

Leisure and Commerce: Seafront Rivals in England's First Seaside Resorts

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During the first half of the 18th century, the earliest seaside resorts were created in England in small coastal towns that had previously made their living as commercial and fishing ports. Today many seaside resorts are still co-located with ports, ranging from small, quaint fishing and leisure harbours to major container and ferry ports. In most towns, industrial places of work are in areas near the periphery or where the edge of the town was located when the factories or mills were being created in the 18th and 19th centuries. However, the harbour inevitably lies at the heart and on the front of a settlement that might become a seaside resort, and often this aspect of their story has continued alongside the new leisure industry that has come to dominate their identity. Therefore, this could lead to conflicts over time between polite society and the commercial realm, and respectable visitors and the men and women servicing the harbour and its shipping. Over 300 years, the detailed geographical and economic relationship between leisure and commerce on seafronts has evolved, and new arrangements are being reached as visitor numbers have increased and as commercial facilities have expanded. This paper will consider a number of 18th-century English and Welsh ports that pioneered sea bathing and seaside holidays. Today, some are seaside resorts, some are purely ports, and a small group have managed to negotiate a more or less uneasy relationship between these two apparently conflicting functions

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The First Resorts: Changing Fortunes

By the mid-18th century, a number of small coastal towns were beginning to be transformed into seaside resorts, a consequence of the arrival of visitors seeking to bathe in the sea for the benefit of their health. At the forefront of this process was Scarborough, which had been a popular spa town since the 1620s and therefore already had all the entertainment facilities that spa, and later seaside, visitors would require. Initially, these facilities were contained within existing buildings in the historic town that had developed on the slope above and behind the harbour. Scarborough's harbour, which was home to a fishing fleet and ship-

building, also served as a port for a growing number of vessels that were transporting coal from north-east England to London. During the 1730s a wealth of documentary material, including an early guidebook, miscellanies of poetry celebrating the town and sea bathing, scientific texts, and Settrington's wonderful panoramic view of the town, clearly demonstrate that sea bathing was a prominent new factor in identity of the town (*A Journey from London to Scarborough*, 1734; *The Scarborough Miscellany for the Year 1732*, 1732; *The Scarborough Miscellany for the Year 1733*, 1733; *The Scarborough Miscellany for the Year 1734*, 1734; Shaw 1734, 1735; Settrington, n.d.).

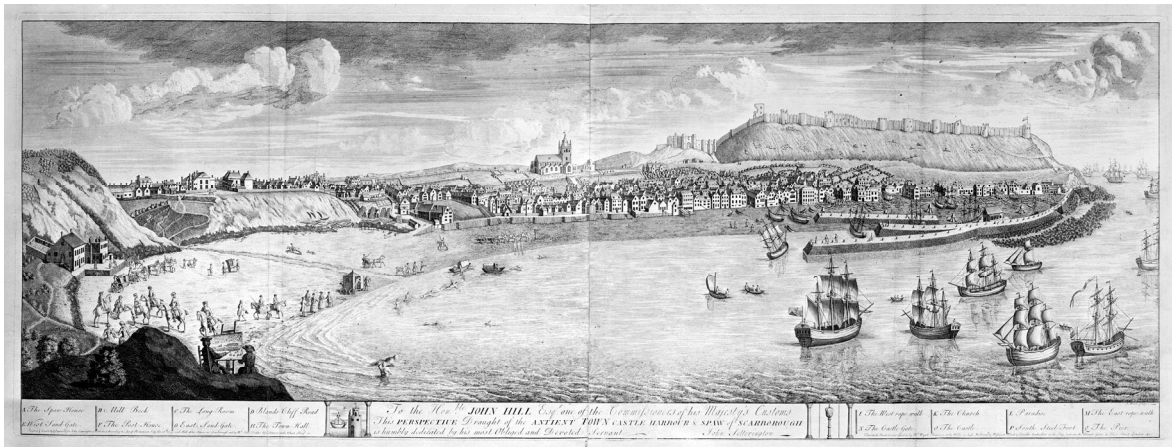


Figure 1 John Settrington, View of the Antient Town, Castle, Harbour, and Spaw of Scarborough 1735 (reproduced with permission from Historic England, cc 80/00145)

At Brighton and Margate, the central narrative of their history in the first half of the 18th century is that the new fad for sea bathing came to the rescue of these failing coastal towns. During the first half of the 18th century, Brighton was a small, struggling, seafaring, and fishing community with no harbour, its boats being drawn up on to the beach (Berry, 2005, pp. 2–6, 10–11). The cessation of fishing in the North Sea, prompted in part by the erosion of the town's foreshore, led to long-term economic decline and a reduction in population (Walton, 1983, p. 48; Borsay, 2000, p. 788). In the first edition of Reverend Lewis' book on the history of the Isle of Thanet published in 1723, he described a struggling fishing industry that was heavily impacting Margate's economy, but by 1736 the situation had worsened with some fishermen having given up fishing due to suffering from poor catches in the North Sea (Lewis, 1736, p. 33). These two examples contrast with Scarborough, where the expansion of the coal industry led to significant investment in the town's harbour and increasing prosperity from the commercial part of its economy. They also make an interesting contrast because, unlike Scarborough with its pre-existing tourist market due to its spa, Brighton and Margate had to rapidly establish the range of entertainment facilities expected by visitors. Local entrepreneurs, often innkeepers and doctors, were beginning to make available bathhouses, circulating li-

braries, theatres and assembly rooms at these, and other, coastal towns for a growing number of aristocrats and gentry seeking to be part of the resort's leading social circle as well as attempting to improve their health. The character of this new clientele, who were wealthy, sophisticated, metropolitan, well-dressed visitors accustomed to luxury, must have been in marked contrast to the population of these first resorts, small, provincial working towns or, as John Byng snottily described them, 'fishing holes' (Andrews, 1934, p. 87). In the early 18th century, John Macky saw Margate as 'a poor pitiful Place' and Revd Lewis in 1736 recorded that the town was 'irregularly built, and the Houses generally old and low' (Macky, 1714, p. 50; Lewis, 1736, p. 123). These ports that were adding a resort function had unpretentious buildings set in small plots separated by narrow streets, and the buildings were predominantly vernacular in style and materials. Something of the atmosphere of these proto-resorts can still be experienced in the old town at Margate, in the Laines, the original part of Brighton and behind the harbour at Scarborough. Although they were being favoured for sea bathing, their orientation, despite the presence of harbours, was not primarily towards the sea, and it was still common for buildings to be facing inland rather than seawards.

Margate and Brighton demonstrate an almost total shift from an economy dependent on the sea for

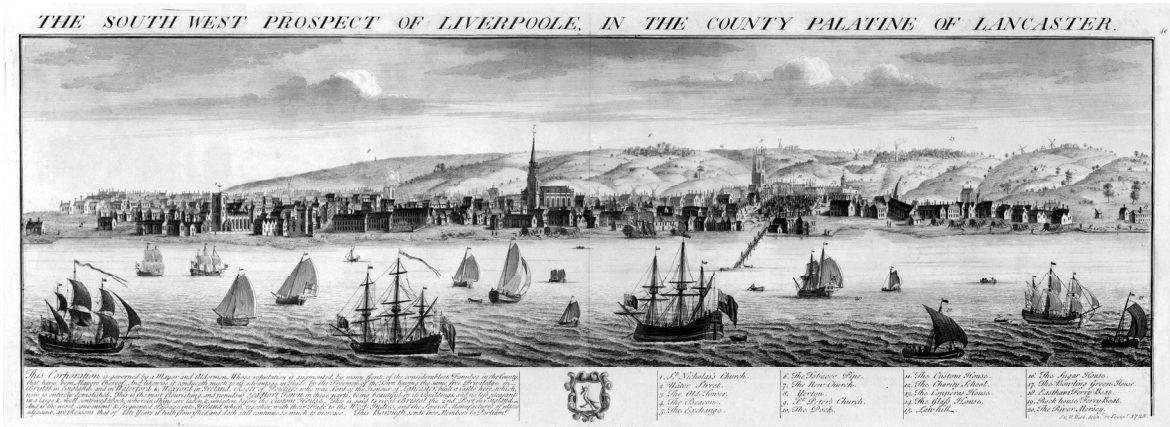


Figure 2 1728 Engraving by Samuel and Nathaniel Buck Entitled the *South-West Prospect of Liverpool* (reproduced with permission from Historic England, BB 86/03830)

commerce and fishing to one focused on leisure by the end of the 18th century. Moreover, by the 19th century, the seafront of these towns was being recast with new buildings that were now facing the prized sea view. At other early seaside resorts, the initial commercial dimension of the original coastal towns has continued to the present day. For instance, Scarborough and Weymouth successfully combine busy working harbours with entertaining holidaymakers, though the size of the harbour and the scale of the commercial economy has not grown nearly as quickly as the leisure industry. At Hastings, a more or less uneasy truce exists between the traditional beach-launched fishing fleet and the encroaching seafront amusements and accommodation desired by tourists.

Liverpool: An Early Seaside Resort?

Inevitably, anyone considering the origins of the seaside resort will concentrate their efforts on existing resorts, plotting the shift from commerce to leisure, and examining the territorial and economic tensions that exist between two more or less incompatible functions. There is also a definite reorientation of these early seaside resorts from a geographical focus on the harbour and the town centre to the seafront and the sea view. England’s rich heritage of seaside resorts has some settlements that can trace their roots back to historic coastal ports and some are still more or less active

today. However, there were a handful of Georgian ‘seaside resorts’ that have followed a different path, shedding their initial seaside, seafront leisure activities as the commercial dimension of these towns expanded.

At the beginning of the 18th century, many early resort facilities were available at Liverpool, a city now regarded as an international port rather than a seaside resort. An urban bathhouse existed during the first decade of the 18th century, and a riverfront bathhouse was depicted in an engraving in 1728 at the edge of the town as it existed at that date. There were probably primitive bathing machines (cart-like contraptions to take bathers into the sea), and updated versions of these facilities were still in use in the early 19th century. As well as opportunities for sea bathing, Liverpool offered the range of facilities required by the clientele of a rapidly-growing port, but these would have also catered for any visitors seeking to bathe in the sea, a function obscured by its later success as a port.

In 1673 Liverpool had around 1,500 inhabitants, living in a town that consisted of only seven main streets covering a mere 300 metres from north to south and spreading a similar distance inland from the waterfront (Chalklin, 1974, pp. 98–100; Sharples & Stonard, 2008, pp. 3–4). In 1680, Daniel Defoe described ‘a large, handsome, well built and encreasing or thriving town;’ ten years later ‘it was much bigger than at my first seeing it, and, by the report of the Inhabitants,

more than twice as big as it was twenty Years before that' (Defoe, 1968, pp. 664–665). By 1700, its population was 5,145; twenty years later it had more than doubled to 11,833, and by the beginning of the 19th century it had grown to more than 80,000 (Chalklin, 1974, p. 20; Enfield, 1773, p. 28; Mitchell, 1962, p. 24). Liverpool moved during the 18th century from being a small provincial town to being the second largest town in England (Chalklin, 2001, p. 79). This rapid growth was in large measure due to its location; like Bristol, it was convenient for the Atlantic trade in slaves, sugar, textiles and tobacco, but it also had a substantial hinterland that expanded rapidly during the 18th century due to the Industrial Revolution (Porter, 1982, pp. 199–200; Chalklin, 1974, pp. 19–20, 49–51; Ascott, Lewis, & Power, 2006, p. 16; Longmore, 1989, pp. 116–146, 117–119). In 1709, 374 ships brought in 14,574 tons of cargo and 334 exported 12,636 tons, but by 1771 this had risen to 891 ships importing 66,656 tons and 1,024 exporting 83,798 tons (Enfield, 1773, p. 67). The Old Dock, the first enclosed, commercial maritime dock in the world, was completed in 1719, and by the end of the 18th century the riverfront was dominated by a mile of docks (Ritchie-Noakes, 1984, p. 19; Ascott et al., 2006, p. 14; Longmore, 1989, pp. 120–122).

With a rapidly growing population and increasing commercial activity, Liverpool also began to expand its civic facilities including a new custom house built in 1721–1722 and an ambitious new exchange complete with lavish ballroom that was erected in 1749–1754 (Rideout, 1927, pp. 5–6, 3–73; Borsay, 1991, pp. 109, 157; Sharples and Stonard, 2008, p. 7). New entertainment facilities included walks and pleasure gardens, a purpose-built theatre that opened in 1772 and by the end of the 18th century, there was a Public Concert Room (Moss, 2007, pp. 125–126, 128–129; Brodie, 2012, pp. 63–76, 66–67). The 1766 *Liverpool Directory* listed a range of professions and facilities that would be expected in a major port, but also in a nascent seaside resort (*Liverpool's First Directory*, 1987). There were booksellers and stationers providing services similar to circulating libraries, innkeepers and coffee-house proprietors, and tradesmen providing luxury services for people of wealth. This infrastructure of leisure evolved to cater to the prosperous port, but these were

also the type of facilities that were fundamental to the development of seaside resorts in the 18th century. However, proof that Liverpool was more than just a growing port, with entertainments for mariners, merchants and residents, is provided by its history of sea-bathing facilities.

The first reference to sea bathing in the vicinity of Liverpool occurs on 5 August 1708 in the diurnal of the local landowner Nicholas Blundell: 'Mr Aldred & I Rode to the Sea & baithed ourselves [...] it was extremely hot as were also the two preceding days, the lick hardly ever known at this time in these parts' (Tyrer, 1968, p. 181). This reference appears six years after his diary begins, suggesting that sea bathing was still only an occasional and novel activity. Blundell seems to have bathed because it was hot, but a year later the sea was being used for medical reasons: 'I went part of the way towards the Sea with my Children but turned back, my Wife & Dorothy Blundell went with them, they were put into the Sea for some out breaks' (Tyrer, 1968, p. 225). The Blundells probably visited the stretch of coast nearest their house, possibly Crosby Beach, where Antony Gormley's atmospheric 'Another Place' has become a modern place of pilgrimage.

At the beginning of the 18th century, Liverpool had an urban bathhouse on the south side of the Pool on the road lying to the south of where the Old Dock would be built (Touzeau, 1910, pp. 358–359, 398). A second bathhouse is mentioned in a 1708 rate book, 'ye bagniall' being in the heart of the rapidly expanding town, probably at the bottom of Water Street, on the riverside beside the Custom House (Peet, 1908, pp. 55–56). However, the first reference to organised sea bathing, which would not have been in the heart of the town, occurs in the early 1720s. On 1 August 1721 Blundell wrote that: 'Pat: Acton lodged here, he came with an Intention to stay some time to Baith in the Sea, I went with him to the Sea side to shew him what Conveniency there was for him.' The entry for the following day reads: 'I went with Pat: Acton to Leverpoole & Procured him a Place to Lodg at & a Conveniency for baithing in the Sea' (Tyrer, 1972, p. 52). 'Conveniency' is being used for something that has not yet acquired a name and Blundell used the term to refer to some-



Figure 3 Detail of Sea Bathing from John Settingington, View of the antient Town, Castle, Harbour, and Spaw of Scarborough 1735 (reproduced with permission from Historic England, c.c 80/00145)

thing to aid bathing. A similar use of the word appears in 1735 referring to sea bathing at Scarborough: 'the Ladies have Guides, Rooms, and Conveniences for it [sea bathing], under the Cliff' (Shaw, 1735, pp. 35–36). In the same year, John Settingington's view of Scarborough depicts a figure emerging from what appears to be a primitive bathing machine, and this seems to be the only 'convenience' to which Shaw can be referring.

Blundell's companion, Father Acton, appears to have been using some form of primitive bathing machine, which was probably available to the north of the docks where there was a waterfront bathhouse by the 1720s. A small rectangular building labelled 'Bath,' divided into two sections, presumably for male and female bathers, is depicted on a map by John Eyes in 1765, at the left (north) side of the map.¹ The same arrangement appears in 1785 and 1796/1797 editions of maps, but the building disappeared with the construction of the Princes' Dock, which opened in 1821 (Ritchie-Noakes, 1984, p. 43; Jarvis, 2014, p. 54). Frus-

¹ Liverpool's 18th-century maps are reviewed in Stewart-Brown (1911, pp. 143–174).

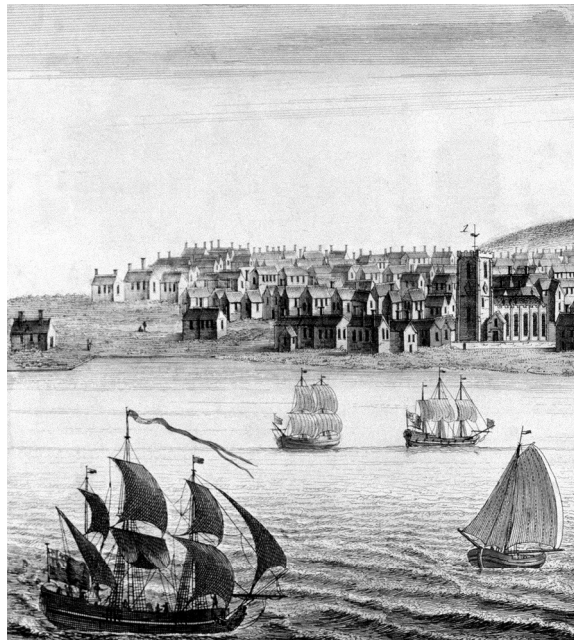


Figure 4 Detail of Bathhouse in 1728 Engraving by Samuel and Nathaniel Buck Entitled the *South-West Prospect of Liverpoole* (reproduced with permission from Historic England, BB 86/03830)

tratingly, Chadwick's map of 1725 does not cover this area, as if it was still largely or wholly undeveloped, and the southern viewpoint of a 1725 painting of the town means that a distant bathhouse could not be seen (Tibbles, 2003, pp. 21–25). However, the building does appear at the far left-hand side of the 1728 engraving by Samuel and Nathaniel Buck entitled the *South-West Prospect of Liverpoole* (Buck & Buck, 1728) which shows the river frontage of the rapidly expanding town (Figure 4).²

A small, rectangular building is shown standing on its own beside the river in the position of the bathhouse on the 1765 and subsequent maps. Its slightly odd size and shape, including the number and position of the chimneys and its tall proportions as depicted by

² On 26 August 1727 Nathaniel Buck visited the Blundell's house to try to sell prints: 'Nathaniell Buck came to see if I would subscribe to his Proposals for Publishing the perspective Views of some old Abbies and Castles &c: in Lancashire, Chesshire and Darby-Shire' (Tyrrer, 1972, p. 221).

the Bucks are confirmed in a view of the bathhouse as it existed at the end of the 18th century. The bathhouse continued in use until the early 19th century but was apparently demolished in 1817 to make way for the Prince's Dock as the riverfront began to become increasingly dominated by docks and other commercial structures. An 1814 map included the site of Prince's Dock with a faint rectangular shape labelled 'Baths,' as if its future removal was expected, while a map published in the following year shows the baths as if intact but with the line of the dock wall running through them.³

As the port grew during the 19th century, bathing was instead relegated to the suburbs and beyond. A bathhouse was open by the 1820s at 1 Neptune Street, which was further to the north, lying inland from East Waterloo Dock (*Gore's General Advertiser*, 6 March 1823). Waterloo and Crosby, where the Blundells had bathed at the beginning of the 18th century, became increasingly popular. At Southport, a bathing house was built in 1792 by William Sutton, followed by his hotel in 1798 and a range of other facilities accrued gradually during the early 19th century (Bailey, 1955, pp. 29, 34; Glazebrook, 1862, pp. 59–64; Alsop, 1832, p. 39; Robinson, 1848, p. 25). In the course of the 19th century, Southport became a favourite place for people from Liverpool to enjoy the sea and a place for wealthy businessmen to live. However, there was still a need for baths to serve Liverpool and people using the docks and a new bathhouse opened on the river in front of George's Dock in 1828 in a monumental classical structure. This was demolished in 1906 during the redevelopment of the Pier Head (Newlands, 1856, p. 10; Calvert, 1987, pp. 117–136, 121).

Modern Ports – Old Resorts

As well as Liverpool, there are other major cities where sea bathing was once a significant presence on the seafront but has now been driven to the peripheries of the settlement or beyond. In a letter dated 'Saturday 9 August 1755,' Mr H wrote that 'Portsmouth has been now, for many months, the rendezvous of the fashionable world; every gay young man of fortune,



Figure 5 Quebec House, Portsmouth from Passing Car Ferry (photo by Allan Brodie)

and woman also, in their circle of joyous amusements, took a transient view of it' (Mr. H., 1757, p. 16). The reason for this seems to have been a nascent sea bathing culture in the town, rather than at nearby Southsea where resort functions developed during the 19th century. Remarkably, Portsmouth still retains its Georgian bathhouse near the docks. Quebec House was built in 1754 and was mentioned in the same year by Dr Richard Pococke: 'The town of late has been resorted to for bathing and drinking the sea-water, and they have made a very handsome bathing-house of wood, at a great expence, with separate baths and apartments for men and women' (Cartwright, 1888, p. 114). In 1755, Archibald Maxwell waxed lyrically about this new facility in a footnote to a poem: 'The open and close Baths begun and finish'd by the worthy Corporation and principal Inhabitants, at their own private Expence; which for Elegance of Structure, and Salubrity of the Water, are no where exceeded' (Maxwell, 1755, p. 15). The incoming tide was used to fill four baths, two of which were apparently large enough for swimming (Riley, 1972, p. 5; Lloyd, 1974, pp. 49, 51) (Figure 5).

This bathhouse still stands near the docks and can be seen most clearly from passing car ferries. While this location may seem strange, a quayside position was also used for Weymouth's first bathhouse in the 18th century, despite the town having a long beach and seafront (Brodie, Ellis, Stuart, & Winter, 2008, p. 12). The same letter written by 'Mr H' in 1755 also recorded

³ Thomas Kaye's Map of 1815 in Gregory et al. (2014, p. 95).

that: 'In this reign of saltwater, great numbers of people of distinction prefer Southampton for bathing; but you agree with me, that the bathing-house is not comparable to that of Portsmouth: not only as being smaller, and uncovered, but here is no water, except at certain times of the tide; whereas at Portsmouth one may always bathe' (Mr H., 1757, p. 25). Southampton had mineral springs and three bathhouses developed beside its two quays as the town only had a muddy foreshore rather than a beach (Temple Patterson, 1966, p. 39; Hembry, 1990, p. 242). A 1771 map shows bathing houses on the water's edge, beside the West Quay with the 'Long Room' behind, while an 1802 map shows a similar arrangement along with Goodman's Baths further to the south. Although the dockside may not seem a particularly salubrious or glamorous location, in 1750 George II's son, Frederick Prince of Wales, bathed in the town while staying nearby (Temple Patterson, 1966, p. 39). Dr Pococke, who visited in 1757, noted that: 'if it had not of late been much frequented for bathing and drinking the salt waters they would have had very little commerce, except among themselves' (Cartwright, 1888, p. 242). Count Friedrich von Kielmansegg, who visited England in 1761–1762, described how: 'Many people come here every year, partly for sea-bathing, partly by order of their physicians, who consider the air of Southampton to be the healthiest in all England' (von Kielmansegg, 1902, p. 270). Baths survived on the quayside until the 1830s when the main bathing establishment was converted into the 'Dock-house' (Freeling, 1839, p. 51). Like Portsmouth and Liverpool, the growing scale of the commercial dimension of the town displaced sea bathing to further afield.

Other, smaller ports also managed the dual function of being a commercial port and a seaside resort for a time. Dover, although primarily a port of transit, provided many features expected at a seaside resort (Figure 6). It hosted visitors during the summer who used its hot baths and bathing machines, as well as its circulating libraries and its new assembly rooms and theatre (*A Guide to all the Watering and Sea-Bathing Places*, 1810 pp. 225–229). Snargate Street running along the base of the cliffs contained facilities for visitors including circulating libraries, a theatre and lodging houses,



Figure 6 Early Photograph of Bathing Machines on the Beach at Dover (reproduced with permission from Historic England, BB 88/03995)

while a row of early 19th century houses survive nearer the modern ferry terminal. During the 19th century, bathing machines are shown in photographs on the beach that lies within the harbour and people still regularly swim in this location. Harwich, a small port in the 18th century, also had private baths filled by the tide and by 1810 the town was offering bathing machines (*A Guide to all the Watering and Sea-Bathing Places*, 1810, p. 261). From 1766, a 'mixture of county, naval and Plymouth families' in search of a colourful social life could use that town's Long Room and the accompanying tepid bath on the shore of Mill Bay (Gill, 1993, p. 193; Rolf, 2011, p. 51). By the early 19th century Swansea was attracting sea bathers despite the pall of copper smoke that apparently hung over the periphery of the town (Miskell, 2011, pp. 113–125, 115–117). It had hot and cold sea water baths, libraries, and an assembly room and theatre – the key pieces of infrastructure for a successful resort.

Conclusion

At Swansea, the construction of commercial docks in the mid-19th century on the foreshore traditionally used for sea bathing meant that this leisure activity shifted out of the town to the western end of Swansea. Moreover, around Britain, there are major towns where, like Swansea, the centre is now dominated by commercial activity and leisure access to

the sea has been displaced to the edge of the settlement or to a largely self-contained twin settlement. In the case of Portsmouth, Southsea serves as its twin with extensive sea bathing and leisure facilities. Waterloo, Crosby and further away Southport now meet the leisure demands of Liverpoolians on the east bank of the Mersey, while on the Wirral, New Brighton remains a popular place for a day out after a trip on the legendary ferry or through the tunnel beneath the river. Dover, now dominated by its ferry terminal, still attracts some people to bathe in the sea, though many appear to be waiting for a ferry or preparing to swim across the English Channel. Furthermore, a modern creation, Port Talbot in South Wales, has the adjacent Aberavon where the residents can enjoy access to the sea against the backdrop of the steelworks, much as the inhabitants of Swansea two centuries ago bathed under clouds from the nearby copper works.

While there is now a geographical and economic need to separate large-scale commercial and industrial activity from leisure pursuits, this was far from the case during the 18th century. Although this process of separation was already underway at many coastal towns, industrial activity, including the working life of the port, was even an attraction for some visitors. For instance, in the diary of his holiday in 1829 Daniel Benham described a visit to the gasworks at Margate and seeing the steam engine at Ramsgate that opened the harbour sluices (Whyman, 1980, pp. 185–225, 191, 197). Moreover, diaries and guidebooks regularly refer to a wide range of industrial, commercial, and institutional sites that members of the public might enjoy visiting, ranging from textile mills and breweries to prisons and active military fortifications. In modern parlance, they were indulging in a form of dark tourism, the difference being that in the 18th century these tourists were examining living phenomena rather than staring at relics of the past. Today, holiday-makers at seaside resorts with active harbours often pass the time watching the boats and fishermen. However, it is unlikely that people driving past the rear of the Liver Building on Liverpool's waterfront realise that they are passing over the site of the town's brief life as a seaside resort during the 18th century. Nor

do many travellers on ferries to France realise that, as they are leaving Portsmouth, they are passing by a Georgian bathhouse, a relic of the town's previous life of leisure.

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