

# SEX ON THE BEACH

## Exploring Gender and Sexuality at British Seaside Resorts 1919-1939

### Introduction

The United Kingdom's interwar period saw conceptions of gender and sexuality questioned and policed amid anxieties of social instability. In *The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the 20th Century*, John Walton frames the seaside as a "place on the margins", both geographically and socially, and suggests that the liminal nature of seaside resorts relaxed boundaries on social behaviour. This project argues that the marginality of interwar seaside resorts created a landscape in which constraints on sexual and gender expression could be explored, challenged, and transgressed.



Figure 1. A group of male friends enjoying a day at the beach.

Image: Cooper, Emmanuel, 1931, Cooper /11/2, Bishop's Gate Institute, London, UK.

### Methodology

The research for this project was primarily conducted through previous scholarship. These secondary sources were approached with the central research question: How were common social expectations of gender and sexual expression performed and challenged within seaside tourism and resort culture of interwar Britain? Research primarily focused on the seaside resort towns of Brighton, Blackpool, and Aberystwyth.

### Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the Jamie Cassels Undergraduate Research Awards, University of Victoria. Special thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Kristin Semmens, for all of her support.

### The Victorian and Edwardian Seaside

- Over the course of the 19th century, English seaside resorts gained popularity among social elites for their health and wellness benefits.
- Morality and modesty were maintained on the beach by gender separation and bathing machines, which allowed bodily concealment while swimming.



Figure 2. An engraved depiction of women using bathing machines in Brighton.

Image: Heath, William, c.1829, Public Domain.

### The Beach and Sexual Opportunity

- After the First World War, pleasure and entertainment replaced morality and wellness at seaside resorts.
- Gender separation on beaches was abolished and bathing machines went out of fashion. Beaches allowed relaxed body culture and sartorial codes.
- Tanning was also popularized during this period, and was an ideal means to pose and show skin in an evocative but socially acceptable way.
- The combined factors of the seaside's liminality and extensive opportunities to display and view the body created an ideal space where socially unacceptable sexual encounters could occur.
- These included premarital sex, extramarital sex, and queer sex.
- These encounters could incur extreme social and even legal consequences, but the seaside offered opportunities to engage in risky sexual behavior under less scrutiny than at home.

### Hedonism and the Working Class



Figure 3. Large crowds at Brighton Beach.

Image: Crowds on the Beach at Brighton, England, 1926, [P&P] No. 25427, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

- The interwar period saw a substantial shift in the class structure of the seaside, as resort towns became accessible to the working class.
- The working class brought a hedonistic atmosphere to the seaside, which loosened traditional social structures and allowed non-conforming behavior to occur under cover of the raucous masses.
- Hedonism was a central point of concern for critics of seaside resorts. Frivolous consumption and enjoyment was considered American, effeminate, and a threat to traditional English masculinity.

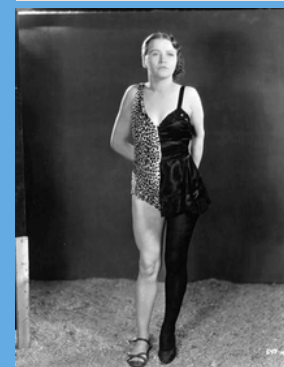


Figure 4. Josephine Joseph on the set of the 1932 film *Freaks*. They often performed as a half-man half-woman in Blackpool.

Image: Josephine Joseph, c 1931, Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

### Gender and Side Shows

- Side shows were common forms of "low brow" entertainment available in seaside resort towns, in which customers paid to view exhibits. These often featured "abnormal" performers.
- Given their intention to shock and amaze viewers, side shows created unique spaces in which bodies that challenged both sex and gender norms could be publicly displayed. Seaside Resorts provided a niche space where individuals who presented or identified beyond the gender binary could exist openly, and even profit.
- A common example of gender bending entertainers were "half-men half-women." These performers presented themselves as gender ambiguous.
- While side shows allowed gender subversion, they also reinforced conceptions of gender non-conformance as an absurdity.
- Side shows played on larger cultural debates and anxieties surrounding gender and sexuality, particularly amid a crisis of masculinity after the First World War.

### Conclusion

The British seaside provided a unique setting in which interwar frameworks governing sex and gender were confronted and relaxed. Critics of the seaside perceived its hedonistic culture as a threat to British social structures, as maintaining strict boundaries for sexual and gendered expression was seen as a crux of social stability. Nevertheless, seaside resort towns continued to push these limitations. Their hedonistic culture, liminality, and opportunity for sexual exploration attracted queer communities to their shores, making the seaside a hub of LGBTQIA+ culture into the later 20th Century.

### References

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