 7.

^{xxx} Immerso, *Coney Island*, pp. 38-40.

^{xxxi} For full referencing, Walton, chap. 1.

^{xxxii} Cross, *Worktowners*.

^{xxxiii} Bennett, *Century of Fun*.

^{xxxiv} *Ibid.*; J.K. Walton, 'Municipal government and the holiday industry in Blackpool, 1876-1914', in J.K. Walton and J. Walvin (eds.),

Leisure in Britain 1780-1939 (Manchester, 1983).

xxxv Immerso, *Coney Island*, chap. 4.

xxxvi Denson, *Coney Island*, chap. 4.

xxxvii Immerso, *Coney Island*, p. 165.

xxxviii *Ibid.*, pp. 143-7; Johnson, *Boardwalk Empire*.

xxxix Immerso, *Coney Island*, pp. 161-3.

xl Bennett, *Century of Fun*, pp. 36-8.

xli Denson, *Coney Island*, chap. 17.

xliv Bennett, *Century of Fun*; Lightbown, 'Buildings and rides'.

xlvi Walton, 'Social Development', pp. 266-9, 272-8.

xlvii Immerso, *Coney Island*, p. 149.

xlviii Joseph Heller, *Now and Then* (London, 1998), pp. 32-3, 44.

l Denson, *Coney Island*, p. 84.

li Immerso, *Coney Island*, pp. 150-5.

lii *Ibid.*, p. 153.

liii Denson, *Coney Island*, pp. 65, 274; Heller, *Now and Then*, p. 51.

lvi Walton, 'Municipal government', pp. 126-30, 154-6.

lvii *Ibid.*, pp. 168-71; Walton, 'Social Development', chaps. 7, 9.

lviii H. Perkin, 'The "social tone" of Victorian seaside resorts in the North-West', *Northern History* 12 (1976), pp. 181-94.

lix Denson, *Coney Island*, pp. 9-24.

lvi *Ibid.*, chap. 3.

lvii *Ibid.*, chap. 5 and *passim*. For Moses, R.A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York, 1974).