

Freak Shows at British Seaside Resorts 1900-1950



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Abstract

This thesis merges the history of the seaside and the history of the freak show, to explore the display of freaks in the first half of the twentieth century, including their meanings, representations and constructions for the British public. It builds upon the scholarly research conducted by Leslie Fiedler, Robert Bogdan, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, and Nadja Durbach that focuses on the exhibition of unusual bodies for entertainment in the nineteenth century. Through concentrating on displays of freakery between 1900 and 1950, it assesses the continuation of freakery at British seaside resorts, spaces on the physical and metaphorical margins of British life. The thesis assesses the seaside space as a site for the continuation of freakery in the twentieth century. It examines the different types of unusual bodies that were displayed as part of the coastal freak show including midgets, starvation performers, fat people, and 'half-men, half-women'. Through contextualising exhibitions of unusual bodies within their social and cultural context, it demonstrates how the British public understood themselves in relation to the unusual person on display, particularly in reference to health, wellness, 'normality', and 'abnormality'. Ultimately, the thesis argues that freak shows remained central to British culture in seaside locations until the mid-twentieth century, when other forms of amusement, such as films and television, became more popular in the leisure lives of the public, and became the primary way in which the public appeased their curiosity in those with unusual bodies.

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Introduction

'When you see a freak in a circus, are you a freak or is he one?'

The display of unusual bodies for entertainment has a long and complex history. 'Freaks', 'monsters', 'oddities', or '*lusus naturae*' have intrigued populations since the medieval period.¹ Those categorised as freaks varied from

cultural icons that range from the cycloptic Polyphemus and the gigantic Goliath to werewolves and the seven adorable little dwarfs... Stone Age cave drawings, for example, record monstrous births, while prehistoric gravesites evince elaborate ritual sacrifices of such bodies.²

By the seventeenth-century, human curiosities were commonly exhibited alongside wild animals in the public spaces of London for the amusement of people from all social backgrounds. Showmen established their displays at local fairs, lecture halls, and marketplaces, spaces where large crowds of people could come and stare at the unusual people on display. Taverns proved to be one of the most popular venues for freak shows; they had a multiplicity of patrons and variety of

¹ Nadja Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture* (California, 2010), p. 1; Rosemarie Garland Thomson, 'From Wonder to Error – A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity' in Rosemarie Garland Thomson (ed.) *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York, 1996), p. 1.

² Rosemarie Garland Thomson, (ed.) *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York, 1996), p. 1.

rooms in which proprietors could exhibit their acts and charge intoxicated people ‘a few shillings to see the extraordinary.’³

Showing so-called ‘freaks of nature’ continued in an ad-hoc fashion until what Nadja Durbach has configured as ‘the heyday of the modern freak show’ from 1847 to 1914.⁴ More than presenting physically abnormal human bodies for amusement and profit, freak shows had social and cultural significance, which enabled the public to understand themselves and their bodies in relation to the person on display. Durbach notes ‘These shows reveal, therefore, that [...] difference was produced in dynamic relation to other form of corporeal “deviance” and cannot be divorced from the discourses of deformity more generally.’⁵ While the interest in those with anomalous bodies remained consistent, the spatial and temporal dimensions in which they were exhibited was transformed. Accordingly, the physical and cultural construction of the freak show was entirely dependent on the environmental context in which it was created, portrayed, and observed. Consequently, the meaning and significance of unusual bodies changed, depending on the time and space in which they were displayed.

The analysis of freak shows provides an interesting and important avenue through which to discuss the social, cultural, economic, and political history of Britain. The freak show was one of the largest cultural institutions of the British

³ Thomas Fahy, *Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination: Constructing the Damaged Body from Willa Cather to Truman Capote* (Basingstoke, 2006), pp. 5-6.

⁴ Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity* (California, 2010), p. 1.

⁵ Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity* (California, 2010), p. 32.

entertainment and leisure industry in the nineteenth century. Alongside other popular recreational activities, such as visiting zoos and museums, attending displays of unusual bodies presented the British public with a spectacle for their entertainment and pleasure. Freakery appealed to all sections of British society. It provided a form of amusement that attracted members of the upper and lower-classes alike, and thereby allowed many from within the lower social orders to be exposed to and therefore to imitate the behaviour of their social superiors. Thus, as a central component of the British entertainment and leisure industry, as well as its ability to mix classes and expose people to difference, the freak show is deserving of extensive historical analysis. Examining the freak show reveals the types of amusements enjoyed by the public, widespread attitudes towards physical abnormality, and the experiences of those who performed in these exhibitions.

This thesis merges the history of the freak show and the history of seaside resorts to analyse the continuation of freak shows in seaside locations in the period 1900 to 1950. It refutes Nadja Durbach's contention that the freak show declined in the early part of the twentieth century, due to the introduction of legislation that restricted the employment of foreign workers, the emergence of the beauty industry, and the rise of the disability rights movement, and the large influx of disabled ex-servicemen in Britain during the aftermath of the First World War.⁶ Rather, it demonstrates that despite changing attitudes towards some forms of disablement, alongside increasing scientific and medical knowledge of physical

⁶ Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity* (California, 2010), p. 171.

difference, people remained curious about unusual bodies. The thesis suggests three main changes in the ways in which freak shows were experienced between 1900 and 1950. Firstly, the spaces in which freak shows were held transitioned from city to seaside. Secondly, freak shows became a working-class phenomenon, rather than a type of entertainment enjoyed by all classes in British society. Finally, the meaning surrounding those with unusual bodies transformed to reflect the social and cultural environment in the first half of the twentieth century.

Primarily, the thesis examines the transition of freak shows from a central mode of entertainment concentrated in the metropolis, to a form of amusement that was present at the geographical peripheries of British life. It posits that the seaside space, situated on the physical and metaphorical margins of Britain, was a place in which the public could partake in a multiplicity of activities that were not acceptable in city spaces, traditionally sites of industrialisation and work. The *marginal* seaside space permitted people to be comfortable with viewing *marginal* bodies; people expected sideshows as part of their summertime excursions and enjoyed them as a traditional and integral aspect of their holiday amusements. However, as seaside spaces attempted to reinvent themselves as respectable holidaying locations in the 1930s, there were numerous efforts to improve the types of entertainment available to holidaymakers through the removal of disreputable displays. Seaside sideshows were targeted by local authorities concerned that the displays encouraged people to associate seaside resorts with unacceptably immoral and degenerative behaviour. It proved difficult to transform

public perceptions of seaside locations and the fascination with human anomalies continued, despite efforts to reinvent the amusements available to excursionists.

The thesis regards the spaces in which freaks were presented for the entertainment of the British public as centrally important to the construction, perception, and representation of normality and abnormality. Through placing freak shows within the seaside, a space focused on health, wellness, and entertainment, the thesis assesses the exhibition of anomalous bodies in relation to contemporary health discourse in the first half of the twentieth century. This was characterised by concerns surrounding the physical and moral degeneration of the British race in the aftermath of the Boer War, the 'Hungry England' debate of the 1930s, the rising obesity rates of the middle classes, and the supposed supremacy of the British race.

By demonstrating that freak shows continued in resorts that were most popular with the working classes, the thesis identifies an important class shift in those who expressed their curiosity in freakery. No longer were the upper classes openly visiting freak shows; instead they opted for upmarket or residential resorts such as Bournemouth or Hastings, which had other forms of entertainment, such as sea-bathing and promenading.⁷ As it became less socially acceptable to stare at difference for amusement, the demographic of those attending freak shows transformed. Therefore, although freak shows remained popular, they were less

⁷ John Hannavy, *The English Seaside in Victorian and Edwardian Times* (Buckinghamshire, 2003) p. 23; p. 63.

acceptable to Britain's upper classes. Through assessing the spaces in which freak shows continued, and the types of people who patronised such exhibitions, historians can better assess how the vectors of class and social status intersected with ideas of deviance, or abnormality in Britain in a period of changing attitudes towards physical variation.

Despite the concern surrounding the acceptability of staring at those with unusual bodies for entertainment, the popularity of freak shows in Britain was emphasised in a report published in January 1921. Hannen Swaffer, an English journalist and drama critic, published a full-page article in *The Graphic*, a British weekly illustrated newspaper which commented on a multiplicity of topics that were interesting to the British public, including amusements, legal trials, and sports news.⁸ Swaffer regularly reported on the variety of freak shows that amused audiences at the Olympia and the Agricultural Hall throughout the first half of the twentieth century. He noted that there was a plethora of different freaks of nature who exhibited their bodies to paying audiences, including 'Ursa: The Bear Lady', 'Rosie Foster: The Half-Lady', 'Jennie Lindsay: The Three-Foot High Midget', and 'Hilda Flack: The Giant School Girl of Epping'.⁹ He revealed, 'Then there are snake swallows and tattooed ladies and cannibals and all sorts of things.'¹⁰

⁸ Linton Andrews, 'Swaffer, Hannen (1879–1962)', rev. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2011 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36379>, accessed 13 April 2017]; *The Graphic* was first published on 4th December 1869 by Illustrated Newspapers Limited. It continued to be published each week until 23 April 1932.

⁹ Hannen Swaffer, 'Are They Freaks or Are We?' *The Graphic*, (London) 8 January 1921.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Swaffer attempted to comprehend why those with unusual bodies were utilised as a form of entertainment and expressed the notion that freaks were only considered 'abnormal' due to the societally constructed perception of that which was understood as 'normal'. He stated, 'When you see a freak in a circus, are you a freak or is he one? When Gulliver saw the Lilliputians he thought they were freaks because they were smaller than he was...Is a horse that stands on its hind legs a freak or a genius? What is a freak? What is a genius?'¹¹ Commenting on the scale of the phenomenon he added, 'At this moment there are more freaks assembled in London than have ever been known.'¹² While Swaffer's report demonstrates that freak shows still took place in metropolitan centres such as London, the primary location for the continuation of freakery by the 1920s was in seaside locations. Moreover, although freak shows still occurred, it is clear they had become less popular with the upper classes, evidenced by numerous articles that articulated complaints about the display of unusual bodies for entertainment. Nevertheless, Swaffer's comment was pertinent in encapsulating the debates which historians of freakery have engaged with in recent years; how did contemporaries determine and understand what was considered 'freakish', why did the public find freaks entertaining, and at what point did the freak show decline?

Traditionally, historians of freakery including Leslie Fiedler, Robert Bogdan, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, and Nadja Durbach have argued that the freak show

¹¹Swaffer, 'Are They Freaks or Are We?', (London) 8 January 1921.

¹² Ibid.

was culturally determined.¹³ They suggest that society distinguished what was considered deviant and subsequently capitalised on it. Furthermore, this shaped societal attitudes and behaviour towards those perceived to be different. The public, apprehensive about the stigmatizing effect of deviance, altered their bodies and behaviour to avoid being considered aberrant. Thomas Fahy argues, 'The freak was not part of this community but someone who reaffirmed the cultural superiority of the onlooker.'¹⁴ Therefore, the analysis of freak shows reveals the expected 'norms' of any given society, as well as the public anxieties that surrounded 'difference', 'deviance', and 'abnormality'. Fahy articulates this, noting

The freak represented what the audience was not – the Other, someone excluded from mainstream society for being different. In this way, 'the freakish body revealed surprisingly insecure power structures and suggested underlying anxieties about the ways individuals defined and related to each other.'¹⁵

The bodily conceptions of the public dictated what was permissible and what was not, with regards to cultivating an acceptable body. Moreover, the physical construction of the ideal body was directly associated with the societal normality of the individual. Thus, the deconstruction of displays of unusual bodies

¹³ See Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (New York, 1993), Robert Bodgan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (London, 1990); Garland Thomson (ed.) *Freakery* (New York, 1996); Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity* (California, 2010).

¹⁴ Fahy, *Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination* (Basingstoke, 2006), p. 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

for entertainment reveals contemporary attitudes towards 'normality' or 'abnormality', and how the public related their bodies to those exhibiting themselves for public entertainment.

Durbach examines the relationship between freakery and disability at the turn of the twentieth century; this is important as the contemporary perceptions of difference and disability influenced the ways in which audiences understood those displayed as part of the seaside freak show. She notes that initially, the term 'disabled' referred to veterans of the First World War who had been maimed in their service to the state.¹⁶ When servicemen were no longer able to work and provide financially for their families' due to the severity of their wounds, they became entitled to state support. She argues that freak show performers in the nineteenth century should not be understood as 'disabled', as 'disabled' people were traditionally labelled such because of their inability to work. Due to their employment in the freak show and circus industry, freak show performers remained outside the domain of poor relief until the latter half of the twentieth century. Durbach states,

The category of "the disabled" took shape, then, at a particular historical moment when the British government was forced to re-evaluate the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, and when British society was compelled to rethink the social meanings attached to bodily disfigurement. The disabled thus only became a socially relevant category in the second decade

¹⁶ Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity*, p. 16.

of the twentieth century, when thousands of wounded soldiers returned from the front and needed to be “rehabilitated” and reincorporated into British society.¹⁷

Based on such categorizations Durbach calls for historians of disability to embrace a more nuanced understanding of freaks as individuals able to achieve financial independence and stability. This thesis will engage with Durbach’s conception of the relationship between bodily difference, individual capacity for labour, and public entertainment. It argues that those who displayed themselves as part of the seaside freak show were understood separately from disabled civilians and servicemen, and therefore their experiences must be regarded as distinct.

However, whilst Durbach argues that the freak show, for numerous reasons, went into decline from 1914 this thesis suggests that freak shows continued to be a popular and accepted type of entertainment in the seaside space, a place on the physical and metaphorical edges of British life. Therefore, this thesis examines public attitudes towards physical difference at a time in which there were more disabled people in Britain than ever before and social beliefs surrounding physical deformity were transforming in light of the consequences of the First World War.

Whilst the public may not have visited freak shows regularly at other times of year, they were a traditional and intrinsic aspect of working-class summer holidaying activities (similar to pantomimes at Christmas), and were enjoyed by a

¹⁷ Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity*, p. 17.

significant proportion of British holidaymakers. This thesis argues that rather than dating the decline of the freak show to the early years of the twentieth century, it instead proliferated until 1950, in spaces dedicated to leisure, pleasure, and fun. The seaside was a site for health, entertainment, nostalgia, and novelty, and therefore provided a space in which the public continued to indulge their interest in those with unusual bodies. Subsequently, visitors were able to correlate health discourse and the freak bodies on display, to understand their own bodily regulation. The thesis argues that freak shows remained an aspect of British culture at seaside resorts until 1950, when entertainment combined with the rising popularity of holidays abroad, the cinema, and television, to encourage the public to enjoy curious sights through alternative mediums. Therefore, the thesis regards the spaces in which freak shows continued as fundamentally important to the persistence of staring at unusual bodies for entertainment, and the cultural construction of those bodies for the public, who stared at human variation and difference through their attendance at such exhibitions.

Although this thesis assesses the curiosity in freaks of nature at British seaside resorts until 1950, this is not to say that this was the point at which interest in freakery began to decline. Subsequently, freakery diminished by the coast, in favour of other forms of amusement. People continued to indulge their fascination in the unusual through new entertainments such as film and television. Gerber argues that

By 1950 because of the combination of the new, medical understanding of physical anomalies, the growth of concern for minority rights, and the rise of alternative forms of amusement such as televisions and movies, the freak show had begun to decline.¹⁸

Arguably, rather than the decline that Gerber suggests, there was a subsequent transition whereby the unusual body continued to be a form of enjoyment but the medium through which it was experienced transformed. However, this thesis will bring together a number of strands of historical study to understand the first major transition of the freak show in the twentieth century. With rising numbers of the British public holidaying abroad, the demographic and traditions of British seaside holidays changed.

This thesis draws upon the methodological approaches utilised by established historians of the freak show, including Bogdan, Garland Thomson, and Durbach, to explore the continuity of freak shows as entertainment in Britain from 1900 to 1950. It utilises images, newspaper reports, and writings from a wide variety of different archives and sources, to comprehend how the public understood those who displayed their bodies as part of the seaside freak show. It employs numerous local and national archives, including the Wellcome Library, the British Library, The National Archives, the Bristol Theatre Archive, and the National Fairground Archive, to inform this research. It has a focus on the visual material

¹⁸ David Gerber, 'The "Careers" of People Exhibited in Freak Shows: The Problem of Volition and Valorization' in Rosemarie Garland Thomson, (ed.) *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York, 1996), p. 43.

accompanying exhibitions of freaks, including *carte de visits* and images associated with their performances. It places images alongside newspaper reports, writings from the Mass Observation archive, and contemporary literature; this enables an assessment of both how freak shows were constructed for the entertainment of the public, and what holidaymakers garnered from the displays. Through placing these sources in the contemporary discourse centred on health, wellness, normality, and abnormality, it is possible to examine why freak shows continued in seaside resorts and the ways in which the seaside space facilitated the understanding of such displays.

The Importance of the Seaside Space

British seaside resorts are unique liminal environments, due in part to their geographical location and their large yet transient populations, that have been leisure spaces for the public since the eighteenth century when they became popular sea-bathing locations.¹⁹ The thesis concentrates its analysis on three major seaside locations; Blackpool, Margate, and Southend-on-Sea. Firstly, Blackpool in Lancashire, was selected as it was the most famous seaside resort in twentieth century Britain. It became popular with visitors from the upper classes in the eighteenth century when the practice of sea-bathing for health and wellbeing

¹⁹ This thesis can be situated within the spatial turn in history, which describes an intellectual movement that places emphasis on place and space in the humanities. Closely linked with quantitative studies of history. The movement has been influential in providing mass amounts of data for study of cultures, regions, and specific locations; See Barney Warf and Santa Arias, *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London, 2009); Fiona Williamson, 'The Spatial Turn of Social and Cultural History: A Review of the Current Field' *European History Quarterly* 44:4 (2014), pp. 703-717.

became fashionable. The arrival of the railways in 1846 encouraged a burgeoning number of working-class visitors to the coast and Blackpool became one of the primary destinations for Northern excursionists and holidaymakers. John Hannavy argues 'Modelled on Paris's Eiffel Tower, but at just over half the height, the 500 foot (152 metre) high tower celebrated Blackpool's pre-eminence as a holiday resort – despite the unpredictable weather of the North-West!'²⁰ Blackpool's Tower and Illuminations, as well as the famous 'Golden Mile', were sites of entertainment and spectacle for the public to visit. Secondly, Margate in Kent was the birthplace of the bathing machine in 1753.²¹ It was similar to Blackpool in the types of entertainment it provided holidaymakers with but its accessibility gave it a more democratic class profile from the start. It attracted Londoners to its sandy beaches and became a traditional holiday destination for workers from the metropolis. Allan Brodie argues, 'Authors as far back as the late eighteenth century mocked the type of people who visited Margate; the constant theme is that while it enjoyed visits from some aristocrats and wealthy gentry, ease of access from London allowed people to visit Margate who could not have afforded to travel to other resorts.'²² This perception of Margate continued throughout the nineteenth century. In 1920, the Dreamland amusement park was established and offered visitors the opportunity to ride one of the first roller coasters in the United Kingdom, 'The

²⁰ John Hannavy, *The English Seaside in Victorian and Edwardian Times* (Buckinghamshire, 2003) p. 16.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²² Allan Brodie, 'The Brown Family Adventure – Seaside Holidays in Kent in the mid-Nineteenth Century' *Journal of Tourism History* 5:1 (2011), p. 18.

Scenic Railway'. Although these innovative new technologies fascinated tourists, curiosities such as fat ladies, thin men, and magicians remained traditional features at the resort. Finally, Southend-on-Sea in Essex held many similar exhibitions to Blackpool and Margate. Due to poor transportation links with London, it was not until the nineteenth century that Southend-on-Sea became a popular holiday destination with tourists and excursionists. However, when the world's longest pleasure pier was built in 1830, measuring almost 1.34 miles in length, many came to experience Southend for an exciting summer holiday.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, each seaside resort mainly catered for the working-class and attracted thousands of holidaymakers each summer season. These places were near major cities and provided an escape for workers who found enjoyment through coastal amusements. Through utilising Blackpool, Margate, and Southend-on-Sea as examples, it is possible to understand the geographical connections with freak shows throughout British coastal locations.²³ While each resort was unique, they shared certain similar characteristics. As liminal spaces on the margins of British life - visited for short periods of time and marked by patterns of consumption and behaviour that were often distinct from normality - the seaside space permitted the public to behave differently. The freedom of holiday-time ensured that excursionists partook in alterative activities that were not part of their everyday lives. Moreover, each was

²³ Where relevant the thesis refers to other seaside resorts where examples of freakery have been found.

home to a large and popular amusement park, a feature not found in other resorts. At Blackpool's 'Pleasure Beach', at Margate's 'Dreamland', and at Southend-on-Sea's 'The Kursall', holidaymakers were entertained and amused with sideshows, stalls, and rides. Each pleasure park had spaces dedicated to the exhibition of human oddities, making them a significant area of investigation for historians of seaside sideshows due to the spatially fixed continuities between locations. While the three major seaside resorts dominate discussion, other locations will be analysed. Blackpool, Margate, and Southend-on-Sea were certainly not the sole venues which hosted freak shows in the twentieth century. However, sources for other seaside resorts are limited, making it more difficult to assess the extent to which freak shows were present at locations such as Skegness, Brighton, and Clacton. In these places, local newspapers made note of certain exhibitions but rarely offered detailed descriptions of displays. Therefore, whilst it remains certain that freaks were present at these seaside locations, there is limited material about the public reaction to their exhibits.

The Fairground Circuit

The freak shows at British seaside resorts were part of a broader fairground circuit and lucrative leisure economy of circuses and local travelling fairs. Placing freak shows within this broader fairground industry provides insight into the context in which many freaks of nature worked. It facilitates better understanding of how and why showmen capitalized on abnormality by displaying unusual bodies

to audiences in search of amusement. One local newspaper described the popularity of fairgrounds in 1905,

There are 46,000,000 people in the United Kingdom and 40,000,000 say the showmen visit their fairgrounds every year. The fairground business was divided into three classes. 'Riding masters' who owned their own roundabouts, who accumulated between five and six million pounds to invest in their business. The second class were big showmen like Bostock and Wombwell, who owned nearly four hundred animals, had a worth of one million pounds. The sideshow entrepreneurs, were the third grade, and they controlled the travelling amusements and freak shows, who had over ten million pounds in their business.²⁴

Freak shows formed part of a greater business enterprise and generated large profits each year. They entertained millions of people, demonstrating the popularity of staring at those with anomalous bodies. Although fairgrounds and freak shows were popular with members of the British public,

Novelty was essential to the appeal of freak shows. Many exhibits assumed new names and varied performances over time to keep audiences intrigued.

These changes not only altered the meanings ascribed to freaks, but they

²⁴ 'The Showman World' *The Era*, Saturday 10 June 1905, p. 20; 'Showmen Meeting at Hull Fair' *The Era*, Saturday 20 October 1906, p. 25; *The Graphic*, Saturday 08 January 1921, p. 10.

also suggested that the grounds for normality were not a given but in continual negotiation with the freakish.²⁵

Yet, '[by] the mid-twentieth century, the ploys became less compelling, less able to mitigate the problem of viewing, and the sideshow grew increasingly distasteful – something that respectable people avoided and that parents kept from their children.'²⁶ This thesis analyses freak shows within their wider entertainment environment in order to assess the meanings, constructions, and representations of unusual bodies, at a time in which attitudes towards 'disability' and 'difference' were slowly transforming but curiosity in the unusual and strange was not. It examines the spatial transition of freak shows from metropolitan centres to seaside resorts; it argues that the physical transition from city to seaside echoed the changing acceptability of staring at freaks in the twentieth century. It argues that the seaside space enabled holidaymakers to appease their interest in the unusual, in a place that was centred around novel entertainments. Ultimately, it suggests that the time in which freak shows declined coincided with the decline of the fairground more broadly.

Literature Review

This thesis merges the history of the seaside and the history of the freak show, to explore the display of unusual bodies for entertainment in the twentieth century, including their meanings, representations, and constructions. Freak shows

²⁵ Fahy, *Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination* (Basingstoke, 2006), p. 2.

²⁶ Fahy, *Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination*, p. 10.

and seaside resorts each have their own body of scholarly inquiry, which will be utilised throughout this thesis. Additionally, there are numerous other facets of historical investigation which are valuable to this study, including the history of the entertainment industry, concepts of environment and space, British social and cultural history in the twentieth century and finally, the history of the body, health, and disability. These sub-disciplines of academic study enable us to historicise the display of unusual bodies throughout Britain in the period 1900-1950.

Freak Shows

The history of the freak show is positioned within numerous historical sub-disciplines, including the history of medicine, health, the body, and disability. Additionally, it is widely contextualised within the history of the entertainment and leisure industries. There has been a wealth of historical research on the history of freakery in recent years, with many historians utilising a variety of methodological approaches to analyse the effect of displaying human oddities for profit and entertainment in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Predominantly, the study of freakery has focused on the American freak show, with historians such as Leslie Fiedler, Robert Bogdan and Rosemarie Garland Thomson historicising the freak show within its social and cultural context, and therefore going beyond the concept that the freak show was solely an exploitative, money-making venture. Such studies have introduced many debates to the exploration of freakery, including its place in normative culture, its function in facilitating spectators to

contemplate their own bodies, and its ability to reveal the anxieties of contemporary society.

In his ground-breaking study on freakery, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, Leslie Fiedler presents a psychoanalytical history which examines the freak as something that defies assumptions and perceptions. He demonstrates that dwarfs and giants test a sense of scale and hermaphrodites challenge the notion that the world fits into two sexes.²⁷ However, Fiedler claims that the freak show was 'intended to be finally therapeutic, cathartic, no matter what the initial terror and insecurity it evokes.'²⁸ Entrenched within contemporary society, it thus reminded audiences that *they* were normal, relieving tensions around difference, deviance, and abnormality. When placed within its cultural context, the study of the freak show in Britain reveals the anxieties of the British public, as well as how they sought to relieve these worries.²⁹

The social construction of prodigious bodies enticed human interest and provoked the imagination of those who stared at them. Robert Bogdan challenges the traditional assumptions that the freak show was a manipulative enterprise, through which those with freakish bodies were considered favourably only for their beneficial fiscal capacity. He maintains that freaks that performed for amusement and profit must be considered within their historical period, in order to remove any moral connotations from the freak show as a form of entertainment. Bogdan sees

²⁷ Fiedler, *Freaks* (New York, 1993), p. 24.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

the significance of the freak show in its social contextualisation, and argues that, “Freak” is not a quality that belongs to the person on display. It is something that we created: a perspective, a set of practices – a social construction.’³⁰ As such, the analysis of the unusual body informs the discussion of a number of aspects of society and culture, including disability, deformity, and the standardization of the body. For David Gerber, the problematic notions of consent and body exploitation of render the freak show a morally offensive space. Gerber debates the morality of the freak show from a personal standpoint arguing,

... another point asserts itself just as insistently in my mind: “This choice is so bad, I don’t care if it is voluntary.” In short, I want to establish...that I do not approve of freak shows and thus find condemnation of them, past or present, a compelling purpose.³¹

Therefore, his concerns mirror the polarising influence of freak shows in a historical and contemporary context, which presents a methodological problem for historians analysing how the public understood freak shows in the twentieth century. Comparably, Michael M. Chemers maintains that the study of the freak show is ‘one of a marginalized community of performers: targeted, isolated, disenfranchised, tortured, abused, and murdered.’³² Certainly, the nature of choice, consent, legitimacy, and marginalisation are important referents when

³⁰ Bogdan, *Freak Show*, p. xi.

³¹ Gerber, ‘The “Careers” of People Exhibited in Freak Shows’ in Rosemarie Garland Thomson, (ed.) *Freakery* (New York, 1996), p. 40.

³² Michael M. Chemers, *Staging Stigma: A Critical Examination of the American Freak Show* (New York, 2008), p. 9.

considering the freak show. However, simply condemning the freak show as morally distasteful undermines the possibility of exploring the extent to which the study of freakery reveals broader cultural values. Although historians must avoid contemporing the freak show, its capacity to illuminate developments in the professionalisation of science and medicine, beliefs surrounding health, wellbeing, or fitness, and the ways in which British people understood themselves, their bodies, and the world around them makes it worthy of historical scrutiny

Chemers further argues that freak shows can work to the detriment of public understanding of disability, especially from an academic scholarship that has focused on it as an entertainment pursuit.³³ Historians must be aware of the potential mistreatment of human oddities to fully comprehend the display of difference throughout history. However, the freak show should not be disregarded, condemned, or criticised. Rather, it should be contextualised within contemporary concepts of disability, difference, and abnormality to understand the experience of those performing as freaks and the public opinion of such displays. As Chemers aptly demonstrates,

Freaks, sometimes intentionally, sometimes unwittingly, render the invisible visible and force us to examine our own thought processes about disability and other forms of stigma in a way that provides a progressive vision for the

³³ Chemers, *Staging Stigma*, p. 9.

future, one in which disability might no longer be stigmatized at all but accepted universally as an everyday component of the human condition.³⁴

Consequently, Chemers examines the freak show as a 'contested site', part of a pervasive social milieu. He establishes that the freak show was a form of stigma management, and evaluates to what degree freaks shaped and were shaped by the changing understanding of disability.³⁵ Therefore, Chemers suggests that considering the freak show within the parameters of British society and culture exposes the entrenched beliefs surrounding disability, in addition to how societies sought to control, understand, and explain human difference.

This is further explored by Rosemarie Garland Thomson who claims that 'the extraordinary body is fundamental to the narratives by which we make sense of ourselves and our world... By its very presence the exceptional body seems to compel explanation, inspire representation, and incite regulation.'³⁶ Garland Thomson proposes that as societies modernised, human oddities were viewed differently. Abnormal people throughout history were typically seen with wonder but with a growth in scientific understanding of the body they began to be explained as 'errors' of evolution.³⁷ Garland Thomson outlines the continual reframing of disability, showing that as the knowledge of society transformed, so

³⁴ Ibid., p. 5.

³⁵ Chemers, *Staging Stigma*, p. 3.

³⁶ Garland Thomson, 'From Wonder to Error' in Garland Thomson (ed.) *Freakery* (New York, 1996), p. 1.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

did the way people understood unusual bodies.³⁸ Furthermore, she argues, 'Freak discourse structured a cultural ritual that seized upon any deviation from the typical, embellishing and intensifying it to produce a human spectacle whose every somatic feature was laden with significance before the gaping spectator.'³⁹ Thus, the analysis of bodily displays gives important insight into the society of any given period, as the freak show was constructed through the magnification of contemporary assumptions and convictions surrounding normalcy and deviancy.

Ultimately, the freak show was a product of the society which hosted the performance. Anna Kerchy and Andrea Zittlau provide a comprehensive, analytical study of freakery in Europe, reviewing the role of freaks in enforcing the boundaries of normality 'in spatiotemporally specific modes which result from traumatic historical circumstances, decisive geographical contextualization, as well as related socio-political concerns and communal anxieties.'⁴⁰ Kerchy and Zittlau explore the concept of 'enfreakment' in relation to the continental European freak show and illuminate both the necessity and advantage of situating freak shows within their contemporary context. They demonstrate that the freak show was a construct of the geographical location where the display of unusual bodies took place, citing the extent to which racial difference and socio-political events such as the Holocaust were reflected in European freak shows.⁴¹ This research builds on their work to

³⁸ Garland Thomson, 'From Wonder to Error' in Garland Thomson (ed.) *Freakery* (New York, 1996), p. 3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴⁰ Anna Kerchy and Andrea Zittlau, *Exploring the Cultural History of Continental European Freak Shows and 'Enfreakment'* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2012), p. 10.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

locate the exhibition of freaks in the social, cultural, economic and political environment of twentieth century Britain.

The role of 'meaning-making', as well as providing entertainment to audiences, has been explored by Marlene Tromp who examines the social context of freakery in Britain, showing that people with unusual bodies had a role to play in negotiating concepts of 'normality' and 'abnormality'. She argues that the freak show was more than just the exploitation of difference for entertainment and 'Ambiguous bodies were not only commodified to produce a profit; they were traffic in such ambiguous social meanings and controversy as well.'⁴² Lillian Craton considers that the unusual body is 'defined by the ideology of its historical moment, but also serves as a tool in the definition of that ideology by facilitating discussion and negotiation of key ideological terms.'⁴³ In her formative work on the freak show in Britain, Nadja Durbach suggests that '... displays of freakery were critical sites for popular and professional debates about the meanings attached to bodily difference.'⁴⁴ She interprets the freak show as a place where the British public could make sense of themselves and those around them. Her focus on Britain draws upon Bogdan's social constructionist approach, and she utilises ephemera such as posters and *carte de visites* to show how the freak show drew upon the societal issues of the period in order to advertise the various exhibitions in a captivating and thought

⁴² Marlene Tromp (ed.) *Victorian Freaks: The Social Context of Freakery in Britain* (Ohio, 2008), p. 7.

⁴³ Lillian Craton, *The Victorian Freak Show: The Significance of Disability and Physical Difference in 19th Century Fiction* (New York, 2009), p. 5.

⁴⁴ Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity*, p. 1.

provoking way. Like Bodgan, she debates the dominant idea that freaks were exploited and attempts to reinstate agency to the performers themselves. Durbach postulates that people who displayed their unusual bodies largely maintained control over their own exhibitions. Furthermore, she notes the changing societal relationship to the unusual body, in terms of the increasing medicalisation of disability and the effect that this had on the burgeoning freak show industry in the period 1847 to 1914. Durbach's approach to the history of freakery in Britain provides essential analysis and contextualisation of the cultural institution of the freak show. This thesis builds upon Durbach's assertions but suggests an alternative narrative to her proposition that freakery went into decline in 1914. Rather, it argues that the exhibition of unusual bodies continued to have a pivotal role in the negotiation of 'normality', 'abnormality' and 'Britishness' at seaside sites and clearly reflected the fundamental socio-cultural anxieties of the period, predominantly those concerning health, fitness, and wellness.

The relationship between health, medicine, and the freak show has been addressed by a number of historians. Durbach scrutinises the relationship between the freak show and medicine through analysing the memoirs of Tom Norman and Fredrick Treves (the showman and the medical practitioner associated with Joseph Merrick, 'The Elephant Man').⁴⁵ Durbach observes by what means the freak show and the medical profession were similar, noting that although extraordinary bodies were central to medical and scientific discourse, and were supposed to be viewed

⁴⁵ Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity*, p. 33.

with a distinctly 'medical gaze', medical professionals sensationalised the unusual body in a similar way to showmen attempting to construct an entertaining sideshow. Comparably, Fiona Pettit utilises ephemeral memorabilia, periodicals, comics, stories, and the *British Medical Journal* (BMJ), to assess freaks in nineteenth century media and medicine. She explains that,

Freak bodies were often so engrained in their show identities, however, that a supposedly objective medical gaze often necessarily drew upon, and reproduced, the spectacularizing practices that the profession sought to exclude.⁴⁶

Framing her thesis with John Kotre's theory of generativity, she is concerned with the attempt of medical practitioners to assert their authority over the freakish body. Instead of considering the freak as the subject of socio-cultural anxieties, she states that 'freakery was not marginal, defining what normality might be, but that it was central, creating the ability for individuals [...] and groups [...] to define and assert their legacies.'⁴⁷ Pettit deliberates the role of the freak in enriching medical knowledge and permitting the medical profession to affirm their control over the unusual body after death. She argues that freak shows were not on the periphery of British culture but central to a number of facets of British life. Not only were freak shows an entertaining leisure pursuit; they played a dominant role in the

⁴⁶ Fiona Pettit, 'The Afterlife of Freak Shows' in Joe Kember, John Plunkett, and Jill A. Sullivan, *Popular Exhibitions, Science and Showmanship 1840-1910* (London, 2012), p. 63.

⁴⁷ Fiona Pettit, *Freaks in Late Nineteenth century British Media and Medicine* (Exeter, 2013), p. 21.

development of medical understanding of teratology, disability, and abnormality. The dichotomy between the freak show and the medical profession was such that they relied on each other for survival and improvement. Physicians required human oddities for their knowledge, research, and professional development. Frequently, the freak show cited the opinion of the medical profession in their promotional material. Therefore, at least in part, the influence of the medical profession on the display of unusual people permitted the acceptability of staring at difference, if not for entertainment, for the growth in popular scientific and medical interest.

Although this thesis does not examine the unusual body within the confines of medicine, it does evaluate the freak as paramount to various aspects of British life, including health and wellbeing. It discusses the continuation of the display of difference as a form of entertainment, examining the freak's function in facilitating the negotiation of bodily sameness and difference. It perceives the freak as promulgating medical knowledge specifically in terms of average health and fitness to its spectators, and particularly in seaside locations.

In this way, the freak show reformed alongside the culture it was part of. Heather McHold deliberates the ability of the freak show to encourage curiosity without aggravating cultural anxiety about 'the spectacle trade'.⁴⁸ Importantly, she argues that between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the freak show

⁴⁸ Heather McHold, 'Even As You and I: Freak Shows and Lay Discourse on Spectacular Deformity' in Marlene Tromp, (ed.) *Victorian Freaks: The Social Context of Freakery in Britain* (Ohio, 2008), p. 22.

became more popular with the working classes than the upper classes. She states that in

order to help alleviate intensifying British antipathy toward itinerate freak show stars and their display before working-class crowds, late Victorian showmen consistently put new emphasis on how those exhibiting their physical deformities expressed respect for gender difference, domestic virtue, hard work, productivity and consumerism.⁴⁹

Therefore, the freak show was a malleable culture of exhibition; its meaning altered depending on the environment, the audience, and the contemporary social issues which dominated public discussion. For working-class audiences, exhibitions focused on evangelistic ideals and were intended to teach the spectators to be as respectable as their social betters. Within the study of freakery, it is fundamental to evaluate variations in the environment, audience, and society surrounding bodily displays, to appreciate their cultural significance within a wider entertainment and leisure industry.

The Entertainment and Leisure Industry

Whilst examining the freak show within a broader cultural context of health and medical discourse is essential for the meaningful analysis of freakery displays, it is also useful to locate them as part of a growing entertainment and leisure industry. British entertainment and leisure is the subject of a number of scholarly

⁴⁹ McHold, 'Even As You and I' in Tromp, (ed.) *Victorian Freaks*, p. 22.

works. In *Consuming Passions*, Judith Flanders postulates that the eighteenth century marked the birth of mass entertainment and leisure in British society. Similarly, Alan Delgado contends that entertainment was a growing commodity. As the nineteenth century progressed, upper, middle, and working-class people spent their surplus income on entertainment activities.⁵⁰ Moreover, with the Industrial Revolution, the development of factories, railways, and innovative new technologies, came greater opportunities for leisure, entertainment, and travel. Ross McKibbin describes Britain as a 'nation at play', a society which valued and enjoyed their leisure time.⁵¹ Therefore, the growing consumer industry gratified all members of British society, and many enjoyed outings to museums, trips to the zoo, and holidays to seaside resorts.

Richard Altick considers a variety of performances in London as a reflection of provincial public interests in entertainment from the seventeenth-century onwards. Significantly, Altick understands his research as shedding light on the 'limitations, contours, and texture of the popular mind in a given place and time.'⁵² Predominantly, he explores the interrelationship between entertainment and British society through the analysis of fairs, theatres, music halls, and art galleries. Altick's *The Shows of London* informs this thesis in various ways. It places the freak show as part of a spectacle culture; as an artistic, performative entertainment,

⁵⁰ Alan Delgado, *Victorian Entertainment* (Florida, 1971), p. 7.

⁵¹ Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain 1880-1950* (Oxford, 1990), p. 140.

⁵² Richard Altick, *The Shows of London: A Panoramic History of Exhibitions, 1600-1862*, (London, 1978), p. 4.

alongside other shows which entertained the British public. As Alan Delgado notes 'People visited the theatres to be taken out of themselves. For many life was drab and sad, so plays full of action were enjoyed.'⁵³ Whilst bodily difference made the freak show an alternative to other musical or theatrical displays, it is vital to appreciate the freak show as a highly structured performance; one which was to help the British public escape from their industrialised working lives. Placing freakery exhibits alongside other customary spectacle entertainments, historians can better assess the role which the freak show had in the leisure and entertainment industry. Moreover, Altick suggests that the analysis of freak shows portrays many other aspects of British life. For example, he states that there was more class interplay than previously supposed, demonstrating greater social democracy and revealing that popular exhibitions generated interest with all members of British society.

Although Altick's research primarily focuses on London, his scholarly findings can be usefully applied to provincial seaside resorts. This unique approach is beneficial as it gives a framework for the extensive analysis of the spaces in which freaks were exhibited. Firstly, it permits the evaluation of a variety of geographical locations. Secondly, it allows for the exploration of the continuation of freak shows in spaces consciously set aside for fun, entertainment, and pleasure. Coastal settings remained places where British people could enjoy themselves without fear of judgement. Furthermore, shows and performances were central to the

⁵³ Delgado, *Victorian Entertainment*, p. 97.

entertainment of holidaymakers, which makes them a pertinent area of investigation.

Joe Kember, John Plunkett, and Jill A. Sullivan assess a variety of popular exhibitions and shows throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They explore the relationship between showmanship, science, and medicine, including the ways in which entertainment imparted knowledge to the spectator, and the roles of technology and education in informing British exhibition culture in the period 1840 to 1910.⁵⁴ Through deconstructing the institutional, spatial, and sensory aspects of performance culture, Kember, Plunkett, and Sullivan analyse a variety of different sites, placing each in the wider spectrum of entertainment and leisure. They cover magic lantern shows, lectures, freak shows, and Egyptian mummy unwrapping demonstrations, detailing that, 'Each had its own particular space, strategy and language of display, as well as drawing on and being contextualized by the showmanship of other forms of popular entertainment.'⁵⁵ Rooted within the Victorian period, the concept of 'rational recreation' had an effect on the way in which entertainment was perceived and engaged with. Rational recreation, the concept that through entertainment there would be social development, particularly in the lower social classes, was central to many entertainment pursuits. Therefore, alongside their educational function, popular shows and exhibitions facilitated the education of their audiences. Kember,

⁵⁴ Kember, Plunkett, and Sullivan, *Popular Exhibitions, Science and Showmanship 1840-1910*, p. 2.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Plunkett and Sullivan argue that one of the socio-cultural functions of popular exhibitions or performances was to further popular scientific and imperial agendas.⁵⁶ They perceive shows, demonstrations, and leisure activities as sites for social, cultural, political, and economic discourse. The analysis of these forms of entertainment portrays prominent concerns in British culture, making it an advantageous subject of research.

Comparably, R. W. Jones, in his study on nineteenth century zoos considers the interrelationship between entertainment and education. He contends that the space and organisation of institutions, were not solely focused on leisure but were also key sites of education. London Zoo, Jones argues, was a site of entertainment with an informative and educational function. It was fashioned to reflect certain aspects of British social and cultural life, notably empire, imperialism, and the superiority of the British race. Jones states that animals in the zoo were observed 'as signs and commodities upon which a number of competing and complementary ideologies, fantasies and dreams were meticulously inscribed.'⁵⁷ The zoo was socially constructed in such a way that sought to exert British western superiority over perceivably less developed and civilized societies, similar to the display of racial difference in freakery exhibitions. At times, racially different freaks were displayed in cages which was reminiscent of zoo animals, enclosed to ensure the public could view them as entertainment. Therefore, a variety of entertainment

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 4.

⁵⁷ R. W. Jones 'The Sight of Creatures Strange to Our Clime: London Zoo and the Consumption of the Exotic,' *The Journal of Victorian Culture* 2:1 (1997), p. 6

activities propagated broader ideas to the British public and were structured in such a way that could be appreciated by those who enjoyed them as entertainment. They acted as sites of discourse for trends in British society, which was understood through their social and cultural contextualisation. Placing sites of entertainment alongside each other allows for the greater awareness of how entertainment functions within British society.

Sadiah Qureshi showcases 'the fundamental importance of entertainment and exhibitionary culture in the nineteenth century discussion of broader, historically significant themes, most pertinently British political activity.'⁵⁸ Qureshi contrasts the display of Zulus in British museums, theatres and zoos, against the conflict surrounding the Cape, slavery, and white British superiority. Importantly, she considers the display of difference as a site for the discussion and interpretation of human variation.⁵⁹ This has further been examined by Michael Sappol and Stephen P. Rice in *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Age of Empire*.⁶⁰ Through the examination of different aspects of bodily display in the 'age of empire', they contest that the freak show was a locus of discourse where people could learn about exotic cultures. Freakery exhibits facilitated public discussion of various aspects of British life. Whilst it enabled British people to educate

⁵⁸ Sadiah Qureshi, 'Meeting the Zulus: Displayed Peoples and the Shows of London 1853-1879' in Joe Kember, John Plunkett, and Jill A. Sullivan, *Popular Exhibitions, Science and Showmanship 1840-1910* (London, 2012), p. 183.

⁵⁹ Kember, Plunkett, and Sullivan, *Popular Exhibitions, Science and Showmanship 1840-1910*, p. 183.

⁶⁰ Michael Sappol and Stephen P. Rice in *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Age of Empire* (Oxford, 2010), p. 3.

themselves about the body, health, and deviance, it was additionally a place where Britain sought to exert their imperial identity and promulgate British superiority to all societal groups. Ultimately, in a multiplicity different entertainment activities, societal constructs, and concepts were presented to spectators and thus they prove a noteworthy aspect of historical research.

Although this thesis does not focus on entertainments other than freak shows, it avails the historical research already conducted on alternative forms of leisure, as the way in which people spent their leisure time reflected many broader contemporary societal interests. Placing the freak show within this expansive entertainment environment allows historians to better assess the purpose, function, and meaning of leisure in British society. Furthermore, it enables the examination of the ways in which the British public interpreted the entertainment pursuits available to them as part of their leisure time.

The Seaside Resort

There has been a substantial amount of historical research on the development of the leisure industry and the expansion of the seaside resort in Britain. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought great social and cultural changes, with alterations in the working lives of British men, and latterly women, affording more expendable income to some middle and working-class families. As Britain went from being an agricultural nation to an industrial one, the deplorable conditions in the cities meant that people longed for escape from their

everyday lives.⁶¹ Concurrently, the provision of limits on the working day and the half-day Saturday holiday in the latter half of the nineteenth century, meant that British people were in greater pursuit of leisure activities. As cities became sites of rapid industrialisation, many people fled to seaside resorts for rest, relaxation, and pleasure. Interestingly, Allan Brodie points out that, 'Seaside resorts, along with industrial cities and spa towns, were the fastest growing towns during the nineteenth century' portraying the burgeoning consumer market for seaside holidays.⁶²

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, seaside locations were places of refuge for upper class people who sought to improve their health by visiting coastal locations known for the healing qualities of seawater and fresh air. However, by the twentieth century, this pleasure seeking extended to the working classes, thereby changing both the atmosphere and the types of entertainment available. The growth of railways from approximately 1840s, to resorts such as Blackpool, Margate, Scarborough, Southend, and Brighton made it significantly easier for members of the working class in neighbouring industrial towns to go to the seaside in pursuit of fun. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Britain experienced some societal change which included (but was certainly not limited to) the decline in church attendance, the rise of scientific thought, paid holidays, limits on the working week, and a growing entertainment culture. This had

⁶¹ Delgado, *Victorian Entertainment*, p. 82

⁶² Allan Brodie (ed.) *Travel and Tourism in Britain, 1700-1914 Volume 3: Seaside Holidays* (London, 2014), p. 7.

a profound effect on the leisure industry as people increasingly sought out new entertainment opportunities on a Sunday. Annual holidays to seaside resorts provided extra leisure time to workers, enabling them to take part in new forms of commercialised entertainment. Allan Brodie contends that seaside resorts utilised technological advances to attract holidaymakers to their shores. 'During the course of the nineteenth century there was a shift from sociable forms of leisure to entertainments using new technologies that had transformed British industry.'⁶³ The development in fairground rides and the famous seaside amusement parks indicated the effect of technological innovation, which brought with it novel and exciting ways for holidaymakers to spend their time. Visitors enjoyed music at summer resorts, including minstrels and Pierrots, as well as shows at the popular seaside theatres. Furthermore, people sought to experience aspects of British cultural life that they could not within their everyday routine due to restraints on both time and money.

James Walvin discusses the importance of understanding how people chose to spend their leisure time, as a way of illustrating contemporary trends in British society. He argues that with the expansion of Britain as an industrial nation, 'Substantial numbers of city dwellers began to turn to nearby seaside towns for escape, however brief, from the cities.'⁶⁴ The popularity of seaside resorts meant that they developed faster than any other location to cater for the accommodation

⁶³ Brodie (ed.) *Travel and Tourism in Britain, 1700-1914*, p. 2.

⁶⁴ James Walvin, *Leisure and Society, 1830-1950* (London, 1978), p. 13.

and needs of holidaymakers and day-trippers.⁶⁵ These unique areas were created for pleasure, relaxation, and rest, which produced an exclusive environment for enjoyment.⁶⁶ Walvin deliberates the continuities and changes of seaside resorts, from their progression from destinations for the upper classes to their emergence as retreats for working class consumers. Yet, as Steven Braggs and Diane Harris note, despite the popularity of seaside resorts in the twentieth century, there were clear distinctions between popular and elite coastal towns. Through analysing seaside guidebooks, they reveal,

There is a definite distinction to be seen between the guidebooks of the more popular resorts of the day and those of resorts whose councils wished them to retain a degree of exclusivity.⁶⁷

While resorts like Blackpool remained popular with members of all classes, through catering to their individual wants and requirements, places such as Brighton were more exclusive, reserving their location for members of the upper classes. Nonetheless, whether from the upper or lower social orders, visits to the seaside remained an important 'escape for a day or two from an unhealthy industrial atmosphere'.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 22.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 23.

⁶⁷ Steven Braggs and Diane Harris, *Sun, Sea and Sand: The Great British Seaside Holiday* (Gloucestershire, 2006), p. 13.

⁶⁸ Walvin, *Leisure and Society, 1830-1950*, p. 74.

John K. Walton discusses the notion of escape from everyday life and the relaxation of usual social restrictions in *The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the Twentieth Century*, and argues that the,

seaside puts the 'civilising process' temporarily in reverse (although the participants understand that they are defying conventions) and conjures up the spirit of carnival, in the sense of upturning social order and celebrating the rude, the excessive, the anarchic, the hidden and gross, in ways which generate tension and put respectability on the defence, generating culture wars in settings where the prim and Rabelaisian sides of British character come into maritime confrontation, and where the genteel, controlled, symmetrical front of the resort finds itself invaded by the disorder, untidiness and misrule of the back.⁶⁹

Walton describes the nature of the seaside resort, 'as a gateway between land and sea, culture and nature, civilized constraint and liberated hedonism.'⁷⁰ The British seaside holiday brought with it a freedom to have fun but there was a dichotomy between two opposing sides of British life. On one hand, the British public were part of a modernising society and sought to distance themselves from objectionable forms of entertainment, and on the other, they continued to enjoy the leisure pursuits which were increasingly regarded as distasteful or crude. Certain seaside resorts, such as Blackpool, Margate, and Southend-on-Sea

⁶⁹ John K. Walton, *The British Seaside Holiday: Holidays and Resorts in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester, 2000), p. 4.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

transformed from places of serenity and recreation for the upper classes, to holiday destinations for working-class families. Others, such as Eastbourne or Bournemouth, retained their exclusivity with members of the upper classes. Nevertheless, many coastal locations saw the monetary benefit of the growing consumer market and reformed for the amusement of people with more spending power and fewer responsibilities. It was within this liminal space that the unusual body continued to be an acceptable and fascinating form of entertainment at working-class holiday destinations.

Space and Environment

Although there has been some noteworthy scholarship on coastal locations in Britain, there has been less academic research specifically on the seaside as a space of entertainment. However, there has been substantial attention given to other entertainment spaces, both in Britain and America that will prove beneficial to this study. James Lilliefors, for instance, plots the cultural history of American boardwalks in a similar way to British seaside resorts. Equivalent to the spas and early seaside towns, they promoted themselves as 'health' resorts, with the promise of increased wellbeing with each summertime excursion. He argues that 'the seashore resort represented an intoxicating alternative to urban/American life.'⁷¹ The connection between America and Britain is visible when analysing the atmosphere and environment that was created there, as a space for enjoyment,

⁷¹ James Lilliefors, *America's Boardwalks: From Coney Island to California* (New Jersey, 2006), p. ix.

entertainment, and pleasure. Lilliefors notes the effect of space on holidaymakers, stating,

It granted them access to a side of themselves that yearned to retreat from adult strictures into a domain where they could be like children again, dazzled by the size of life's promises, by the scope of possibilities.⁷²

Therefore, the types of entertainment available for holidaymakers both in Britain and America reflected an environment which was created for the relaxation of holidaymakers. As sites, arguably more importantly, the seaside resorts of both the United States and Britain can be read as a barometer of contemporary social values. Lilliefors suggests that Coney Island reflected racist opinion in American society. Similarly, seaside spaces in Britain portrayed British social concerns, and therefore, seaside locations need to be assessed with knowledge of their place in British social and cultural life.⁷³

The significance of entertainment spaces also been addressed by Karen R. Jones and John Wills in *The Invention of the Park: From the Garden of Eden to Disney's Magic Kingdom*. Jones and Wills explore the purpose and nature of leisure spaces, focusing their study on a variety of parks. They examine the evolving conceptualisation of the park from a naturalistic, green space to somewhere full of gaudy, modern amusements, noting that 'The meaning of the park has altered

⁷² Ibid., p. 30.

⁷³ Lilliefors, *America's Boardwalks*, p. x.

significantly over time.⁷⁴ They understand entertainment spaces as having substantial social and cultural meaning, pointing towards social relations, democratisation, industrialisation, changing concepts of work, modernisation, transformations in tastes, nationhood, citizenship, and politics. They approach the park as a social structure, a place of social betterment, a space of rejuvenation and maintain that 'The park idea intrigues through such a varied intersection with cultural forces. In turn, the landscape represents a useful crucible for the examination of mainstream social values.'⁷⁵ This thesis will utilise this notion of an eco-cultural space in the consideration of the seaside resort as an entertainment site and one which reflected British social and cultural values, interests, and experiences. In a similar way to the development of parks from natural spaces to amusement centres, the seaside resort evolved from a place of natural health and healing to a location dedicated to entertainment. Although coastal resorts were on the margins of British society, it is clear to see the variety of ways such environments were shaped by issues central to social and cultural life: interclass relationships, the effects of industrialisation, a desire to escape from working life, and the notions of healthy and unhealthy bodies. This research examines the space of the seaside resort in relation to the continued fascination with unusual bodies. It assesses how social and cultural trends, which were prevalent at the seaside resort,

⁷⁴ Karen R. Jones and John Wills, *The Invention of the Park: From the Garden of Eden to Disney's Magic Kingdom* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 3.

⁷⁵ Jones and Wills, *The Invention of the Park*, p. 8.

shaped the construction of the bodies on display, and promoted health and wellness to the British public.

Specifically with reference to exhibitions of curiosity, Vanessa Toulmin argues that the environment changed the acceptability, audience, and nature of the freak show. She claims that from the mid-nineteenth century there were momentous changes in the leisure and entertainment industry, which in turn created a market and audience for differing entertainment venues.⁷⁶ Toulmin indicates that the reception of freakery displays was dependent on the space surrounding the act. In urban locations, the freak show no longer remained an acceptable form of entertainment but in a marginal environment created for pleasure, human interest in unusual bodies continued to be expressed. This is not to say that there was not outrage over the persistence of the freak show, nevertheless this was similar to the concern relating to the moral degeneration of the public, that began in the nineteenth century and led to the closure of Bartholomew Fair in the 1850s. It must be noted that there were many variations of the seaside resort and that regional differences affected the types of entertainment available. Whilst some resorts provided outdoor physical activities, others offered a more commercial type of fun including piers, amusement rides, and sideshows on the promenade, which contributed to its popularity with large numbers of people.

⁷⁶ Vanessa Toulmin, "Curios Things in Curios Places': Temporary Exhibition Venues in the Victorian and Edwardian Entertainment Environment', *Early Popular Visual Culture* 4:2 (2006), p. 117.

Comparably, Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell in *Cultural Locations of Disability* evaluate the cultural spaces set aside for disabled citizens. Although they do not directly discuss freak shows, through the implementation of the cultural model of disability, they question how disabled people experienced their environments and their bodies. This thesis explores the spaces that people with unusual bodies were expected to adopt, and the ways in which the freak show aided both the freak and the 'normal' individual to control, interpret, and make sense of their difference.

The seaside space is central to interpreting the types of entertainment available for holidaymakers at resorts. Walvin suggests that there were clear social distinctions between coastal locations and therefore it is evident that the differences in leisure reflected the social tone of the resort.⁷⁷ This thesis will investigate whether the social tone of the resort affected the provision of freak shows as an entertainment activity for holidaymakers. Despite the differing social constituencies of seaside towns, entertainment activities such as the freak show captured the attention of British holidaymaking audiences throughout the first half of the twentieth century, with seaside resorts of central importance in the continuation of these displays. This thesis examines the movement of freakery to coastal locations until 1950, when a twofold shift affected entertainment at the seaside. Firstly, there was a growth in holidays abroad, which affected the popularity of the seaside resort, and secondly, British leisure changed moving

⁷⁷ Walvin, *Leisure and Society, 1830-1950*, p. 70.

towards television programmes, stage shows, and film in the second half of the century.

The History of the Body, Health, and Disability

Conducive to the full examination of freak shows at British seaside resorts in the period 1900 to 1950, this thesis will not adopt one primary theoretical framework but employs a multifaceted approach to evaluate, assess, and explore the display of difference in twentieth century Britain. Through the contextualisation of bodily displays within British society, it is possible to analyse aspects of British life, including how bodies were invested with significance and meaning, the anxieties and beliefs regarding 'normality' and 'abnormality', and the ways in which they were expressed through freakery displays. Moreover, the analysis of unusual bodies within freak shows allows for an assessment of the effect of the standardisation of the body, the emphasis placed on health and fitness, as well as the effect of normative beliefs and ideologies on the British public.

Elizabeth Hallam and Brian V. Street survey the way in which 'Otherness' has been 'constituted, communicated and transformed.'⁷⁸ Through the examination of the social, cultural, and political aspects of race and gender, they critically engage with the academic discourse which exaggerates or essentialises the 'other'.⁷⁹ Through this engagement, Hallam and Street suggest that scholars are able to

⁷⁸ Elizabeth Hallam and Brian V. Street, *Cultural Encounters: Representing 'Otherness'* (London, 2000), p. 1.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

interpret the cultural codes, conventions, and practices of any given society, including the social and political concepts that continue their existence.⁸⁰ They note,

'Otherness' both within and between social groups is constructed through subtle manipulations of signs and images and case studies of how this happened in different times and places can help us recognize and interpret the unmarked cases through which racism and stereotyping of difference operate in contemporary society.⁸¹

This thesis exploits the concept that, through the use of visual and material sources, historians can interpret the social and cultural codes advanced through freakery exhibitions. The use of images, *carte de visites*, and posters, in addition to newspaper reports and biographical writings, permits an understanding of the central notions of marginalisation, deviance, difference, and abnormality. Furthermore, through the investigation of the ways in which 'otherness' was depicted and envisioned, historians can interpret how spectators sought to understand human variation in relation to the freak. Rosemarie Garland Thomson in *Extraordinary Bodies* seeks to understand the connection between meaning and representation in relation to those with unusual bodies. Garland Thomson

expand[s] our understanding of the cultural construction of bodies and identity by reframing "disability" as another culture-bound, physically

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 5.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 9.

justified difference to consider along with race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality.⁸²

Through the deconstruction of that which society identified as 'normal' and 'abnormal', Garland Thomson suggests that it shows the physically disabled body as a source of social anxieties and issues surrounding vulnerability, control, and identity. She regards the unusual body as a product of cultural rules surrounding what bodies *should* do.

In the research of the display of unusual bodies for entertainment, it is essential that historians understand the social construction of the normal, typical, or healthy body. There are a number of methodological approaches which are useful when applied to the discussion of the freak show. Mary Kosut and Lisa Jean Moore perceived the body as the 'medium or raw material through which we navigate the world, but it is also an entity that is invested with meanings.'⁸³ They argue that 'Bodies are endlessly mediated by our cultural commentary.'⁸⁴ Furthermore, 'The definitions of ordinariness and extraordinariness are thus dialectical and the terms are co-constitutive.'⁸⁵ Therefore, all bodies should be

⁸² Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York, 1997), p. 5.

⁸³ Mary Kosut and Lisa Jean Moore, 'Introduction: Not Just the Reflexive Reflex: Flesh and Bone in the Social Sciences' in Lisa Jean Moore, and Mary Kosut (eds.), *The Body Reader: Essential Social and Cultural Readings* (London, 2010), p. 1.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸⁵ Mary Kosut and Lisa Jean Moore, 'Extraordinary Bodies' in Lisa Jean Moore, and Mary Kosut (eds.), *The Body Reader: Essential Social and Cultural Readings* (London, 2010), p. 283.

viewed as symbolic and analysed in terms of the discourses that shaped the cultural discussion surrounding them.

Subsequently, unusual bodies must be understood in terms of the contemporary conceptualisation of the 'normal' or healthy body. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska in *Managing the Body: Beauty, Health and Fitness in Britain, 1880-1939* discusses the effect of the Boer War on Britain, as it revealed the unfitness of the British men who served in the military service and resulted in greater state involvement in the promotion of health to the public. The fitness of the British race was an intrinsic part of her imperial strength, and with the prevalence of Darwin's theories of evolution, the ideal body was not only of individual importance but was considered part of national duty.⁸⁶ The body became representative of the nation as a whole and maintained its function in the negotiation of what it meant to be a British man or woman. Zweiniger-Bargielowska states that,

the body became a central locus in conceptions of citizenship from the turn of the century. The fit male body of the worker and soldier was emblematic of national vigour and women's fitness as race mothers was equally important for Britain to maintain its position as an imperial nation.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Managing the Body: Beauty, Health and Fitness in Britain, 1880-1939* (Oxford, 2010), p. 2; 3.

⁸⁷ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Managing the Body*, p. 13.

She explores the new interest in the body and its role in the construction of identity. She suggests that the emergence of body management offered methods through which people could 'forge new identities'.⁸⁸

Body management is defined here as the practice of a regiment to cultivate beauty, health and fitness, by a means of dietary reform, gymnastics, sports and athletic exercise, exposure of the skin to sun and air, personal cleanliness and dress reform.⁸⁹

This meant that by the late 1920s, there was a greater emphasis on beauty and fitness, which provided new norms for members of all classes. Later, there were a number of schemes that were dedicated to improving the health of the British public, including the National Fitness Campaign of the 1930s and the development of keep-fit clubs for women.⁹⁰ The 1938 Holidays with Pay Act further served the improvement of British health, as workers could take time away from their working schedule in order to rest and relax.

As part of normative, healthy fitness, it is beneficial to examine the concepts of beauty in relation to the freak show. Typically, those with 'beautiful' bodies were perceived to have an upstanding, moral character. Analysing the 'attractive' and the 'ugly' of society, reveals the standards of beauty in Britain, as well as the perception of those deemed 'different'. David M. Turner reveals,

⁸⁸ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Managing the Body*, p. 11.

⁸⁹ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Managing the Body*, p. 1.

⁹⁰ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Managing the Body*, p. 12; 14.

In spite of these difficulties, the study of ideals of physical beauty and their influence on society is worth pursuing since it may tell us much about past understanding of body image and the ways in which corporeal ideals are used to inscribe gender and other social differences.⁹¹

Therefore, through the analysis of standards of beauty, historians can better comprehend concepts surrounding the average body, the importance of beauty, health, and fitness to maintaining one's place in British society. Laura Gowing describes the body as a narrative which spectators could read and which were enriched with social meanings.⁹² Fundamentally, the body was considered a source of knowledge, pointing toward the social and moral standing of a person. Having an abnormal body signified a deviant person. Therefore, the social discourse surrounding the beautiful body exposes the expectations of beauty in society and how bodies were interpreted within it. Particularly, it highlights what was considered 'average' or 'normal' and how those with different physiques should change or control their bodies.

The body was important in British society and it was to be managed in terms of health and fitness. The seaside resort in Britain provided a space where these concepts were prevalent; health, fitness, and beauty were promoted as ideal. This thesis uses these themes to analyse freak show exhibits such as fat boys, 'starving

⁹¹ David M. Turner, 'The Body Beautiful' in Carole Reeves (eds.) *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2010), p. 113.

⁹² Laura Gowing, 'Marked Bodies and Social Meanings' in Carole Reeves (eds.) *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2010), p. 136.

brides', midget troupes, and 'half-men, half-women, revealing how they were socially constructed with notions of health and body management. For example, it argues that the controversy surrounding starvation as a form of entertainment was intertwined with the performers promotion of deviance from the cultural standards of normal, healthy fitness. Nonetheless, despite the controversy around starving bodies as entertainment in the 1930s, British people continued to enjoy staring at deviance well into the twentieth century.

Methodology

Cultural historians researching the history of medicine and disability utilise a variety of methods to understand the importance of freak shows. Rosemarie Garland Thomson in *Staring: How We Look* asserts that staring creates a complex interrelationship between the 'starer' and the 'staree'. She outlines that staring has traditionally been considered negatively and that from an early age children are taught of the impoliteness of staring at sights which are considered different, abnormal, or strange. 'Even though we like to stare, everybody knows we are not supposed to do it. Mothers scold gawking children. Etiquette manuals caution against untoward eyeing.'⁹³ However, she states that '... intense visual engagement creates a circuit of communication and meaning-making. Staring bespeaks involvement and being stared at demands a response.'⁹⁴ As Garland Thomson describes it, staring is charged with significance and this facilitates our

⁹³ Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford, 2009), p. 5.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

comprehension of the society surrounding the staring exchange. She deliberates, 'Staring offers an occasion to rethink the status quo. Who we are can shift into focus by staring at who we think we are not.'⁹⁵ The British freak show enabled the public to look at, discuss, and assess unsightly and unusual bodies, as well as providing the opportunity for the spectators to consider themselves, their bodies, and their place within wider British society. Importantly, broader cultural ideologies had implications upon the way these discussions and considerations were deliberated. This is evident in a number of sources, such as advertisements and posters, which utilised different aspects of British life in the promotion of freakery performances. This enables historians to gauge the tensions, anxieties, and ideas which were prominent in British social discourse around 'abnormality', difference, and health.

The construction of unusual bodies for entertainment, through advertisements and posters, facilitated the socio-cultural meaning that people garnered from the display. Both Peter Burke and Ludmilla Jordanova consider images as an important form of historical evidence.⁹⁶ Jordanova argues that it is beneficial to academic research to approach the past with an awareness of visual and material culture as this formed how people engaged with the world around them.⁹⁷ What people stared at, particularly in terms of the freak show, consolidates

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁹⁶ Peter Burke *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (New York, 2008), p. 14.

⁹⁷ Ludmilla Jordanova, *The Look of the Past: Visual and Material Evidence in Historical Practice* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 1.

our knowledge of what was contemplated as 'normal' or 'abnormal', and what this meant to the British public. The use of visual culture, in the form of photographs, posters, *carte de visites*, and freak show memorabilia aids historical understanding of the construction of the unusual body for the amusement of the British public. Despite their usefulness, images must be understood as representational, often presenting distortions of reality. Burke suggests that those who created the images were interpreters of their own society.⁹⁸ Predominantly, they act as evidence of mentalities, ideologies, and identities, which is particularly useful in the study of freakery. The photographs of freak show performers were often highly significant in ways in which spectators could understand. However, to expose their significance, they must be analysed in detail, so that researchers can fully comprehend how twentieth century British audiences perceived them. Whilst there are benefits and pitfalls of using images in historical research, when used in conjunction with textual accounts, written biographical works, and contemporary public opinion, they present historians with a well-rounded historical narrative and the opportunity for interesting interpretation of historical events.⁹⁹ Images are particularly useful in the history of the body (and the unusual body) as it is possible to track the changing notions of health and beauty, therefore facilitating the exploration of alternative representations of bodily norms.¹⁰⁰ Rachel Adams contends,

⁹⁸ Burke *Eyewitnessing*, p. 14-16.

⁹⁹ Burke *Eyewitnessing*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

images attest to the fact that freakishness is a historically variable quality, derived less from particular physical attributes than the spectacle of the extraordinary body swathed in theatrical props, promoted by advertising and performative fanfare.¹⁰¹

Nonetheless, the freak show was more than just the exploitation of difference for amusement and profit, it disseminated notions of 'normality', 'abnormality', health, wellness, and fitness to the British population. The role of visual sources in the promotion of freakery displays, as both encouraging pleasure and conveying information, provides a source of information for the analysis of the influence of the display, as well as informing historians on the prevalent trends, anxieties, and beliefs of the contemporary British public.

The visual culture of the period also provides insight into the methods which showmen employed to advertise their acts and achieve substantial levels of interest. Ludmilla Jordanova proposes that 'On one hand, advertisements draw upon what is generally recognizable and understood by those who will see them – they rely on prevailing assumptions and knowledge.'¹⁰² Consequently, freak show advertisements should be viewed as embedded within contemporary culture to understand the ways in which spectators observed and discussed bodily abnormality. It is necessary to consider the audience that promotional material attempted to attract, as this was reflected in a variety of freakery advertisements

¹⁰¹ Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freak and the American Cultural Imagination* (London, 2001), p. 5.

¹⁰² Jordanova, *The Look of the Past*, p. 174.

and ultimately fashioned public discourse surrounding the unusual bodies on display. Ronald E. Ostman debates the importance of photography and artistic representations in persuading people of all social groups to go to sideshows.¹⁰³ The nineteenth century provided innovation such as the development of daguerreotype photography which gave people an example of what they might experience at the freak show. Potential spectators, either sceptical or interested, were then intrigued to know how hirsute the hairy lady was or whether the hybrid human/animal camel girl was real or fiction.¹⁰⁴ Visual sources can be decoded in a number of ways, focusing on the shape of the body, or its fashioning for the British public to interpret. Ruth Barnes and Joanne B. Eichers in *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning* describe dress as a 'cultural phenomenon'.¹⁰⁵ Of course, clothing had a practical function, yet the way that a person chose to dress was affected by the culture and society in which they were raised. Furthermore, how people dressed portrayed their social, economic, and moral standing. Barnes and Eichers postulate,

A cultural identity is thus expressed, and visual communication is established before verbal interaction even transmits whether such a verbal exchange is possible or desirable.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Ronald E. Ostman, 'Photography and Persuasion: Farm Security Administration Photographs of Circus and Carnival Sideshows' in Rosemarie Garland Thomson (ed.) *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York, 1996), p. 121.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ruth Barnes and Joanne B. Eicher, *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning* (Oxford, 1992), p. 1.

¹⁰⁶ Barnes and Eicher, *Dress and Gender*, p. 1.

Within this thesis, the construction of cultural identity through clothing in images and memorabilia is read as a significant aspect of the creation of the freak show. Through the deconstruction of freak show photographs, specifically *carte de visites* we can better understand how deviance was conceptualised, understood, and perceived by spectators. The clothing in which freaks were exhibited encouraged audiences to form their own perceptions of the person on display and aided the construction of the identity of that person. Therefore, not only did those with unusual bodies promote ideas surrounding health and fitness, but they also represented notions of masculinity, femininity, and class. Typically, the freak show achieved this in two ways. Firstly, freaks were often dressed in clothes which increased their social standing, juxtaposing their deformity with those from the upper classes, and making the display even more entertaining. Secondly, often in the case of female freaks such as fat ladies or midgets, they were dressed in revealing clothes, accentuating their physical, social, and moral deviance.

Photographic evidence will prove vitally important to this thesis, as the creation of exhibitions, *carte de visites*, and posters suggested the ways in which freaks were to be observed, discussed, and deciphered. In some instances, photographs were not used for freak show advertisements as they revealed too much of the display itself. It was only unusual bodies that lay beyond the imagination of the viewing British public who were photographed for promotional reasons.¹⁰⁷ This research engages

¹⁰⁷Ostman, 'Photography and Persuasion' in Garland Thomson (ed.) *Freakery*, p. 122.

with the promotional material of the freak show, to understand the construction of freakery and its portrayal to the viewing British public.

Archives and Collections: Problems and Issues

This thesis utilises several archives to locate the written and visual culture of freak shows, including the Bristol Theatre Collection, the Blackpool Local Family and History Centre, and the Wellcome Library. While these archives have provided numerous different visual sources, from photographs of the spaces that freaks were displayed to the freaks themselves, at times the sporadic nature of the holdings placed limitations on the research. Larger national archival collections such as the John Johnson Collection at the Bodleian Library and the Evanion Collection at the British Library did not possess any material relating to seaside freak shows. However, local archives proved more useful, despite having a significant amount of uncatalogued material. Furthermore, some freak shows were only recorded one or two times providing limited information on those acts. However, through piecing together visual sources with reports in local and national newspapers, it was possible to understand how those with unusual bodies were constructed and perceived as forms of entertainment and education. Similarly, the National Fairground Archive at the University of Sheffield was helpful in providing some contextual information about fairgrounds, circuses, and freak shows in the nineteenth century but they only had limited information on seaside freaks in the twentieth century. Holdings in the Mass Observation Archive were helpful in conceiving the purpose of holidays amongst the working classes, how they

perceived the entertainment available to them, and the ways in which showmen constructed the displays. Additionally, the thesis uses contemporary health publications to comprehend how freaks could be situated within the health discourse and medicalisation of disability in the period.

The first half of the twentieth century brought numerous changes to British social and cultural life. The rapid growth of industrial cities and urban areas in the previous century not only meant that workers had more money but the implementation of paid holidays allowed them the time to participate in a variety of leisure pursuits. The British seaside resort, which had been the preserve of the upper and middle classes of the nineteenth century, now became a place of refuge for the worker who wanted to escape the monotony of everyday life in the twentieth century. The environment created at the seaside resort, meanwhile, allowed the British public to enjoy themselves, and cast off usual societal restraints. Holidaymakers enjoyed the leisure pursuits available at the beach including ever-popular donkey rides, Pierrot displays, and sea-bathing. The freak show, which had been such a prominent form of Victorian entertainment, relocated from metropolitan areas to seaside resorts such as Blackpool, Margate, and Southend-on-Sea and continued to play a pivotal role in communicating ideas surrounding the body, deviance, and 'Britishness'. Significantly, this transplanting of the freak show from cities to seaside resorts permitted a continued interest in unusual bodies, such as midgets, fat ladies, and 'starving brides' and also added new forms of oddity that

reflected the specific environmental dynamics of the coastal resort as well as changes in British culture and society in the first half of the twentieth century.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter One explores the locations in which freaks were exhibited for the public's entertainment; it demonstrates that the seaside space remained one of the primary amusement sites in which freak shows remained. The seaside spaces of the twentieth century were unique and complex locations with various factors affecting their growth, development, and atmosphere. Not only did the environment provide the physical space for entertainment available to holidaymakers; it reflected the significance of those experiences for the public. Seaside spaces were constructed through three main components: their geographical location, their individuality, and the meanings holidaymakers attached to such places. This thesis argues that the unique seaside space, situated on the physical and metaphorical peripheries of British life enabled the continuation of freak shows until the 1950s. It suggests that seaside freakery performances were constructed with concepts related specifically to the seaside environment, as well as wider social and cultural debates in contemporary British society. Although some of the displays remained similar to those that were popular with audiences in the Victorian period, others transformed as part of the culture that they were displayed in. Viewing freaks at the seaside enabled the public to renegotiate their identity, both as British citizens and as holidaymakers, through comparing themselves to those on display. It provided them with the time and space to ponder their health, wellness, and Britishness.

Finally, the balance of the nostalgia and novelty associated with seaside resorts stabilised the anxiety and tension surrounding the rapid modernisation of Britain. Through their escape to the seaside environment, the public were able to relax away from the pressures of modernity. Furthermore, the freak show relieved the tension associated with working life and provided spectators with a throwback to entertainment that was reminiscent to a pre-industrialisation Britain. These facets of twentieth century seaside resorts worked together to shape the conceptualisation of freaks in seaside locations.

One of the most popular forms of amusements at British seaside resorts were the midgets who performed in highly specialised midget villages. Chapter Two focuses its analysis on displays of midget troupes in the period 1900 to 1950. Midgets were one of the most popular acts in the twentieth century and entertained audiences throughout Britain; they were not solely displayed in seaside resorts but often performed in pantomimes in towns and cities.¹⁰⁸ Housed in specialist midget villages that were scaled for the use of 'little people', displays of midgets enabled the public on holiday in British seaside resorts to renegotiate their perceptions of disability by experiencing an environment created for other individuals. The troupes, within their highly-specialised environment, revealed to holidaymakers that difference was a societally constructed concept. Through the analysis of images, film clips, and newspapers, this chapter also argues that midget

¹⁰⁸ The popularity of using midgets and dwarfs as a form of entertainment increased in the 1930s when *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was released by Disney in 1937.

villages were represented as an idealised example of British society, and thus, reflected numerous entrenched notions surrounding marriage, domesticity, and recreation.

Midget weddings were some of the most popular and spectacular forms of entertainment throughout the summer season. Crowds of excited onlookers gathered to see the bride and groom enter and leave the church alongside their entourage of freak bridesmaids and groomsmen. The ceremonial traditions evident in midget weddings were akin to the weddings of averagely-sized individuals that members of the audience would typically have attended. The celebration of midget weddings reflected the promotion of marriage in the wake of its decline; it endorsed matrimony to the younger, single population and it encouraged married people to consider the sanctity of their own wedding vows. The widespread use of birth control and the rising rates of illegitimate births in the 1920s signified greater liberation and sexual freedom amidst the British public as the twentieth century progressed.

The focus on midget weddings subsequently encouraged holidaymakers to consider domesticity and the troupes conveyed the benefits associated with a stable family unit, such as happiness and healthiness. When midget troupes were depicted taking part in wholesome seaside activities, such as swimming and sunbathing, they promoted ideas of wellness and recreation that dominated holiday locations. Midget troupes, as miniature versions of average-sized British people, conveyed intricate attitudes towards national identity, marriage, sexual

experiences, and healthiness in their displays, permitting audiences to consider themselves in relation to those with unusual bodies, who both performed and were present in seaside spaces.

Other freaks that were novel to seaside resorts, also presented social and cultural ideals to their audiences. Chapter Three demonstrates that the 'Starving Brides' were an innovative form of entertainment that raised curiosity at seaside resorts in the 1930s. Starvation exhibitions were a prominent and intriguing part of the seaside freak show in the first half of the twentieth century. Walking along the promenade holidaymakers were confronted with starving brides and starving vicars, as part of the itinerant freak show which travelled between seaside resorts. In the seaside space, dedicated to health and wellness, the starving brides garnered the interest of the public, particularly amidst contemporary issues such as the 1930s 'Hungry England' debate and the rise of dieting in the middle classes. The performers directly contradicted the health advice of the time which advocated a nutritious and wholesome diet complemented by regular exercise such as swimming or walking. Starvation exhibits warned working-class spectators of the consequences of not maintaining a healthy physique, through the physical representations of deterioration that were displayed outside the exhibition. However, as the starvers were putting their lives in danger for their craft, they increased anxieties from local corporations who were concerned about the reputation of seaside locations. Nevertheless, it was evident that fasting people performed in coastal locations and that the holidaying public enjoyed viewing their

bodies for entertainment. As fasting men and women continued to exhibit themselves regularly at seaside resorts, there was sustained debate in local newspapers. Yet starving brides remained popular until 1950, when coastal locations became a less prominent part of British cultural life.

Chapter Four moves on to analyse exhibitions of bodily difference on the other end of the scale. Through 'enfreaking' the fat body, medical professionals brought together contemporary medical discourse and popular culture, and employed it to educate the public on the reasons why they should lose weight. Obesity was condemned because of the physical risks associated with being overweight. However, there were numerous social sanctions that faced those who were too fat, including not being able to find clothes that fit. This chapter examines displays of fat people in relation to the burgeoning obesity rates in the middle classes. Utilising ephemera associated with Lenny Mason, 'The Leicester Fat Boy', Miss Rosie, the 36-stone fat lady, and the Westwood Family, it argues that people conceptualised what they were in relation to what they were not. They were, therefore, able to categorize themselves as 'normal' or 'abnormal' by staring at a person on display. As the twentieth century progressed there was a greater awareness of the effect of excess weight on personal health and wellbeing.

Specifically, this chapter suggests that displays of fat people in freak shows at seaside resorts were understood in relation to the contemporary health discourse surrounding the rising obesity rates in the middle classes. In comparison with the exhibitions of starvation performers, Miss Rosie and Lenny Mason were

the epitome of what the British public should guard against. Fat people gave audiences a tangible example of what was considered physically unhealthy, within the seaside environment which was one that was associated with healthiness. However, they had social significance as well; the display of fat freaks encouraged the understanding of fat people as 'abnormal', reflecting and reaffirming the promotion of physical and social 'normality'. For instance, a fat woman exposed her inability to control her sexual appetite, whilst a fat man showed himself to be effeminate and emasculated. Through learning about body management, in publications provided by the *Women's League of Health and Beauty* and *The New Health Society*, and by partaking in healthy activities by the coast, men and women were encouraged to cultivate a 'normal' body, for the health and strength of the British nation.

Between 1900 and 1950, traditional gender roles were challenged by the effect of the First and Second World Wars, initiating a gender crisis throughout Britain.¹⁰⁹ For example, as women transitioned out of the home and into the public sphere many were described as 'mannish'; men, suffering from the strain of war, were branded as 'effeminate'.¹¹⁰ Fundamentally, there was concern about the effect of the indistinctness between genders. This transcended the medical profession, as doctors thought that women could spontaneously become men, if

¹⁰⁹ See Lesley A. Hall, *Sex, Gender, and Social Change in Britain since 1880* (Basingstoke, 2000).

¹¹⁰ 'Mannish Women' *Leeds Mercury*, Tuesday 27 April 1920, p. 6.

they took part in masculine pursuits.¹¹¹ Chapter 5 engages with these debates through an analysis of displays of 'half-men, half-women', including the display of Colonel Barker, a transgender man who performed at seaside resorts. It must be understood in relation to the concern regarding the blurred boundary between men and women, and an increasing concern about the prominence of homosexuality in the twentieth century, both of which were evident in the legal case against Colonel Barker. The exhibitions and the court cases reflect the changing conceptualization of gender and sexuality in the period. Furthermore, they gave the public an opportunity to discuss issues such as gender and sexuality, as the legal professional attempted to clarify the law surrounding sexual deviance.

Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates that freak shows migrated from metropolitan areas to seaside resorts, and subsequently, continued into the twentieth century. It argues that they reflected the social and cultural context in which they were displayed. Through bringing together the histories of medicine, disability, freakery, entertainment, and leisure it comprehends how conceptions of bodily health, wellness, and normality were evident within displays of freakery. Moreover, it seeks to understand the continued public fascination with human variation or difference, and how, through viewing abnormality as part of the freak show, audiences reassured themselves of their own normality.

¹¹¹ Lisa Carstens, 'Unbecoming Women: Sex reversal in the Scientific Discourse on Female Deviance in Britain, 1880-1920' *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20:1 (2011), p. 76.
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Chapter 1

Making Space for Freakery:

The Construction of the Seaside as an Entertainment Space, 1900-1950

Introduction

Seaside resorts have always been recreational spaces; from their establishment as healthy environments for Britain's elite, until their transition to centres of entertainment for the working classes, resorts were locations on the physical and metaphorical margins, where the public relaxed from the pressures of modern life. Prior to the expansion of holiday resorts in the latter half of the nineteenth century courtesy of the implementation of Bank Holidays in 1871, seaside towns were typically the preserve of the upper classes who holidayed by the coast to 'take in' the sea air and bathe in the salt water for the benefit of their health.¹¹² With the move towards factory working environments and a growing consumer culture, the middle and working classes followed the lead of the upper

¹¹² There were numerous different bodies campaigning for holidays with pay in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For example, the Trades Union Congress started to campaign for paid holidays for workers in 1911. A committee of inquiry report, which occurred in 1938, recommended the gradual introduction of a statutory right to holidays in July 1938. The Holidays with Pay Act gave workers, whose minimum wage was governed by trade boards, the right to one week of paid holiday per year. The Trades Union Congress was disappointed by this decision, declaring it to be limited. Rather, they advocated 2 weeks' holiday per year for workers. Nevertheless, holidays with pay increased the number of people visiting seaside resorts for their summertime excursion.

classes and hurried to the coast to experience the entertainments available to them at seaside resorts.

Tom Harrison, founder of the Mass Observation project, commented on the importance and significance of the developing working class holiday in the first half of the twentieth century.

As well as the weekly trajectory of spending centred around the weekend, there is an annual cycle of importance. Most Worktown families save up every week for one week's summer holiday, when the whole town stops work simultaneously and takes its "wakes," mainly at Blackpool. Planning for this week begins months ahead, and thinking about next year's holiday may begin immediately after the last one is over. Every kind of saving device and stimulus is brought into operation, and families will suffer actual privation so that they may be sure to put aside enough money for a real splash at Blackpool. There, for the week, they will spend anything up to £50. They will eat and drink as they have never eaten and drunk for a year, will go to first-class theatres and variety shows, the circus, the zoo, the aquarium, the Pleasure Beach, on every kind of racer, roundabout and Ghost Train, to the museum, the sexual abnormalities and the waxworks, onto the piers and into the band concerts, in boats and to fortune-sellers, and to all other things quite lacking in the smoky, uniform, industrial context of Worktown. All the way they pay. At Blackpool there are not afraid to behave conspicuously for once in the year; they wear weird paper hats with slogans

on then: “Kiss Me, Charlie” or “Come Up and See Me Sometime.” Drunks staggering along the pavement are quite in order, and anybody may introduce themselves to anybody else and become friends in a few minutes – it takes months to make a friend in Worktown. Again, at Blackpool, it is difficult to assess the “normal” income level of anybody. People at the D level will save up and spend their holiday at an expensive hotel. The whole point of Blackpool is that it gives you liberation from normal restraints and levels, the opportunity to be luxurious and extravagant in surrounding which are almost Oriental in their architecture. We came to the conclusion from our Worktown studies, that the week’s holiday at Blackpool was the biggest “stabilizer” in Worktown life. It kept people satisfied and happy, either in memory or in anticipation, throughout all sorts of economic difficulties and depressions and distress... These class cycles (if I am right in calling them that) can be found in many other aspects of British life. Their significance is (I think) that each of them provides a kind of rationalization of class difference, compensation for economic inferiority and a temporary satisfaction of economic ambition. Whenever they have the “opportunity” many D Worktowners go and act like C and B, many C Worktowners go and act like B and A.¹¹³

¹¹³ Tom Harrisson, ‘Notes on Class Consciousness and Class Un-Consciousness’ *The Sociological Review: Journal of the Institute of Sociology* 34:3-4 (1942), pp. 156-157.
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Allan Brodie notes, ‘...a holiday was no longer restricted simply to the richest members of society, but could be enjoyed by working people frolicking in the sea.’¹¹⁴ However,

As working-class visitors joined their social superiors at the seaside in ever-increasing numbers they posed problems and offered opportunities in the resorts. The existing “better-class” visiting public often reacted angrily to the proximity of the more boisterous of the excursionists, but in some places the new visitors came to constitute a market of sufficient size and apparent elasticity to encourage entrepreneurs to cater specifically for them. Indeed, where working-class demand was heaviest some resorts saw their economies transformed in the late nineteenth century, as the “better-class” visitor began to retreat to quieter and more select holiday and residential haunts.¹¹⁵

Subsequently, resorts developed their own social tone and market, based on numerous factors, including their geographical location and the types of visitors the towns attracted.¹¹⁶ The position of a resort influenced the variety of people who holidayed there with resorts accessible from nearby towns and cities attracting local workers, whilst those further afield were popular with the upper classes who

¹¹⁴ Allan Brodie, ‘The Brown Family Adventure – Seaside Holidays in Kent in the mid-Nineteenth Century’ *Journal of Tourism History* 5:1 (2011), p. 1.

¹¹⁵ John Walton, ‘The Demand for Working-Class Seaside Holidays in Victorian England’ *Economic History* 34:2 (1981), p. 250.

¹¹⁶ Harold Perkin, ‘The Social Tone of Victorian Seaside Resorts in the North West’ *Northern History* 11 (1975).

travelled there by car. Holidaymakers influenced the development and construction of the town through their individual preferences, as resorts concentrated on attracting as many holidaymakers as possible, providing them with the entertainment and amusement they desired. For example, Margate and Southend-on-Sea were easily accessible from London and appealed to workers who wanted escape from the challenges of modern life and, therefore, enjoyed the thrills of the contemporary amusement park, which influenced the growth of Dreamland and the Kursall, both popular seaside amusement venues.¹¹⁷

However, seaside resorts were also subject to the will and governance of local authorities. Harold Perkin demonstrates that Scarborough and Skegness were equidistant from large industrial towns, but that they had inherently different social tones due to their history, and the effect of local politics, which determined the progression and improvement of each location. Perkin suggests that social elites helped to regulate the tone of the resort, due to their financial control and vested interest in the success of the summer season.¹¹⁸ Thus, the people who financially invested in the development of seaside resorts had precedent over the type of holidaymakers it attracted, as they decided on the types of entertainment that were permissible there. Seaside resorts were thus influenced by a conglomeration of the competing ideals of business owners, local authorities, and holidaymakers themselves.

¹¹⁷ For example, holidays enabled the working classes who laboured in factories to escape the regimentation of factory laws.

¹¹⁸ Perkin, 'The Social Tone of Victorian Seaside Resorts in the North West', (1975).

Seaside resorts developed into two distinct categories: upmarket locations that were visited by the upper and middle classes, and pleasure resorts that were most popular with the working classes. The nature of some seaside towns including Blackpool, Margate, and Southend-on-Sea, changed as they expanded; they transformed from exclusive upper-class health locations into large and bustling mass entertainment centres, that marked their reinvention as leisure spaces. Moreover, as more of the population started to holiday by the coast, a distinctively working-class holiday emerged, which was characterised by cheap entertainments, amusements, stalls, and sideshows at large pleasure resorts from 1890.¹¹⁹ These holidays were extraordinarily popular and newspapers frequently commented on the large crowds of holidaymakers who visited the coast on their summer excursions.¹²⁰

Coastal holidays became so popular with working-class families in the first half of the twentieth century that by the outbreak of World War Two the *Association of Health and Pleasure Resorts* described the government's war-time evacuation scheme as a 'triumphant perfection of inconvenience.'¹²¹ This demonstrated that, by 1939, seaside holidays had an established place in Britain's social, cultural, and economic environment, to the extent that the onset of war - at least in the minds of local chambers of commerce - was not going to disrupt public

¹¹⁹ John Walton, 'The Demand for Working-Class Seaside Holidays in Victorian England', pp. 251-252.

¹²⁰ *Lancashire Evening Post*, Tuesday 29 March 1910 p. 2; *Leeds Mercury*, Monday 05 August 1912, p. 10; *The Scotsman*, Monday 10 June 1935, p. 16.

¹²¹ 'Billeting Criticism: Health Resorts and Perfect Inconvenience', *Gloucestershire Echo*, Wednesday 25 January 1939.

holidaying traditions. Not only did such resorts remain central to the local leisure economy but they had become essential elements in the typical summer calendar: 'Holidays had become a marker of citizenship, a right to pleasure.'¹²²

This chapter assesses the development of seaside locations from health resorts that were the preserve of the wealthy, to places in which people from all social backgrounds spent their summer holidays. There are a plethora of histories detailing the development of seaside resorts and holidays in Britain, including the reasons for the expansion of coastal locations, why people spent their holidays at the seaside, and the variety of entertainments available for their amusement.¹²³ As highlighted in the previous literature review, attention has been given to the seaside as a space in which summertime excursions occurred, how this space was designed, and how the space itself encouraged people to behave in a certain way.

Most significantly, seaside holidays had become an integral feature of leisure and entertainment and, therefore, became 'salient representations of British culture.'¹²⁴ Holidays transformed workers into consumers, enabled men to relax from the stresses of employment, encouraged families to spend time together, and facilitated good-spirited fun. 'The tourist experience is thus marked as distinct in both spatio-temporal terms and also in the kinds of behaviour both

¹²² John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London, 1990), p. 27.

¹²³ See James Walvin, *Leisure and Society, 1830-1950* (London, 1978); John Walton, *The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester, 2000); John K. Walton, *The English Seaside Resort: A Social History 1750-1914* (Leicester, 1983).

¹²⁴ David Jarratt and Sean Gammon, 'We had the most wonderful times': seaside nostalgia at a British resort' *Tourism Recreation Research* 41:2 (2016), p. 123.

expected and indulged in. Time is not spent in productive activity but in the conspicuous consumption of leisure.¹²⁵ To fully appreciate the seaside environment, this chapter assesses both the physical and metaphorical construction of the coastal space. It examines how this affected the identity of holidaymakers, the experiences which tourists had on their summer holidays, and the how the public's behaviour changed from the city to the seaside. Steve Allen argues,

In respect of the seaside, we witness a change from the medicalised beach of the eighteenth century, where 'dipping' was seen as a cure, to the pleasure beach of the nineteenth century. The shift included not only ascribing a different function for the sea, but also a concomitant change in relationship as public space, characterised by greater social mixing and ... as a carnivalesque display of the undisciplined body.¹²⁶

It was within this transforming public space that displays of unusual bodies continued to be a popular form of entertainment. 'The marginal status of the location influences the display of a set of permissive attitudes and behaviours. Frivolity, sexual licentiousness and general indulgence at the seaside (at times tarnished by explosions of violence) have become familiar imagery...'¹²⁷ Specifically, this chapter utilises aspects of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the 'carnavalesque' and

¹²⁵ Kevin Meethan, 'Place, Image and Power: Brighton as a Resort' in Tom Selwyn (ed.), *The Tourist Image: Myths and Myth Making in Tourism* (Chichester, 1996) p. 179.

¹²⁶ Steve Allen 'British Cinema at the Seaside – the Limits of Liminality' *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 5:1 (2009), p. 53.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

John Urry's conceptualisation of the 'tourist gaze' to explain why staring at freaks was a popular and expected pastime within the seaside environment whilst in towns and cities, freak shows were becoming a less accepted form of amusement.¹²⁸ As Perkin and Walvin have illuminated, seaside resorts were irrevocably shaped by their geographies and became distinctive places given over to leisure. As such, the resorts were idiosyncratic environments which developed with unprecedented popularity, as cities became increasingly industrialised, and there was greater need for supplementary recreational spaces for tourists to enjoy their newly acquired leisure time. Arriving in these spatially demarcated landscapes, the public were removed from their everyday, work-focused environment and routine, and were presented with an unusually pleasure-centred space that transformed their roles and behaviour.

John Walton suggests that holidays permitted the public to relax from the strict social guidelines that governed them, and, therefore, there were different behavioural codes within seaside locations. He argues that the corporeal and symbolic construction of seaside resorts simultaneously promoted and encouraged escape from industrial life; he maintains that the space enabled people to defy traditional social conventions, meaning that they took part in activities not akin to their everyday lives.¹²⁹ Through analysing the seaside resort as a *space*, historians can thereby understand the continuities and changes between the physical and

¹²⁸ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, 2009); See Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (London, 1990).

¹²⁹ John K. Walton, *The British Seaside*, p. 4.

metaphorical boundaries of the city and the seaside, to understand why people observed different social conventions in alternative spaces.

In city spaces, the public were expected to live in accordance with traditional behaviour codes, including adhering to their daily schedule which revolved around working life, domestic duties, and participating in appropriate forms of leisure such as exercise, music, and community groups. Fundamentally, people were expected to exude the virtues of hard work, personal responsibility, and good character. However, within the seaside environment, holidaymakers were removed from their strict schedule and instead spent their day enjoying a variety of pastimes, including swimming, sunbathing, and the thrills of modern pleasure parks. Through analysing the cultural boundaries of both the city and the seaside, there is an opportunity to understand why, 'The English seemed united, almost obsessed in the summer-time rush to the sea; they travelled to the coast like lemmings, and behaved oddly out of character on arrival.'¹³⁰

The physical and metaphorical construction of recreational environments simultaneously facilitated and fashioned the experience of those holidaying within them. Sean Gammon and Sam Elkington posit that, 'The contemporary leisure landscape is a complex and diverse one that is both natural and built, dark and light, safe and dangerous, contained or without boundary and profoundly influences the

¹³⁰ James Walvin, *Leisure and Society, 1830-1950* (London, 1978), p. 82.

manner in which leisure is performed and experienced.’¹³¹ The seaside surroundings had a remarkable effect on holidaymakers’ experience of leisure, pleasure, and fun.

Ultimately, this chapter assesses the extent to which seaside environments were constructed as places on the margins of British life - liminal spaces in which the public could indulge in behaviours less appropriate in nearby cities and metropolitan locations. It argues that the space was central to the behavioural changes that occurred in holidaymakers between their homes and holiday destinations. Additionally, it suggests that the types of entertainments available to excursionists reflected the idiosyncrasies of the seaside environment, and indicates that the uniqueness of the seaside space permitted the continuation of staring at freaks for entertainment. Finally, it contends that the change in place and space influenced the overall seaside experience, making seaside holidays the most popular form of tourism throughout Britain in the twentieth century.

While there are numerous ways to understand the social and cultural construction of space, this chapter utilises newspaper reports, posters, and questionnaires from the Mass Observation Archives, to understand how seaside resorts developed from 1900 to 1950. It understands the interrelationship between geographical location, the infrastructure or physicality of seaside resorts, and the

¹³¹ Sam Elkington and Sean Gammon, ‘Reading Landscapes: Articulating a Non-Essentialist Representation of Space, Place and Identity in Leisure’ in Sam Elkington and Sean Gammon (eds.) *Landscape of Leisure: Space, Place, and Leisure* (London, 2015), p. 2.

way in which holidaymakers used and conceptualised the space throughout this period. It analyses the complex construction of space through assessing variables which affected the development of resorts and seeks to understand how this fashioned the social tone of individual coastal towns, in turn creating the leisure environment of Margate, Blackpool, and Southend-on-Sea. Therefore, it closely examines the reasons why some seaside resorts possessed a 'carnavalesque' spirit, whilst others maintained a demure atmosphere.

Although, in 'carnavalesque' resorts, staring at those with anomalous bodies was an accepted part of holidaying culture, more sedate resorts did not promote this type of entertainment, instead endorsing more upmarket forms of leisure such as promenading by the shore.¹³² Local authorities created seaside spaces in ways which reflected the partialities of the dominant holidaymaking group in that particular area. Therefore, seaside resorts often developed with divergent customs and traditions, based on their specific geographical location and preferences of individual holidaymakers. These components facilitated the construction of seaside resorts, including the meanings attached to seaside holidays and how public behaviour transformed on their arrival to the coast.

¹³² For example, seaside towns such as Brighton were promoted as healthy locations for the upper classes and stayed away from branding themselves as large entertainment and pleasure centres.

The Development of Seaside Resorts in the Twentieth century

The transformation of seaside resorts was influenced by a complex network of geographical, economic, and social developments. Both prior to and throughout the twentieth century, cities were economic sites, focused on modernisation, industrialisation, and employment. With this progress, there was an inherent need for greater provision of leisure spaces.¹³³ Inland spa towns, such as Bath, Harrogate, and Leamington were popular in the eighteenth century and provided the upper classes with somewhere to focus on health and recreation.¹³⁴ However, as the nineteenth century progressed, seaside resorts became popular with Britain's social elite. Scarborough was Britain's first coastal spa town, which was transformed into a seaside resort. It exemplified the interrelationship between spas and seaside resorts as spaces of health and recreation.¹³⁵

Seaside resorts, geographically separate from large, industrial cities equally provided for the recreational requirements of the newly leisured working classes.¹³⁶ All resorts catered for British people's entertainment, yet they developed distinctive and individual identities which provided different activities for the visitors they attracted. Furthermore, resorts were used and meanings were

¹³⁴ Harrogate is an English Spa that was founded in 1596. Doctors wrote about the health benefits of the spa water as early as 1660. However, the Royal Baths did not open until 1897 when it offered spa treatments to the public. In 1914, there was a decline in the number of spa treatments available to the public. Leamington was originally a very small village but the discovery of saline springs attracted visitors for the healing qualities of the water. By 1860, the spa had Leamington had closed.

¹³⁵ See Walton, *The English Seaside Resort* (Leicester, 1983).

¹³⁶ The development of railways encouraged working-class people to go to the seaside as there was better and cheaper transportation.

constructed individually by holidaymakers. Walton suggests that resorts meant different things to different people and changed over time.

As the seaside holiday habit percolated downwards through the increasingly complex social strata of the first industrial nation... its changing manifestations came to influence the development of individual resorts in varying and often divergent ways, as the holiday expectations of a widening range of social and cultural groupings sought expression and satisfaction in styles which were not always mutually compatible.¹³⁷

Entertainment environments such as seaside resorts often reflected a multitude of meanings which mirrored the social discourse surrounding the appropriate use of leisure time, distinctions between the popular leisure pursuits of differing classes, and individual entertainment preferences. For instance, Sandra Dawson tracks the development of holiday camps in Britain in the 1930s and places their growing popularity in the context of contemporary political, sociological, and gender debates. Utilising a range of archival sources, including government documents, memoirs, and newspaper articles she reveals how they became part of the archetypal 'British' holiday. She argues further that the development of working-class package holidays was a response to the government's decision to introduce Holidays with Pay in July 1938, which introduced a statutory right to holidays.¹³⁸ The Holidays with Pay Act gave workers the right to one week's paid

¹³⁷ Walton, *The English Seaside Resort*, p. 5.

¹³⁸ See Sandra Trudgen Dawson, *Holiday Camps in Twentieth century Britain: Packaging Pleasure* (Manchester, 2011).

holiday a year and, therefore, a variety of holidays became more popular with the British public. Seaside resorts undeniably shared some of these traits (and in fact, sported holiday camps) but at the same time, developed differently from other entertainment models. Traditionally spaces of health at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, by the beginning of the twentieth century they became synonymous with concepts such as entertainment, freedom, nostalgia, and novelty. By understanding the traditions and expectations of British tourists surrounding seaside holidays, including where they enjoyed visiting and their preferred amusement activities, we can gain an understanding of the complex creation of seaside resorts. Importantly, this revealed the varied constructions of the seaside space and how holidaymakers fashioned the seaside environment themselves. John Walton argues,

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the capacious diversity of the British seaside had room for visitors of all social classes and strata, although working-class access to resorts varied in different parts of the country according to family incomes and holiday traditions. The poorest... were lucky to manage the occasional day-trip under charitable auspices although they might have fun at the coast in brief respites from seasonal jobs as waiters, hotel or boarding-house servants, laundrymaids or even itinerant entertainers.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Walton, *The British Seaside*, p. 51.

Therefore, it was evident that holidays were different for the upper classes and the working classes. However, although the British seaside holiday was diverse, each social group developed their own traditions. Upper-class visitors to the coast tended to travel to quieter resorts, whereas working-class holidaymakers went to ones with more activity. The *Beveridge Holiday Questionnaire*, collated by Mass Observation in 1947, demonstrates how seaside holidays changed over the first half of the twentieth century. The questionnaire encouraged people to discuss their holiday traditions, aspirations, habits, and financial capabilities.¹⁴⁰ Seaside holidays were popular amongst participants, with one observer noting, 'I like the seaside best. I like the air and the excitement. Like Brighton and places like that. You can have a good time. It's a change – you can get away from everything. Nothing to worry about.'¹⁴¹ The concept of freedom from everyday life appeared in a number of reports, with one reply suggesting, 'I like freedom from restraint on holiday, I like to go, do and wear what I like and a small place is better for that sort of holiday.'¹⁴² Men and women had different ideals of what they preferred as part of their ideal

¹⁴⁰ The Mass Observation Archive was created to gather documents about everyday life in Britain; According to Mass Observation Online, 'For the duration of the war most people 'dug in' and stayed where they were, beyond an annual trip to family and friends nearby. Even after the war, for most of the Mass Observation diarists a few days at the seaside in Brighton or Grange-over-Sands was the height of luxury. By the 1950s, national security and more settled household finances meant that a lucky few could be more adventurous: taking more than one trip a year, travelling further, and staying in hotels rather than with friends. Foreign holidays were still the realm of the wealthy, and the few diarists who travelled beyond Britain's borders provide a fascinating insight into continental travel during the 1950s and 60s.' <<http://resources.amdigital.co.uk/chain.kent.ac.uk/mo/map/>> [Accessed 23/05/17, 12.25pm]; James Hinton, *The Mass Observers: A History, 1937-1949* (Oxford, 2013), p. 3.

¹⁴¹ Mass Observation Archive, Topic Collection 58, Holidays 1937-1951.

¹⁴² Ibid.

summer holiday. For example, men took the opportunity to escape from the mundanity of working life. However, one female contributor revealed that their concept of a satisfying holiday was 'When you can get away, relax without fastidious social or domestic worries.'¹⁴³ They continued, '... away from everything, not to have to do anything for myself, to be able to get right away from dishes and shopping. I like to go somewhere quiet. I like to be served hand and foot and not to have to think or worry about anything. That's my idea of a holiday.'¹⁴⁴ It was clear that many British people – workers, housewives, and families – enjoyed the sense of freedom and escape associated with a holiday by the sea. Yet, they enjoyed divergent holidaying practices, and thus, had different ideas of what a holiday encompassed.

Nonetheless, the reports conveyed that holidaymakers had individual notions of freedom and escape, which were evident through the discussion of the different types of holiday that they enjoyed going on. While some enjoyed healthy pursuits, many also enjoyed the exciting entertainments available to them. Ultimately, their idea of an ideal holiday informed the types of resorts they holidayed in. Although some opted for 'a place with good air, pleasant country and bathing and sailing facilities. Preferably a small, quiet sort of place', others instead needed somewhere with 'plenty to do', 'sport' and 'entertainment'.¹⁴⁵ One observer, who enjoyed the bustle of seaside resorts, noted that they preferred,

¹⁴³ Mass Observation Archive, Topic Collection 58, Holidays 1937-1951.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

‘Somewhere like Southport or Blackpool, up North anyway. I like it up there, there’s plenty of life and nice country around as well.’¹⁴⁶ Ultimately, observations from participants in the *Beveridge Questionnaire* demonstrated numerous things about British holidays. Firstly, they portrayed the individual nature of seaside holidays. They exposed that what people enjoyed doing on their summer holiday was variable. It was evident that seaside resorts were distinct; they had fluctuating degrees of the traditional seaside properties of freedom, health, entertainment, leisure, nostalgia, and novelty. They operated together and created the unique seaside environment which attracted the British public year after year. Resorts were constructed in such a way that attracted their target clientele; resorts such as Blackpool targeted working-class holidaymakers and therefore, there were many cheap entertainments such as freak shows and fairground games. A poster which advertised ‘Magical Margate’ as a working-class seaside resort presented the amusements at the front as ‘cheap’ and within easy distance of London for those who needed to commute to the coast.¹⁴⁷

A similar poster that advertised Southend-on-Sea revealed that alongside the ‘maximum sunshine’ and ‘bracing air’, there were ‘abundant amusements’ to entertain holidaymakers.¹⁴⁸ Whereas, resorts such as Bournemouth and Eastbourne

¹⁴⁶ Mass Observation Archive, Topic Collection 58, Holidays 1937-1951.

¹⁴⁷ Figure 1.1 ‘Magical Margate’ c. 1900.

<http://www.advertisingarchives.co.uk/index.php?service=search&action=do_quick_search&language=en&q=margate> [Accessed 20/08/17, 14.40pm.]

¹⁴⁸ Figure 1.2 ‘Southend-on-Sea’ c. 1910.

<http://www.advertisingarchives.co.uk/index.php?service=search&action=do_quick_search&language=en&q=southend> [Accessed 20/08/17, 14.42pm.]

focused their attention on garnering a middle or upper-class clientele by presenting their locations as health and leisure spaces. A home film, created by a holidaymaker called Mr. Carter, documented a typical middle-class holiday to Scarborough. It showed the family preparing to leave early in the morning and driving to the coast; it noted that it was 'The Start of a Perfect Day'.¹⁴⁹ It showed the family enjoying the walled gardens, swimming in the sea, and consuming afternoon tea.

¹⁴⁹ 'Reminiscence of our 1932 Summer Holiday at Scarborough'
<http://player.bfi.org.uk/film/watch-reminiscences-of-our-1932-summer-holiday-at-scarborough-1932/> [Accessed 22/06/17 13.07pm]; not all middle-class families would have travelled by car to the seaside, many would have also travelled on the train, which marked the beginning of the summer holiday excursion.

Figure 1.1 'Magical Margate' c. 1900.



**MAGICAL
MARGATE**

**FINEST SANDS
IN
ENGLAND**

FREQUENT FAST TRAINS

CHEAP DAY TRIPS - WEEK END BOOKINGS
LONG PERIOD EXCURSIONS (8-15 DAYS)
MONTHLY TICKETS

Season Tickets at Specially Reduced Rates

For full particulars of Cheap Trains, Fares etc. see **SPECIAL EXCURSION PROGRAMME** obtainable at any of the S.E.&C.R.² C² Booking Offices or by post on application to the Superintendent of the Line - S.E.&C.R.² London Bridge S² SE.

ILLUSTRATED GUIDE. Send stamp to Chamber of Commerce Information Bureau.

Figure 1.2 'Southend-on-Sea' c. 1910.



Therefore, it was evident that what constituted an ideal summer holiday was different for various social groups.

More broadly, the seaside space was a locus of discourse through which wider public debate about appropriate forms of leisure was negotiated. Brad Beavan argues that leisure was regarded as both a problem and an opportunity; there was discussion surrounding the proper use of leisure and how it could educate and encourage the working classes to be beneficial members of society.¹⁵⁰ People were expected to engage with 'elevated leisure', wholesome activities on their summer holiday excursions, which promoted the improvement of British citizenship.¹⁵¹ There was a distinct difference between those who utilised their leisure time effectively and so-called 'pleasure seekers', who sought amusement and fun at seaside resorts. As Beavan discusses, contemporary philanthropists considered 'pleasure seeking' to be predominant within the working classes, who had little concern for citizenship or politics.¹⁵² In particular, mass leisure pursuits available at working-class seaside resorts, seemed attractive to pleasure seekers, such as the amusements and stalls at large pleasure parks. Beavan argues, 'With few moral restraints, leisure entrepreneurs capitalised on traits within working-class culture and recast them into appealing commercial ventures.'¹⁵³ Seaside

¹⁵⁰ Brad Beavan, *Leisure, Citizenship and Working-Class Men in Britain, 1850-1945* (Manchester, 2005), p. 1.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁵³ Beavan, *Leisure, Citizenship and Working-Class Men in Britain, 1850-1945*, p. 44.

resort impresarios capitalised on the amusement-seeking tendencies of the working classes, building pleasure spaces which catered for these entertainment needs. However, the growth of pleasure-seeking within the emerging leisure culture concerned social reformers, and manifested itself in public discourse surrounding the social development of individual seaside resorts. This is evident in the Blackpool Improvement Act of 1935, which was an act to clear the promenade of disreputable amusements and behaviours; it attempted to reinvent the town for an upper-class clientele. For social reformers, fears surrounding hedonistic delights, signified the degeneration of civic responsibility and good citizenship. Some local seaside authorities were keen to promote their resorts to a respectable, upper-class clientele, rather than rambunctious working-class crowds who brought chaos and disorder to the coast.

The concept of respectability transcended through the entertainment provided for holidaymakers, which also indicated the targeted clientele of Britain's seaside locations. The belief in 'rational recreation' dominated the Victorian period and continued into the twentieth century. It stimulated the belief that *leisure* was meant for the improvement of the self, whether through intellectual engagement, or cultivating physical fitness through exercise and games. Conversely, *pleasure* focused on enjoyment and play, rather than individual or national efficiency. Leisure and pleasure were inextricably linked to class division; leisure being central to the upper classes, and the working classes were considered to be the dominant

'pleasure seekers'.¹⁵⁴ Coastal locations utilised the concepts of leisure and pleasure to promote themselves to their respective clientele. Therefore, whilst some were recognised as 'Britain's foremost pleasure resort', others endorsed the healthful qualities of the water and air. In other words, some seaside resorts preferred to be noted for their leisure activities, dedicated to improving the body and mind. They focused on healthy exercise pursuits, such as swimming or fitness clubs, and promoted holidays for the whole family. However, pleasure-centred resorts often promoted the amusements, entertainments, and rollercoasters which became principal in holidaymaker's conceptualisation of seaside holidays as the twentieth century progressed. For example, advertisement posters for Blackpool often featured the rides such as at Pleasure Beach, for Southend-on-Sea, they included the Kursaal, and at Margate, they promoted Dreamland. Correspondingly with the respectability attached to certain seaside fashions, the entertainments provided in specific locations were pervaded with notions of propriety (or lack of propriety) within British holidays, and therefore, aided the construction of seaside resorts in different geographical locations. Additionally, the entertainment provided coincided with the wider debates about the purpose of leisure in British society in the 1930s.

There was considerable discussion on how to encourage responsible moral behaviour, and seaside resorts represented broader social discourse surrounding the appropriate use of leisure time. In accordance with the theory of philosopher

¹⁵⁴ Beavan, *Leisure, Citizenship and Working-Class Men in Britain, 1850-1945*, p. 1.

and sociologist, Henri Lefebvre which understood the production of space in relation to the 'the perceived-conceived-lived triad', seaside spaces were palimpsest locations where experience and representation were central to their construction and understanding in the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁵⁵ This contributed to their inclusion in wider societal discourse surrounding leisure and pleasure in British society. More recently, Alexander Geppert argues that exhibition spaces in the nineteenth century were multidimensional, and that they embodied numerous and divergent meanings to the contemporary public.¹⁵⁶ John Walton posits,

the Victorian and Edwardian seaside resort was important not only as a repository for investment, consumer spending and social emulation, but also as a crucible of conflict between classes and lifestyles, as wealthy and status-conscious visitors and residents competed with plebeian locals and roistering excursionists for access to and enjoyment of amenities. The seaside brought mutually incompatible modes of recreation and enjoyment into close proximity in ways which seldom happened inland, and gave an added edge to the perennial Victorian debate about the proper relationship between leisure, class, religion, and morality.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, 1995) p. 40; Lefebvre assesses the meaning of space and considers how relations across territories were given 'cultural meaning'. He attempted to establish the importance of 'lived' grassroots experiences and understandings of geographical space as fundamentally social.

¹⁵⁶ Alexander C. T. Geppert, *Fleeting Cities: Imperial Expositions in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (Basingstoke, 2013), pp. 1-6.

¹⁵⁷ Walton, *The English Seaside Resort*, p. 3.

It must be noted that although some traditionally working-class resorts attempted to reform themselves into more upmarket locations, previous traditions often dominated. John Walton argues that it was difficult for municipal councils to transform seaside resorts,

Even when the affluent residential or less-affluent retired or white-collar sectors of resort economies came to the fore in some areas by the later nineteenth century, their development was strongly influenced by the pre-existing reputations of resorts as holiday centres.¹⁵⁸

For example, Blackpool was close to an industrial area of Lancashire and attracted a multitude of working-class people. Nonetheless, local councillors attempted to refashion the resort for a more respectable clientele. Yet, Blackpool continued to attract crowds of workers, to which authorities responded with a programme of systematic social zoning.¹⁵⁹ The North shore was tolled and reserved for the upper classes, whilst the South shore became the mecca of working class tourists.¹⁶⁰ A similar structure was in place at Margate, where the South shore was dominated by the elite and the North Shore (home to Dreamland) accommodated the working classes. There were economic benefits to catering for both the upper and working classes. The upper classes brought with them patronage and

¹⁵⁸ Walton, *The British Seaside*, p. 4-5

¹⁵⁹ Such practices were common to other entertainment spaces designed to install positive cultural values. For instance, public parks separated different kinds of activity such as walking or swimming.

¹⁶⁰ The south shore was home to the Golden Mile and is where the freak shows were most likely located.

respectability, which created a positive perception of the coastal resort more widely. However, working-class crowds willing to spend their annual savings on cheap entertainment, generated substantial financial benefits to coastal economies.

Through assessing the geographical development of seaside towns, it is clear that their progression into large leisure and entertainment spaces was complex and there were a number of factors which influenced their growth into resorts, such as location, transportation links, the divide of landownership, and the distribution of wealth.¹⁶¹ The social tone, an important part of seaside development, also cultivated variation between resorts. Furthermore, it facilitated the construction of complex eco-cultural seaside spaces as they fashioned and refashioned themselves as places for different social groups. Importantly, it was the working-class, pleasure-centred resorts, such as Margate, Blackpool, and Southend-on-Sea, that were more likely to have freak shows as part of the 'carnavalesque' entertainment and amusement culture.

From City to Seaside: A Physical Transition

As tourists travelled between the city and the seaside, they experienced a physical transition. They left an urban working life in search of a seaside vacation. On a metaphorical level, the public actively recast their identity and behaviour as they found themselves in locations with differing societal norms. The physical

¹⁶¹ Perkin, 'The Social Tone of Victorian Seaside Resorts in the North West' (1975).

features of seaside locations symbolised this transition. Judy Hemmingway argues that the ‘...tropes of space and place are of analytic importance in understanding the enactment of life.’¹⁶² Furthermore, ‘...the seaside is not neutral but a site of contest and conflict where social relations, moralities and cultures are made and remade.’¹⁶³ David Churchill notes,

Cultural historians of space have emphasized the geographical basis of identity formation, the social connotations of particular districts and the subjective significance of the town. Such issues were especially prominent in small seaside towns undergoing rapid expansion. By the 1870s, thousands of day-trippers dispersed each year to ‘resort’, yet they arrived in place which other called ‘home’. This spatial contradiction provides rich opportunities for the study of social interaction, urban affiliation and the regulation of public space.¹⁶⁴

Additionally, Tom Selwyn argues, ‘Provided we bear in mind that neither centres nor peripheries are immutably fixed in a geographical or historical sense, it seems clear that tourism is one of the engines which manufacture and structure relationships between centres and peripheries.’¹⁶⁵ Nowhere was this clearer than in the geographical transition that holidaymakers experienced as they moved from

¹⁶² Judy Hemmingway, ‘Sexual Learning and the Seaside: Relocating the ‘Dirty Weekend’ and Teenage Girls Sexuality’ *Sex Education* 6:4 (2006), p. 429

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 430.

¹⁶⁴ David Churchill, ‘Living in a Leisure Town: Residential Reaction to the Growth of Popular Tourism in Southend, 1870-1890’ *Urban History* 41:1 (2014), p. 43.

¹⁶⁵ Tom Selwyn (ed.), *The Tourist Image: Myths and Myth Making in Tourism* (Chichester, 1996), p. 9.

metropolitan spaces to peripheral locations. The relationship between centres and peripheries was intrinsic to the behavioural change in those who holidayed in ‘carnavalesque’ resorts and the continued acceptability of staring at those with unusual bodies. Stephen Walker argues, ‘What is socially peripheral is often symbolically central, and if we ignore or minimize inversion and other forms of cultural negation, we often fail to understand the dynamics of symbolic processes generally.’¹⁶⁶ The socially marginal seaside space became a central symbolic site for considering British culture and tradition.

As part of the physical transition, the architecture of the city and the seaside mirrored the divergent functions of the respective spaces. For example, industrial metropolises were spaces of work, modernisation, and economics, and therefore they were dominated by an architectural order of imposing buildings and factories, which reflected Britain’s industrial strength. Fred Grey discusses the physicality of seaside locations, revealing that, ‘Some crucial characteristics of seaside architecture – its eclecticism, the uniqueness of the design challenge, the lack of a coherent architectural symbolism, the frequent emphasis on the showy façade’ created an overall environment of leisure, pleasure, and fun.¹⁶⁷ Thus, the infrastructure of seaside resorts was fundamental in constructing the seaside space; the aesthetics and design of the seaside contributed to its meaning and allure for British holidaymakers. It reflected both the social class of the visitors and the

¹⁶⁶ Stephen Walker, ‘Illusory Object and Fairground Architecture’ *The Journal of Architecture*, 20:2 (2015), pp. 329-330.

¹⁶⁷ Fred Gray, *Designing the Seaside: Architecture, Society and Nature* (London, 2006), p. 45.

entertainment that took place there. The architectural differences were part of a wider environmental variance which dichotomised the unhealthy conditions of the industrial city and the restorative virtues of the coastal resort. Most significantly, advertisements encouraged holidaymakers to make the most of their time outdoors.

As the twentieth century progressed, meanwhile, some resorts became known for their innovative entertainments (such as Ferris wheels and rollercoasters), which provided physical and psychological freedom and restoration from the monotony of the working environment. It, thereby, created a holiday atmosphere, and enabled the spirit of freedom and escape that many holidaymakers longed for.

For Josephine Kane, seaside architecture, not only relates to the physical transition of the holidaymaker, but also serves as a signifier of individuality. As such, she views the architecture

As an artificial confection designed to entice people seeking leisure and pleasure (and usually intended to generate income and a profit), architecture became the glue of individual resorts and a defining characteristic distinguishing one seaside place from another...Seaside architecture has helped create, structure and define holidays by the sea and the consumption and very meaning of the seaside.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ Fred Gray, *Designing the Seaside: Architecture, Society and Nature* (London, 2006), p. 7.
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Buildings, amusement parks, and other seaside landmarks thus created the character of specific seaside locations, for example Blackpool's Tower, Brighton's Pavilion, or Margate's Dreamland. Each was architecturally distinctive to their respective resorts and influenced their conceptualisation in the minds of contemporary holidaymakers. These iconic architectural symbols helped attract people to each resort, marking them sites of entertainment and leisure consumption through emblematic structures of play. The otherworldly characteristics of the rollercoasters, rides, and Ferris Wheels, at venues such as Pleasure Beach and the Kursall, indicated the concepts of escapism, fun, and freedom associated with the seaside towns. As Stephen Walker asserts, 'The architecture of the fairground clearly sets out to provide that eye-catching, fascinating sparkle.'¹⁶⁹ He states

The fairground has long been overlooked as a site of architectural interest.

This has slowly begun to change in the last fifty years, when a few architects have been drawn to various aspects of the fair – its history, its visual or technical appeal, its accommodation of multiple programmes, or its nomadic, temporal, event-based nature – as a source of inspiration, and championing it as an example of 'other' architecture that can provide a refreshing alternative to traditional architectural production.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ Walker, 'Illusory Object and Fairground Architecture', p. 309.

¹⁷⁰ Walker, 'Illusory Object and Fairground Architecture', p. 309.

Although escapism constituted a central tenet of the popularity of seaside holidays, rollercoasters and coastal landmarks such as Blackpool Tower or the pier at Southend-on-Sea replicated elements of industrialisation. Through their design and use of innovative technological advances they portrayed the advancement of the British nation. For example, Darren Webb highlights the importance of Blackpool Tower as an emblem of modernity.

The Tower buildings were a major architectural innovation, combining several functions in a single structure – an immense, enclosed red-brick box that hid the outside world completely from view. Once inside, everything became an event. The corridors and staircases were covered in opulent low-relief panels that infused the act of walking with such a sense of fantastic otherness that bottlenecks were frequently encountered as visitors stood motionless in awe. Those who managed to walk were then presented with the aquarium, menagerie and botanical gardens, a succession of glimpses into the exoticism of other extant realities. Descending then into the base of the buildings, the visitor entered the Tower Circus, not only the largest and most extravagant in the world but also a space which offered an insight into the possibilities of the future.¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ Darren Webb, 'Bakhtin at the Seaside: Utopia, Modernity and the Carnavalesque' *Theory, Culture & Society*, 22:3 (2005), pp. 132-133.

Blackpool Tower exemplified how seaside architecture was imbued with meaning, and represented a multiplicity of societal tropes to holidaymakers. Webb contends that,

The Tower was the greatest achievement of Victorian seaside architecture, 'the architecture of pleasure, novelty, excitement and stimulation'. It was also a defining symbol of the late-Victorian leisure industry. As such, the pleasure, novelty, and excitement it offered could be cited as evidence of the way in which the "carnavalesque" practices were transformed and subsumed within disciplined, ameliorative form of social control now referred to as 'mass culture'.¹⁷²

He argues, 'Accompanying the transformation of the town's pleasure economy came a transformation in the key motifs of Blackpool's constructed place-image. Whereas previously the emphasis had been placed on health, hubbub and dance, the motifs of modernity and progress now came to the fore.'¹⁷³

In short, the developments and discourse of the 1890s made it clear that Blackpool was a space of pleasure for the working class created in large part by the working class. It is true, therefore, that something profound happened in Blackpool during the 1890s. This was not the suppression of the carnivalesque, however, nor was it the ideological incorporation of the masses. Rather, the 1890s witnessed Blackpool's transformation from a

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 135.

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 128.

homely town with a bracing sea breeze into a space of hope; a space symbolizing hope in the collective creative potential of the working class. Blackpool Tower was the ultimate product and the ultimate symbol of hope.¹⁷⁴

Within other locations, such as Brighton, buildings and landmarks were associated with themes of escapism; oriental buildings were situated on piers and symbolised colonial allegiance within the British empire.¹⁷⁵ However, as the first half of the twentieth century progressed, John Walton argues that, ‘...in Britain if not elsewhere, the combination of austerity and desire for novelty in the years after the Second World War created a conducive environment for new kinds of foreign recreational travel.’¹⁷⁶ Working-class people did not have the financial capacity to travel abroad. However, they experienced exotic sites at their traditional leisure resorts like Brighton. Ornate palaces by the sea demonstrated that holidaymakers did not have to travel abroad to experience varied cultural practices. Such buildings presented tourists with the opportunity to experience new worlds on Britain’s margins and it helped the holidaying public to escape from their normal lives.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ Webb, ‘Bakhtin at the Seaside: Utopia, Modernity and the Carnavalesque’, p. 128.

¹⁷⁵ For example, Brighton’s Royal Pavilion, situated in the centre of Brighton, was built as a seaside pleasure place for King George IV. It boasts an Indo-Islamic exterior, and the interior was influenced by both Chinese and Indian fashion. The Royal Pavilion is a prime example of exoticism by the sea, by which many holidaymakers were fascinated.

¹⁷⁶ John K. Walton, ‘The Origins of the Modern Package Tour? British Motor-Coach Tours in Europe, 1930-70’ *Journal of Transport History* 32:3 (2011), p. 146. Before the rising popularity of the coach tour, people experienced novel sights through viewing exotic buildings and environments at seaside resorts in the early twentieth century.

¹⁷⁷ Fred Gray, *Designing the Seaside: Architecture, Society and Nature* (London, 2006), p. 45.

Western seaside resorts have always sought to provide out-of-the-ordinary experiences and, particularly from the early nineteenth century, architecture was used to intimate other exotic and pleasurable places and times. Visiting the seaside came to mean not only journeying to the edge of land – in itself a unique experience – but transport users to alternative worlds.¹⁷⁸

Travel to the coast disrupted the structure of everyday life, as traditional norms were undermined by exotic architecture and altered behavioural expectations. Accordingly, these spaces encouraged people to leave behind the societal constraints which restricted them at home. As such, there was a reciprocal relationship between the constructed environment and the lived experience of holidaymakers as – for the summer season at least - the public removed themselves from the monotony and industrial discipline of everyday life and indulged in the spirit of the carnival.

The ‘Carnavalesque’ Spirit of Seaside Resorts

Predominantly, the seaside acted as an escape for people from the banality of the everyday. The architecture of seaside locations reflected this notion, and helped to create a space in which people experienced freedom and excitement. Judy Hemmingway notes that ‘...coastal resorts are enmeshed with the seaside’s cultural symbolism, and this new material-mental dialect or relationship between

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 91.

'real-and-imagined' places is mobilized to explore how the cultural habitus or disposition of a place influences the ... activities and learning that takes place there and how these in turn influence place-images.¹⁷⁹

This process was evident within the coastal amusement parks such as Pleasure Beach, Dreamland, and the Kursall. Kane suggests,

Order and coherence belonged to the realms of the everyday, which the amusement parks sought to banish. The otherworldly landscape was designed to transport visitors away from the blandness of working life, to suspend normative social etiquettes and to encourage visitors to become spendthrifts for the day.¹⁸⁰

The physical change experienced by holidaymakers corresponded with a behavioural transformation. With the transition from the working and domestic environment, holidaymakers came to the seaside and duly transformed from workers to holidaymakers to embrace a 'carnavalesque' spirit. Darren Webb notes that 'The combination of huge working-class crowds and the spatial concentration of forms of popular recreation displaced from inland saw the beach and promenade become sites of carnival praxis.'¹⁸¹ This shift was enabled firstly because of the physical change from the domestic environment to the seaside space, which empowered ordinary British people to change their identity. Secondly, through

¹⁷⁹ Hemmingway, 'Sexual Learning and the Seaside: Relocating the 'Dirty Weekend' and Teenage Girls Sexuality', p. 430.

¹⁸⁰ Josephine Kane, *The Architecture of Pleasure: British Amusement Parks 1900-1939* (Surrey, 2013), p. 231.

¹⁸¹ Webb, 'Bakhtin at the Seaside: Utopia, Modernity and the Carnavalesque', p. 124.

participating in seaside activities in a highly-constructed environment, and spending money on items associated with the seaside, people performed what it meant to be holidaymakers and also consumed it. Additionally, men and women altered the way they dressed to suit the seaside environment. Thus, within the boundaries of seaside locations, ordinary people consciously took on the mantle of 'holidaymaker' – a telling transformation which altered the way they consumed the coastal landscape.

The Beveridge Holiday Questionnaire revealed one of the most prominent factors of an enjoyable summer holiday was the freedom from work, domestic duties, and the opportunity to escape from ordinary life. This concept of the seaside as a space of freedom is usefully embellished by Bakhtin's theory of the 'carnavalesque', a mode signified by subversion and liberation from the typical and ordinary.¹⁸² As various scholars have shown, 'Carnavalesque' spaces were characterized by freedom, equality, and abundance; they were places in which most behaviours and events were permissible. Moreover, as Webb points out, 'the utility of the concept of carnival lies in its capacity to illuminate potentially transgressive elements within popular social and cultural practices'¹⁸³ Thus, where scholars such as Walton discuss the process whereby a crowd is temporarily freed from work, and becomes involved in the business of pleasure, the 'carnavalesque' spirit presides. However, as recent reassessments of the use of 'carnavalesque'

¹⁸² See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, 2009).

¹⁸³ See Darren Webb, 'Bakhtin at the Seaside: Utopia, Modernity and the Carnavalesque' *Theory, Culture & Society* 22:3 (2005).

theory in the discussion of seaside resorts focus on the overuse of the term.¹⁸⁴

Darren Webb contends that 'the concept has been over-utilized. Confronted with a crowd temporarily freed from work and engaged in the pursuit of pleasure, it seems that many writers cannot resist the temptation to turn to Bakhtin.'¹⁸⁵ Webb further critiques the use of Bahktin's theory in the analysis of seaside locations in the nineteenth century stating,

It is true that a popular entertainments industry had begun to develop in Blackpool as early as the 1860s. Beach entertainments, open-air dancing, firework extravaganzas and freak shows all made for a crowded, noisy, boisterous cacophony. What needs to be emphasized, however, is that this hubbub lacked any utopian character, depth or meaning because its forms of laughter were grounded firmly in distorted, divided human relations.¹⁸⁶

Nevertheless, despite recent criticisms of the application of the carnivalesque to the examination of seaside resorts, *aspects* of Bahktin's theory are pertinent to the behavioural changes that occurred as holidaymakers toured the coast in the first half of the twentieth century due to the loud and boisterous nature of the holidaying crowd. Firstly, the norms of everyday life were upturned within the seaside environment. Workers were transformed into holidaymakers, and women were no longer immersed in domestic duties. Rather than the pressures of work, people were governed by enjoyment, recreation, and pleasure.

¹⁸⁴ See Webb, 'Bakhtin at the Seaside: Utopia, Modernity and the Carnavalesque'.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

Arguably, the 'carnavalesque' environment made the seaside more exciting for workers, who typically adhered to the monotony of ordinary life. The seaside presented workers with the opportunity to relieve the tension and stress that they experienced in their archetypal industrial surroundings.

The crowd itself is subject to several academic studies. George Rude argues that, '...crowds behaved differently in different situations...'¹⁸⁷ He points out that historians may face problems when attempting to 'establish the causes, motives, and mental and social attitudes underlying the crowd's activities... the historian needs to tread warily, to look out for constant pitfalls, to avoid snap judgements, and to be more tentative in his conclusions... Yet the historian must use what evidence he can lay his hands on; and documents such as these, with all their imperfections, enable him, at least, to fill in a part of his picture and to answer some, if not all, of the question with which he started.'¹⁸⁸ However, there are assertions that are significant when assessing the actions and behaviours of crowds. For example, 'Taking the word "morality" to mean constant respect for certain social conventions, and the permanent repression of selfish impulses, it is quite evident that crowds are too impulsive and too mobile to be moral.'¹⁸⁹ Thus, crowds of people were likely to be less moral than individuals and '...crowds often abandon themselves to low instincts...'.¹⁹⁰ Therefore, it is possible to argue that the crowd of

¹⁸⁷ George Rude, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848* (New York, 1966), p. 238.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁸⁹ Gustave LeBon, *The Crowd* (New Jersey, 1995), p. 76.

¹⁹⁰ LeBon, *The Crowd*, p. 104.

working-class holidaymakers felt able to stare at unusual bodies for entertainment due to the crowd mentality that they adopted.

The geographical separation and physical difference between resorts and nearby cities, as well as the experience of transitioning from their domestic space to their holidaying space, directly affected their relaxation, enjoyment, and behaviour. Aside from their excursion from nearby cities and freedom from work, holidaymakers also experienced less responsibility and fewer societal restrictions. Whereas people in cities were expected to keep their conduct within typical behaviour codes, within the boundaries of seaside resorts, they were given more time and autonomy, which give them a greater sense of exhilaration and fun.¹⁹¹

Liberty from work meant a number of things to British holidaymakers. The restraint of the working schedule meant that ordinary life was governed by work and domestic duties, with leisure (or pleasure) coming after the required work was carried out. Within the holiday atmosphere, they were no longer ruled by their duties. Rather the aspects of life they enjoyed the most became of utmost significance. Arguably, this freedom from the working environment, had an effect on the way people conducted their working life. The implementation of Bank Holidays was, in part, due to people taking unallocated days off, if they had the resources to do so. However, with the control of working hours and regular holidays, workers were disinclined to shirk their working duties. Therefore, whilst allowing working class people scheduled freedom to relieve the stresses and strains

¹⁹¹ Walton, *The British Seaside*, pp. 3-4.

of working life, holidays also encouraged them to perform well in the working environment. Workers were less likely to become disillusioned and more likely to perform well if permitted to take regular breaks. The working-class participation in holiday saving schemes further motivated them to consistently attend work; the freedom many working class people longed for, and the opportunity to save for holidays, encouraged them to work hard throughout the year.

Excursionists were encouraged to relax and amuse themselves in ways which were unavailable to them within everyday life. On holiday, people were not subject to strict rituals and were permitted to engage with the activities available for their entertainment such as afternoons spent at the beach, or enjoying the amusements on the pier. However, Walton suggests that even though people appreciated their freedom, they experienced it within the social boundaries of seaside resorts. Although coastal locations were marginal or liminal spaces, they were not places of complete unrestraint. Holidaymakers could not fully disregard the internal controls which formulated their everyday behaviour. Nonetheless, there was a significant shift in the attitude and conduct of those holidaying by the coast, which was evident in contemporary newspaper reports.

Although communities often went on holiday together and some social norms were maintained, several local newspapers noted the large, and sometimes boisterous crowds, that visited coastal resorts in the period between 1900 and 1950. For example, an article in the *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser* on Friday 26th August, 1904 expressed outrage at a London reporter who

had conveyed the summer crowds at Blackpool as disorderly and boisterous. He suggested that holidaymakers (mainly from Lancashire, Yorkshire and Cheshire) had succumbed to 'violence and rowdyism', thus demonstrating the negative associations with mass leisure at the seaside. The paper, in protest to the initial report, described Blackpool as full of 'hearty, good humour and friendly freedom'¹⁹². Moreover, it observed,

The crowds he saw at the popular seaside resort on Bank Holiday [sic] seem to have staggered him. He was evidently unused to such a sight at any holiday rendezvous with which he had previously made acquaintance, and in his amazement, he permitted his imagination to run riot...

Furthermore, the article suggests that,

They are, perhaps, heartier in their demonstrations of satisfaction and delight than are the sprinkling of Southerners who occasionally find their way to the West Coast, but they are nonetheless good-tempered and good-mannered in their exuberance.

This incident exposed the 'carnavalesque' conceptualisation of the seaside space. The article alluded to the enthusiasm and exhilaration of the holidaymaking crowd on their trips to the coast, suggesting that in the liberty from their working and domestic environment, they embraced the 'carnavalesque' spirit. Nevertheless, it described the excursionists as 'friendly' and 'boisterous' as well as 'good

¹⁹² 'Seaside Resorts: An Injustice to Breezy Blackpool' *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Friday 26 August 1904, p. 4.

humoured' and 'pleasant'. As Walton argues, although it was evident that public behaviour altered by the coast, holidaymakers not unaware of the social expectations and rules which they typically abided by. However, it was within this 'carnavalesque' environment that the public were free to continue to stare at those with unusual bodies for their pleasure and entertainment.

A Space of Looking and Seeing: The Tourist Gaze

An article in the *Dorking and Leatherhead Advertiser* commented on the popularity of staring at freaks for entertainment during the summer holidaying season. It noted, 'People who had nothing better to do with their time and money at the seaside went to the professor and listened to the talk; in fact, the seaside would be a dull place but for such side-shows.'¹⁹³ As part of their seaside holidays, holidaymakers looked at a range of different articles; buildings, rides, and the natural environment. However, despite the innovative technological advancements which provided exhilarating entertainment to excursionists through the pleasure parks, a *British Pathé* film in 1947 noted that, 'for all the mechanical gadgets invented for an antidote to boredom, the human heart still thrills to the pleasure of unusual sights of freaks and monsters.'¹⁹⁴ Therefore, it was clear, that despite Nadja Durbach's assertions, freak shows continued to amuse the British public within

¹⁹³ *Dorking and Leatherhead Advertiser*, Saturday 06 September, 1913, p. 2.

¹⁹⁴ 'Blackpool Issue Title Pathé Pictorial Goes...' *British Pathé* Film 1947 < <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/blackpool-issue-title-pathe-pictorial-goes-to-the/query/blackpool+freak+shows> > [Accessed 26/06/17, 14.46pm].

seaside locations, until the mid-twentieth century.¹⁹⁵ By departing the working environment, and breaking with established routines and practices, holidaymakers constructed a tourist gaze, which permitted them to appease their curiosity through viewing those with unusual bodies.¹⁹⁶

Urry argues for the fundamental 'visual nature of the tourist experience'.¹⁹⁷ He maintains, 'It is the distinctiveness of the visual that gives to all sorts of activities a special or unique character...'¹⁹⁸ However, he points out that it is not a simple process, stating that '...such visual consumption is not a simple and straightforward process. Views are not literally seen because tourism paradigmatically involves the collection of signs.'¹⁹⁹ Furthermore, '...there has to be something distinctive to be gazed upon, that the signs collected by tourists have to be visually extraordinary... The tourist experience involves something that is visually different and distinguished from otherwise mundane activities. The tourist gaze endows the tourist experience with a striking, almost sacred, importance.'²⁰⁰

Urry's conceptualisation of the tourist gaze demonstrates that part of the tourist experience was to gaze on various different landscapes which were out of the

¹⁹⁵ Nadja Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture* (London, 2010), p. 171.

¹⁹⁶ John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London, 1990), p. 2; The tourist gaze can be understood as how the tourist constructed holidays from landscapes. Urry also suggests that this reflects what is normal in society.

¹⁹⁷ John Urry, 'The Tourist Gaze "Revisited"', *The American Behavioral Scientist* 36:2 (1992), p. 172.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Urry, 'The Tourist Gaze "Revisited"', p. 173.

ordinary. He suggests that 'this gaze is as socially organised and systematised as is the gaze of the medic.'²⁰¹

Urry suggests that,

To gaze as a tourist is to insert oneself within a historical process to consume signs or markers of particular histories. Different tourist gazes involve particular processes by which the collective memory of a society is organized and reproduced. Likewise, different tourist gazes involve particular consumptions of space, both the configuration of different sights and markers across space and the manner in which that space is socially and culturally constructed for consumption (such as the construction of a "nature" for leisure).²⁰²

The public could enact a 'tourist gaze' whilst on holiday and this permitted them to stare at unusual sights both in terms of the landscape and the people who were on display in these locations. Part of the tourist practice was to take part in activities that were not available to them in everyday life. It was no longer as socially permissible to stare at those with unusual bodies for entertainments in non-tourist locations. However, within holiday resorts, it was such practices that helped to construct the public as holidaymakers. 'The gaze therefore presupposes a system of social activities and signs which locate the particular tourist practices, not

²⁰¹ Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, p. 1. According to Urry, there are three different types of gaze, which must be noted. Firstly, gazes that are self-consciously organized by professionals. Secondly, different gazes are authorized by different discourses. Thirdly, there is a distinction to note between the romantic and the collective tourist gaze.

²⁰² John Urry, 'The Tourist Gaze "Revisited"', p. 172.

in terms of some intrinsic characteristics but through the contrasts implied with non-tourist social practices...'²⁰³

Interestingly, Urry points out the parallels between the tourist gaze and the study of deviance itself. He contends,

This involves the investigation of bizarre and idiosyncratic social practices which happen to be defined as deviant in some societies but not necessarily in others. The assumption is that the investigation of deviance can reveal interesting and significant aspects of 'normal' societies.'²⁰⁴

Therefore, just as the study of deviance reveals what is 'normal' and 'abnormal', the tourist gaze helped to distinguish what was part of 'everyday society' and what was not. This was particularly pertinent within the seaside environment of the twentieth century, as holidaymakers had both a tourist gaze, and were gazing at deviance as part of their summertime excursions.

The uniqueness of the seaside environment, which created the holidaying experience, permitted the public to negotiate their identity as holidaymakers. In turn, this empowered them to look through a 'tourist gaze'. Within the seaside environment, the public expected to cast their eyes on extraordinary sights; they anticipated seeing unusual wonders. Therefore, the complex construction of the liminal seaside space and the ability for holidaymakers to assume an alternative identity, permitted them to engage in activities and behaviours that were otherwise

²⁰³ Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, p. 2.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

unacceptable. This included gazing at the unusual carnivalesque environment and the unusual bodies that were displayed within it. Both the environment, and the freaks that were exhibited there were 'read' by holidaymakers, who deciphered the signs and symbols surrounding them, to make sense of their own lived experience.

Conclusion

As Britain became a modern industrial nation, seaside resorts and holidays grew with unprecedented popularity. The tourist experience was a distinct spatio-temporal phenomenon that altered the societal expectations placed on the public, and transformed them into holidaymakers as they visited British seaside resorts in the twentieth century. The seaside space provided the physical context for the different events and experiences associated with seaside holidays. However, it also reflected a socio-cultural significance of those events construction at work (and play). Seaside spaces were complex and unique environments; they were affected by a multiplicity of different elements, including their geographical development, the effect of the holidaymaking crowds, and the competing ideals of local authorities and entrepreneurs. 'Carnivalesque' resorts, that were typically near large cities, and most popular with the working classes (namely Blackpool, Margate, and Southend-on-Sea), became associated with wider debates about the function and purpose of leisure in Britain. Nevertheless, 'carnivalesque' seaside spaces also provided the physical context for the continuation of freak shows in the twentieth century. Moreover, the construction of a 'tourist gaze' meant that the public expected to see unusual sights on their summer holidays. This thesis argues that

the convergence of these elements created a unique seaside space that permitted the continuation of freak shows in British culture until the mid-twentieth century. Moreover, it argues that seaside freakery performances were enacted using concepts specific to the seaside environment such as health and wellness, as well as reflecting wider contemporary social and cultural values. Seaside freaks gave British people the freedom to renegotiate their identity, both as holidaymakers and as British citizens; the temporary freakery performance invited more lasting transformations. For example, holidaymakers were encouraged, through their attendance at freak shows, to obtain and maintain a more healthy body. These facets of seaside resorts worked together to shape the conceptualisation of freaks in seaside locations.

Chapter 2

‘When we first saw them, we thought we’d made a mistake and hit the nursery’: Midget Troupes at British Seaside Resorts, 1900-1950

Introduction

A *British Pathé* film, released in 1931, entitled ‘*Little People*’ revealed some of the common observations that audiences made when visiting midget shows as part of their summertime entertainment. It revealed that alongside remarkable displays that involved singing, dancing, and acting, midgets also participated in a variety of traditional holidaymaking activities that the public enjoyed. The film showed a troupe of midgets in Blackpool riding the Ferris wheel and rollercoasters at Pleasure Beach.²⁰⁵ Likewise, numerous photographs and newspaper reports revealed that the troupes spent time on the sands, took swimming lessons, and enjoyed the enthralling rides and rollercoasters at coastal amusement parks, like all members of society.

²⁰⁵ Little ‘uns – A Blackpool Sidelight < <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/little-uns-a-blackpool-sidelight/query/blackpool+midgets> > [Accessed 23/10/15, 14.16pm].

The *British Pathe* film exposed that, when confronted with the midgets, holidaymakers assumed that they were children. It declared, 'When we first saw them, we thought we'd made a mistake and hit the nursery... But no!! They were just little people – grown up, ages 17-50 and none over 3ft in height.'²⁰⁶ A similar film, which promoted the attractions of the resort, described the midget troupe as 'Full-grown – but on a diminutive spree.'²⁰⁷ It was evident that the midgets and holidaymakers alike embraced the childlike attitude, which meant they could enjoy seaside amusements with fun and playfulness.

Spectacularly staged midget marriages established the link between the midgets' performances and their presence at seaside resorts. The weddings, that took place in numerous coastal locations, were often legally binding and a celebration of the love between two people. However, they attracted crowds of excited onlookers and freakery entertainers formed part of the wedding entourage. This revealed the interrelationship between the 'real' and 'performed' lives of the freaks who entertained the public at coastal locations; holidaymakers were interested in viewing midget displays, but were also intrigued by the personal lives of those they were observing.

Whilst the extravagant exhibitions 'enfreaked' the midgets and demonstrated the abnormality of their unusual bodies, their participation in

²⁰⁶< <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/little-people/query/midget+weddings> > [Accessed 17/09/15, 08.46am].

²⁰⁷ 'Little 'uns a Blackpool Sidelight' <<http://www.britishpathe.com/video/little-uns-a-blackpool-sidelight> > [accessed 6 August 2014].

ordinary holiday activities normalised them through demonstrating that they enjoyed the same leisure pursuits as the general population. Furthermore, it simultaneously permitted holidaymakers to stare at those with anomalous bodies in a more discrete way, as the midgets were exhibited in a relaxed setting. It enabled holidaymakers to understand themselves in relation to the people on display, as they could closely compare their bodies with those of small stature. Therefore, contemporary holidaymakers conceptualised midgets as miniature representations of average people, which subsequently helped them to discern what was considered 'normal' and 'abnormal' within the holiday environment.

Medical advancements and a greater understanding of bodily deformity, combined with two global conflicts and a resultant influx of war-disabled veterans, fostered changes in the societal understanding of disability in the twentieth century. Despite new awareness, midget troupes remained a popular form of spectacle in the period 1900 to 1950. As seen in Chapter 1, from the turn of the century, freak shows were increasingly regarded as inappropriate in metropolitan areas, but acceptable in spaces dedicated to entertainment, spectacle, and performance (such as fairs, circuses, and seaside resorts). Within unique seaside entertainment spaces, midgets were perceived as less physically deformed than other traditional freak show performers such as 'armless wonders' or 'pinheads'. Additionally, they performed in plays, recitals, and concerts, which facilitated their construction as *entertainers* rather than freaks. Therefore, their displays at Britain's most popular seaside resorts continued to be an accepted form of amusement.

Moreover, they encapsulated many of the themes and meanings that British people garnered from their seaside holidays.

This chapter places midget performances within the context of British seaside resorts throughout the first half of the twentieth century. It assesses the social and cultural construction of midgets through the visual material associated with their exhibitions. It moves away from the case study approach of individual midgets such as Charles Stratton, and instead offers an analysis of John Lester and Fred Roper's midget troupes in the context of the seaside space. This enables a broader methodological approach that permits an assessment of the spaces that midgets were displayed in, their relationship with each other and the showmen who exhibited them, and their interaction with holidaymakers. As discussed in the previous chapter, the seaside space was interpreted by society in various ways. It was regarded as a space of health, entertainment, freedom, escape, nostalgia, and novelty. The chapter demonstrates how midgets reflected various conceptualisations of the seaside space in a multitude of ways. Additionally, it suggests that midget troupes presented holidaymakers with the opportunity to understand themselves and their lives, in relation to the anomalous bodies on display. Midgets replicated many concepts associated with the seaside, concurrently encouraging audiences to consider their identity as holidaymakers. Likewise, they permitted the public to contemplate their everyday lives, through their promotion of domesticity, family, and recreation. Ultimately, displays of midgets were a locus of discourse for the public engagement with the seaside

environment and they promoted wholesome, family, seaside entertainment that everyone could enjoy.

Midgets or Dwarfs?

The World of Midgets, a book describing how people of small stature lived and interacted, was published in 1938. It revealed a hierarchy of dwarfism in the twentieth century.

Midgets consider dwarfs minor monstrosities, almost a race apart from themselves. Midgets bitterly resent being called or considered dwarfs.

Toward these little people of fantastic form, they hold a smug attitude very similar to that held by normal people towards them.²⁰⁸

The latter part of the eighteenth century saw an increased fascination and curiosity in those with unusual bodies from both the public and medical profession, who sought to understand the reasoning behind various physical abnormalities. Due to developments in pseudoscience such as the expanding study of phrenology, measuring bodily features was a dominant method employed for understanding the body. Measurements were taken of noses and skulls to determine race,

²⁰⁸ Walter Bodin and Burnet Hershey, *The World of Midgets* (Great Britain, 1938), p. 37.

intelligence, and individual personal qualities.²⁰⁹ There was an inextricable link between physical appearance (and by extension, physical deformity) and culturally determined factors such as character, personality, and morality. The more physically aberrant a person appeared, the more socially deviant they were deemed to be. Therefore, measurements proved influential to the perceptions of dwarfs and midgets in the first half of the twentieth century. It was the measurements of their heads, arms, and bodies that rendered them different to each other, and led to midgets resenting being considered 'dwarfs'.

Since the medieval period, the term 'dwarf' was used to describe people of small stature. However, 'midget' was first used in the mid-nineteenth century to describe diminutive people who were in proportion. P.T. Barnum popularised the term through his public displays of Charles Stratton, Lavinia Warren, and Commodore Nutt. Although there were clear distinctions between midgets and dwarfs in freak shows, it is unclear whether or not this translated to the public looking for entertainment. Significantly, it was midgets, not dwarfs who featured most heavily within the ephemeral material associated with freak shows at seaside resorts. Many of the *carte de visites* depicted proportional people of small stature so that audiences could easily relate themselves to the anomalous bodies on display.

²⁰⁹ See John Van Whye, *Phrenology and the Origins of Victorian Scientific Naturalism* (Aldershot, 2004); Stephen Tomlinson, *Head Masters: Phrenology, Secular Education, and Nineteenth century Social Thought* (Tuscaloosa, 2005); Roger Cooter, *The Cultural Meaning of Popular Science: Phrenology and the Organization of Consent in Nineteenth century Britain* (Cambridge, 1984).

Armand Marie Leroi addresses the implications of proportional size in relation to midgets, suggesting that although their 'proportions were not quite those of a full-sized adult; they are rather close to those of a child of the same size.'²¹⁰ The association of midgets with children affected how they functioned in the freak show. This was evident in an article in the *Western Times*, which described the midgets of 'Tiny Town' as 'evidently little more than stereotyped children, and therefore bear extraordinary resemblance to one another.'²¹¹ Therefore, it is conceivable that the wider populations conceptualised them as children or miniature representations of the public. Moreover, people of average stature related more to midgets than dwarfs, who were considered more physically abnormal than their childlike midget counterparts. This was central to their construction in the seaside freak show, as adults holidaying by the coast were described as a 'nation at play', thus revealing their own childlike tendencies.

Midgets troupes performed at British seaside resorts and were often perceived as children within the seaside environment as they physically embodied the relationship between seaside and childlikeness. Furthermore, the supposed childlikeness of the midgets made them a popular holiday attraction. Within the seaside environment, holidaymakers participated in playful activities, traditionally equated with children such as swimming and building sandcastles. Gary Cross and John Walton have written extensively on the playful, holidaying crowd and they

²¹⁰ Armand Marie Leroi, *Mutants: On the form, varieties and errors of the human body*, (London, 2003), p. 175.

²¹¹ 'The Dwarfs of Tiny Town', *Western Times*, Tuesday 28th December 1909, p. 6.

argue that seaside resorts 'promised experiences and meanings that contrasted with, relieved, and yet often confirmed the ordinary work-a-day life of their paying visitors.²¹² This liberation from and yet reconciliation with the everyday is what made their visitors into playful crowds.'²¹³ Adults, free from the stresses of work and domestic duties engaged with a space set aside for their pleasure. Midget troupes embellished this sense of whimsy childlike fun or playfulness of their surroundings, and were depicted as children in many of the images associated with their displays. Presented participating in an array of seaside activities, they were seemingly freed from the expectations of adulthood because of their size. Similarly, holidaymakers rendered partially free from the societal restrictions that governed their behaviour at home, were able to fully immerse themselves in the community of the seaside resort and its loosened social codes.

More specifically, midgets promoted a variety of leisure activities that were regarded as healthy, wholesome amusements. For example, troupes operated the rides at Pleasure Beach in Blackpool, encouraging adults to enjoy themselves in the pleasure spaces intended for them. They permitted people to relax from everyday duties and to indulge in the childlike trait of playfulness. This reinforced the idea that people should, whilst not deviating too far from the norms, relax away from the tensions of work and domesticity. Consequently, it is fundamentally important for freak shows to be placed in their physical, social, and cultural context, to

²¹² See Gary Cross and John Walton, *The Playful Crowd: Pleasure Places in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2005); John Walton, *The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester, 2000).

²¹³ Cross and Walton, *The Playful Crowd*, p. 5.

understand how the public understood themselves in relation to those on display. The physical environment facilitated the comprehension of the midget's difference, and enabled holidaymakers to assess their physical and social normality, through comparing their bodies to the ones that were on display.

Historiography and Background

People of small stature have participated in entertainment, leisure, and spectacle culture throughout history. Royal courts had midgets as jesters throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, who entertained their 'masters' and aggrandized their reign. They simultaneously entertained onlookers and conveyed a social and cultural meaning to society. Dwarfs or midgets were given names that underscored their subordination and were sometimes preceded with the word 'little' to emphasize their small size. Often, they were addressed as 'Count' or 'General', which proved humorous to people, who assumed that someone so small would not possess such a grand title. This juxtaposition revealed their inferiority to royalty, as their littleness was associated with their lack of strength, grandeur, and prestige. Midgets emphasised the grandiosity and authority of the monarchy.²¹⁴

Nevertheless, with the decline in royal households, the court dwarf phenomenon largely disappeared. However, they still entertained royalty in the

²¹⁴ Betty M. Adelson, *The Lives of Dwarfs: Their Journey from Public Curiosity toward Social Liberation*, (London, 2005), p. 20; Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago, 1988), p. 97.

heyday of the freak show. Queen Victoria, who was particularly fascinated with freaks, had a special interest in midgets and held numerous private appointments with Charles Stratton, more commonly known as General Tom Thumb, and his wife, Lavinia Warren, at which she presented them with gifts from the Royal Family. Stratton is central to academic debate on midgets due to his position as 'the first to become an international sensation.'²¹⁵ With the exception of Stratton, midgets have seen less scholarly attention than other freak show performers, such as those with racially different bodies.²¹⁶

Historians including Robert Bogdan and Lori Merish focus their discussion on the social construction of midgets and their popularity throughout the heyday of the freak show.²¹⁷ Midgets were the most prolific performers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the construction of their performances enhanced their popularity with audiences. For midgets to have an extended career, they were consistently transformed and framed within the public discourse of each unique culture, which enabled them to generate continued interest with the public. Bogdan suggests that the methods used to manufacture freakery performances

²¹⁵ Francine Hornberger, *Carny Folk: The World's Weirdest Sideshow Acts* (New York, 2005), p. 13.

²¹⁶ The main scholars who write about people of small stature in freak shows include: Betty M. Adelson, *The Lives of Dwarves: Their Journey from Public Curiosity Towards Social Liberation* (London, 2005); Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Profit and Amusement* (Chicago, 1988), Lori Merish 'Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics: Tom Thumb and Shirley Temple' in Rosemarie Garland Thomson (ed.) *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (London, 1996).

²¹⁷ See Bogdan, *Freak Show*, (Chicago, 1988); Lori Merish 'Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics: Tom Thumb and Shirley Temple' in Rosemarie Garland Thomson (ed.) *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (London, 1996).

exposed the beliefs, anxieties, and apprehensions of any given society.²¹⁸ Through exploiting contemporary debates associated with 'normality' and 'abnormality', freaks acquired popularity and encouraged people to associate numerous social and cultural ideas with their exhibitions. The analysis of freak shows offers an innovative insight into the societies and cultures that surrounded them. Moreover, they facilitate our understanding of difference and deviance including how people relieved tensions and anxieties surrounding these concepts.

Throughout history, the spaces where midgets performed proved principal in their cultural construction. The transition from royal courts to popular entertainment venues was reminiscent of their transformation from an elite to a broader form of entertainment. Therefore, it is significant to place midgets within the physical, social, and cultural spaces where they were displayed, to comprehend their meanings, representations, and constructions. Betty M. Adelson emphasises the importance of placing people of small stature within their individual contexts.²¹⁹ She demonstrates that the perceptions of midgets varied between cultures, which revealed that contemporary public discourse surrounding difference, deviance, and, 'abnormality' changed depending on the society. Adelson contends that,

In few societies, dwarfs were treated with respect and honor; in others, violence and abasement were rampant. Sometimes both treatments coexisted. Dwarfs almost always occasioned some difference in status: they

²¹⁸ Bogdan, *Freak Show* (Chicago, 1988), p. 95.

²¹⁹ See Betty M. Adelson, *The Lives of Dwarfs: Their Journey from Public Curiosity toward Social Liberation*, (London, 2005).

might have been viewed as having a special relationship with the gods, or employed for entertainment. In every society, there were at least a few individuals who, because of their unique personalities or family background, attained a higher social status than other members of the group.²²⁰

It is essential to situate midgets in the period 1900 to 1950 within the physical surroundings that hosted their performances, as well as within the specific seaside culture that fashioned the way holidaymakers perceived the displays. People understood midgets in terms of the ideologies and mentalities associated with normality and abnormality. This had specific connotations in the seaside environment. Through analysing midgets it is possible to examine the perceptions of difference in the period and how these ideas were promulgated to the public in the seaside space.

Midget Villages: Space, Presence, and Performance

Situating midgets within a performance space is fundamental to comprehending how audiences interpreted them. Freak shows were transitory and performers were displayed in a multiplicity of settings. Nadja Durbach places them as central to a wider entertainment culture, noting the fluidity of freak shows as they travelled throughout Britain.²²¹ She considers them more widespread and popular than many other forms of leisure that were merely found in cosmopolitan

²²⁰ Adelson, *The Lives of Dwarfs*, pp. 3-4.

²²¹ Nadja Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture* (California, 2010), p. 5.

spaces. 'While show shops, aquariums, music halls, and other new entertainment spots were largely metropolitan phenomena, freak shows were highly mobile spectacles that visited not only cities but also towns and sometimes villages across the United Kingdom.'²²² A number of main exhibition spaces that housed freak shows closed in London at the beginning of the twentieth century, such as the Egyptian Hall in 1905. Nevertheless, freak shows remained popular amusements in local town fairs and seaside locations, demonstrating their ongoing centrality to entertainment culture. During their transition to a variety of alternative physical locations, their exhibitions were constructed with specific social and cultural ideas attributed to those spaces.

Seaside resorts were geographically fixed pleasure spaces and holidaymakers were constantly entertained within them. As demonstrated in Chapter One, they were 'carnavalesque' places where tourists expected the novel and exciting. The public anticipated seeing things that they would not usually see in their everyday lives. From the natural amenities – the sea and beach - to Punch and Judy shows or donkey rides on the sands – each activity provided novelty to people who lived in urban conurbations and were not acquainted with such sights, experiences, smells, and visual delights.²²³ The physical surroundings of the coast and the activities available there, created an atmosphere that the public associated with those places. Therefore, those with unusual bodies, such as midgets, helped to

²²² Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity* (California, 2010), p. 5.

²²³ See John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London, 1990).

fashion an exciting and novel entertainment space. They added to the uniqueness of resorts and people were permitted to enjoy viewing midgets as part of their summertime entertainment. There was a symbiotic relationship between the midgets and the space, which facilitated their social and cultural construction. Not only did ideas associated with the seaside infiltrate the troupe's exhibition, but their presence in coastal towns also helped to create the seaside environment.

Midget troupes were displayed in specialist midget villages, which shaped public discourse surrounding their displays and furthered their popularity at seaside resorts.²²⁴ Midget villages, or 'Tiny Towns', were spaces in which those with unusual bodies continued to be popular attractions. Predominantly situated as part of World's Fairs, London's Olympia, and seaside resorts, midget towns were reduced scale representations of larger urban areas where people of small stature gathered to perform and live, often for the entertainment of spectators.²²⁵ Midget villages provided an alternative to traditional freakery performances in which audiences went into a room and passively stared at an individual on display. The spaces allowed holidaymakers to walk around midget towns and experience an environment solely created for diminutive people. The physical construction of the

²²⁴ Figure 2.1. *Carte de Visit* of 'Fred Roper and his Wonder Midgets', Wellcome Library, Ephemera Collection, c. 1930s; Figure 2.2. *Carte de Visit* of John Lester's Midgets "In Midget Town", Blackpool, The Local and Family History Centre, Blackpool Central Library, Cyril Critchlow Collection, Vol. 67.

²²⁵ Richard Howells and Michael M. Chemers, 'Midget Cities: Utopia, Utopianism and the Vor-shein of the 'Freak' Show, *Disability Studies Quarterly* 25:3. <<http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/579/756>> [Accessed 4/01/16, 12.12pm].

display had several specific functions that fashioned the show to entertain, arouse interest, and convey meaning to audiences.

Midget villages by the coast were unique settings. They were an entertainment space within an entertainment space. Midgets who performed at seaside midget villages entertained holidaymakers merely through going about their daily lives. However, the displays were highly significant; freakery displays were structured through the balancing of ideas to create a complex series of meanings. Firstly, the abnormality of anomalous bodies meant that they were 'othered' by those staring at them for amusement. The midget village encouraged audiences to reflect on midget troupes as spectacles and contained them within an alternative environment to people who were perceived as 'normal'. As with the booths and stalls which housed freak shows within them, midget villages were enclosed areas that confined those with abnormal bodies within their precincts. These spaces promoted the acceptability of staring at people who were considered different. As with the freak show of the nineteenth century, spaces like this gave people permission to indulge their interest and stare at those considered different.

Concurrently, midget villages normalised the midgets who were displayed in them because they were viewed in a space that was proportional to their size. This demonstrated that the only noticeable difference between midgets and the average population was their height. Subsequently, they were not regarded as extraordinarily unusual, unlike racially different freaks, who were perceived as both physically and socially transgressive. Furthermore, midgets were often exhibited in

ways that accentuated their Britishness, which was directly related to their professed normality. Their presentation in 'Tiny Towns' or 'Lilliputian Villages' facilitated the creation of their displays as representations of the nation. Thus, showmen appealed to the shifting tastes and sensibilities of the public by promoting the Britishness of their displays.

The exhibition of John Lester and Fred Roper's troupes in quintessentially English villages, as seen in Figure 2.1, Figure 2.2, and Figure 2.3 reflected the centrality of national identity to the construction of such displays.²²⁶

²²⁶ Figure 2.1. *Carte de Visit* of 'Fred Roper and his Wonder Midgets', Wellcome Library, Ephemera Collection, c. 1930s; Figure 2.2. *Carte de Visit* of John Lester's Midgets "In Midget Town", Blackpool, The Local and Family History Centre, Blackpool Central Library, Cyril Critchlow Collection, Vol. 67; Figure 2.3 *Carte de Visit* of Fred Roper and some of his British Wonder Midgets, c. 1920s, Wellcome Library, London, EPH499.

Figure 2.1. *Carte de Visit* of 'Fred Roper and his Wonder Midgets'.

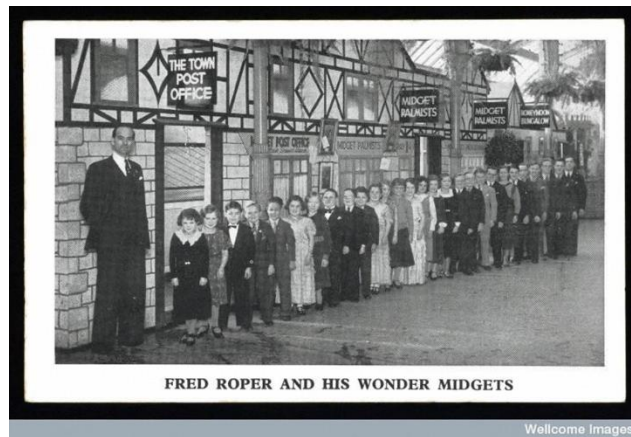


Figure 2.2. *Carte de Visit* of John Lester's Midgets "In Midget Town".



Figure 2.3. *Carte de Visit* of Fred Roper and some of his British Wonder Midgets.



Midget villages were representations of traditional English municipalities. Scaled to midget size, they often included a post office, police station, and shops in which the midgets could go about their daily lives.²²⁷ Despite the ‘othering’ of their small height, the infrastructure that surrounded them encouraged people to consider the midgets as representations of British people. David Matless notes, ‘...everything is to be consumed as a sign of itself; the village is village Englishness... Sites become archetypes, and if they are not archetypes they are not proper sites.’²²⁸ Matless further illustrates the relationship between the public and ‘landscaped citizenship’ which ‘worked through a mutual constitution of the aesthetic and the social, the eye and the body. The aim of extending visual pleasure to the people was tempered by a desire to control potentially disruptive bodily effects.’²²⁹ This was evident in the midget villages that holidaymakers could go to as part of their summertime entertainment.²³⁰ The Tudor style houses that decorated ‘Tiny Towns’ were synonymous with villages situated in the British countryside that holidaymakers would be familiar with. Consequently, the physicality of midget displays reflected the burgeoning importance of national identity in the first half of the twentieth century. It, therefore, gave people a model of citizenship to follow; the midgets were miniature representations of British people.

²²⁷ Figure 2.1. Carte de Visit of ‘Fred Roper and his Wonder Midgets’, Wellcome Library, Ephemera Collection, c. 1930s; Figure 2.2. *Carte de Visit* of John Lester’s Midgets “In Midget Town”, Blackpool, The Local and Family History Centre, Blackpool Central Library, Cyril Critchlow Collection, Vol. 67; Figure 2.3 *Carte de Visit* of Fred Roper and some of his British Wonder Midgets, c. 1920s, Wellcome Library, London, EPH499.

²²⁸ David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London, 1998), p. 67.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.


²³⁰ Figure 2.4, Midget Town at Dreamland Margate c. 1930.

Figure 2.4. Midget Town at Dreamland Margate, c. 1930.

WHAT YOU WILL SEE
IN
MIDGET TOWN
DREAMLAND

:: MARGATE ::

ADMISSION - 6d.
CHILDREN - 3d.



LITTLE LADY GODIVA RONALD STREET

The poster is framed by a decorative border. The text is centered and uses a mix of serif and bold sans-serif fonts. The names of the featured children are printed in a simple, clean font below their respective portraits.

They presented holidaymakers with a form of utopia in which they could understand and conceptualise Britishness, in a period in which modernity was transforming the landscape of Britain itself. 'In the interwar period the spaces of rural leisure were transformed in terms of technology, social movement and literary accompaniment.'²³¹ However, midget towns were traditional representations of Britain, at a point of great change; they instilled traditional British values into those who were walking around the tiny town. The interaction between midgets and holidaymakers, within traditionally British villages, permitted the public to negotiate what it meant to be British during the 'dismantling of empire' when 'working-class men and women returned from distant lands with new customs and prejudices'.²³²

Nationality also infiltrated the ways that midgets were discussed in newspapers. An article in *The Era* in 1931, which discussed Fred Roper's midgets, described them as 'a troupe of some twenty clever little people, all British born, and who have toured the world.'²³³ This demonstrated that national identity was of primary importance in their display. It encouraged British people to relate themselves to the

²³¹ Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, p. 63.

²³² Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain 1890-1960* (London, 1994), p. 176.

²³³ 'Wonder Midgets', *The Era*, Wednesday 13 May 1931, p. 15.

midgets who were part of the entertainment culture of seaside locations, and understand those of small stature in relation to their own lives, bodies, and experiences.²³⁴

For a small admission price, tourists could experience the village and comprehend a world created for people different to themselves. More than indulging their interest in those with unusual bodies, excursionists were presented with the opportunity to experience having a body which was maladapted to its surroundings. Richard Howells and Michael M. Chemers assert that,

In the case of people of short stature the case is still more clearly seen: Being a “midget” is not even intrinsically impairment at all. It only becomes a disability in a world scaled exclusively to the needs of the (presumed) majority. Within the narrowly-defined confines of a “Midget City”, then, people of short stature are no longer disabled.²³⁵

Although midget villages encouraged people to regard those with unusual bodies as a spectacle through which to be entertained, it simultaneously

²³⁴ There was a sense of pride in the British origins of midget troupes. There was a growing cinema industry, and British born actors were increasingly popular. Charlie Chaplin starred in the most prolific slapstick comedies of the twentieth century, and was recognised as an international sensation. Due to the expansion of the British entertainment industry into a worldwide institution, midgets (who were performers, as well as those with unusual bodies) were able to fit within a new definition of the freak show. People celebrated British born midgets and showmen successfully exploited this to acquire interest in their display. Furthermore, midgets had their own role on screen. The popularity of films such as the *Western*, *Terror of Tiny Town*, and Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, demonstrated continuity between conventional embodiments of freakery and their transformation into other forms of widespread entertainment.

²³⁵ Howells and Chemers, 'Midget Cities: Utopia, Utopianism and the Vor-shein of the 'Freak' Show, *Disability Studies Quarterly* 25:3. <<http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/579/756> > [Accessed 4/01/16, 12.12pm].

normalised the midgets on display. They were able to enjoy their day-to-day life without the problems presented to them from the outside world. Within 'Tiny Town', those of average height were 'abnormal' and therefore, freakery was reversed. Perhaps for the first time, audiences were permitted to experience their own difference to the people and environment around them. As seen in Figure 2.1 and Figure 2.2, standing alongside makeshift buildings, shops, and a multitude of little people, the audience became the minority.²³⁶ This reflected the slowly shifting attitudes towards difference. The association between physical deviance and social transgression was diminishing, with medical advancements explaining disability and difference through scientific terminology. Yet, the freak show continued to be a locus of discourse for the anxieties associated with abnormality. Midget villages permitted the public to negotiate these broad, societal changes, in the same way as the nineteenth century – through viewing those with unusual bodies. However, it fundamentally allowed them to experience possessing an unusual body, demonstrating the similarities between 'average' and 'abnormal' people. These ideas could then be practiced in the seaside environment, due to its function as an entertainment space. People could continue to stare at those with visually different bodies, and with their new understanding, renegotiate their beliefs surrounding abnormality.

²³⁶ Figure 2.1. Carte de Visit of 'Fred Roper and his Wonder Midgets', Wellcome Library, Ephemera Collection, c. 1930s; Figure 2.2. *Carte de Visit* of John Lester's Midgets "In Midget Town", Blackpool, The Local and Family History Centre, Blackpool Central Library, Cyril Critchlow Collection, Vol. 67.

Sadiah Qureshi argues, 'While some consumers may have been content to observe, others clearly wished to converse and physically engage with...peoples...'²³⁷ The interaction between consumers and exhibited people was significant. It enabled them to engage with freaks in a way that was different to the everyday. While

...wandering the streets of London involved distanced and fleeting observational practices in which histories of passers-by were reconstructed solely from glances; but clearly, many urban spectators were left wishing for more. Exhibitors capitalized on the thirst for interaction by charging these spectators for the privilege of being able to stare at, talk to, shake hands with, and bestow gifts on displayed peoples; their willingness to allow and facilitate such interaction suggests its importance for commercial success. Patrons could satisfy their curiosity but also demonstrate humanity by asking questions about a performer's health, eating habits, or emotional wellbeing... Showmen removed such barriers to investigation while legitimating actions that would otherwise have proved improper.²³⁸

Midget villages provided the public with the opportunity to relate to people with unusual bodies, showing them as similar but distinctive to themselves. Freakery within the midget town was inverted, enabling holidaymakers to process transforming attitudes towards disability. Moreover, midget villages gave them a

²³⁷ Sadiah Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire, and Anthropology in Nineteenth century Britain* (London, 2011), p. 160.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

representation of their own domestic spaces. Home and family life was familiar to everyone who visited the coast. Therefore, the physical construction of midget villages encouraged tourists to consider their similarity to people who were different to them. Additionally, it offered tourists the opportunity to reflect on their own domestic situation. The infrastructure surrounding the freak show utilised contemporary social and cultural discourse to frame the way in which people considered difference, deviance, and abnormality.

It is worth noting the other physical constructions in which midget performers were exhibited in seaside resorts. They were displayed against other physical constructions to make them seem even smaller. For example, they were advertised as living in 'Midget Mansions', which demonstrated the smallness of the midget against the comparable largeness of a mansion. One newspaper that published an advertisement on a midget display in Ramsgate noted,

Midget Entertainer. Merrie England's New Artiste. Always on the look-out for the most original and unique artistes, the management of Merrie England, Ramsgate's sea front amusement park have captured a new personality in Miss Marget Rubel, the smallest midget entertainer in the world. Miss Rubel, who is 23 years of age, is 2ft. 2ins. High and this is her first visit to England. She will be appearing for one month only at the Midget Mansion along with a troupe of tiny and versatile artistes who present an

interesting and unusual singing, dancing, and instrumental act. Miss Rubel adds further charm and talent to the company.²³⁹

Another report demonstrated the midgets were also exhibited on a 'A Model Railway'.

Boys and girls who went to the last Pea-Nut Fun Fair will remember riding on the model railway... The organisers of Pea-Nut Fun Fair always like to introduce something really out of the ordinary, and this year they have brought along "The World's Smallest Married Couple." The little people are Colonel and Mrs. Cox, who may be visited in their Midget Mansion. Colonel Cox claims to be the only bearded dwarf alive, so don't ask him about Snow White and the other six.²⁴⁰

The newspaper, therefore, revealed the array of different ways that midgets were displayed for paying audiences. The report also noted the clear association between physical midget displays and the dwarfs that became part of Disney's iconic classic children's film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937. However, while these other methods of displaying midgets demonstrate the variety of shows that were available to holidaymakers and tourists at coastal locations, midget villages were the most popular and prevalent way to enjoy staring at people of small stature for entertainment.

²³⁹ *Thanet Advertiser*, Tuesday 17 August 1937, p. 4.

²⁴⁰ *Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser*, Friday 26 May 1939, p. 23.

Midget villages, mansions, and railways, distorted the boundaries between presence and performance in coastal locations. In British society, midgets were often regarded as performers because their bodies did not deviate far from normality. To continue public interest in their displays, they showcased their singing, dancing, and intelligent conversations as methods through which to entertain audiences. However, even their presence at seaside resorts also amused the public. The exhibition of midgets in seaside spaces differed from the customary embodiment of their performances. Whilst they continued to act in plays and variety shows, their *presence* at coastal locations revealed an alternative way of understanding and perceiving difference.

Nevertheless, due to the entirety of the seaside space being dedicated to amusement, people continued to be intrigued by their bodies outside the midget village and this was regarded as acceptable. Their *presence* in seaside resorts, rather than their *performance* in midget villages, reflected two main concepts. Firstly, it enabled audiences to associate themselves with midgets more easily. Secondly, it echoed changing understandings of disability, as those with unusual bodies were increasingly integrated into society on a broader scale.

Midget Marriages

If midget villages cemented identity to citizenship then marriage was central to perceptions of domesticity in the first half of the twentieth century and pervaded all aspects of social and cultural life, including displays of midget troupes. Whilst their performance in midget villages encouraged people to assess ideas such as

domesticity and nationality in British society, their theatrical and extravagant midget weddings enabled people to consider the changing ideas surrounding domestic relationships. Jean Franzino argues that midget weddings, such as that of Charles Stratton and Lavinia Warren, revealed the cultural, social, and political role of the non-normative body as an entertainment site.²⁴¹ She suggests that, 'What audience members saw on the sideshow stage shaped their ideas about identity, normality, and communal and national belonging, with ramifications for how they thought about such issues such as ... which bodies were fit for the full privileges of citizenship.'²⁴² Franzino demonstrates how midgets were a product of their own specific culture and the multitude of ways they enabled spectators to reflect upon, understand, and process various ideas. A plethora of midget marriages were reported in British newspapers and must be analysed alongside contemporary public discourse to understand their significance and meaning for British audiences.

Midget weddings took place across Britain throughout the first half of the twentieth century and were often theatrical events that spectators watched for their pleasure and entertainment. Weddings of midgets in places like Southend-On-Sea, Blackpool, and Margate showed the inextricable link between midget marriages and entertainment. The distinction between reality and fabrication was unclear. Whilst some weddings were legally binding, others were solely entertainment. However, many major resorts had annual weddings, which suggests

²⁴¹ Jean Franzino, "'The Biggest Little Marriage on Record': Union and Disunion in Tom Thumb's America' *American Quarterly*, (Vol. 67, No. 1, March 2015), p. 189.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 190.

they were as much a part of summer seaside traditions as they were a celebration of true love.²⁴³ Midget troupes capitalised on the spectacular weddings to acquire greater popularity throughout the holiday season. They employed various methods to do this.

Relationships were encouraged or fabricated in Midget Towns to attract commercial interest, as holidaymakers wanted constant updates on the personal lives of performers. Local newspapers were interested in the romantic lives of midgets and reported on their engagements or subsequent weddings and holidaymakers attended the church to see the newlywedded couple emerge. There was public outcry at a midget wedding in 1932, when over one thousand people gathered to watch the diminutive couple wed, accompanied by a midget company who were performing at a local music hall. Police were drafted in to control the crowds, demonstrating the public fascination with the wedding. Inside the church, women were rebuked for standing on pew seats to get a glimpse of the tiny couple. A report in the *Edinburgh Evening News* noted, 'They were told it was a religious ceremony, not an entertainment.'²⁴⁴ This was a common occurrence. *The Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette* provided details of another wedding in 1932, where a separate but similar incident occurred. Following the reprimanding of guests who stood on their chairs to see the wedding, 'a policeman had to lift the tiny pair into the waiting motorcar, and policemen rode on the footboard to the

²⁴³ It must be noted that elements of ceremony and display were evident in the weddings of average sized people.

²⁴⁴ 'At a Midget Wedding' *Edinburgh Evening News*, Thursday 07 April 1932, p. 3.

reception hall to keep the onlookers away.²⁴⁵ The enormous crowds gathered to watch the midget ensemble emerge from the church caused great controversy at Southend-On-Sea. An article in the *Western Morning News* on Wednesday 11th November 1936 reported on the wedding of Mr Robert Edward Pattinson and Miss Alice Morris. It revealed that the 'Police were called in to control a crowd which gathered at Southend Registry Office to-day to see the wedding'.²⁴⁶ This demonstrated that midget weddings were attended by large crowds of people, interested in the romance, spectacle, and oddity of the wedding day. The newspaper that reported on the masses of holidaymakers waiting to see the tiny couple, was a form of advertisement for midget exhibitions and performances, generating greater profit and income for freak shows.

People waited outside the registry office or church to see the little bride and groom, followed by their entourage of friends; other freakery performers were often in attendance. This placed the weddings firmly within the freak show industry. For example, the marriage of Fred Cliffe and Norah Buttram, two of John Lester's midget troupe, was reported in the *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette* and the *Western Daily Press*. The reports revealed, 'At this wedding of the midget circus ring, 30 midgets, all circus friends of the bride and bridegroom, will be in attendance. The bridegroom sings cowboy songs and rides a performing pony in the midget circus ring. The bride is a solo dancer, soprano singer, and actress in the

²⁴⁵ 'Midget's Wedding' *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, Monday 15 August 1932, p. 6.

²⁴⁶ 'Midget's Wedding' *Western Morning News*, Wednesday 11 November 1936. p. 7.

little sawdust circle.²⁴⁷ John Lester, the troupe's showman, walked the bride down the aisle and gave her away. Not only did this place the wedding within freak show culture; it simultaneously added an element of celebrity to the affair.²⁴⁸

Similarly, a *British Pathé* film clip of the wedding of Mr and Mrs Retter showed a group of albino people clothed in traditional First Nation dress.²⁴⁹ Additionally, another midget wedding in Blackpool featured a giant alongside the newly married midgets and ended with a circus parade. 'The procession to the church included an Elephant, carrying six midgets, and a coach bearing the "mayor" of the midget community.'²⁵⁰ This further showed the extravagance and spectacle that characterised midget weddings in the twentieth century. The exhibition of the midgets, riding on an elephant, and surrounded by a plethora of different freaks signified the association between the weddings and the freakery displays which dominated Britain's coastal locations.

Midget weddings were entrenched within the cultural meanings and anxiety surrounding marriage in British society. They took place in a period where conceptualisations of conjugal relationships changed from being patriarchal to companionship orientated. John Benson suggests that as industrialisation occurred, and marriage had the potential to become less important, home became a refuge

²⁴⁷ 'Wedding of Circus Midgets' *Western Daily Press*, Monday 27 April 1936, p. 7.

²⁴⁸ *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 27 April 1936, p. 89.

²⁴⁹ 'Midget's Wedding – Blackpool 1938' < <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/midgets-wedding-blackpool/query/retter++midget++wedding> > [Accessed 31/05/17, 10.09am].

²⁵⁰ 'Midgets Marriage', *Gloucester Citizen*, Thursday 07 June 1928, p. 11.

from the challenges of work which led to the instability of marital relationships and a rising number of divorces.²⁵¹

This caused significant apprehension amidst contemporaries, as the traditional belief was that marriage was important for both sexes. Yet, there were gendered divisions in the perception behind its significance. For women, who were supposedly able to control their sexual desires, marriage was important for satisfying their maternal instinct. For men, whose sexual desire was less easy to control, marriage was one method through which to reduce, 'sexual frustration, promiscuity or perversion'.²⁵² The issue became more controversial during the First World War as tensions were exacerbated due to the number of male deaths, leading to a surplus of single women who were required to maintain the purity of the British race. Katherine Holden suggests, 'Fruitful marriages bearing healthy children were the key to the strength and virility of the British nation, an excess of single people a sign of degeneracy and weakness.'²⁵³ Therefore, it is unsurprising that there was such interest in midget marriages. Relationships between midgets offered people the opportunity to consider their own romantic and sexual relationships.

²⁵¹ John Benson, 'Domination, Subordination and Struggle: middle-class marriage in early twentieth century Wolverhampton, England' *Women's History Review* 19:3 (2010) pp. 421-422.

²⁵² Katherine Holden, "'Nature takes no notice of morality': Singleness and Married Love in Interwar Britain', *Women's History Review* 11:3 (2002), p. 495.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 497.

These ideas were prevalent in the images of midget brides and grooms, which shaped the way British holidaymakers perceived the weddings.²⁵⁴ A *carte de visit* of Mr and Mrs Franks, two of John Lester's midgets who performed in Blackpool Tower, indicated the way some midgets were exhibited to holidaymakers.²⁵⁵ The image, as seen in Figure 2.5, depicted the couple, who were similar in height, on their wedding day. They were photographed beside a chair to show spectators how small they were in comparison to an everyday object, which emphasised their physical difference and proved amusing to audiences.

²⁵⁴ These images were available for holidaymakers to buy as souvenirs.

²⁵⁵ Figure 2.5 *Carte de Visit* of the Famous Midget Bridal Couple, Mr and Mrs Franks, Blackpool. The Local and Family History Centre, Blackpool Central Library, Cyril Critchlow Collection, Vol. 67.

Figure 2.5. *Carte de Visit* of the Famous Midget Bridal Couple, Mr and Mrs Franks.



Midget marriages frequently used humour to attract spectators. Notes in the Mass Observation Archive stated that, 'For the showman... Normal matrimonial conditions must be parodied to be attractive.'²⁵⁶ This was evident in a film clip of one midget wedding in Blackpool that declared, 'A Miniature Marriage. At Blackpool, a tiny maid weds a tiny man ----- and now, of course, he feels even smaller'.²⁵⁷ Similarly, a *carte de visite* of Major Marco beside his new wife, contrasted him with a female of normal size, demonstrating that the notion of a women being 'in control' within the martial relationship was humorous.²⁵⁸ The photograph further elevated her height through her position on a set of stairs. The image both emphasised Major Marco's smallness and aggrandized him through his social position as Mayor of Midget Town. Retaining a social status was important in normalising the freak as a member of British society, as their bodies rendered them to the outskirts of British normality. Both the *carte de visit* and the film echoed the transformation from patriarchal to companionship marriage. They satirised the relationship between men and women within the period, as well as reflecting contemporary social and cultural ideals regarding marital relationships. They played humorously on one of the standard tropes of contemporary British life, to structure the discussion of midgets and amuse holidaymakers at the seaside.

²⁵⁶ Gary Cross, *Worktowners at Blackpool* (London, 1990), p. 183.

²⁵⁷ 'Wedding of performers from Lester's Midgets Troupe at Blackpool'

<http://www.itnsource.com/shotlist//BHC_RTV/1928/01/01/BGT407130876/> [accessed 4th August 2014].

²⁵⁸ Figure 2.6 *Carte de Visit* of Major Marco, The Lord Mayor and Mayoress, Blackpool. The Local and Family History Centre, Blackpool Central Library, Cyril Critchlow Collection, Vol. 67.

Figure 2.6. *Carte de Visit* of Major Marco, Blackpool.



Despite the increasing role of the father in home life, it illustrated the continued prominence of a woman's role within the domestic sphere. Ross McKibbin contends that in public life between 1918-1951, England remained an almost single-sex society but women took priority in the home. It was not until women became more involved in Britain's working life, towards the middle of the century when gender roles in the domestic sphere became more equalised.²⁵⁹ This had an effect on contemporary marriages, as men and women no longer had distinct roles within marital relationships. The midget weddings reflected this concept through the creation of the *carte de visites*, which echoed public discourse surrounding marriage in the period.

Audience interest in midget weddings was multifaceted. Primarily, they were another form of entertainment and spectacle available for holidaymakers to engage with at seaside resorts. Their display, in conjunction with showmen, other freakery entertainers, and even elephants, revealed that they brought together the ceremonial traditions associated with average weddings, and elements concomitant in freak shows, creating an innovative form of spectacle, unique to the period. Nonetheless, midget weddings became a locus of discourse for wider ideologies surrounding the institution of marriage, which was temporarily declining in the 1920s. There were inherent concerns that this would contribute to the degeneration of British society, due to increasing rates of immorality and promiscuity. Midget weddings at seaside resorts established marriage as central to

²⁵⁹ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Culture: England 1918 -1951* (Oxford, 2000), p. 518-519.

romantic and sexual relationships. The childlikeness of the midgets encouraged the public to perceive sexual relationships within the confines of a marital partnership. Particularly, as children, innocent and naïve, would not have considered romantic relationships outside the confines of marriage.

Sex

Human interest in midgets extended beyond their nuptials. People were also curious about the sexual experiences of midgets in the 1930s, despite the correlation between midgets and children, due to their small size. Walter Bodin, in *The World of Midgets*, addresses the incongruous nature of the sexuality and childlikeness of midgets. He suggests,

Our first reaction to these questions may be one of revulsion. This is due to our subconscious association of littleness with childlikeness. This midget's size suggests a child entirely unconscious of sex in its simplest manifestations. And to consider little children in the throes of love, to relate them in any way to potential parenthood is unthinkable to normal, healthy men and women.²⁶⁰

The public regarded midgets as having childlike qualities and therefore it is vital to assess the relationship between this and people's interest in their sexual experiences within the context of the seaside resort. Although, their bodies were

²⁶⁰ Bodin and Hershey, *The World of Midgets*, p. 79.

described as 'child-like', holidaymakers invariably thought about how midgets gratified their sexual passions. However, Bodin continued,

when we realize that adult midgets are mature human beings – veritable miniature copies of ourselves – these questions lose their morbid implications and are entirely healthy and natural.²⁶¹

This demonstrated that spectators regarded midgets as smaller versions of themselves. Although their freakishness was in their smallness and they associated midgets with childlikeness, holidaymakers related themselves to the midgets on display, despite their evident differences. It was, for this reason, that midgets were regarded as having adult passions.

Due to their association with average adults, audiences used midgets as a site for negotiating their own sexuality and sexual desires. *The World of Midgets* disclosed that audiences inevitably considered their own sexual relationships, when considering midgets' desires.

The sight of midgets invariably causes normal sized men and women to speculate on their sex lives. It is among their first reactions. They wonder first, if these little men and women are normally sexed, with normal desires, and, second, if they are capable of indulging their desires in a normal way.²⁶²

²⁶¹ Bodin and Hershey, *The World of Midgets*, p. 79.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 79.

Therefore, it is clear that holidaymakers considered what was 'normal' and 'abnormal' within their own sexual relationships. Comprehending issues to do with sexuality, in relation to midgets, allowed the public to contemplate what was considered 'normal' and what was considered 'deviant' behaviour. Cate Haste argues that there was a redefinition of the moral boundaries regarding sexual behaviour in the first half of the twentieth century, which caused considerable anxiety. Haste suggests, 'Since the early years of the century, the individual's right to personal sexual freedom has been strengthened and the state's power to intervene in private morality in the interests of social order and stability has been reduced.'²⁶³ This was pertinent within the seaside environment where people were more likely to engage in promiscuous sexual behaviour, due to their freedom from rigid societal restrictions.²⁶⁴

Seaside holidays gave young people more opportunities to exercise greater sexual freedom than ever before. The institution of marriage was under pressure following 1914; there was increasing number of single women, and concern surrounding homosexuality, promiscuity, and perversion.²⁶⁵ Yet, as Katherine Holden reveals, 'marriage was deemed the only safe container for male sexuality, enabling men to preserve and nurture their 'best powers' and to produce healthy

²⁶³ Cate Haste, *Rules of Desire: Sex in Britain World War I to the Present* (London, 1994) p. 4.

²⁶⁴ John K. Walton, *The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 3-4.

²⁶⁵ Helen Jones, *Health and Society in Twentieth Century Britain* (London, 2014) p. 35-36; Janet Fink, 'For Better or For Worse? Unmarried Motherhood in Mid-Twentieth century Popular British Film and Fiction' *Women's History Review* 20:1 (2011), p. 145; See Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain 1918-1960* (Oxford, 2008).

children essential to the survival of the British race.²⁶⁶ One of the ways in which midget troupes were displayed encouraged people to consider sexuality within the confines of a marital relationship.

Fears surrounding sexual immorality and indecency permeated many exhibitions at seaside resorts. For example, waxworks, such as those at Tussaud's in Blackpool, advised holidaymakers, particularly the working classes, of the consequences of licentious conduct. The museum warned of the dangers and consequences of unprotected, premarital sex. Therefore, it used concepts of morality and evangelistic virtues to teach boundaries to the working classes, who were supposedly unable to control themselves within a space of diminished societal constraints.²⁶⁷ This was illustrated in a guidebook that discussed the effect of masturbation and described the 'eternal damnation' for those who habitually masturbated. It encouraged people to maintain their self-control and self-dignity, warning them of the consequences of their actions.²⁶⁸ Furthermore, it maintained that attendance at the museum would help to limit inappropriate sexual relations associated with seaside resort holidays, through educating the working classes. While this alleviated some concern about sexual promiscuity, there continued to be noteworthy unease around the topic.

²⁶⁶ Katherine Holden, 'Nature takes no notice of morality': Singleness and Married Love in Interwar Britain', *Women's History Review* 20:1 (2011), p. 483.

²⁶⁷ John Walton, *The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester, 2000), p. 16.

²⁶⁸ Gary Cross, *Worktowners at Blackpool* (London, 1990), p. 199.

The interest and concern surrounding sexual deviancy in coastal locations, pervaded public discourse surrounding midgets. People were disproportionately interested in their sexual experiences, including whether they had intercourse with people of average height, whether they had a 'normal' sexual appetite, and how they conducted their romantic relationships. The *World of Midgets* confirmed that those of small stature did not confine themselves to having sex with midgets.²⁶⁹ Bodin established that, 'With them as us, love is a tyrant when ruled by passion, and midgets like us, mate as love dictates.'²⁷⁰ In fact, readers were informed that, 'Midgets love and are loved and enjoy the fruits of love. They have their Don Juans and their Jezebels.'²⁷¹ For example, within the freak show, there were a number of relationships (fabricated or not) between midgets and giants, which accentuated the difference between the two with unusual bodies. However, these also presented intriguing questions about the logistics of their relationships.

As midgets were presented in the context of the marital relationship, audiences were expected to situate their understanding of midget sexuality within matrimony. Arguably, their childlikeness reflected the virtuousness of childhood. This suggested that they were expected to enter marriage with purity and innocence. Furthermore, this facilitated the promotion of sex within the marital relationship, subsequently encouraging the people to place their own sexuality within marriage. This was a fundamental part of nationhood in the twentieth

²⁶⁹ Bodin and Hershey, *The World of Midgets*, p. 80.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 79-80.

century. Marriage was the only acceptable vessel for children and family was a crucial aspect of national identity. Thus, through promoting marriage, and sexuality within it, this endorsed the importance of family, which in turn led to a stronger, healthier nation.

Holidays by the Sea: Family, Recreation, and Health

Midget troupes were constructed in a variety of ways for spectators to engage with them and the way they were perceived was dependent on the setting they were in and the activities they were doing. As well as providing entertainment for tourists, they emphasised the importance of engaging with the healthy and wholesome seaside activities associated with the coast. As with the infrastructure of midget villages, the activities that midgets took part in denoted the centrality of Britishness, family, and domesticity. The concept of a wholesome family, extended not only to the moral, but physical health of the British nation. These complex societal ideals and attitudes were encapsulated through the images and reports on the midget troupes taking part in popular seaside activities such as swimming. Unlike many of the other freak show performers who dominated the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, midgets were often seen partaking in an assortment of recreational pursuits that holidaymakers could watch. Whether operating rides at Pleasure Beach, playing on the sands, encouraging holidaymakers to pursue seaside leisure activities such as swimming, or entertaining through singing, dancing, and performance, the numerous ways in which midgets were socially and culturally constructed conveyed meaning and significance to the tourists who observed them.

A newspaper article reporting on Lester's midgets in 1938, noted their activities at popular seaside destinations, revealing their inclination towards comedy, sport, and swimming. The paper declared,

Besides being a very healthy amusement, this love of swimming is a fine advertisement, especially at the seaside, for a troupe of almost nude midgets running the sands certainly attracts attention.²⁷²

The article demonstrates midgets' popularity at British seaside resorts and their promotion of healthy recreational activities by the coast. Furthermore, they had their own spaces, in the form of midget villages, as an added attraction for holidaymakers. Beliefs surrounding rational recreation and maintaining an acceptable standard of health and fitness were central tropes of national identity, evident in the seaside space. Therefore, it is clear that midget troupes not only endorsed the appropriateness of swimming as a wholesome family activity, but also promoted actively engaging with the national responsibility to preserve health. Furthermore, the newspaper report demonstrated the provision of activities and resources at the seaside that reduced the debilitating consequences of the metropolis, such as exercise, as well as exposure to sunlight and fresh air.

The description of the midgets as 'almost nude' revealed the association between nudity, swimming, and health. Nina J. Morris discusses the meaning attached to the relationship between the body and environment. She outlines the

²⁷² DWARFS, MIDGETS, GIANTS Named Only Ref: MM/REF/TH/SU/8P/4 LESTER'S ROYAL MIDGETS. 'HABITS OF CLEVER LITTLE PEOPLE', 26 Feb 1938. Bristol Theatre Collection. 158

way in which naturist practices reflected contemporary European-wide debates on urbanism, nationhood, health, and nature, associated with the Sunlight League of 1924.²⁷³ The publication of *Man and Sunlight* by Hans Suren in 1927, promoted naturalistic ideas.²⁷⁴ It argued that the medical profession needed to embrace a more 'holistic' approach to health and the body. Suren suggested that this included embracing the benefits of sunlight and fresh air, to improve the health of the nation.²⁷⁵ He believed that twentieth century bodies were negatively affected by degenerative urban conditions and '...promoted a moral geography of landscape in which the contemporary city was considered to be an unsuitable environment for humans...'²⁷⁶ He believed that society would become devoid of health and strength if they did not get enough sunlight. This provoked concern because of the link between industrialism and physical degeneration, which ultimately reflected the fragility of the Empire.²⁷⁷ Morris contends that '*Man and Sunlight* was published in Britain in a period when the expansion of leisure and recreation in the natural environment was being welcomed as an opportunity for the culture of citizenship, and celebrated as a powerful antidote to the harmful impact urban life was perceived to have on the human body.'²⁷⁸ Fresh air, sunlight, and exposure to the elements, was believed to improve both physical and moral health. Moreover, it

²⁷³ Nina J. Morris, 'Naked in Nature: Naturism, Nature and the Senses in Early 20th Century Britain' *Cultural Geographies* 16:283 (2009), p. 283.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

was understood to improve character, spirituality, and morality, leading to a well-rounded and wholesome nation. The seaside resorts facilitated the permeation of these ideas into society and presented holidaymakers with the space to enjoy the natural environment, away from health-deteriorating cities. The midgets reflected this as they were viewed within natural and healthy seaside environment.

The promotion of the benefits of sunlight and fresh air on the body undoubtedly influenced holidaymakers who were keen to avail themselves of the health benefits associated with the coast. Removed from the degeneration that prevailed in urban areas, with time to spend outside during long summer days, there was greater interest in the benefits of exposing skin to the elements. Carter contends, 'the Sunlight League tirelessly campaigned in the interwar years for mixed bathing and an end to restrictive dress codes at seaside resorts and new lidos.'²⁷⁹ As the century progressed, within seaside spaces, showing extra skin became more appropriate than in metropolitan areas. Therefore, midget troupes playing and swimming on the beach, promoted swimming and the exposure to sunlight and fresh air, which was endorsed as health inducing throughout the 1930s. Whilst it was not appropriate for a fully-grown adult to parade on the beach with little or no clothing, the connection between midgets and childlikeness encouraged people to consider it appropriate. This helped to alleviate

²⁷⁹ Simon Carter, 'Leagues of Sunshine: Sunlight, Health and Environment' in Virginia Berridge and Martin Gorsky, *Environment, Health and History* (Basingstoke, 2012) p. 110. 160

condemnation from people worried about morality and the association of nakedness with inappropriate sexual behaviour.

Holidaymakers collected images of the midgets taking part in swimming lessons at lidos. The assortment of memorabilia available for spectators to buy as souvenirs of their holiday included images of Fred Roper with his midget troupe as seen in Figure 2.7 and 2.8. The *carte de visites* culturally constructed the midgets for contemporary audiences. Figure 2.7 showed the midget troupe preparing to dive into an open-air swimming pool, with Fred Roper beside them as they played on the diving board.²⁸⁰ Not only did the images promote the public discourse surrounding exercise and sunlight, but they also revealed the importance of family in encouraging health. Figure 2.7 and 2.8 portrayed Roper in an overtly paternalistic way, as if he was teaching his troupe how to swim, perhaps inferring that British holidaymakers taught their children how to swim during their annual summer holiday.²⁸¹ The contrast between Fred Roper, the manager of the midget performers, and the midgets themselves accentuated how small they were in comparison with a fully-grown male adult. Although the midgets were adult in age, the image represented them as children. Their facial expressions conveyed innocent

²⁸⁰ *Carte de Visit* of Fred Roper and Seven of his 20 Wonder Midgets, c. 1920. Wellcome Library, London, EPH499.

²⁸¹ *Carte de Visit* of Fred Roper and his Wonder Midgets, c.1920. Wellcome Library, London, EPH499.

naivety, excitement, and playfulness, which suggested that they enjoyed the activities available at the seaside resort.²⁸²

²⁸² Additionally, the images revealed the father-like nature of showmen who looked after their actors and performers. Due to the association between freak shows and mistreatment of those increasingly being understood as disabled, it was important for sideshow managers to be seen to have a close bond, and caring relationship with their performers. These images promoted the affectionate relationship between freaks and showman, demonstrating to members of the public they were not exploiting people with unusual bodies.

Figure 2.7. *Carte de Visit* of Fred Roper and his Wonder Midgets.

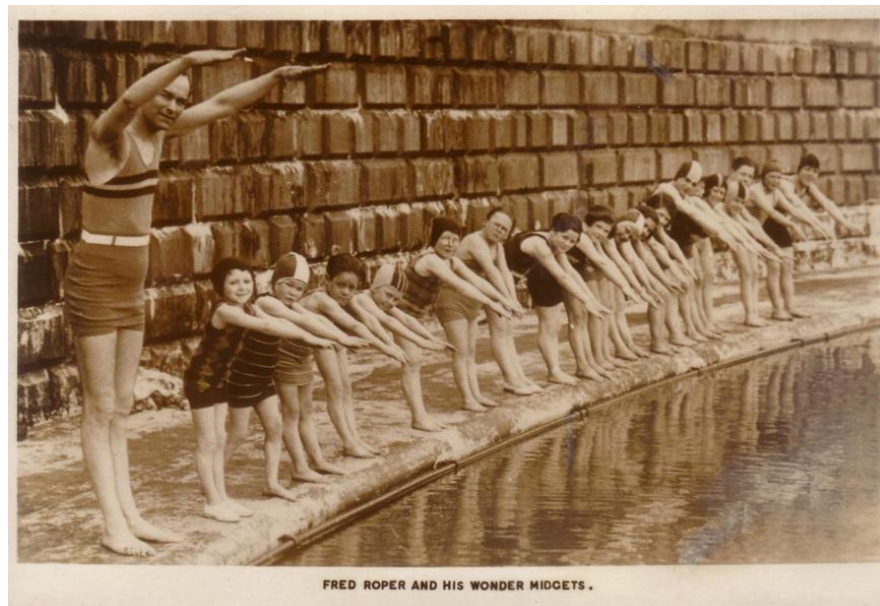


Figure 2.8. *Carte de Visit* of Fred Roper and Seven of his 20 Wonder Midgets.



The display of midget troupes alongside their manager reflected the changing cultural construction of the father-child relationship. As with the visual culture associated with midget weddings, the images of Roper and his troupe demonstrated these instrumental changes.²⁸³ The relationship between masculinity and domesticity at the beginning of the twentieth century was complex. Martin Francis suggests that 'Men constantly travelled back and forward across the frontier of domesticity, if only in the realm of imagination, attracted by the responsibilities of marriage or fatherhood, but also enchanted by fantasies of the energetic life and homo-social camaraderie of the adventure hero.'²⁸⁴ The growing significance of men in the domestic sphere was not only associated with normative masculinity in the inter-war period, but was synonymous with the construction of national identity.²⁸⁵ Laura King argues that there were a number of reasons for the changing role of the father in British society between 1914-1960.²⁸⁶ Men were regarded as crucial to the moral and social development of children and fundamental to the overall health of British society.²⁸⁷ Due to the belief that fathers were central to the healthy development of the body and mind, men had an ever-increasing role in childcare tasks and subsequently, a greater role in family life. Particularly in the latter part of the mid-twentieth century, the family became central to rebuilding

²⁸³ Scott McCracken, *Masculinities, Modernist Fiction and the Urban Public Sphere* (Manchester, 2007), p. 6.

²⁸⁴ Martin Francis, 'The Domestication of the Male? Recent Research on Nineteenth-and Twentieth century British Masculinity' *The Historical Journal* 45:3 (2002), p. 643.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 641.

²⁸⁶ See Laura King, *Family Men: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Britain, 1914-1960* (Oxford, 2015).

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

British society and post-war reconstruction. Consequently, this led to emphasis of the father-child relationship that associated masculine identity to the domestic setting.²⁸⁸ King reveals that, 'The father-child relationship was imbued with greater social, cultural and psychological meaning. The new meaning given to fatherhood could be found in the press from the mid-1930s, as commentators regularly called for a greater status for fathers.'²⁸⁹ The father-figure of Roper reflected the changing role of father's in twentieth century society.

The altering patterns of leisure in British society, was significant to the refashioning of familial interactions.²⁹⁰ The father-child relationship was unique due to the limited time a father spent with the rest of the family within the domestic setting. Leisure was crucial to the nurturing of families because it provided the time and space in which these ideas could be negotiated, understood, and appreciated. Seaside holidays provided families with time together and an extended period when fathers could be involved in instilling virtues and values into their children. By the 1930s the father-child relationship was becoming increasingly important.²⁹¹ Therefore, the burgeoning centrality of the father figure in social and cultural life was emphasised in popular exhibitions of midgets at seaside resorts, which often depicted midgets standing beside their own paternal influence. Summer holidays enabled men to practice these ideals and develop healthy family relationships.

²⁸⁸ King, *Family Men*, p. 3.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

The portrayal of Fred Roper as a paternalistic influence over the childlike midgets reveals the nature of the father (or father-figure) at the time. Both midgets and their showman promoted the positive nature of a father's domestic position as head of family and his close relationship with his children. The display revealed the benefits of a summertime excursion to the coast, where holidaymakers could enjoy quality time with their families. It encouraged fathers to teach their children to swim, or other such activities, which promoted health and family. Ultimately, this enabled British men to participate in their new domestic position, asserting a new form of masculinity and affirming their national identity.

Conclusion

Seaside holidays in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries were popular with the British public. Fathers and mothers brought their children for an enjoyable time together at the coast. Against a backdrop of the changing role of men and women in British society, a move from patriarchal to companionate marriage, and a rising level of divorce as the century progressed, there was concern surrounding the degeneration and immorality of the British race.²⁹² As Helen Jones argues, 'The wildest rumours abounded about the extent of extra-marital sex and preceded any upturn in the illegitimacy rates, but once the rates began to creep up (albeit not as fast as was feared) they supposedly provided the evidence for those trumpeting their warnings from the high moral plains.'²⁹³ Nevertheless, following

²⁹² Helen Jones, *Health and Society in Twentieth Century Britain* (London, 2014), p. 35-36.

²⁹³ Jones, *Health and Society in Twentieth century Britain*, p. 36.

the First World War, there was a move towards domesticity and the home became central to constructing a national identity. Part of this, was ensuring that the public were keeping their bodies and minds healthy. Through the analysis of images, film clips, and newspapers, this chapter has argued that midget troupes reflected many prominent ideas surrounding marriage, domesticity, and recreation in the first half of the twentieth century. Midget weddings were some of the most spectacular forms of entertainment in the summer season and thousands of people gathered to see the bride and groom, alongside their freak show entourage, leave the church. The ceremonial traditions and spectacle were similar to weddings that the public was acquainted with. However, they had additional factors, which associated them with the freak show. The celebration of midget weddings promoted marriage in the wake of its decline. It endorsed matrimony to the younger, single population. Moreover, it encouraged married people to consider the sanctity of their own wedding vows. The widespread use of birth control and the rising rates of illegitimate births signified greater liberation and sexual freedom amidst the British public. Midget weddings promoted the consideration of sexual relationships only within the confines of a marital partnership. Their association with childlikeness and naivety demonstrated ideas surrounding domesticity to onlookers and holidaymakers. Subsequently, this encouraged holidaymakers to consider domesticity, particularly with many of the displays placed in specialist midget villages. Domesticity conveyed the meanings associated with a stable family unit, namely happiness and healthiness. Therefore, when midget troupes were depicted taking part in wholesome seaside activities, they promoted the ideas of wellness

and recreation that dominated coastal locations. Midget troupes, as miniature versions of average-sized British people, conceptualised complex attitudes towards national identity, marriage, sexual experiences, and healthiness in their displays, permitting audiences to consider themselves in relation to those with unusual bodies, who both performed and were present in seaside spaces.

Chapter 3

From Fasting Vicars to Starving Brides: Starvation Performers at Seaside Resorts, 1900-1950.

Introduction

In 1934, the *Lancashire Evening Post* reported on the strong public objection against the sideshows that dominated the Golden Mile in Blackpool. The report emphasised the efforts of the local corporation to rid Central Beach of disreputable amusements. It described one of the more controversial exhibits displayed on the front, known as the 'starving brides'. The report noted,

This section is known as Central Beach and former residential houses have been turned into side-shows where such exhibitions as starving brides in glass coffins, newly married couples starving to death...and other shows which are considered undesirable are run. In some cases, young men and women who are alleged to have recently got married lie on beds in separate glass cases clad only in pyjamas and their only sustenance is, apparently, mineral water and cigarettes. Prizes are offered of as much as £250 to any couple who can fast in the 'coffins' for more than 30 days.²⁹⁴

²⁹⁴ *Lancashire Evening Post*, Saturday 08 September, 1934, p. 5.

Displayed in barrels, glass cases, or coffins, the starvation performers were an integral feature of the seaside freak show and were often presented alongside other entertainers.²⁹⁵

As forms of spectacle in the category of 'living natural wonders' they were exhibited amidst acrobats, illusionists, ventriloquists, fire-eaters, clowns, quacks, and fortune-tellers. Apart from freaks of nature – giants, dwarfs, Siamese twins, extremely fat people, women with two faces, men with three hands, etc. – young and old came to gaze at emaciated people.²⁹⁶

Throughout the nineteenth century, observers were fascinated in those with anomalous bodies. Whilst starvation performers were a twentieth century phenomenon, extraordinarily thin men were displayed as part of the Victorian freak show. They were frequently exhibited alongside exceedingly fat women to exacerbate the disparities between the two, making the abnormal bodies seemingly even more unusual.

An account of one 'living skeleton' was published in the *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*; it described his gaunt appearance. 'Every bone in his face stood out against the skin, for there seemed to be no flesh, and his clothes hung as loosely on him as they would have upon a skeleton.'²⁹⁷ Although emaciated

²⁹⁵ Both men and women starved themselves in front of holidaymakers. However, starving women appear to be more popular than starving men.

²⁹⁶ Walter Vandereycken and Ron Van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls: The History of Self-Starvation* (London, 1994), p. 77.

²⁹⁷ *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, Wednesday 24 August 1892, p. 4.

people displayed themselves in front of audiences as 'the Living Skeleton', they did not actively starve themselves for long periods of time; they were already extremely slender.²⁹⁸ In fact, some thin men ate vast quantities of food, to demonstrate that they had not been starving themselves. Therefore, displays of self-starvation at seaside resorts in the twentieth century, whilst associated with the thin men of the nineteenth century, were not wholly comparable. They had new constructions, meanings, and representations, which reflected contemporary British society. This ensured that they were innovative and culturally relevant to the audiences who frequented the shows.

Despite their popularity with the public, the starvation performers engendered anxieties with the local authorities. A member of the Blackpool Town Council, concerned about the reflection that these exhibitions had on the resort as a health and leisure space, commented on the display, stating,

My view is that when people come to Blackpool they come for a healthy and invigorating holiday, and to see fat women on show and thin ones who are starving in coffins and barrels, must be, to say the least of it, not nice.²⁹⁹

The starving performers revealed broader concerns about the poverty and malnutrition of the working classes, the physical deterioration of the British race,

²⁹⁸ *Dublin Medical Press*, Wednesday 02 December 1863, p. 32; *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, Monday 31 January 1887, p. 2; 'A Living Skeleton', *Banbury Advertiser*, Thursday 29 April 1886, p. 7.

²⁹⁹ *Lancashire Evening Post*, Saturday 08 September, 1934, p. 5.

and the moral degradation associated with spectating curiosity exhibits. It is unsurprising that the 'starving brides' produced debate and disagreement from within the local establishment. Despite enduring contention, displays of people starving themselves in glass cases or barrels were a prevalent and favoured form of seaside amusement. Holidaymakers gazed at those on display and thousands of individuals were recorded as visiting the booths each day to stare at the emaciated bodies. Moreover, the public attempted to comprehend both how, and why, the young newlyweds were risking their health through fasting for elongated periods of time.³⁰⁰

This chapter examines starvation exhibits at Blackpool, Margate, and South-end-on-Sea to understand their meanings, representations, and constructions for British holidaymakers.³⁰¹ Through situating starvation performers within the context of seaside holidays, the chapter demonstrates the influence that the seaside space had on the fashioning of these displays; it establishes that health discourse was prominent in the social significance of British seaside holidays and the activities that were available to tourists. Furthermore, the chapter investigates how holidaymakers comprehended the displays of self-starvation, through the association of undernourishment with poverty and malnutrition, the degeneration of the British race, and the rising unacceptability of staring at exhibitions of freakery.

³⁰⁰ Starvation performers were not just popular at British seaside resorts but there are reports of fasting men and women throughout Britain in the twentieth century.

³⁰¹ Performers often travelled between seaside resorts throughout the summer seasons.

Utilising scholarly debates on the history of the freak show, seaside resorts, and the body and wellness, alongside contemporary medical and health discourse, this chapter seeks to assess the public perception of starvation exhibitions. It examines why women in particular were intrigued by the starvation performances. Additionally, it analyses the subsequent controversy around the displays, from those concerned about the effect on the seaside environment. Firstly, the chapter will briefly outline the history of self-starvation as a reflection on society and culture, demonstrating the association between Victorian fasting girls and the seaside starvation performers. Secondly, it will explore the relationship between starvation displays and concerns about the health of the British population in the wake of the Hungry England debate. Thirdly, it will investigate the association between starvation and death. Finally, it will assess the public outcry that accompanied the 'beasty little shows'.³⁰²

The History of Self-Starvation

There have been documented accounts of self-starvation since the medieval period, which expose its profound socio-cultural meanings for contemporary societies.³⁰³ For example, prior to starving as an amusement, it was primarily perceived as a religious miracle or a divine sign from God. More recently, in the nineteenth

³⁰² *Hull Daily Mail*, Saturday 12 October, 1934, p. 7.

³⁰³ Although self-starvation is currently understood as a psychological condition (Anorexia Nervosa), it must be understood in terms of motivations within its social, cultural, and economic context.

and twentieth centuries, hunger striking was a method through which to take control in political matters.³⁰⁴ It is clear that historically, self-starvation was representative of the broader discourses that uncovered the collective beliefs or anxieties that were most prevalent at the time.

In the medieval period, people had a multifaceted relationship with food; it had social, cultural, and religious inferences. Predominantly, food was not always readily available and this had physical ramifications for the poorest in society. Consequently, having sufficient or excess food was considered a sign of prosperity, which was, undoubtedly, attributed to blessings from God. However, through refraining from gluttony, people could express their personal piety to the outside world. Abstaining from food was equated to holiness, while overindulgence was regarded as sinful. Rather, those who could were expected to provide for the poorest in society. Through philanthropic acts such as giving food to the poor, benevolent individuals could demonstrate their wealth, religiosity, holiness, and devotion to God. Therefore, food went beyond physical necessity and was imbued with social value.

The significance attached to food made it particularly valuable to women, who utilised it to ensure their individual godliness and to garner power within the

³⁰⁴ For example, to achieve political prisoner status for Suffragettes.

family. Joan Jacobs Brumberg indicates that sustained fasting was considered a female miracle and that religious women gained veneration, reverence, and respect, due to their devotion to the Christian Eucharist.³⁰⁵ Through manipulating their bodies they proved their religiosity and devotion to God. This ultimately increased their standing in society as they proved their value, worth, and devoutness through controlling their bodies.³⁰⁶ Food was emblematic for women and it permitted them to express their internal thoughts, emotions, and beliefs through exploiting their bodies as a form of communication. Symbolic food practices (such as fasting) enabled women to exert control within the family through defining their religious vocations as separate from their spouse. Through controlling their nutritional intake, they acquired control and status, which enabled them to become empowered individuals. Thus, the female relationship with food and self-starvation exposed the place of women in medieval society. Although there were different incarnations of self-starvation in various periods and cultures, the relationship between the individual, food, and society continued throughout history.

From Religion to Entertainment: The Case of Sarah Jacobs 'The Welsh Fasting Girl'

By the mid-nineteenth century, there was a subtle shift between self-starvation for religious purposes and fasting for entertainment. Victorian fasting girls

³⁰⁵ Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa* (London, 1989), p. 41.

³⁰⁶ Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls*, (London, 1989).

were a variation on the miraculous female starvers from the medieval period; they were usually female adolescents that disclosed that they could survive without food for an extended period of time. In an era in which women were unable to verbally express their opinions, abstaining from food allowed them to communicate through controlling their bodies. Some historians, such as Mari Williams, consider Victorian fasting girls as initial instances of anorexia nervosa, an eating disorder characterised by low body weight, a reluctance to eat, and a strong desire to be thin.³⁰⁷ However, contemporaries claimed that the Victorian fasting girls were human miracles, with mystical or religious powers, similar to medieval fasting women who were regarded as supernatural in their ability to abstain from food. Therefore, it is evident that there was an enduring conviction that self-starvation had continued religious meaning. Yet, fasting girls were also forms of entertainment for those who visited them to see the unusual spectacle.

Sarah Jacobs, the famous Welsh fasting girl, exemplified the connection between religious or miraculous connotations of starvation and entertainment. Jacobs became ill after contracting scarlet fever in 1867 and subsequently found it difficult to eat. By October of the same year, she began to refuse all food, but surprisingly continued to look healthy. She seemed to defy all logic, sustaining health despite declining all nutritional intake. After months of not eating, people began to visit the

³⁰⁷ Mari A. Williams, 'Jacob, Sarah (1857–1869)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, May 2005 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/89662>, accessed 11 Nov 2016].

‘female miracle’ and she became an object of curiosity as the public attempted to comprehend her miraculous fast. People were fascinated in how she could sustain health without nutrition, leading them to religious interpretations of the fast.

Many came to visit Jacobs as a form of pilgrimage. She was a sign of spirituality and as it appeared that she could survive on spiritual devotion, Jacobs was a living example of the biblical adage that states, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God’.³⁰⁸ The people who travelled to see her placed their gifts on her bed and surrounded her with flowers, while she read and quoted the bible for them. This continued for two years and people believed that she was a miracle child. As her case gained further interest, the local vicar and medical men decided to watch over Jacobs, to ensure that she was not secretly eating, and therefore deceiving the public. She did not admit to fraud, lying, pride, religious conviction, or a medical complaint, but her health deteriorated rapidly following the introduction of continuous supervision of the fast.

Doctors and religious men observed what was happening to her in an attempt to conceptualise her ritualistic fast. Both the medical profession and the church endeavored to provide explanation for her ability to, apparently, survive without sustenance. This mirrored the struggle between medicine and religion in

³⁰⁸ Matthew 4:4 (New International Version).

the Victorian period, when medical advancements and theories were eclipsing religious rationalisations of disease. The display revealed the discourse between religion and medicine, as medical men sought control of the body aside from religious vindications of the miraculous fast. Additionally, it exposed the innovative research and knowledge on the body and health in nineteenth century medicine.

The medical profession and the public alike debated whether Jacobs' elongated starvation was disingenuous. Newspapers frequently reported on the case and commented on the authenticity of her fast. One article noted that doctors assumed that Jacobs was telling the truth.

This girl who, it is alleged, has taken neither food nor physic for nearly two years and a half, continues to exist. She lies in a state of semi-consciousness, and at times suffers a good deal of pain, to alleviate which morphia is said to be resorted to. Notwithstanding, the harsh things that have been said by outsiders, those best in a position to judge have still no reason to believe that the case is one of imposture.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁹ 'Fasting Girls' *Driffield Times* Saturday 30th September 1876 p. 4.
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While some medical men considered the starvation of Sarah Jacobs as impossible, others believed that she had not eaten.³¹⁰ Jacobs captivated people's imagination because they were unaware of how she was able to maintain health without adequate nutrition. Furthermore, they were uncertain of whether or not she was telling the truth. She was regarded as somewhat extraordinary for two reasons. Firstly, if she was being truthful, she demonstrated her ability to go without food, which ordinary people could not do. Secondly, if she was deceitful, she had misled her family, the medical profession, religious leaders, and the general public, which was, indisputably, entertaining. Whether or not there were scientific, medical, or religious reasons for her inability or unwillingness to eat, she was the object of curiosity and thus, was a form of entertainment

In December 1879, Jacobs died due to the effects of starvation. As can be seen in Figure 3.1, the front page of *The Illustrated Police News*, there was a vigil around her bed, attended by physicians and nurses, as she deteriorated rapidly following the medical control of her fast.³¹¹ An article in the *Cheltenham Chronicle* stated 'On one point all, except a few of the most skeptical, are agreed, and that is, that the girl did not exist at all without food for any great length of time; and that the story of her so-called fasting is simply an unmistakable fraud, for which the

³¹⁰ Sian Busby, *"A Wonderful Little Girl": The True Story of Sarah Jacob, the Welsh Fasting Girl* (London, 2003), p. 8.

³¹¹ Figure 3.1. 'The Welsh Fasting Girl', *The Illustrated Police News*.

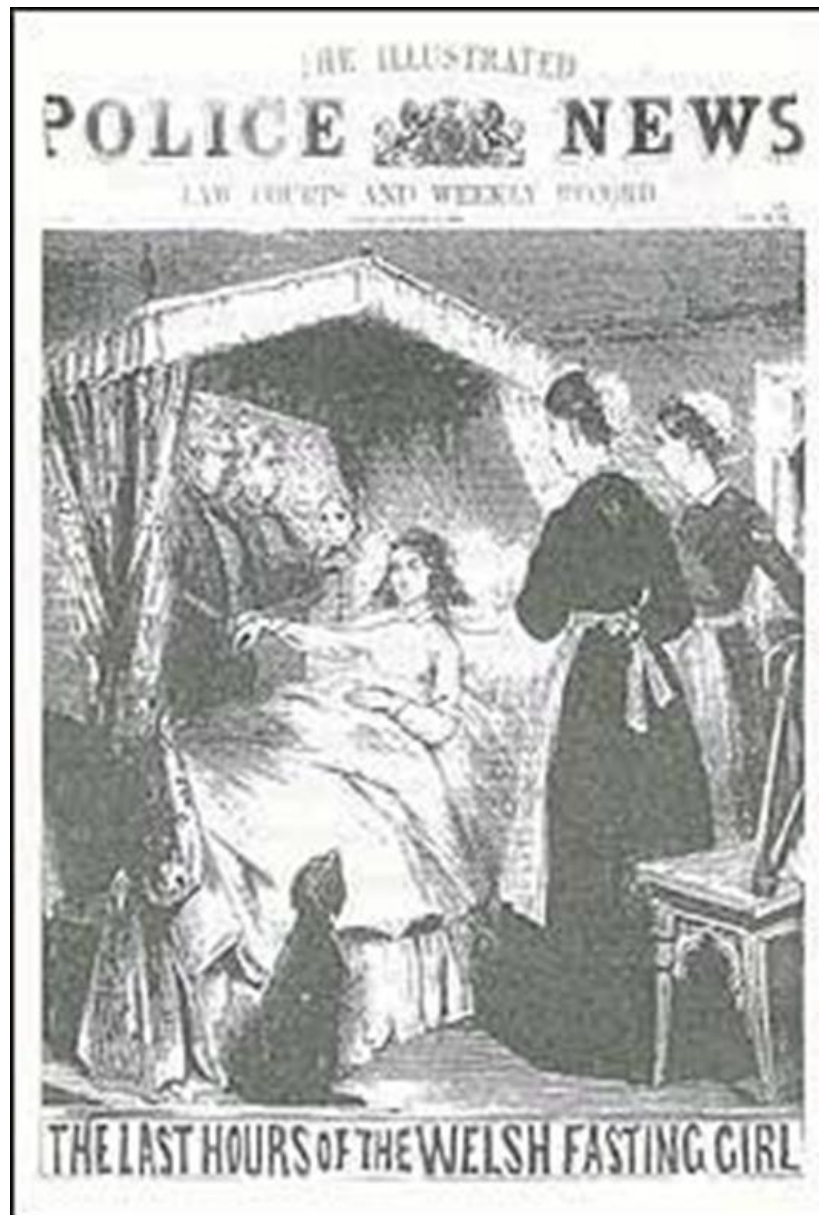
poor girl has paid the penalty with her life.³¹² Newspapers commented on the predicament, condemning the medics involved in her vigil.

The inquest on Sarah Jacobs, the Welsh fasting girl was opened at Pencader, near Carmarthen, to-day. Dr Thoman, who made a post mortem examination, found, on opening the deceased's chest, a layer of fat one inch thick. The chest, lungs, heart, liver, in fact all the organs were perfectly healthy. He found no malformation, nor any traces of disease. The medical testimony was unanimous that death resulted from exhaustion consequent on want of nourishment.³¹³

³¹² *Cheltenham Chronicle*, Tuesday 28 December, 1869, p. 2.

³¹³ *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, Wednesday 22 December 1869 p. 2

Figure 3.1. 'The Welsh Fasting Girl', *The Illustrated Police News*.



Following her death, most agreed that she had been secretly eating to maintain her health. Subsequently, there was an investigation into her demise and her parents were convicted of manslaughter. Whilst nobody could prove that they had purposefully starved their daughter, they were convicted as guilty of doing nothing to protect her.

Regardless of the debate over whether Jacobs had truly been fasting or not, her story reveals the complexity of fasting girls; whether they were a religious miracle, a medical marvel, or a locus of entertainment, they revealed broader discourses in British society. As doctors began to regulate, research, and explain cases of fasting girls, their interest in them grew. Physicians became increasingly fascinated in their behaviour, as they sought to repudiate the myth that women could go without food for long periods of time. Walter Vandereycken and Ron van Deth establish the ways in which doctors attempted to gain control of fasting.

Apart from hunger strikes, two rather bizarre forms of entertainment managed to withdraw emaciation and food abstinence from the physicians' direct sphere of influence. In the late nineteenth century, so-called 'living skeletons' and 'hunger artists' ('fasting artists') exploited their extreme emaciation and extraordinary food abstinence. Initially at fairs and later in circuses and amusement parks they were on view for payment. Of these two forms

of entertainment, the hunger artist is obviously a modern variant of the former fasting girls, for both created a furor by unequalled fasting and used it as a source of income.³¹⁴

Although doctors attempted to claim self-starvation out of the hands of the public, they could not control hunger artists. Self-starvation continued to be a widely accepted form of entertainment and was representative of a variety of other social and cultural matters in the twentieth century, such as anxieties surrounding thin bodies and concerns about the degeneration of health. Fasting artists continued to be physical manifestation of complex social, cultural, and religious debates.

Twentieth century Displays of Self-Starvation

The fasting girls of the nineteenth century transformed into the starvation performers of the twentieth century. Managed by itinerant showmen, the fasts could either conclude after a pre-established number of days or might continue for as long as the starvers could endure without succumbing to hunger.³¹⁵ These fasts were different from the illusive fasting girls who deceived audiences by attempting to demonstrate their supernatural power; starving artists actively demonstrated control over their bodies and food. The public believed that they were purposefully

³¹⁴ Walter Vandereycken and Ron van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls: The History of Self-Starvation* (London, 1994), pp. 75-76.

³¹⁵ Such as Luke Gannon, the famous Blackpool showman.

starving themselves as both a form of entertainment due to the signs that were posted around the booth, presenting details of the length of the fasts. However, they were also an illustration of control for the women who patronised the exhibit.

The 'starving brides' were young married couples displayed in coffin-like boxes, and were frequently exhibited alongside their wedding dresses and suits. They starved themselves for the entertainment of holidaymakers to make money for their honeymoons and new lives together. Figure 3.2 shows one of the 'starving brides' as she was exhibited in her glass cabinet; she looked emaciated and was surrounded by numerous curious onlookers.³¹⁶

The displays were described in a local Blackpool newspaper, such as *The Straits Times*. One such report published in 1934 noted,

³¹⁶ Figure 3.2. Photograph of the 'Starving Brides', Blackpool, The Local and Family History Centre, Blackpool Central Library, Cyril Critchlow Collection, The Starving Brides file.

Figure 3.2. Photograph of the 'Starving Brides'.



Exhibitions which will outrage the moral sense of Britain are taking place at Blackpool every day before the eyes of thousands... Starving brides and bridegrooms, newly married couples, who it is admitted are mostly forced by poverty to make themselves a public show are enclosed in partitioned glass cases in three establishments on the Central Beach and are attempting to fast for periods of 30 and 32 days for wagers of £250. The show is the same at all three places. Each exposes the fasting pair to the gaze of the multitude. The couple lie in single beds, which are separated by a wall. The crowd flies round and looks through a glass top... Bride and bridegrooms straight from the altar starve for 30 days, says one poster. What courage! Will they do it. "Honeymoon couple starves for love." is another message, and there are questionable gibes about "Two genuine little love birds."... In front of the show are two waxwork "brides," one radiant, the other in draggled wedding garments and of corpse-line lineaments "after starving."

As well as the waxworks outside the barrels, audiences were enticed to the display by the aggrandized posters that updated them on the health of the participants. Messages that were chalked onto a blackboard declared, 'How Long Can She Last', 'A Living Breathing Wonder', and 'The Pluckiest Girl in the World Now Lies Here In a Coffin', gaining the attention of potential spectators.³¹⁷ The advertisements and images associated with the display were reminiscent of posters or *carte*

³¹⁷ The National Archives Entertainment: Exhibitions of persons fasting (Ref: HO 45/16275). Kew, London.

de visites from Victorian period that utilised hyperbolic phrasing to attract audiences, denoting the continuation of freakery and persistent public curiosity in difference within seaside spaces.

The 'starving brides' and other fasting artists, such as the Rector of Stiffkey, were sensationalist forms of entertainment frequented by those interested in unusual bodies. A sideshow worker revealed how popular the displays were with holidaymakers.

"You would be flabbergasted," an assistant at one show told me, "if you came here at the weekend. On Saturday and Sunday we have queues of people waiting to come in."³¹⁸

Displays of self-starvation were an unusual form of entertainment, which provided escapism from the reality of everyday life. The *Ramsgate and Thanet Gazette* revealed that the starving brides in Margate were a form of distraction during the onset of war in 1914, noting that,

People even spared time to see the "fasting lady" and it was hoped the scares had worn themselves out.³¹⁹

³¹⁸ 'Brides Starve in Coffins', *The Straits Times*, 28 October 1934, p. 7.

³¹⁹ 'No Panic' in Margate, *Ramsgate and Thanet Gazette*, 15 August 1914, p. 6.

This revealed why people continued to be interested in freakery exhibits; it removed them from the reality of daily life and distracted them from other events. It provided them with amusement, entertainment, and fun.

As opposed to other forms of freakery, starvation acts permitted 'ordinary' or 'normal' people to 'enfreak' their bodies and to display them in front of paying audiences; the acts were not born with an unusual body but were taking part in an abnormal activity. This made them more controversial than other performers, such as fat ladies, as they were actively 'enfreaking' their bodies and putting their health in danger. Performers defied normality through inhibiting their natural desire to eat. Therefore, 'average' people transformed their bodies into something uncommon and used it to their economic advantage. Robert Bogdan suggests, 'One did not have to be born with an abnormality to be a popular or even outstanding exotic or aggrandized freak. While it was more difficult for other than born freaks to reach the height of their profession, many exhibits were completely normal except in the way they were presented. Others acquired their physical oddity for the purposes of exhibition. Still others learned to do unusual acts to make them eligible for the freak show.'³²⁰

³²⁰ Bogdan, *Freak Show* (London, 1990), p. 235.

Starving people were considered unusual for two main reasons. Firstly, their emaciated bodies were often much thinner than the average public, meaning they eventually possessed a physically abnormal body, similar to other freakery exhibitors such as the fat lady. It was not solely their extensive fasts that made them popular, but their extreme thinness attracted people to view their bodies.³²¹ However, their ability to go without substantial nutrition also added to mystery, intrigue, and curiosity that surrounded their exhibition; they were performing for their audiences and offering them an illusion of the miraculous. This was a fundamental component of the display as an entertainment ritual. Secondly, showmen constructed their displays with various anecdotes to interest people in the exhibit and encourage conversation amongst holidaymakers; there were champion fasters who continually starved for long periods of time, newly married starvers on Honeymoon, and people who starved for moral reasons, most notably the Rector of Stiffkey.

The establishment of starvation competitions permitted people to become part of the freak show through manipulating their physical form. However, when placed within twentieth century health discourse, the displays represented the dangers of malnutrition to the public. Nevertheless, this was somewhat ironic because, through putting themselves on display, performers were failing to nourish themselves properly, and therefore, endangering their health and wellness.

³²¹ Vandereycken and Van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls*, p. 77.
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Notwithstanding concerns about the safety of such displays, both men and women took part in fasts for a multitude of reasons. Furthermore, the exhibitions represented a plethora of concurrent debates in society, including the reasons why people were habitually fasting for the entertainment of others. An article in *The Straits Times* revealed that some of the participants were forced into displaying their bodies due to financial difficulties. The report suggested,

If anything is more nauseating than the shows themselves it is the cynical admissions that some of the men and women on view have been driven to make themselves public exhibits because of hard times, and the brazen cant that the showmen are really conferring a benefit on those unfortunate souls by giving them the chance of gaining money in this way.³²²

The exhibits produced polemic disputes about the morality of presenting vulnerable individuals as part of the freak show. The showmen responsible for the inauguration of the exhibitions supported their decision to provide performers with employment.

“They would starve on the streets, anyhow,” one proprietor told me. “Surely it is better for them to starve in a glass cabinet and get an opportunity to set

³²² ‘Brides Starve in Coffins’, *The Straits Times*, 28 October 1934, p. 7.

themselves up in life. I give generous compensation even if they cannot last out the full time.”³²³

The showmen endorsed their decision to display the fasting artists, as it afforded performers the prospect of providing for their financial needs. The couples had no other option, if they wished to marry and therefore, the proprietor’s validated their own morality by arguing that they were giving them the opportunity to make a substantial amount of money and set themselves up in life. However, controversy was unrelenting, as some regarded the displays as evidence of the privileged exploiting the weakest and most vulnerable in society. Moreover, showmen put the entertainers’ lives in danger and threatened their individual health. The display revealed the financial desperation that some people experienced and the lengths they would go to, to earn money. Therefore, it exposed fears surrounding the economic health of the nation, and subsequently, the physical deterioration of the British race in the first half of the twentieth century.

Malnutrition

A local newspaper article uncovered the association between starvation displays and apprehensions about poverty and malnutrition throughout the working classes in 1930s Britain.

³²³ ‘Brides Starve in Coffins’, *The Straits Times*, 28 October 1934, p. 7.

I talked with a young man whose business it apparently is to 'lecture' to the patrons of one of these shows. He told me an amazing story of how his proprietor has a list of couples who are anxious to get married but have no means of doing so apart from some such help as may accrue from one of those fasting wagers or 'compensation.'

'Some of them,' he said, 'are literally starving.' He related how his proprietor organized the wedding for couples who wished to be married away from their home towns, there was a wedding breakfast, the proprietor paying all expenses.

'They go from the wedding breakfast,' he said, straight to the cabinet and there they are put on view. The bride's dress, veil, and shoes are always hung up in front just as you see these now.³²⁴

Although there was public anxiety about hunger in the Victorian period, following the Boer War in 1899, there was even more noteworthy deliberation surrounding the undernourishment of army recruits and the degeneration of public health. While numerous men volunteered to fight as part of the war effort, many

³²⁴ 'Brides Starve in Coffins', *The Straits Times*, 28 October 1934, p. 7.

were prohibited due to ill-health. Pat Thane reports that over one-third of volunteers for the armed forces throughout the Boer War were rejected due to physical inadequacy; they were either too short or too thin, which was directly linked to the effects of malnutrition.³²⁵ In 1903, the Inter-departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration was established to investigate the reasons why recruitment was so problematic at the end of the nineteenth century. The report showed no evidence of decreasing physical health but it signaled substantial anxiety amongst contemporaries concerned about the physical deterioration of the British race.³²⁶ Although the report suggested that there was little evidence of physical deterioration, it posited that living and working conditions needed to be improved. Jay Winter notes 'No observer of political debate in early twentieth century Britain could have failed to notice the frequency with which the theme of the relationship between Imperial power and public health was discussed.'³²⁷ Thus, it was evident that maintaining a healthy weight had wider nationwide implications; it was vital to procuring a strong nation within an international setting.

In the early years of the twentieth century, there were nutritional scientific discoveries which developed a better scientific understanding of the relationship

³²⁵ Pat Thane, *The Foundations of the Welfare State*, (Basingstoke, 2004), p. 64.

³²⁶ See Vanessa Heggie, 'Lies, Damn Lies, and Manchester's Recruiting Statistics: Degeneration as "Urban Legend" in Victorian and Edwardian Britain' *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 63:2 (2008) pp. 178-216; Although recruitment statistics have been problematised, it is evident that they caused significant controversy in British society in the 1920s and 1930s.

³²⁷ Jay Winter, 'Military Fitness and Civilian Health in Britain during the First World War' *Journal of Contemporary History*, 15:2 (1980), pp. 211.

between food and the body. The discovery of new vitamins, such as Vitamin B in 1911 and Vitamin A in 1912, gave rise to a major nutritional paradigm; experiments that were conducted on rats ensured that there was a move away from a caloric model of appropriate sustenance.

World War I food programs assured that by the end of the war millions of people had become familiar with the basic tenets of early nutrition, but this nutritional logic was already being challenged by the discovery in the 1910s of odorless, tasteless, and previously undetected components of food that researchers named vitamins. Their link to deficiency diseases undermined the logic of early nutrition by revealing the fact that calories alone were not enough to promote health and sustain life. Vitamins ended the reign of the caloric measure complicated the pecuniary economy food.³²⁸

By the 1920s, the 'newer nutrition' was sweeping the nation and 'enthraling the middle class'.³²⁹ There was greater awareness that maintaining adequate nutrition meant more than getting enough calories; it now included getting the correct amount of vitamins and minerals too.

³²⁸ Charlotte Biltekoff, 'Critical Nutrition Studies' in Jeffrey M. Pilcher (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Food History* (Oxford, 2012), p. 5.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Succeeding the inauguration of the Ministry of Health in 1919, there was an enquiry into many health and social care issues, to examine the effect of economic crises, unemployment, and poverty on British health. As the century progressed, consideration was given to the diet of the population. Adequate nutrition was regarded as central to the improvement of health, with much of the debate surrounding the poor recruitment rate for the Boer War, blamed on insufficient food in the working classes. This ignited the 'Hungry England' debate that culminated in numerous 'hunger marches' throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

Latterly, the Greenwood Committee was founded in 1930 to examine the allegations of malnutrition in the working classes, attesting to the concern surrounding the health and wellbeing of the British public. Problematically, doctors could not clearly define 'malnutrition' and therefore, the reports and surveys carried out by the state were limited in their effectiveness. They were unable to provide a cohesive image of the health of the population. The investigations carried out by the committee found that the public was not extraordinarily affected by malnutrition, apart from a number of exceptions. Nevertheless, it is still unclear to what extent undernourishment affected the public because of the ambiguous nature of what constituted it in the first place.³³⁰ Helen Jones argues that 'It has long been thought that the First World War was an unmitigated disaster for the health and well-being of the nation. The slaughter of the troops, the food shortages and the trauma of

³³⁰ The National Archives, File number: MH 56/53, Diet and Nutrition Advisory Committee (Greenwood Committee) Standards of Malnutrition.

war affected not only combatants but also civilians to an unprecedented extent.³³¹ However, there was better nutrition, higher life expectancy, a lower mortality rate. Therefore, Jones argues that mortality rates were not a great indicator of health and wellness.

Charles Webster postulates that,

While it is accepted that poverty, poor housing, and ill-health constituted meaningful problems during the depression, we are warned that colourful detail relating to residual problems during the depression, should not detract from recognition of a secular trend towards improvement in the social and economic condition of the population as a whole...The statistics again point to an improvement in the national health and physical well-being of the population. Death rates declined, children were on average fatter and healthier than their parents had been, and the worst forms of malnutritional diseases, such as rickets and scurvy, had all but disappeared by the Second World War.³³²

Conversely, Juliet Gardiner argues that an assessment conducted by the Week-End Review in the Spring of 1933 '...found that unemployment relief payments were insufficient to provide the minimum diet for a family recommended by the recently established Advisory Committee on Nutrition set up by the Ministry of

³³¹ Helen Jones, *Health and Society in Twentieth Century Britain* (London, 2014), p. 34.

³³² Charles Webster, 'Hungry or Healthy Thirties?' *History Workshop Journal* 13:1 (1982), p. 110-111.

Health...³³³ This meant that poorer families were unable to maintain proper health through adequate sustenance as they could not afford ample nutrition.³³⁴ Gardiner suggests that women in the family often had to go without food, to ensure that their husband and children were fed.³³⁵ The public discourse associated with the physical degeneration of the British race instigated apprehension with different sectors of society. Despite overall improvements in the health of the nation, the working classes continued to struggle financially under austerity in Britain. Consequently, they were unable to maintain a nutritional diet, as per governmental recommendations and the state was limited in their ability to intervene. Therefore, some resorted to partaking in starvation exhibits to stabilise their financial situation. Arguably, this appealed to newlyweds in particular as they were becoming independent of their parental families for the first time. As the article detailed, some performers were starving anyway and they needed money to get married. Therefore, some made the pragmatic decision to use their position to their advantage. Displays of starvation presented people with an opportunity to earn money. Yet, they also encapsulated debates about the physical degeneration of the British race through malnutrition.

³³³ Juliet Gardiner, *The Thirties: An Intimate History* (London, 2011), p. 67.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

³³⁵ Gardiner, *The Thirties*, p. 78.

The exhibit indicated to audiences the physical effects of becoming malnourished and represented the stages of deterioration that people experienced, as a result of insufficient food. The *Biggleswade Chronicle* reported that outside the exhibit,

were life-size cut-out pictures of a blushing bride (“as she was”) followed by others in gradual stages of deterioration until a final cadaverous representation was described “as she is now.” On the ground floor a long queue was lined up to pay 2d. to look at this remarkable spectacle. Apparently there was a wager or something of that sort, for posted up on a blackboard near the entrance was a notice to the effect that “as the starving bride cannot now win the £250, to-day is positively the last day of exhibition.” And that “all profits of this day will be given to the starving brides.” Poor Girl!³³⁶

Considering the concerns about the deterioration of public health, the construction of the exhibition clearly outlined the effects of starvation on the body, within the seaside space that was already dedicated to health and wellness. Life-size cardboard representations and daily updates showed the public the harmful effects of malnutrition. They served as visible warnings of the stages of deterioration for those who were not feeding themselves appropriately. They subtly encouraged people to take control of their health and cautioned them that starvation led to

³³⁶ *Biggleswade Chronicle*, Friday 25 August 1933, p. 3.
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emaciation, and perhaps even death. Through viewing the physical representations and the displays, audiences were able measure themselves against the 'abnormality' of the shrunken body. Therefore, the public could place themselves on a metaphorical scale of normality either for reassurance of their personal health or to encourage them to make dietary changes to improve their nutritional intake.

Weight-Loss and Body Management

As well as warning the public of the consequences of physical deterioration, some people were captivated by the exhibit and were in awe of the self-control that the participants possessed. One local newspaper revealed the popularity of the 'starving brides' with women. It stated,

The majority of the crowds who cabinet-gazed were women and young girls. Some laughed harshly at the foolishness of anybody who would undergo such an ordeal, whatever the financial straits. Others, including girls, peered with fascination and a sort of awe at the pallid and deathly features behind the glass.³³⁷

Women were particularly fascinated with the discipline that the starvers had as evidenced through their ability to abstain from eating.³³⁸ Starvation had

³³⁷ The Local and Family History Centre, Blackpool Central Library, Cyril Critchlow Collection, The Starving Brides file.

³³⁸ Starving grooms are less promoted and talked about but they were displayed. It is not clear why there is less interest in starving grooms.

numerous meanings for females from all social backgrounds. Historically, women had a specific interest in, and relationship with, food; it was closely associated with female identity. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska argues that while it might seem incongruous in a period of economic instability and malnutrition, dieting became more prevalent in the middle classes.³³⁹ She posits that,

Female dietary restraint was not just due to poverty. Moderate eating signified control over appetite and represented politeness and refinement. Notions of excess weight are culturally constructed and the celebration of a slim ideal in women's fashion in the 1920s gave rise to a female reducing culture.³⁴⁰

The 1920s 'flapper' figure became popular in the immediate post-war period; it was regarded as a signifier of modernity. Lucy Bland argues,

The term 'modern woman' was often used interchangeably with 'flapper' (although strictly the latter referred to girls and women too young to vote, and thus under thirty, while an older woman could still be termed 'modern'). The modern-woman-cum-flapper, a figure found across all classes, represented modernity, mobility, new opportunities, a brave new

³³⁹ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Slimming Through the Depression: Obesity and Reducing Culture in Interwar Britain' in Derek J. Oddy, Peter J. Atkinds, Virginie Amilien, *The Rise of Obesity in Europe: A Twentieth Century Food History* (Surrey, 2009), p. 177.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

world, a break with the pre-war world of chaperones, Victorian values and restrictive clothing.³⁴¹

Therefore,

The flapper, which later became closely associated with the 'roaring' 1920s, was a personification of the upheavals of the time, embodying fears and anxieties about modernity, and instabilities of gender, class, race, and national identity... She was associated with short hair, short skirts, dropped waistlines, a flat chest, in fact a look that was decidedly androgynous... As the role of women in society change in the first half of the twentieth century, they fashioned their bodies to signify modernity and freedom from Victorian values.³⁴²

Furthermore, women utilised food or control of the body as a method through which to express their inner selves to the world, to solidify their place in society, and to reflect their role in family life. Controlling the female appetite was evidence of suppressing intense emotion or sexual desire, excesses of which were most closely associated with the working classes. Joan Jacobs Brumberg argues that appetite was 'regarded as a barometer of sexuality' and reveals that

³⁴¹ Lucy Bland, *Modern Women on Trial: Sexual Transgression in Ages of the Flapper* (Manchester, 2013), p. 3.

³⁴² Laura Doan, 'Passing Fashions: Reading Female Masculinities in the 1920s' *Feminist Studies* (24:3), p. 664.

For the Victorian physician, nonnutritive eating constituted proof of the fact that the adolescent girl was essentially out of control and that the process of sexual maturation could generate voracious and dangerous appetites.³⁴³

Young girls were 'caught up in the process of sexual maturation' and therefore 'subject to vagaries of appetite and peculiar cravings.'³⁴⁴ Regulating their appetite enabled women to control other aspects of life such as sexuality. It was a form of discourse exploiting the body to communicate and control their personality, character, and sexuality to reside within the confines of contemporary femininity.

A controlled appetite for food elevated womanhood and cultivated femininity, as it compounded the attributes, behaviours, and roles associated with being a woman. Jacobs Brumberg reveals that, 'By eating only tiny amounts, young women could disassociate themselves from sexuality and fecundity and they could achieve an unambiguous class identity.'³⁴⁵ Therefore, women who controlled their appetites avoided being regarded as sexual beings, and were seen as passive, submissive, and feminine. The starving brides exhibition replicated the concept of suppressing one's appetite, as cigarettes were often presented in the cabinets in which the performers were displayed. Cigarettes were a well-known appetite suppressant following the 'Reach for a Lucky' campaign in 1925, which targeted women as new consumers for cigarettes. Smoking was a sign of modernity, femininity, and suppressed one's appetite. Through engaging in self-starvation, not only were women able to

³⁴³ Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls*, p. 175.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

suppress their sense of sexuality; they were able to reinforce their class status in British society by avoiding bodies or behaviour most associated with the working classes. 'Historical evidence suggests that many women managed their food and their appetite in response to the notion that sturdiness in women implied low status, a lack of gentility, and even vulgarity. Eating less rather than more became a preferred pattern for those who were status conscious.'³⁴⁶

In consideration of the burgeoning dieting and fitness industry, aimed at women and young girls, it is conceivable that starvation displays, while warning of the dangers of possessing a large appetite, were also metaphorically associated with health, weight-loss, and beauty. Contemporary beauty culturalists such as Grace Peckham Murray, Helena Rubenstein, and Hazel Bishop promoted scientific ways of cultivating an improved body, including weight-reduction as one way to foster a beautiful physique. 'The beauty experts also preached the credo of self-denial: to be beautiful, most women must suffer.'³⁴⁷ Female starvation displays echoed the necessity of self-denial to be attractive. While obesity was both medically precarious and socially dangerous, being fat was regarded as ugly and sinful.³⁴⁸

However, while slimming was becoming increasingly common, doctors criticized the weight-loss craze, condemning it as excessive. There was an abundance of

³⁴⁶ Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls*, p. 186.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

advertisements that advocated weight-gain to increase attractiveness. There were a variety of advertisements that promoted weight gain and portrayed curvier women as more attractive than those who were underweight. One such report aimed at holidaymakers was headlined, 'How to become plump, popular, and attractive' and showed men and women during their summer excursions to the beach.³⁴⁹ It commented,

Would a little more flesh make you more stylish and attractive. Would 10 or 20 pounds make you better make satisfied with your personal appearance? If you so, you should try Sargol. It will make you nice and plump, give you greater strength, better health, and double your powers of endurance. No matter what the cause of your thinness... For women who can never appear stylish in anything they wear because of their thinness, this remarkable treatment may prove a revelation. It is a beauty-maker as well as a form-builder and a never strengthener [sic].³⁵⁰

Another explained the how even men felt self-conscious at the beach. It stated,

So skinny, he's shy in a bathing suit... Don't you know someone who is so thin he looks a skeleton in a bathing kit? [sic] Isn't he quick at covering up his legs and getting into his trousers. He's afraid of being laughed at. And

³⁴⁹ Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls*, p. 243.

³⁵⁰ *Leeds Mercury*, Tuesday 26th July 1921, p. 5.

he's right. Few things are so ridiculous as a grown man with weak spindly legs.³⁵¹

The concern about bodily physique was associated with being underweight. Additionally, fashion trends indicated that women aspired to have narrow waists and fuller chest or hips. It was agreed that this looked wholesome and healthy, increasing the confidence of women. However, the adverts gave little explanation of why people felt this way about their bodies. The apprehension about emaciated or underweight bodies was represented through the starvation displays. Curious observers were confronted with waxworks depicting emaciated brides suffering from the effects of malnourishment from dieting.

The model representing the bride was purchased from a local Ladies Outfitter and has the following notice attached, 'As this bonny girl thinks she will appear on her wedding day. The Head of the "Emaciated corpse like figure" was made by a local amateur wax moulder and bears the following placard "But we know she will look like this".³⁵²

Although malnutrition dominated public interest in health in the twentieth century, there was a parallel rising interest in nutrition and dieting. While concern

³⁵¹ *Western Gazette*, Friday 25th July 1928, p. 12.

³⁵² The National Archives Entertainment: Exhibitions of persons fasting (Ref: HO 45/16275). Kew, London.

about the escalating obesity rates did not overshadow the concept of 'hungry England', it generated substantial concern and exposed the 'social and economic inequality of interwar Britain, characterized by the emergence of affluence within the middle classes and persistent poverty among sections of the working class.'³⁵³ The multiplicity of meanings concomitant with the displays epitomized the delicate balance between undernourishment in the working classes, an escalating dieting culture, and the dictates of fashion. Whereas the working classes were scraping to find enough to eat, the middle classes were struggling with weight-related issues following the consumption of too much food. Moreover, women were not permitted to be either too fat or thin due to the trends of fashion at the time. Rather, they were encouraged not to deviate from average sizing.

Outward appearance was particularly important to women as it communicated their wealth, womanhood, and social status. It signified their place in modernity to other facets of society. The development of a mass consumer culture permitted women to fashion themselves on the most recent styles through mimicking the clothing, makeup, hairstyles, and even body shape of people in films and magazines.³⁵⁴ The rise of advertising culture prompted the procurement of a slender body, which evolved into a signifier of civilized Western culture. 'A woman with a slender body distinguished herself from the plump Victorian matron and her old-fashioned

³⁵³ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Slimming Through the Depression: Obesity and Reducing Culture in Interwar Britain' in Derek J. Oddy, Peter J. Atkinds, Virginie Amilien, *The Rise of Obesity in Europe: A Twentieth Century Food History* (Surrey, 2009), p. 188.

³⁵⁴ Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls*, (London, 1989), p. 244.

ideals of nurturance, service, and self-sacrifice. The body of the “new woman” was a sign of modernity that marked her for more than traditional motherhood and domesticity.³⁵⁵ Through cultivating a fashionable body consisting a narrow waist with curvaceous features, upper class women became beautiful.³⁵⁶ Unquestionably, being either underweight or overweight was associated with physical risks. It also portrayed perceived character flaws; it was a social impediment to be avoided at all costs. Thus, maintaining a healthy physique was of utmost importance.³⁵⁷ From the perfect holiness of self-starvation in the medieval period, thinness reflected a woman’s perfect social standing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

With concerns about malnutrition in the working classes and obesity in the upper classes, the starving brides provided a warning of the dangers of a lack of nutritional food. While women should keep their bodies within the confines of physical normality and beauty ideals, the displays portrayed the dangerous effects of extreme dieting. It showed that they would become emaciated, weak, and risk death

³⁵⁵ Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls*, p. 245.

³⁵⁶ While the working classes were becoming more interested in their appearance than in previous centuries, working class women were less inclined to focus on thinness. This could be for a number of reasons. Notably, they adhered to more traditional and stereotypical gender roles. Undoubtedly, they were focused more on working and providing nutrition for their families, leaving little time to concentrate on outward appearance. However, it is clear that there was a positive correlation between gender, social class, and a desire to be thin.

³⁵⁷ Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls*, p. 238.

if they were not properly nourishing themselves.³⁵⁸ More importantly, the exhibition revealed the complex relationship between women, food, and the 'starving brides'.

The body (and indeed, the starving body) became a physical manifestation of class, status, and citizenship in British society. However, it also revealed issues beyond class; it reflected the need for a form of control and self-expression.

Specifically for women, it was a method through which to convey their thoughts and beliefs in a patriarchal society.³⁵⁹ For upper-class women, 'Food was to be feared because it was connected to gluttony and to physical ugliness.'³⁶⁰ They were subjected to strict social and cultural regulations about when, where, and what they should eat. Moreover, it was perceived as unsightly to eaten large amounts of food in public and indicated greed, lust, and uncontrolled desires. Food was closely

³⁵⁸ Nevertheless, some working class women did not just choose to diet; rather, they were forced to abstain from food due to their place in the family. Women, as nurturers and providers of nutrition, were at the forefront of promoting healthy lifestyles. However, at times they had to abstain from food to provide for more needy members of the family, for example the husband and children. Therefore, it is possible that the exhibition reflected the problems associated with this.

³⁵⁹ Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa* (London, 1989), p. 43; Historically, women had a meaningful relationship with food. It was female, not male starvers, who were regarded as miraculous. The most noteworthy medieval accounts of self-starvation were of women, fasting for religious purposes. Into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, women continued to utilise food for social and cultural reasons. Food became a way of communicating internal thoughts, desires, and anxieties, with society and it was particularly prominent in the lives of women. Emphasis was placed on personal aesthetics in the twentieth century and the body was the focus of health and beauty discourse. However, women also utilised the body to alter their perception in society and communicate with others about their internal beliefs about themselves; A variety of studies demonstrate that women of the upper classes regarded maintaining a thin physique as important. The traditional association of fatness with prosperity and good health all but disappeared in the twentieth century. The ideal body was thinner than it had previously been and it was advocated in the higher classes of society.

³⁶⁰ Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls*, p. 179.

linked to femininity and restrictive eating was promoted among young women.³⁶¹ However, this was part of a delicate balance. Although women should not overindulge, neither should they maintain a body which was underweight, as this too was regarded as unsightly and immoral.

Morality

Aside from the 'starving brides', other fasting artists garnered the attention of holidaymakers at British seaside resorts. The Rector of Stiffkey was famously known as the 'Prostitutes' Padre'; he was removed from church leadership after being found guilty of immoral conduct with prostitutes in Soho, whom he claimed to be ministering to. Although he was forbidden to serve the church in any formal capacity, it was unclear whether he was guilty of the crimes of which he was accused.

Subsequently, Davidson became a prolific starvation performer at many of the most popular seaside resorts, including Blackpool, Southend-On-Sea, and Skegness, in order to make money and protest his innocence surrounding the allegations of sexual misconduct. Reverend Davidson's act was particularly interesting. Not only did he participate in self-starvation, he additionally pretended to be roasted on a spit by the devil.³⁶² He added a number of variations to his display to encourage crowds to attend his exhibit. It was noteworthy that Davidson's display was constructed differently from the exhibitions of starving brides, due to the gender of the

³⁶¹ Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls*, p. 178.

³⁶² See Tom Cullen, *The Prostitute's Padre* (London, 1975).

exhibitors. Whilst the displays of female starvers focused on malnutrition, male starvation exhibits focused on morality.

The religious symbolism in the display contributed to its social construction; it revealed the continued importance of fasting for religious purposes. It was an emotive way of petitioning God and the public for justice. Through abstaining from food, the vicar denied the desires of his flesh to glorify God and to demonstrate his innocence. It paralleled the sacrificial lifestyle that Davidson had lived, in ministry to others. Moreover, it was supposed to validate his humility to the masses. The popularity and intrigue in his exhibition was clear,

Yesterday, over 3,000 people from all parts of the country came to see me, and, of those, 750 told me that they had come to Blackpool specially to shake me by the hand.³⁶³

Although these figures are ambiguous, it is evident in Figure 3.3 that the exhibit was extremely popular with people and that tourists came to Blackpool on holiday to see him. The Rector's starvation acted as a physical form of protesting; it demonstrated how strongly he felt about his own innocence and the steps he

³⁶³ 'Rector and Showman Fined for Obstruction' *Nottingham Evening Post*, Saturday 10 September 1932, p. 5.

would take to assure the public of his virtuousness.³⁶⁴ It publicized his story, drawing attention to it, even if the response was not always positive. This indicated that fasting or self-starvation in the twentieth century continued to be a powerful form of communicating, as it was in earlier historical periods. While the display was supposed to be a sign of holiness, it upturned the religious ideal of the sanctity of the body. Due to the risk of death that was associated with self-starvation, the Rector was charged with attempted suicide in 1935.³⁶⁵ The charge stated that ‘he unlawfully starved himself with the intention of committing suicide.’³⁶⁶

³⁶⁴ Figure 3.3. Image of the Rector of Stiffkey Starvation Exhibit. < <http://blackpoolmuseum.com/blackpool-sideshow/> > [Accessed 20/08/17, 15.47pm].

³⁶⁵ ‘Ex-Rector of Stiffkey Committed for Trial’, *The Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, Friday 09 August 1935, p. 1.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

Figure 3.3. Image of the Rector of Stiffkey Starvation Exhibit.



There were numerous court cases over fasting artists, as reported in local press. The *Lancashire Evening Post* on Tuesday 19 July 1932, reported on the Margate starvation performer, who had been deceiving the public; whilst pretending to be fasting, she was in fact, eating two meals a day. The article noted,

When the “fasting lady” case was resumed at Margate to-day it was alleged that elaborate arrangements including the application of rouge, were made to give a wasting appearance, although the woman was fed twice every 24 hours. To-day the charges against Winfred Tomlinson (18), actress, Wolverhampton, otherwise “Miss June” the fasting lady and Violet Mather, a dancer, were withdrawn...³⁶⁷

Another report in the *Thanet Advertiser and Echo* revealed

Large crowds again gathered at Margate Police Court on Tuesday when the “Fasting Lady” and four other persons associated with her alleged attempt to set up a world’s record forty-four days fast [sic], appeared on remand before the borough magistrates. Miss Winifred Mary Tomlinson, aged 18 years, described as an actress (The Fasting Lady), whose address was given as Rugby-street, Wolverhampton...³⁶⁸

There were serious concerns over the health of participants in starvation displays and many debated the morality of such exhibitions; this was apparent in

³⁶⁷ *Lancashire Evening Post*, Tuesday 19 July 1932.

³⁶⁸ *Thanet Advertiser and Echo*, Friday 15th July, 1932, p. 11.

the crowds of people who attended the court hearings of the performers. Additionally, religious leaders petitioned the Home Office to prevent people starving themselves as entertainment. One letter from a Church of England Vicar stated,

...that such an abuse of the Body, is little short of deliberate suicide... Apart from that we feel that the Human Body is sacred, and should not be so abused. I write very humbly to ask, IF YOU CAN GIVE ME DETAILS OF ANY LAW BY WHICH WE CAN PROCEED TO STOP THE NAUSEATING SPECTACLE.³⁶⁹

This portrayed the varied and widespread concern surrounding starvation, which was ultimately linked with physical deterioration and death. A newspaper report on the trial noted, 'Davidson was alleged to have gone to premises on Blackpool front and there put himself in some sort of cabinet and announced that it was his intention to starve to death unless the Archbishop or Bishop proceeded to put him back into the position he had formerly held.'³⁷⁰ The Rector of Stiffkey was fined £4 and Luke Gannon, the showman responsible for his exhibition, a total of £6 because of their peep show.³⁷¹ Despite this charge, Davidson continued starving at other seaside locations until his death, in an attempt to have the charges against

³⁶⁹ The National Archives, Entertainment: Exhibitions of persons fasting (Ref: HO 45/16275).

³⁷⁰ 'Ex-Rector of Stiffkey Committed for Trial', *The Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, Friday 09 August 1935, p. 1.

³⁷¹ 'Rector Fined', *Nottingham Evening Post*, Saturday 10 September 1932, p. 1.

him revoked. Newspapers followed the exhibition of the ex-Rector until he was fatally mauled by a lion at an amusement resort in Skegness, after transforming his display into a variation of the biblical story of Daniel in the lion's den.³⁷²

Death

Although the death of the Rector of Stiffkey was not a consequence of self-starvation, there were other deaths as a result of fasting performances. When champion faster, Ricardo Sacco, died from stomach problems following a 40-day fast, it validated the concerns about such precarious displays. Sacco fasted in numerous seaside locations, including Blackpool and Southend-on-Sea, in the early twentieth century, losing approximately 2 stone throughout the duration of his fasts, as seen in Figure 3.4 and 3.5.³⁷³ However, in 1929, Sacco died following 65 days of self-starvation.

³⁷² 'Ex-Rector's Death' *Derby Daily Telegraph*, Friday 30 July 1937, p. 1.

³⁷³ *Motherwell Times*, Friday 09 September, 1927, p. 6; Figure 3. 6. *Carte de Visit* of Ricardo Sacco, The World's Champion Fasting Man, Blackpool. The Local and Family History Centre, Blackpool Central Library, Cyril Critchlow Collection, Ricardo Sacco File. Figure 3.7. *Carte de Visit* of Ricardo Sacco, The World's Champion Fasting Man, Blackpool. The Local and Family History Centre, Blackpool Central Library, Cyril Critchlow Collection, Ricardo Sacco File.

Figure 3.4 *Carte de Visit* of Richard Sacco.



Figure 3.5. *Carte de Visit* of Ricardo Sacco.



An article in the *Dundee Courier* reported,

His friends say that his death was not caused by fasting, but by an internal complaint. During his last fast at Blackpool he had stated that he would not enter upon another similar feat, but intended to retire ... He was extremely emaciated and had been confined to his bed for several weeks. In his youth he had been a fine specimen of manhood, but his many prolonged fasts during which he lived in glass cases, had reduced him to little more than a skeleton... When fasting he took only soda water and frequently smoked cigarettes.³⁷⁴

The report suggested that, in spite of the longevity of his starvation and his stomach complaints, his family and friends wished to avoid the association between his career as a champion faster and his untimely death.³⁷⁵ Notwithstanding their denial, it seemed apparent that there was a link between the weakening of his body through malnutrition and the 'internal complaints' that led to his death.

³⁷⁴ *Dundee Courier*, Tuesday 05 November, 1929, p. 9.

³⁷⁵ This can be attributed to the association between starvation and suicide. Suicide was illegal in Britain until the Suicide Act of 1961.

Showmen were aware of the possibility that their acts risked death through partaking in the exhibition. The relationship between starvation and death was evident in the construction of many fasting displays. A typical cabinet or barrel, was described, as a 'coffin', demonstrating the morbidity associated with the display.

The size of the coffin is approximately 8ft. long, by 3 ft. wide, and 3ft. 6 ins. in depth, and has a glass top. Inside, at the head, there is a chemical incinerator, the top of which forms a shelf and on this stands bottles of lemonade and packets of cigarettes.

The implication of death in the displays exposed people to conceptualisations of death and dying through popular culture. Not only was the show entertaining but it also revealed the public curiosity in morbid or macabre exhibitions. Moreover, it redefined death as something other than a frightening experience. It allowed people to assess their attitudes towards death in the confines of popular culture. However, it was precisely the association between curiosity, macabre entertainment, and death, within an environment dedicated to health and wellness, that made them such a controversial form of entertainment.

'Beastly Little Shows'

Unquestionably, starvation performers caused outrage in some communities. The *Daily Mail* described them as 'perfectly horrid, un-Christian and beastly

shows.³⁷⁶ Although exhibitions of unusual spectacles were appropriate if the public were able to learn from the display, on a holiday that was supposed to be centred around health and wellbeing, displays of unhealthiness were problematic. Not only did actively starving go against the contemporary health advice but it also encouraged the perception of seaside resorts as spaces on the margins of British life that were the centre of objectionable entertainments. Exhibitors were putting their own health in danger, which exacerbated concerns about the conditions of the working-class population. Additionally, if the public were required to starve themselves for money because they had no other viable option, it raised apprehensions about economic circumstances in Britain. The starvers risked death to provide for their needs. However, ironically, through starvation they were not able to maintain an acceptable level of healthiness. Thus, a plethora of broader societal concerns were revealed through the display. Namely, that the public resorted to doing whatever they could to fulfill their physiological requirements (including fasting for entertainment) but even this was not enough to preserve health.

Unsurprisingly, the local authorities were perturbed by how people viewed the exhibit and there were concerns about how public regarded holiday resorts. If there was a continuation of disreputable amusements, there could be a rise of unacceptable behaviour. Throughout the 1930s, there were frequent endeavors to

³⁷⁶ *Hull Daily Mail*, Saturday 12 October, 1934, p. 7.
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transform coastal locations into respectable leisure spaces. However, holidaymakers largely remained intrigued by freak shows and other curiosity exhibits. Furthermore, people who displayed their extreme weight loss had a significant social function in educating people about the consequences of a lack of nutritional food.

Whilst freak shows such as the 'Starving Brides' were a risqué style of amusement, people were increasingly aware of the dangers of undernourishment, making the exhibition an intrinsic aspect of twentieth century health discourse.

Conclusion

Fasting has been part of history since the medieval period to the present day. In medieval tradition, it was a sign of religiosity, demonstrating the piety of the people who could go without eating for an extended period. It is important to note that the female relationship with self-starvation was an extremely pertinent one. The case of Sarah Jacobs, demonstrates the continued relationship between self-starvation and religion, as many flocked to see the human miracle. Her fast revealed the tensions between religion and medicine, as both sought to explain the phenomenon. However, Jacobs also exposed self-starvation as an entertainment and some travelled to see her for amusement or pleasure.

Self-starvation continued as a spectacle into the twentieth century. Starvation exhibitions were a prominent and intriguing part of the seaside freak show. Holidaymakers were confronted with starving brides, or indeed, vicars, as part of the itinerant freak show which continued until the 1950s. In the seaside space, dedicated to health and wellness, the starving brides garnered people's interest, particularly amidst contemporary issues such as the 'Hungry England' debate and the rise

of dieting in the middle classes. The performers directly contradicted the health advice of the time, which advocated a nutritious and wholesome diet, complemented by regular exercise such as swimming or walking. Starvation exhibits warned spectators of the consequences of not maintaining a healthy physique, through the physical representations of deterioration associated with the displays. However, as the starvers were putting their lives in danger for their craft, they increased anxieties from local corporations who were concerned about the reflection on seaside locations. Vandereyckn and van Deth suggest that,

After 1930 they [fasting artists] almost completely disappeared from the scene. They lost out increasingly to other forms of entertainment (film, television) and the improved social security system prevented them from having to earn their living as freaks. In addition, they were widely regarded as human beings with psychological disorders and defects, whose public exhibition was no longer deemed ethically justified.³⁷⁷

Nevertheless, it is evident that fasting people performed in coastal locations until the mid-twentieth century. Fasting men and women continued to exhibit themselves regularly at seaside resorts and there was sustained debate in local newspapers. They remained popular until the 1950s when coastal locations became a less prominent part of British cultural life.

³⁷⁷ Vandereyckn and van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls*, p. 76.

Chapter 4

'This isn't a fat person's world': Obesity, Exhibition, and Health by the Sea.

Introduction

In his book entitled *Weight Reduction: Diet and Dishes*, published in 1937, E. E. Claxton cautioned his readers of some of the undesirable attention experienced by those who were overweight.

Let us first take some of the minor disadvantages, and with them we may remember that fatness has been a butt for humour from time immemorial. Why do we laugh or want to laugh at the fat man? The fat man is the one exception that we allow ourselves for laughter directed against or caused by deformity. A hundred or more years ago almost any physical abnormality was an object of humour. The dwarf, the giant, the hunchback, the cripple, the thin man, the fat man, and so on, were all considered a great joke.

These curiosities and anomalies survive still for the amusement of morbid onlookers at side shows in fairs and circuses, but laughter at the expense of the unfortunate victims is now confined only to the obese, and even that is

considered in these days as questionable taste... we must still admit, however, that a fat man or woman looks funny.³⁷⁸

Claxton observed the continued public fascination with staring at various people with anomalous bodies for entertainment. However, due to the changing tastes and sensibilities of the British public, Claxton emphasised that audiences were only permitted to laugh at fat people, as it was regarded as inappropriate to mock those who possessed more physically abnormal bodies, such as 'hunchbacks' or 'cripples'.

While starvation performers at seaside resorts such as Blackpool, Margate, and Southend-on-Sea provided an innovative form of freakery by the coast, fat ladies and fat boys offered holidaymakers a more traditional, and subsequently, less controversial mode of entertainment. Fat ladies became synonymous with freak shows as early as the eighteenth century and there was rarely a sideshow without an overweight exhibitor displaying their abnormally large body for audiences to stare at.³⁷⁹ A newspaper article published in 1857 commented on the public perception of fatness in the nineteenth century,

We like fat people – good, jolly, laughing, broad-visaged fat people. We love fat women, fat boys, fat babies, fat purses, a fat job, fat everything. Fat men are never treacherous, fat women are not sharp-tongued, fat boys are not

³⁷⁸ E. E. Claxton, *Weight Reduction: Diet and Dishes* (London, 1937), p. 14.

³⁷⁹ Fat women were more common than fat men. Although fat men did display their bodies, like Lenny Mason, 'The Leicester Fat Boy', they were not seen as transgressive in the same way that fat women were.

mischievous, fat babies are always good. In fine, fat people are the kindest, and therefore the most popular.³⁸⁰

A similar article, entitled 'All the Fun of the Fair' was published in *The Sunday Times* in 1920. It described the continued appeal of fat ladies to the holidaymakers, tourists, and excursionists who visited freakery exhibitions in Britain throughout the twentieth century. It revealed,

But it is the Fat Lady who is the queen of every heart...Never was there such a galaxy of adiposity. They have to be seen to be believed, it is almost a relief to dazzled eyes to turn into the menagerie, and of a certainty a surprise when you get there. For this is no ordinary Fair Menagerie, with the usual mangy and hungry-looking brutes cowering behind rusty bars.³⁸¹

Fat ladies were regarded as more beautiful, healthy, and feminine than the undernourished women starving themselves in coffins for the entertainment of summertime excursionists. This mirrored the fashionable ideal for the female body that suggested that women were only be considered beautiful when they were plump and curvaceous, as these were the signs of health and fertility. Whereas, being underweight was observed as unhealthy and subsequently, unbeautiful. Such beliefs manifested within the seaside environment, in which health and the body were of prime importance.³⁸² This was exemplified in contemporary advertisements

³⁸⁰ *Bucks Herald*, Saturday 15 August 1857, p. 4.

³⁸¹ Special to "the Sunday Times". "All the Fun of the Fair." *Sunday Times* [London, England] 4 Jan. 1920: 13. *The Sunday Times Digital Archive*. Web. 23 Jan. 2017.

³⁸² The seaside was an environment that promoted health. Maintaining a healthy body was central to advocating the health of the nation. The body was more exposed in the seaside

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promoting weight-restorative supplements, that probed both men and women if their social experiences were negatively affecting their weight.³⁸³ They suggested that to be popular, one must maintain a rounded, hour-glass figure. The advertisements encouraged the public to gain weight before their summer holidays. Having a thin body signified poverty or malnutrition, and was not in keeping with the glamour and opulence possessed by Hollywood actresses that many middle and working-class women tried to emulate in their everyday lives. Therefore, having an underweight body was perceived as affecting the female social experience, particularly during the summer seaside holiday when their bodies were on show more frequently than at other times of year. While curves were desirable, excessive fatness was not and there was a plethora of dieting and weight-reducing literature readily available for the public to educate themselves on how to lose their surplus fat, to obtain a healthy and attractive body.³⁸⁴

It was within this cultural environment that the public analysed and interpreted the exhibitions of fat people that were prevalent and popular at Britain's most vibrant seaside resorts. Weight was intrinsic to public discourse on health and wellness and, in the healthy seaside space, displays of abnormally large

environment, than in urban environments as the clothing that people wore was more revealing.

³⁸³ *Leeds Mercury*, Tuesday 26 July 1921, p. 5; *Western Gazette*, Friday 27 July 1928, p. 12.

³⁸⁴ For example, Cecil Webb-Johnson, *Why Be Fat?* (London, 1923), p. 21; Robert Kemp, *Nobody Need Be Fat* (London, 1959); E. E. Claxton, *Weight Reduction: Diet and Dishes* (London, 1937); William Banting, *Letter on Corpulence*, (London, 1863); Leonard Williams, *Obesity* (Oxford, 1926); Sir Lauder Brunton, *On Obesity* (Harrison and Sons, printers, 1902); F. A. Hornibrook, *The Culture of the Abdomen: The Cure of Obesity and Constipation* (W. Heinemann, 1927).

men and women served as a warning of the consequences of overindulgence. Furthermore, they represented the antithesis of the starving body, which was displayed as part of the 'Starving Bride' exhibit, amongst others. On a metaphorical scale of normality, the starving body and the fat body were at either end; neither was acceptable for the average British public. Such displays encouraged audiences to control their weight through adhering to contemporary health and wellness advice, or risk having an unusual body, such as those exhibited as part of the seaside freak show. Presentations of extreme weight represented the complexities of twentieth century health advice, which promoted both weight-gain, weight-loss, and the maintenance of a healthy body weight.³⁸⁵

This chapter examines the display of fat men and women in seaside freak shows in Blackpool, Margate, and Southend-on-Sea. Ideas associated with fatness in the seaside environment were primarily significant, as in Mass Observation, it revealed that 'Eating is one of the principal holiday activities...'³⁸⁶ It analyses the images and newspaper reports associated with unusual fat bodies in relation to the burgeoning literature on nutrition, weight, dieting, and excessive fatness in the first half of the twentieth century. Although there was an abundance of advertisements that promoted the replenishment of weight for the undernourished working classes, there were societal concerns surrounding the increasing obesity rates in the middle classes and the degeneration of society as a whole.³⁸⁷ This chapter assesses

³⁸⁵ There often appears to be mixed messages.

³⁸⁶ Mass Observation Archive, Topic Collection 58, Holidays 1937-1951.

³⁸⁷ This became more prevalent the interwar period, as obesity was progressively problematic in the middle classes.

the relationship between health, beauty, weight, nourishment, and the nation, demonstrating that fat freaks personified the intricacies of weight-related issues in contemporary society.

The use of humour in the construction of, and ideas surrounding, displays of fat people, ensured that fatness was associated with funniness, mockery, and embarrassment. Consequently, feelings of humiliation were incited in the overweight population, and shame was used to appeal to their sentiments to encourage them to lose weight. Through the 'enfreakment' of those with abnormally large bodies, the public understood the conceptualization of 'normal' and 'abnormal' weight. Their assessment of the anomalous fat body facilitated their understanding of what constituted an average or healthy body weight. The exhibitions promoted the widely-accepted perception that the maintenance of a normal body weight ensured the social normality of the individual, as the body was imbued with social and cultural significance. Thus, through obtaining or restoring a healthy weight, people could ease their embarrassment, establish their place in British society, and confirm their social normality.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that debates surrounding health, nutrition, and obesity were evident in the 'enfreakment' of fat people at British seaside resorts. The public discourse that surrounded the displays encapsulated the wider social anxieties surrounding weight, obesity, and the importance of a healthy body. Subsequently, sideshows that displayed fat bodies represented these broader

health discussions to the holidaying public and provided them with a frame in which to understand and debate topics surrounding the health of the nation.

Historians have researched the social consequences of fatness in a multiplicity of contexts. Sander Gilman argues that obesity had alternate meanings to different societies throughout history.³⁸⁸ He states, 'For the ancient world, the control of the body and its weight was an intrinsic part of religious belief. The ancient Greeks saw food as part of a complex web that connected human beings and the gods through the humours.'³⁸⁹ However, in the medieval period, ideas about the body had progressed and thinness was regarded as saintly; a thin body was fundamental to a godly, Christian life. Christian people participated in fasts to petition God to answer their prayers. While thinness was equated to holiness, fatness signified selfishness and greed. Nevertheless, 'By the Renaissance, the Christian understanding of gluttony as the wellspring of obesity comes into conflict with a new scientific understanding of obesity.'³⁹⁰ Corpulence became a locus of discourse for the nature of illness and the relationship of the body with the divine.³⁹¹

Between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was a transition from Christian to secular perceptions of the body and its function in society. Rather than being governed by the regulations imposed by religious belief, the body

³⁸⁸ For example, being too fat signified being unhealthy in the twentieth century. However, this was not always the case as in the eighteenth century, being larger signified wealth and social status.

³⁸⁹ Sander L. Gilman, *Obesity: The Biography* (Oxford, 2010), p. 21.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

became a cultural commodity and people were expected to conform to contemporary cultural standards. Although fasting and thinness became less important in Christianity, regulating food intake was regarded as proper etiquette during upper and middle-class meals.³⁹² It is evident that throughout history, food, appetite, and the body went beyond physiological necessity; it had substantial value and significance for society. Food and appetite was to be managed and controlled, whether that was to do with the religious connotations of eating and fasting, or whether it related to social status and class debate. However, it was not until the late nineteenth century that there was a larger hostility towards fat that drew upon conceptualizations of morality, control, and consumption.³⁹³ Yet, such assertions were evident in the earlier attitudes towards food and eating behaviours.

Peter Stearns echoes Gilman's claim that the ideal body is reflective of the contemporary social and cultural milieu.³⁹⁴ A variety of external social forces influenced the idealized body such as changes in fashion, the standardization of clothing, and the exponential growth of the dieting and fitness industry, all of which encouraged the physical and social control of the body.³⁹⁵ Stearns indicates that, 'More subtly than the great corset controversy, growing utilization of standardized dress sizes for ready-to-wear women's clothing may have encouraged greater

³⁹² Nevertheless, it was the middle classes in the twentieth century that struggled with obesity the most.

³⁹³ Peter N. Stearns, *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (London, 1997), p. xiii.

³⁹⁴ He exemplifies thinness as a particularly Western ideal and associates the crusade against fatness with Western countries such as Britain and America.

³⁹⁵ Additionally, this dictated what was considered fat and what was considered thin.

attention to slenderness.³⁹⁶ The expanding commercial market and modernization of society had a significant effect on the changing perfect body. Through defining what constituted an ideal body, it also determined what was considered 'fat'. Stearns posits that at the turn of the twentieth century, attitudes towards the body changed and society was more 'fat-phobic' than ever before.³⁹⁷ Although there was concern about fat in relation to aesthetics and beauty in the nineteenth century, this transitioned into a 'moral crusade' against fatness in the following century.³⁹⁸ He notes, 'Aesthetic, religious, and athletic precedents for hostility to fat helped shape the cultural turn, as did the fairly prompt insertion of talented commercial hucksters.'³⁹⁹ Consequently, there was greater emphasis placed on losing weight and conforming to the ideals, styles, and trends of the time.

Kathleen LeBesco and Jana Evans Braziel suggest that,

Since World War II, when the diet and fitness industries burgeoned and fostered a mass obsession with weight and body shape, *fat* has been a four-letter word. It has been vilified in ways ideologically loaded yet cleverly intertwined with concepts of nature, health, and beauty.⁴⁰⁰

However, 'What counts as fat and how it is valued is far from universal; indeed, these judgments are saturated with cultural, historical, political, and

³⁹⁶ Peter N. Stearns, *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (London, 1997), p. 13.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁴⁰⁰ Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco, *Bodies out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* (California, 2001), p. 2.

economic influences.⁴⁰¹ Therefore, evaluating attitudes towards fatness in Britain throughout the first half of the twentieth century assists with a detailed comprehension of concepts related to health, beauty, and the body.

From 1900 to 1950, there was substantial public debate about the health of the nation, characterized by the controversy centred on Hungry England in the 1930s and the rising obesity rates in the middle classes between 1900 and 1950. British bodies came under scrutiny from the state, the medical profession, and the growing commercial market. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska argues that,

The concurrence of obesity with extensive undernutrition exemplifies the social and economic inequality of interwar Britain, characterized by the emergence of affluence within the middle classes and persistent poverty among sections of the working class. The disparate food systems of the middle and working classes represented opposing poles and yet, the dietary patterns and habits of both groups were also perceived to exhibit common elements because fat, emaciated and stunted bodies deviated from conceptions of the normal.⁴⁰²

⁴⁰¹ Braziel and LeBresco, *Bodies out of Bounds*, p. 2.

⁴⁰² Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Slimming Through the Depression: Obesity and Reducing in Interwar Britain' in Derek Oddy, Peter J. Atkins, and Virginia Amilien (eds.) *The Rise of Obesity in Europe: A Twentieth Century Food History* (Surrey, 2009), p. 188.

She continues, 'A study of obesity, therefore, provides an important supplement to the historiography of diet, nutrition and public health in interwar Britain, which is dominated by a focus on hunger and under-nutrition.'⁴⁰³

This chapter situates the display of abnormally corpulent individuals within the scholarly research on the cultural meaning of the body, fatness, and health. Additionally, it utilizes the seaside space to comprehend the public understanding of such displays. Analysing the cultural representations of fatness in the freak show exposes the public perceptions of, and attitudes to, unusually large bodies. Freak shows employed the social context surrounding the displays to make them culturally relevant to the audiences visiting the coast. The ways in which audiences interpreted the exhibit, reveals public attitudes towards bodily difference and fatness. The social, cultural, physical, and holistic ideas that were evident in freak show exhibits taught the British public what they were, or what they should be, in comparison to that which was considered deviant in British society.

Obesity in the Late Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Prior to the nineteenth century, obesity was an indication of affluence rather than ill-health. Daniel Lambert, the Jolly Jailor of Leicester, was the most notorious freak with an overweight body to exhibit themselves in Victorian London. As seen in Figure 4.1, Lambert clothed his large body in attire that emphasised his prosperity, and thus promoted his social status. Heavier men were often perceived

⁴⁰³ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Slimming Through the Depression' in Derek Oddy, Peter J. Atkins, and Virginia Amilien (eds.) *The Rise of Obesity in Europe*, p. 177.

as healthier and wealthier than their slighter counterparts because their weight demonstrated that they could afford luxurious food. However, the effect of Lambert's excessive fatness on his health was apparent. An article in *The Times* described Lambert as a 'prodigy of human bulk' and reported that on his death, 'at the age of 40, Lambert weighed no less than 52 stone 11lb., that is 739lb.,... Daniel Lambert's coffin with his body could not be brought down the stairs of the house in which he died, and the wall at the sides of the window had to be broken away to provide an exit.'⁴⁰⁴ The article simultaneously noted the young age at which Lambert had died and the problems caused by his size following his death; this made apparent the association between excessive weight, ill-health, social abnormality.

⁴⁰⁴ "HUMAN OBESITY.-We recorded on Saturday the." *Times* [London, England] 6 Aug. 1883: 8. *The Times Digital Archive*. Web. 2 Feb. 2017.
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Figure 4.1. Daniel Lambert, c. 1800.



By the latter half of the nineteenth century, theories about the body were changing and it was no longer healthy or socially acceptable to be overweight.

Zweiniger-Bargielowska argues that,

optimistic assumptions about the health benefits of material progress were challenged by medical practitioners who noted a rise in obesity among their middle-class patients due to the combination of an ever more abundant diet and an increasingly sedentary lifestyle. The development highlights the inherent ambiguities of modernity exemplified by the endeavor to reduce effort and produce abundance through technological progress that conflicted with the aesthetic vision of a muscular, fit, and healthy body.⁴⁰⁵

By the early part of the twentieth century, a flourishing consumer culture ensured that excess food was readily available for people to buy and eat.⁴⁰⁶ Obesity became increasingly common against a backdrop of relative affluence and a surplus source of nourishing sustenance.⁴⁰⁷ However, the nation's response to consumerism was multifaceted. Although the public had greater financial freedom and could dedicate their money to whatever they wanted, it was socially and morally advocated that people controlled their consumer behaviour to avoid immorality and greed. The cultural reaction to consumerism revealed a continued moral anxiety in relation to consumption. The attack on fat echoed a broader

⁴⁰⁵ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'The Culture of the Abdomen: Obesity and Reducing in Britain, circa 1900-1939' *Journal of British Studies* 44:2 (2005), pp. 242-243.

⁴⁰⁶ While it is clear that the working classes still struggled to eat enough, the middle and upper classes had sufficient, even excess food.

⁴⁰⁷ Gilman, *Obesity*, p. 61.

criticism of consumerism, and thinness remained a sign of virtue. Dominance over the body was a form of moral control over consumption.⁴⁰⁸ Stearns suggests, 'Fat and guilt became inextricably intertwined in a society that needed new guilt to balance its new appetites and that saw fat as a visible reminder of the dark side of a consumer society.'⁴⁰⁹ He argues that, 'Fat became a secular sin and an obvious one at that. A few people, indeed, were drawn to worship at the temple of fat free bodies...Controlling appetite has been a significant component of appropriate moral and religious behavior at many points in human history and in diverse cultures.'⁴¹⁰ Similarly Robert Pollack Seid notes,

In short, technological innovations, economic changes, and the ideology of efficiency all conspired to reinforce the slenderized ideal. The human body – both male and female – was to be as efficient, as effective, as economical, and as beautiful as the sleek new machines, as the rationalized workplace. It was these turn-of-the-century developments that forged the society we know today and that established the framework for our prejudice against fat.⁴¹¹

Therefore, with the rise of consumerism, and the risk of immorality in the form of excess, dieting became increasingly popular.

⁴⁰⁸ Stearns, *Fat History*, p. 56-59.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁴¹¹ Robert Pollack Seid, *Never Too Thin: Why Women are at War with their Bodies* (New York, 1989), p. 83.

William Banting was regarded as the first structured dieter; he published his *Letter on Corpulence* in 1863, in which he documented his effort to lose weight. He aimed to assist others who also suffered with obesity. In his publication, he stated,

Of all the parasites that affect humanity I do not know of, nor can I imagine, any more distressing than that of Obesity, and having just emerged from a very long probation in this affliction, I am desirous of circulating my humble knowledge and experience for the benefit of my fellow man.⁴¹²

His personal writings revealed his distress at being an overweight individual, who had lost control of his eating. His writings were available for public consumption; he encouraged other overweight people to manage their food intake and consequently, enjoy a more fulfilling life, free from the physical and social restrictions of possessing an overweight body. However, Banting also educated the medical profession in the fundamental principles of weight management through documenting his experience of weight-loss. Consequently, physicians became increasingly aware of the physical risks of being overweight.

From the 1880s onward, the medical profession and policy makers became concerned about perceived physical degeneration due to the corrupting influence of modern urban lifestyles in general and an unhealthy diet in particular. The relationship between poor health in the working class and poverty in early twentieth century Britain is well known. Degeneration was

⁴¹² William Banting, *Letter on Corpulence* (London, 1863).
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also attributed to excess consumption resulting in obesity that was most prevalent among middle-class men. Indeed, lower middle-class men's domesticated lifestyles in the suburbs had been linked to "widespread anxieties about physical and cultural degeneration" since the start of the century.⁴¹³

Doctors frequently researched and discussed methods through which to combat the obesity problem. By 1929, the first 'slimming craze' was documented in the *British Medical Journal* by W. F. Christie. Medics intermittently published their findings in the *British Medical Journal* and *The Lancet*, which demonstrated the concern that fatness was causing medical professionals and the threat that it posed to the health of the public. Greater scientific understanding of the way that the body worked was followed by the publication of contemporary dietary advice in books, magazines, and newspapers.

Physicians explained the risks of excess weight, as well as the ways that weight could be controlled. Diet was perceived as central to a person's overall health. 'Health was more than a 'purely negative absence of disease, and could not be achieved by investigating and treating diseases, but by the 'adoption of a healthy lifestyle' which involved a 'return to nature', a 'life of open air', and 'clean and pure food.'⁴¹⁴ Public health was not solely associated with maintaining sanitation but

⁴¹³ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'The Culture of the Abdomen: Obesity and Reducing in Britain, circa 1900-1939', p. 242.

⁴¹⁴ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Raising a Nation of 'Good Animals': The New Health Society and Health Education Campaigns in Interwar Britain' *Social History of Medicine* 20:1 (2007), p. 74.

also procuring a healthy body through diet and exercise. Moreover, it was entwined with the social and moral discourse that focused on maintaining a healthy body for the strength of the nation.

Between 1900 and 1950, a flourish of self-help and medical literature became accessible to the British public. *Corpulency and the Cure* (1904) and *Why Be Fat?* (1923) provide an example of the health texts that addressed the physical risks of being overweight, such as an increased possibility of heart disease or cancer. They also offered possible solutions to obesity. 'Reducing manuals... recommended a modified diet, physical culture, moderation with regards to alcohol and tobacco consumption, thorough mastication, and regular evacuation of the bowels.'⁴¹⁵ Even local and national newspapers contained advice that suggested ways that the public could combat obesity and ill-health. One such example recommended,

If you suffer from obesity you need not be afraid of eating plenty of butter as so many women are. This does not induce a tendency to obesity as so many people suppose. Your diet should be a well-selected one. Eat toast instead of bread; eat plenty of green vegetables and fruit. Avoid too many soups. Take meat in moderation, and as much fish and poultry as you like, with the exception of shell-fish and salmon. Take as little sugar in your food and beverages as possible. Another effective plan in keeping away obesity is

⁴¹⁵ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'The Culture of the Abdomen: Obesity and Reducing in Britain, circa 1900-1939', p. 267.

to never drink with your meals. Take a glass of warm water half an hour before meals and a glass of cold water half an hour afterwards.⁴¹⁶

Similarly, they described ways that people could improve their condition through physical exertion.

Walking is the best example in the treatment of obesity and should be taken after food rather than before, because otherwise it may lead to an increased appetite, and the patient may be inclined to eat more than he otherwise would. In warm weather swimming is a most admirable form of exercise, combining both the exercise of the muscles and the advantage of bathing. The patient should be regularly weighed and measured, so as to determine the results which are being obtained. A diminution in weight should not be effected too rapidly.⁴¹⁷

Health advice followed the latest medical discoveries and wellbeing trends; the relationship between bathing, dieting, and health was particularly significant in the seaside environment when the public regularly engaged with such pursuits. Correspondingly, the public became increasingly aware that physical health was based on a variety of factors, including eating healthily and exercising sufficiently.

Several community groups and societies were formed to combat obesity. The *New Health Society* was established in 1925 and campaigned for better health with an 'emphasis on the connection between health, individual responsibility and

⁴¹⁶ *Framlingham Weekly News*, Saturday 21 July 1917, p. 2.

⁴¹⁷ *Rochdale Observer*, Saturday 28 August 1915, p. 2.

citizenship' which showed 'the continued relevance of arguments more commonly associated with the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods.'⁴¹⁸ Health was believed to be the responsibility of the individual and a duty of citizenship 'which sidestepped the question of poverty and inequality.'⁴¹⁹ The ideological stance of the *New Health Society* was similar to that of George Newman, the Chief Medical Officer, who advocated a holistic approach to the health of the nation.⁴²⁰ The state were also involved in promoting the overall health and wellness of the public. State campaigns endorsed the responsibility of the individual to maintain their health and wellness. Moreover, they advocated appropriately balanced nutrition and exercise to generate a healthier nation.⁴²¹

Medical practitioners, community groups, and the state did not solely emphasize the physical repercussions of being overweight but also analysed the social problems it caused. The elevation of individual responsibility created a nuanced understanding of maintaining a fat body in British society; a fat body revealed the inferiority, immorality, and abnormality of the overweight person. Therefore, sustaining a corpulent body had both physical and social repercussions for overweight individuals. These consequences were utilized to encourage people

⁴¹⁸ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Raising a Nation of 'Good Animals': The New Health Society and Health Education Campaigns in Interwar Britain', p. 76. Such health campaigns must be understood in relation to the rising popularity of social Darwinism and eugenicist rhetoric 'with utopian body practices and progressive gender ideology'.

⁴¹⁹ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Raising a Nation of 'Good Animals': The New Health Society and Health Education Campaigns in Interwar Britain', p. 73.

⁴²⁰ This was also advocated by Lloyd George, who attempted to build an A1 Nation, through improving health and fitness.

⁴²¹ There were other societies that had a similar ideology. For example, the Women's League of Health and Beauty and The Sunlight League.

to lose weight, through demonstrating their inability to 'fit' in society. Robert Kemp, a medical doctor in Liverpool, summed up the experiences of overweight people living in Britain. He stated,

On the whole then this isn't a fat person's world even though there are so many sufferers. Clothes, seats, cars, airplanes, bunks, beds and buses are all made for the average waistline and hip measurement. If you are too fat it means that nearly every facet of your life has to be altered to fit your unusual build.⁴²²

Kemp revealed the problematic results of the increasing obesity rates in Britain. He demonstrated that the built environment was not created to cope with those whose bodies lay outside the confines of 'normality'; that society was designed for the averagely sized person and not equipped to facilitate larger bodies.⁴²³ He showed the greater intolerance of those who were classed as overweight or obese. Kemp utilised the societal effects of not maintaining an average physique to prompt overweight people to lose their excess fat. He warned them of the humiliation, shame, embarrassment, and judgment associated with being unable to find clothes to fit, not being able to sit in an airplane seat, or being restricted from other forms of public transport. In turn, this revealed one of the prevailing messages of contemporary health advice. Namely, that a healthy body was the responsibility of the individual and that it was fundamental to the

⁴²² Robert Kemp, *Nobody Need Be Fat* (London, 1959), p. 34.

⁴²³ He also demonstrated that there were a growing number of overweight or obese members of the British public.

construction of social normality. Furthermore, those who did not preserve their physical health were often subject to social sanctions and humiliation.

There were ambiguous boundaries between professional and public thought on obesity. A contemporary physician, Cecil Webb-Johnson noted,

Obesity, according to the average medical student, is considered more of a joke than a subject fit for serious thought and consideration. One or more of his fellow students are known as "Fatty." "Tubby," or "Elephant." And as they are generally lethargic and good-natured, the nick-names stick to them and are not resented.⁴²⁴

This exposed that broader societal conceptualisations of fatness infiltrated the medical professions' perception of obesity. At times, it was not treated as a serious health issue or medical condition. Rather, within the confines of the hospital or consultation room, as with the outside world, fatness was perceived as humorous and something which could be laughed at. This shows that obesity was (in part) culturally defined and that it was society that determined what was considered 'normal' and 'abnormal'. Therefore, it is demonstrable that scientific and medical debates contained elements of cultural thought surrounding the body, and there was not a clear cut distinction between popular and medical discourse.

⁴²⁴ Cecil Webb-Johnson, *Why Be Fat?* (London, 1923), p. 9.

Society insisted on proper weight control as a sign of good character, as well as a proof of health consciousness and style.⁴²⁵ Many sub-sections of society entered the debate on fatness including fashion entrepreneurs, doctors, and nutritional scientists. They all had an interest in presenting the problems of fat to the public, and ensuring that they were investing their time, money, and efforts, in reducing their weight to an appropriate level.

In the Western cultural imagination, physical development may be likened to a form of alchemy in which abject bodies become purified through rigorous and sometimes painful effort that transforms the corporeal whole into something better. Despite the modern tendency to describe bodily attributes by way of machine metaphors, the cultural relationship between the muscular and the mechanical became tighter around the end of the nineteenth century, just when the human body was becoming less essential for the labor process.⁴²⁶

Anyone with a physically unusual body weight was considered deviant and had to work to achieve a more normal physique, through laborious diet and exercise. This would, in turn, affect their social standing in British society. Both underweight and overweight people caused substantial concern in a society that had heightened fears surrounding degeneration of the nation in a period of political and societal uncertainty. The public knew that health and longevity of life were

⁴²⁵ It was most prevalent in the middle classes which was associated with social status.

⁴²⁶ Christopher E. Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West: Gender, Civilization and the Body* (Hampshire, 2008), p. 199 - 200.

some of the important personal benefits of maintaining a healthy weight.

Therefore, reducing culture was associated with both physical fitness and moral integrity. Such ideas were evident in the displays of fat people in twentieth century seaside resorts.

Fatness and Humour in the Seaside Freak Show

Lenny Mason, the Leicester Fat Boy, exhibited his obese body on Blackpool's Central Beach.⁴²⁷ He was reported to be the 'WORLD'S FATTEST BOY'.⁴²⁸ An article entitled 'What will the food controller say?' offered £100 to anyone who could find a rival to him.⁴²⁹ Mason was particularly large for his age and it was seemingly impossible to present the public with anyone who could challenge his size. The advertisements that promoted his display were predominantly focused on the measurements of his body.

Lenny Mason, of Leicester, is said to be the fattest boy in the world. He is 16 years of age, and 5 feet 3 inches in height but his waist measurement is 64 ½ inches and his arm measures 23 inches round. He weighed 27 stone when he was fourteen years of age and his present weight is thirty stone.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁷ Figure 4.2 *Carte de Visit* for Lenny Mason, Leicester Fat Boy, Blackpool, The Local and Family History Centre, Blackpool Central Library, Cyril Critchlow Collection, Vol. 163.

⁴²⁸ *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, Thursday 30 October 1919, p. 8.

⁴²⁹ *Derby Daily Telegraph*, Friday 22 February 1918, p. 1.

⁴³⁰ *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, Thursday 30 October 1919, p. 8.

Figure 4.2 Carte de Visit for Lenny Mason, Blackpool.



The interest in the circumference of his waist and arms echoed a greater focus on measurements as an indicator of health, as promoted by the *British Medical Association*. The emphasis on measurability resulted in the belief that true physical and moral health would be evident in the measurement of the body, revealing the importance that Western society placed on 'normative appearance'.⁴³¹

Average statistical norms were central to the development of the made-to-measure clothing industry that became increasingly influential in the thriving consumer market. To keep up with the latest fashion trends, the public (particularly the female public) needed to ensure their bodies were sized appropriately to engage with such developments. With the expanding popularity of standard clothing sizes, came the expectation that people were supposed to construct their bodies within average statistical measurements. No longer were clothes made to fit around the body. Moreover, the use of corsets was not as widespread as in earlier years and people were roused to implement better body management to mould their bodies into a socially acceptable silhouette.

The public could manage their bodies through diet, exercise, and self-help, to assist with their bodily conformation to average sizing. Dieting became increasingly widespread in the twentieth century and measurements became a method through which to gauge the success of the dieter. This demonstrated a

⁴³¹ Annemarie Jutel 'The Emergence of Overweight as a Disease Entity: Measuring up Normality', *Social Science and Medicine* 63:9 (2006), p. 2269.
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continued fascination with statistical measurements and body size. Body management was symbiotic with the construction of identity, and freakery displays encouraged spectators to remain within normative social boundaries. Who a person was, was associated with their body and those who could sculpt their bodies in a specific way, ensured a higher social status than those who were unable or unwilling. Christopher Forth and Ana Carden-Coyne argue that the body was central to ‘...shaping what it meant to be a modern person.’⁴³² They suggest that,

Techniques of the self, then have persisted in our modern ways of approaching our food, our appetite, and our bodies. The steps we take to feed, manage, and sculpt our bellies have been intimately connected with who we are and what we wish to be.⁴³³

Both the body and appetite were things that needed regulated, contained, and controlled; overweight people were perceived as being unable to control their appetites, and consequently, lacked self-governance and self-control. Displays of large people such as Lenny Mason, the ‘Leicester Fat Boy’ and Miss Rosie, a popular fat lady, alongside those participating in long fasts, warned the public to keep their bodies within the average statistical sizes of the time.⁴³⁴

⁴³² Christopher E. Forth and Ana Carden-Coyne, “‘The Belly and Beyond: Body, Self, and Culture in Ancient and Modern Times’ in Christopher E. Forth and Ana Carden-Coyne (eds.) *Cultures of the Abdomen: Diet, Digestion, and Fat in the Modern World* (Basingstoke, 2005), p. 7.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴³⁴ Figure 4.2 *Carte de Visit* for Lenny Mason, Leicester Fat Boy, Blackpool, The Local and Family History Centre, Blackpool Central Library, Cyril Critchlow Collection, Vol. 163; Figure 4.3 *Carte de Visit* for Miss Rosie, c. 1900, Wellcome Library, London. EPH WD. Freaks:1:1. 249

Figure 4.3. Carte de Visit for Miss Rosie, c. 1900.



Many *carte de visites* and newspaper reports published their body measurements, to permit the public to compare and contrast their own statistics with those on display. This was particularly pertinent to individuals who were engaging in weight reducing behaviour, as the medical profession advocated continuous measurement of the body to assess the success of the dieter. As with the people fasting for the entertainment of onlookers, who were an example of the physical deterioration attributed to malnutrition, extraordinarily fat people became an example of the consequences of gluttony and over-indulgence. It was unacceptable for the public to possess a body that was either too fat or too thin, as weight was synonymous with health, and the health of the public echoed the health of the nation. Consequentially, such people were subjected to humiliation, ridicule, and mockery, as a response to their inability to maintain a healthy body. This was evident in the social construction of freak with fat bodies at British seaside resorts.

Robert Bogdan, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, and David Gerber have analysed the conception of fat people as freak show exhibitors through examining the images, newspapers, written reports, and personal testimonies accompanying their shows. They note that unlike other freak show displays, there was significant mocking involved with exhibitions of fat people. This demonstrated a darker side to the freak show, as it acted as a platform on which audiences could laugh at those on display.⁴³⁵ It gave those with 'normal' bodies a moral superiority over those with

⁴³⁵ However, overweight people who displayed themselves in the freak show asserted their agency over their physically different bodies and capitalized on their abnormality for the fiscal benefits it provided. Furthermore, corpulent people exacerbated their physical and social difference, which encouraged people to laugh at their exhibitions.

'abnormal' bodies. This promoted a clear message to the overweight community; that they should control their bodies, or they too would be subjected to the mockery targeted at fat people in the freak show.

Robert Bogdan argues that the construction of fat individuals who performed in freak shows was different to the creation of the bearded lady, for example. While the bearded lady, particularly in the Victorian period, was regarded as educational,

The presentation of extremely obese exhibits came closest to a purely mocking mode. People who weighed over five hundred pounds took on such names as "Tiny Brown," "Baby Ruth," "Alpine," "Jolly Trixie," and "Dolly Dimples." Huge women wore dainty, little girl's outfits, danced soft shoe, and chucked.⁴³⁶

Similarly, Gerber reveals,

the prototypical case of an ultra-obese individual, whose performance consists of little more than wearing clothes that reveal her extreme weight, while being seated in an especially small chair that enhances the same impression, and allowing herself to be stared at by an audience.⁴³⁷

⁴³⁶ Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (London, 1988), p. 114; a bearded lady was often billed as evidence of Darwin's 'Missing Link'.

⁴³⁷ David Gerber, 'The "Careers" of People Exhibited in Freak Shows: The Problem of Volition and Valorization' in Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (London, 1996), p. 38.

Exhibitions sometimes encouraged practices which humiliated the person on display. An advertisement in the *Gloucester Citizen* in 1922 entitled 'Don't Prod The Fat Lady' reported that, 'Notices are posted...appealing to ladies to refrain from prodding the two fat sisters with umbrellas. It appears that some women have done this to ascertain whether the sisters are padded.'⁴³⁸ Fat men or women were categorized as a funny entertainment, as opposed to the other categorizations, such as exotic or aggrandized forms of amusement. Showmen exploited the comedic value of the fat person to construct them for the entertainment of the public.⁴³⁹

However, there was a deeper relationship between fatness and humour that warned audiences of the consequences of being overweight. Christopher Forth and Ana Carden-Coyne examine the interrelationship between comedy and fat people, revealing that they were simultaneously a type of amusement for audiences, as well as a way of excluding those who were considered different or unusual. This permitted those with 'normal' bodies to establish their place in 'normative' society.

⁴³⁸ "Don't Prod the Fat Lady." *Gloucester Citizen*, 17 Jan. 1922, p. 8. *British Library Newspapers*, tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/4FYE46. Accessed 23 Jan. 2017

⁴³⁹ Fat freaks were often involved in arranged marriages that were advertised for the public to come and see. Fat women and thin men, seemingly incongruous couples, were brought together for the entertainment of those around them. These marriages were not always pretend, and sometimes, exhibitors did find true love. The marriages were an attempt to show social and cultural normality and garner audience attention. Yet, they also provided entertainment to audiences, who were amused by the thought that two unusual people might wed.

People with weight-related issues were highly stigmatized in British society.

⁴⁴⁰ Newspapers and periodicals intermittently commented on the availability of clothing for unusually large individuals. In the case of Lenny Mason, one newspaper report suggested that his weight caused extra expenditure on his clothing, as he could not wear fashion from department stores. Therefore, he was forced to buy tailored suits, which cost around £10, much more than averagely sized clothes.⁴⁴¹ Such discussions incited shame in the overweight person, as they were unable to demarcate their place in modern society and stabilize their social status.

The interrelationship between average statistical norms, clothing, and the freak show encouraged greater body management because people were humiliated for being inherently abnormal if they did not scale their body to a standard size. Fatness was regarded as something to be laughed at. Cecil Webb-Johnson noted, 'A fat man is a joke, and a fat woman is two jokes – one on herself and one on her husband. Half the comedy in the world is predicated as the paunch.'⁴⁴² It was acceptable to shame, humiliate, and laugh at corpulent people. Such reactions were justified fat people maintained their physique through overindulgence and did not stay in line with the current health guidelines. It was not the same as laughing at someone who was congenitally deformed. Rather, fat people actively damaged their health through overindulgence and they did not adhere to the societal obligation which promoted keeping one's body within the confines of normality.

⁴⁴⁰ Gilman, *Obesity*, p. 63.

⁴⁴¹ *Nottingham Evening Post*, Friday 31 October 1919, p. 3.

⁴⁴² Cecil Webb-Johnson, *Why Be Fat?* (London, 1923), p. 21.

Therefore, they deserved to be subjected to social sanctions. Gilman suggests that, 'The idea that a weakness of will was the cause of obesity became a medical as well as a popular trope by the end of the eighteenth century.'⁴⁴³ As obesity was considered a weakness of will, corpulent people were humiliated in the hope that this would ensure they lost weight. This suggested that people with unusually large bodies were perceived as physically, socially, and morally inferior to those who could control their body weight.

The physical and social constructions of exhibitions of fat people reflected public discourses on health and wellness in the twentieth century. Their construction as humorous performances encouraged people to laugh at fat people. The humour attached to exhibitions of corpulent individuals increased the shame associated with being overweight and inspired those with larger bodies to shed the excess fat they were carrying to avoid humiliation. As reducing became more popular throughout society, fat people who were not displayed as part of the seaside freak show, became the object of stigmatization, which resulted in shame. However, the fat person could reinstate themselves back into society, through transforming their bodies to fit within the contemporary physical ideal.⁴⁴⁴ Moreover, holidaymakers could engage with reducing through other sideshows at the seaside. For example, one showman's act was to guess the weight of people who wished to know,

⁴⁴³ Gilman, *Obesity*, p. 59.

⁴⁴⁴ Forth and Carden-Coyne, "The Belly and Beyond" in Forth and Carden-Coyne (eds.) *Cultures of the Abdomen*, p. 14.

Guess your weight sir, if I fail to guess within 4lbs then you can have it free,
come along sir, guess your weight lady. If I fail then its all for nowt. Free...
Guess the babies weight mother... the only sure way to tell if you [sic]
healthy, take your weight, see [sic] that list and it tells you what you should
weigh for your age and your high [sic] ... now then young man... 9.9... ah,
9.10. 2d. please.⁴⁴⁵

Therefore, they could find out their weight and closely compare their own body to those on display.

Fat Boys

Audiences had exposure to these ideas through the fat people who displayed their bodies in coastal sideshows. The exhibitions provided onlookers with a frame in which they could appreciate the physical and social consequences of obesity. However, the ways in which fat people were conceptualized differed depending on the gender of the exhibitor; while women were interpreted in relation to concepts of femininity, sexuality, and appetite, men were understood 'against the background of dominant codes of manliness and a wider debate about the physical fitness of the British race.'⁴⁴⁶

Weight-related problems were primarily associated with middle-class men in the first half of the twentieth century. While obesity occurred in both men and

⁴⁴⁵ Mass Observation, Worktown Collection, 58A Sideshows and Amusements, p. 77.

⁴⁴⁶ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'The Culture of the Abdomen: Obesity and Reducing in Britain, circa 1900-1939' *Journal of British Studies* 44:2 (2005), p. 241.

women, 'medical debate on obesity and popular manuals generally assumed a male norm.'⁴⁴⁷ This demonstrated the substantial anxiety that male fatness caused the medical profession, who were keen to provide the public with methods through which to reduce their unhealthy excess fat. Bodily size was one way to assess the healthiness of an individual. Therefore, it was generally assumed that a fatter body equalled an unhealthier person. A *carte de visit* of Mason's exhibit showed that his arms and legs were uncovered to emphasize his corpulence, which coupled with the detailed measurements provided, permitted the male audience to stare at, assess, and understand his fatness. Fat people were often exhibited wearing revealing clothing; skin was exposed so that audiences could stare at the extent of their fatness and measure themselves in relation to the obese body on show.⁴⁴⁸ In turn, this encouraged the audience to transform their own bodies into something more socially acceptable.

Displays of fat boys exploited the fear that some men experienced about appearing weak or effeminate by presenting them as the antithesis of masculinity. Men were expected to maintain their manliness through physical strength and fitness, and the 'cultivation of a fit male body' was central to British citizenship and a response to 'the needs of the British Empire.'⁴⁴⁹ Corpulent men contrasted with

⁴⁴⁷ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Obesity and Reducing in Britain, circa 1900-1939', p. 254.

⁴⁴⁸ Firstly, prior to the twentieth century, obesity signified strength and manliness, so displays of fat boys reflected the changing construction of the 'ideal' body. Obesity was no longer considered a sign of strength, but feminine and thus, weak. Secondly, twentieth century audiences would not have seen obesity on such a scale as this in everyday life.

⁴⁴⁹ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Building a British Superman: Physical Culture in Interwar Britain' *Journal of Contemporary History* 41:4 (2006), p. 596.

the ideals of beauty that stressed muscular strength, athleticism, and pride in appearance. Lenny Mason demonstrated what men should not be; unfit, uncontrolled, and gluttonous. Rather, men were expected to partake in exercise, eat well, and exude health.⁴⁵⁰ Male fatness was frequently perceived as humorous as overweight men were the opposite of what society expected of them. Zweiniger-Bargielowska points out that, 'The association of obesity and fat with humiliation, ridicule, or pity was perhaps an even greater incentive to reduce.'⁴⁵¹ By not maintaining an average bodily norm, there were obvious societal consequences. Obese individuals were ostracized for their bodily difference, which had a psychological impression on their personal relationship with food and eating.

Mason's enormous body encouraged the procurement of physical strength through inducing the fear of abnormality and associating fatness with humour. Through staring at freaks with fat bodies, audiences garnered how the wider public perceived fatness and fat people; through this, they understood the consequences of their own obesity. However, Mason's body also brought a sense of relief to those who frequented his exhibit; firstly, that they were not as abnormal as he was, and secondly, that they could rectify their weight through better body management. Subsequently, Mason's fatness enabled people to normalize themselves in relation to him. Whilst spectators may have required greater body management, they were most likely more statistically normal than the fat boy on show. Through staring at

⁴⁵⁰ See Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Managing the Body: Beauty, Health and Fitness in Britain, 1880-1939* (Oxford, 2010).

⁴⁵¹ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'The Culture of the Abdomen: Obesity and Reducing in Britain, circa 1900-1939', p. 264.

the unusual body and assessing its physical and social 'abnormality', audiences could then assess their own bodies. Holidaymakers became afraid of the consequences of overindulging and were stimulated to take control of their bodies to remain within average statistical norms.

Mason was portrayed wearing a tunic, which was considered a particularly feminine piece of clothing. Similarly, Tom Westwood was displayed in clothing which mimicked that of his overweight sisters, with frilled detailing on his collar enhancing his femininity.⁴⁵²

⁴⁵² Figure 4.4, Carte de Visit of the Westwood Family, (c. 1907) EPH499, Wellcome Library London.

Figure 4.4. *Carte de Visite* of the Westwood Family, c. 1907.



There was such an intense focus on male obesity because it conflicted with 'hegemonic masculinity' and men were ridiculed for it.⁴⁵³ Christopher Forth argues that

the incorporation of manhood was a complex and fraught business.

Throughout the modern era, physicians dispensed dietetic advice aimed at weaning men from the indulgent lifestyles that threatened their health and rendered them unfit for the active life that is an enduring component of masculinity, including physical labor and military prowess. Like the other diseases of civilization, dietetic mismanagement also threatened to generate or aggravate a host of sexual disorders, from masturbation to impotence, that spelled disaster even for the most hardy of men... when combined with the other health problems of modern life, dietary issues raised questions about warrior manhood at the very moment that modern nations began to emerge.⁴⁵⁴

Corpulent men were never referred to as masculine and they were billed as fat 'boys' rather than fat 'men'. This was a conscious decision on the part of the showmen creating the displays. They exploited the fact that the fat male body was not considered masculine; rather, it was perceived as boyish, soft, weak, and feminine. This attack on masculinity was accentuated in the images accompanying

⁴⁵³ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'The Culture of the Abdomen: Obesity and Reducing in Britain, circa 1900-1939', p. 262.

⁴⁵⁴ Christopher E. Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West: Gender, Civilization and the Body* (Hampshire, 2008), p. 113.

the displays. The apprehension surrounding the masculinity of fat men extended into anxiety about the sexuality of men who could not control their appetites. Forth maintains that 'critics contended that the slippery slope to effeminacy and sodomy was lubricated with rich food and drink...⁴⁵⁵ Therefore, the effeminate fat body was regarded as evidence of, or a precursor to, unusual sexual behaviour. Stigmatizing the fat body was connected to denouncing deviant sexuality; it was a rejection of homosexual practices.⁴⁵⁶ Therefore, this suggested to the male audience that, if they were overweight, they would be observed as effeminate, and perhaps even associated with shameful homosexual practices. Ultimately, if the physical risks were not an incentive to lose weight, perhaps the social sanctions of fatness would encourage the individual to take control of their diet. Therefore, displays exploited masculine anxieties and apprehensions to encourage men to evaluate their bodies and lifestyles, in a bid to improve the health of holidaymakers. Although fat boys were an amusing form of entertainment, their exhibitions undoubtedly had serious undertones of social and cultural thought. By linking fatness so closely with identity and humour, it associated shame with spectacle, and thus mobilized overweight men to engage with reducing culture.

⁴⁵⁵ =. Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West*, p. 93.

⁴⁵⁶ The Sexual Offences Act 1967 was an Act of Parliament in the United Kingdom. It decriminalized homosexual acts in private between two men, at the age of 21. Homosexual acts were not decriminalized in Scotland by the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act in 1989, and in Northern Ireland by the Homosexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order of 1982.

Fat Ladies

The ways in which fat people were displayed varied between genders. There were several ways that fat women were exhibited to the public, which reflected the complex societal expectations of women in the twentieth century. In the same way as Lenny Mason, Miss Rosie and Ruby Westwood, fat ladies who displayed their bodies throughout Britain, portrayed that women should maintain a statistically 'normal' and healthy body.⁴⁵⁷ Fat women were 'othered' for possessing a frame that did not fit within the physical 'norms' of the time. Their otherness was exposed through the revealing costumes that they wore as part of their display, which made visible the level of their fatness. Fat women were 'enfreaked' to encourage other overweight ladies to diet, so that they could adhere to the societal conventions of health, beauty, and glamour.

The idealized female body transformed at the start of the twentieth century. Robert Pollack Seid argues, 'Rather suddenly, in 1908, the voluptuous hourglass figure fell out of favor. It was replaced by a body type closer to the one we admire today: slender, long-limbed, and relatively straight.'⁴⁵⁸ Consequently, women had to alter their bodies through diet and exercise, to adhere to the dictates of contemporary fashion. Additionally, Seid states,

Slimness was becoming synonymous with grace and elegance, and for the first time, the body underneath had to be slim without the aid of rigid body-

⁴⁵⁷ *The Era*, Saturday 20 February 1909, p. 29.

⁴⁵⁸ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, p. 81.

shaping undergarments... The lower body, once kept private and hidden beneath outer garments, petticoats, and stays, suddenly became more exposed and more public.⁴⁵⁹

The new preference for a slim and toned physique, and the greater exposure of the female body, were evidence of profound cultural changes such as the shifting perceptions of the body, health, and to an extent the social position of women.⁴⁶⁰ As the twentieth century progressed, women were permitted to take greater control of their bodies and their lives.⁴⁶¹ This was reflected in the changing idealized body. The display of fat women in freak shows exposed the anxieties that resulted from the emergence of the modernized women. 'The body was a key site for the construction of femininity. A modern, actively cultivated body was yet another aspect of women's liberation along with political emancipation, greater gender equality and expanded employment opportunities after the First World War.'⁴⁶²

The dramatic transformation in what was expected of women's bodies reflected the power of a revolution in their social and cultural lives. 'Physical culture promoters aimed to teach women how to acquire health, beauty and racial fitness by practicing a hygienic regimen which was accessible and affordable.'⁴⁶³ This

⁴⁵⁹ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, p. 81.

⁴⁶⁰ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, p. 82.

⁴⁶¹ See Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Women in Twentieth century Britain* (Harlow, 2001).

⁴⁶² Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'The Making of a Modern Female Body: beauty, health and fitness in interwar Britain' *Women's History Review*, 20:2 (2011) p. 300.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

included ensuring that they had maintained a healthy weight; that they were not too slender nor too fat.⁴⁶⁴ 'In interwar Britain female athleticism, keep-fit classes and physical culture were celebrated as emblems of modernity and women who cultivated their bodies in the pursuit of beauty, health and fitness represented civic virtue.'⁴⁶⁵

Female dieting culture was part of a wider promotion of beauty, health, and fitness discourse, which was aimed at women. Beauty culturalists, such as Annette Kellermann and Helena Gent 'preached the message of health and beauty, as essential prerequisites of a happy marriage, which could be achieved by means of rational diet and exercise.'⁴⁶⁶ Advice was available in a multiplicity of publications. There was a burgeoning number of self-help manuals, dieting books, and food-related magazine articles, which offered women advice on how to lose their surplus fat. For example, an article in *The Sunday Times* revealed that the fashionable world had started to condemn fatness, and instead advocated a slender physique. It reported,

The close-fitting gown having come to stay, fatness is *de trop* – that is to say, "not in it". Fat ladies are socially as well as physically at a disadvantage.

There is one loophole of escape, however, for the over-fat laud. Let her get a bottle of Marmole Prescription Tablets, and take one tablet after each

⁴⁶⁴ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'The Making of a Modern Female Body: beauty, health and fitness in interwar Britain', p. 307.

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

meal and at bedtime, and very soon she will be wearing the new modes with comfort and grace.⁴⁶⁷ These tablets are 'also a very pleasant method to adopt, for they render dieting and exercising entirely unnecessary.'⁴⁶⁸

Such publications presented women with quick-fix solutions to their weight problems. Rather than suggesting lifestyle changes for the long-term health benefits, they promoted the successful short-term answers, that would enable women to wear clothing to make themselves physically attractive. However, this was also an expression of superior social status.⁴⁶⁹ 'In setting up a slender ideal, fashion also seemed to be performing one of its more venerable functions: competitive display of social status. In a curious inversion of popular imagery, the poor and lower classes began to be seen as stock and plump rather than as thin and undernourished...'⁴⁷⁰ Maintaining a body that was in keeping with the idealized female frame enabled women to ensure a higher social status than those who could not control their bodies.

As with fat boys, fat ladies had both a physical and a social meaning for audiences. Miss Rosie's exhibit exposed the societal apprehension around that changing meaning of womanhood and sexual deviance, in a period in which women freer to express their sexual preferences. Miss Rosie was simultaneously feminized

⁴⁶⁷ "Fashionable World Condemns Fat." *Sunday Times* [London, England] 18 Dec. 1910: 15. *The Sunday Times Digital Archive*. Web. 23 Jan. 2017.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁹ Lucy Hartley, 'A Science of Beauty? Femininity, Fitness, and the Nineteenth century Physiognomic', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 12:1 (2001), p. 19

⁴⁷⁰ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, p. 91.

and sexualized, and therefore portrayed several concepts specifically to female holidaymakers.⁴⁷¹ The *carte de visit* depicted Miss Rosie as overtly feminine, as she was carrying and wearing flowers in her hair.⁴⁷² The flowers signified beauty, purity, elegance, and innocence; they revealed the character of the fat lady. Furthermore, a newspaper report on Miss Rosie's exhibition stated, 'She is engaged at needlework, but at your entrance a smile creases her face, and almost hides her eyes in rolls of fat.'⁴⁷³ Miss Rosie was both costumed in feminine clothing and displayed occupied with pastimes that were typically associated with women, which revealed to the audience that female holidaymakers were expected to reflect upon her exhibition. These aspects of her display reinforced her social normality and enabled people to relate themselves to the person in front of them.

While Miss Rosie reinforced gender stereotypes, she concurrently defied them. A newspaper report that detailed her exhibition disclosed, 'She wears a flamboyant evening gown, sleeveless and cut perilously low...' which revealed the inherent concern with the sexual deviance of the fat lady.⁴⁷⁴ The uncovering of skin was considered inappropriate for women even within the relaxed boundaries of

⁴⁷¹ For male holidaymakers, they may have regarded her as attractive or sexual. Female holidaymakers were more likely to compare their body to her body, assessing their 'normality' or 'abnormality'.

⁴⁷² Figure 4.3 *Carte de Visit* for Miss Rosie, c. 1900, Wellcome Library, London. EPH WD. Freaks:1:1.

⁴⁷³ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁴ The Local and Family History Centre, Blackpool Central Library, Cyril Critchlow Collection. Newspaper Clippings. 'Gazette and Herald 09/08/1930'; However, there was a difference between the *carte de visit* and the way that the fat lady was verbally constructed in newspapers. Perhaps this is because it encouraged people to frequent the exhibit if they were intrigued by the sexualization of those with abnormal bodies.

British seaside resorts. Moreover, her inability to control her hunger for food was perceived as equal to an incapability to regulate her sexual desires, as 'hunger for sex and for food were not imagined as radically separate urges'.⁴⁷⁵ The sexualization of Miss Rosie, through her revealing dress and the unveiling of her excess skin, dictated to female spectators that they should remain within the confines of British womanhood and retain complete control over their sexual desires. Such exhibits sought to encourage the women who attended the display to keep their bodies within the confines of physical, social, and sexual 'normality'. As with displays of difference in the nineteenth century, freak shows simultaneously entertained and educated British holidaymakers in the twentieth century. Not only did freak show acts demonstrate the importance of maintaining a normative physicality but they revealed the necessity of staying within the confines of British social boundaries.

Conclusion

As the twentieth century progressed there was an awareness of the effect of excess weight on personal health and wellbeing. While the 'Hungry England' debate raised concerns about the malnutrition of the British working classes there were also anxieties surrounding the rising obesity rates of the middle classes. Dieting literature utilized fat freaks such as Daniel Lambert to encourage people to lose weight. Through 'enfreaking' the fat body, medical professionals brought together medical discourse and popular culture, and employed it to educate the public on

⁴⁷⁵ Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West*, p. 93.
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the reasons why they should commit to losing weight. Obesity was condemned because of the physical risks associated with being overweight. However, there were numerous social sanctions that faced those who were too fat, including not being able to find clothes to fit or being unable to sit in an airplane seat. This chapter has argued that displays of fat people in freak shows were understood in relation to the contemporary health discourse surrounding the rising obesity rates in the middle classes. Comparable with the exhibitions of starvation performers, Miss Rosie and Lenny Mason were the epitome of what the British public should not be. Fat people gave audiences a tangible example of what was considered physically unhealthy. They had significant social meaning as well. For instance, a fat woman exposed their inability to control their sexual appetite, whilst a fat man showed himself to be effeminate and emasculated. However, through the construction of the fat person as funny, and the association of fatness with humiliation and shame, being overweight became a stigmatized and embarrassing problem. The display of fat freaks encouraged the understanding of fat people as 'abnormal' and 'humorous', both reflecting and reaffirming the promotion of physical and social 'normality'. Through learning about body management and partaking in healthy activities, such as those provided by the *Women's League of Health and Beauty* and *The New Health Society* men and women were encouraged to cultivate a 'normal' body, for the health and strength of the British nation.

Chapter 5

‘Entirely Normal Man – The World’s Greatest Living Freak’: Freakish Sexuality at British Seaside Resorts.

Introduction

An article published in the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, on Saturday 9th August 1930 described a court case involving one of the most fascinating freak show exhibitors to display themselves for the amusement of British holidaymakers to the coast; ‘the man-woman’, the ‘freak that was no freak’.⁴⁷⁶ The newspaper report outlined,

A remarkable story of a man who described himself as half man and half woman was told at Blackpool yesterday, when three men were committed for trial on charges of conspiracy and fraud. The police stated that at an amusement arcade in Blackpool one of the defendants was on show wearing a false breast on the left side and a band around his head with hair protruding on the left side, but on the right it was closely cut. He told the audience that his abnormal condition was discovered when he was young, but the truth was that his body was that of an entirely normal male. The defence was that it was just showmanship.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷⁶ *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, Saturday 09 August 1930.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

A similarly curious story was published in the *Yorkshire Evening Post* in 1930 of a 'half-man, half-woman' advertised as Josephine-Joseph. Josephine Waas, an average biological female, was displayed as a 'half-man, half-woman' in British seaside resorts for the entertainment of the holidaying public, in search of cheap thrills and titillating amusement. The article exposed the controversy associated with the display, which was reportedly 'deceiving' tourists into reasoning that they were observing an authentic hermaphrodite.

George Waas, who has been running a 'half man, half woman' exhibition known as Josephine-Joseph, at Temple Beach, Blackpool, was fined £25 for false pretences. His wife, Josephine, who was also charged with the offence, and was the exhibit, was discharged on condition that neither of them hold the exhibition again. Superintendent R. Hannan said the case was not brought with any spirit of vindictiveness, but with a view to protecting the gullible public who paid to see the exhibition. It was stated that Waas's wife was exhibited as Josephine-Joseph, half man, half woman, the world's greatest living freak.⁴⁷⁸

'Half-men, half-women' were a popular and captivating form of amusement in British coastal locations, with thousands of holidaymakers frequenting the exhibits each summer season. Often presented as a brother and sister in one body, they possessed names that accentuated their physical ambiguity, such as 'Josephine-Joseph', 'Phil-Phyllis', or 'Karl-Katrina', ensuring that the public were

⁴⁷⁸ *Yorkshire Evening Post*, Friday 22 August 1930, p. 7.

aware that the person on stage possessed characteristics that were both masculine and feminine but was not fully one or the other. Large plaques outside the booths which housed the equivocal performers questioned holidaymakers, 'Is it a man, or is it a woman?' and sideshow barkers encouraged them to find out for themselves by looking, and in turn, making their own decision about the body on display.⁴⁷⁹ In the 1930s, there was public curiosity towards sexual ambiguity; both science and the state classified people into distinct genders, which subsequently reinforced stereotypical societal gender norms for both men and women, and safeguarded social stability in Britain, through the promotion of strictly gendered public and private spheres, achieved through the elevation and promotion of marital relationships for stable and successful lives.

'Half-men, half-women' capitalized on the intrigue, debate, and anxiety surrounding sexual indistinctness, and therefore, attracted a multiplicity of holidaymakers to their displays. The seaside space was important in the creation of the public discourse surrounding these exhibitions. Judy Hemmingway argues that space and place are important in the production of sexual cultures through analysing the binary between the "wholesome" and the 'raffish' to show how disorder is both accomplished and domesticated in coastal resorts.'⁴⁸⁰ The space was particularly important in understanding sexual deviance within the seaside

⁴⁷⁹ True hermaphrodites were extremely rare and seldom exhibited themselves in the freak show. In fact, many hermaphrodites did not like to have the medical profession involved and declined examination.

⁴⁸⁰ Judy Hemmingway, 'Sexual Learning and the Seaside: Relocating the 'Dirty Weekend' and Teenage Girls Sexuality' *Sex Education* 6:4 (2006), p. 430.

freak show, as 'The coastal fringe is not just a topographic margin but a site of marginality where 'immoral' leisure activities, which hitherto were only permitted during regulated intervals of reinvigoration, can take place all year round.'⁴⁸¹ Non-traditional sexual behaviour, such as pre-marital sex, was more permissible at British seaside resorts, due to the liminal nature of the seaside space. Therefore, it was a pertinent environment in which to discuss and understand a variety of sexual practices, as they were more likely to occur in marginal locations, sites of experimentation, anonymity, and loosened social norms. However, displays of 'half-men, half-women' in the period encapsulated broader societal discourse on the indistinctness between men and women throughout the 1920s and 1930s, which was categorised by the emergence of women from the private to the public sphere, and a crisis of masculinity following the First World War in 1918.

Confusion surrounded the blurred boundaries between men and women in the period was reflected in the numerous court cases reported in local newspapers. Through condemning sexually deviant performers within the confines of a legal case, lawyers could show that sexual indistinctness was improper in a court of law. This revealed to the general British public that, while it might have been an acceptable form of entertainment, sexual deviance of any kind was not permissible. The court cases reinforced that the performers were *not* sexually ambiguous, rather, they were a deceptive form of amusement. Court involvement in the

⁴⁸¹ Hemmingway, 'Sexual Learning and the Seaside: Relocating the 'Dirty Weekend' and Teenage Girls Sexuality', p. 432.

exhibitions revealed the state's need to portray to the public that being half way between a man and women was unlikely, undesirable, and objectionable. Thus, the judgements reinforced the social conventions associated with maintaining gender norms, within a period of unprecedented societal transformation of gender and the role of women in the first half of the twentieth century.

The court cases consistently criticized displays of 'half-men, half-women' for two main reasons. Firstly, they were reported to be misleading, and secondly, they were labelled as 'indecent'. The newspaper reports that documented the court proceedings revealed the construction of such performances for the public, demonstrating how they were created to convey meaning to the holidaying masses at seaside resorts, which reflected the indistinctness and instability of traditional binary conceptualisations of gender and sexuality between 1920 and 1940. The newspaper reports on the court cases provide useful insight into the construction of 'half-man, half-woman' displays, as well as the subsequent public reaction to them. For example, the local police visited an exhibitor promoted as "Senor-Senorita" in 1930, after receiving an anonymous tip-off from a concerned resident. Describing the show as 'indecent' and 'not suitable for children', he noted that the sideshow barker stood outside the booth, shouting the question "Is it a man or woman?" to intrigued onlookers, encouraging them to pay the fee and see for themselves.

The policeman reported what he found inside the booth: 'The person exhibited wore what appeared to be a bodice and a short skirt on one side and a

light covering on the other. The left breast appeared to be padded.⁴⁸² To enhance the feminine characteristics of the biological male who was exhibited, the showmen inserted supplementary padding to the performer's costume, to give the illusion of breasts and hips. The witness continued, 'On the left hand was a lady's ring and on the right hand a gentleman's signet ring.'⁴⁸³ Furthermore, 'The left leg, which was bare, had no hair on it at all, and it had the appearance of having been shaved and powdered. The right leg was hairy. On the left foot a lady's shoe was worn and on the right a gentleman's shoe.'⁴⁸⁴ Even the position in which the defendant was standing was designed to promote the divided and indistinct gender of the individual. 'St. John was standing with one leg bent and the other straight, thus revealing muscles. He drew the attention of the public to the contrasts of both sides, left and right.'⁴⁸⁵ The detail given by newspaper reports exposed what was revealed to the public when they stepped into the covered booth; the article detailed the numerous methods through which the showmen and, indeed, performers, constructed the exhibit to delude the public, through posture, hair removal, and astute costuming. Interestingly, it allowed readers to appease their curiosity without even going to the show.

The legal profession took the case so seriously because of the promotion of ambiguity within the show. The defendant in the case argued with the prosecution,

⁴⁸² 'Resumed Hearing of 'Half-Man-Woman' Case', *Hull Daily Mail*, Wednesday 05 November 1930.

⁴⁸³ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

stating, 'We don't say it is part man and part woman but leave it to you to find out.'⁴⁸⁶ The witness insisted, 'He is a man' and the defendant replied 'Yes he is, but we don't say what he is.'⁴⁸⁷ Although he did not deny that the show was created for the purpose of entertainment, he suggested that he had done nothing wrong as he had never claimed that 'Senor-Senorita' was a 'half-man, half-woman', merely that they *could* be.

Further comments were made about the advertisements that were placed outside the show to intrigue curious holidaymakers and excursionists. Signage was used to artistic effect; one such sign presented a man and woman partially naked and another declared, 'Is it half man half woman?' However, the words 'is it' were extraordinarily small and, therefore, could not be seen from a distance.⁴⁸⁸

Objections were made about the billboards which were accused of duping the public into believing they viewed an authentic freak of nature. Ultimately, newspaper reports on the display exposed the dissatisfaction that local authorities, and the British public, had surrounding the display of 'half-men, half-women', which related primarily to the challenge to traditional gender and sexuality.

Moreover, they demonstrated the fervent attempt to prosecute those involved with the creation, promotion, and performance of such exhibitions. While other exhibitions, such as the starving brides faced police intervention, the cases were not reported as widely or as in depth, as those of 'half-men, half-women', as there

⁴⁸⁶ 'Resumed Hearing of 'Half-Man-Woman' Case', *Hull Daily Mail*, Wednesday 05 November 1930.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

were moral implications of accepting confused gender or sexuality within entertainment spaces, even those in which sexual immorality was more apparent. Through the involvement of the legal profession in these cases, there was wider condemnation of others engaging in deviant sexual practices or behaviours. When placed within their contemporary context, they provide insight into representations and perceptions of gender and sexuality, both through the construction of, and reaction to, the exhibitions at British seaside resorts in the period between 1920 and 1940.

Scholarly research that focuses on the display of ‘half-men, half-women’ predominantly concentrates on the nineteenth century. Leslie Fiedler notes that,

Before unisex clothes and hairstyling, even such superficial counterfeits of androgyny seem to have provided audiences with a sufficient thrill, though there were always those who wanted more and were willing to pay to see the “morphodites” strip down and reveal that one breast was full and hairless, the other flat and furry. Their genitals, however, even inside the tent were usually concealed, though the spieler hinted at their double nature, and sometimes a select few (almost always “gentlemen only”) were permitted to gaze at the final mystery.⁴⁸⁹

However, most performers did not reveal their genitals, rather keeping the suspense, and presumably hiding the fact that they were not truly hermaphrodites.

⁴⁸⁹ Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (Middlesex, 1979), p. 181. 277

Nonetheless, ‘Some fairground Hermaphrodites must have been true intersexes, freaky enough to satisfy any beholder; but most in all probability were fakes, just trying to make a living – or, responding, perhaps, to a psychic dissatisfaction with their physiological gender.’⁴⁹⁰

A significant portion of the historical research on hermaphrodites has focused on the debate between entertainment and medical science. Geertje Mak examines the case of Katharina/Karl Hohmann, who was the subject of one of the most famous cases of hermaphroditism in nineteenth century medical science. She notes the popularity of hermaphrodite displays,

Hermaphrodites on show often travelled around, probably following the itineraries of fairs at which they could show themselves to curious audiences. The most famous hermaphrodites travelled all over Europe. It is likely that most of them tried to combine public shows with demonstrations for medical scientists, as this not only allowed them to earn money, but provided them with authenticating certificates which added credibility to their shows for the general public.⁴⁹¹

Mak specifically analyses the relationship between popular culture and scientific curiosity, demonstrating the overlap between two distinct aspects of society and culture.

⁴⁹⁰ Fiedler, *Freaks*, p. 181.

⁴⁹¹ Geertje Mak, ‘Hermaphrodites on Show: The Case of Katharina/Karl Hohmann and its Use in Nineteenth century Medical Science’, *Social History of Medicine*, 25:1 (2012), pp. 65-83.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, hospitals had become places where illnesses were 'exhibited' so that students could learn from observing patients and dissecting their deceased bodies. This is the reason that hospitals in Europe were mainly occupied by poor people; the rich avoided these places of experimentation and exhibition as much as possible.

Hermaphrodites seeking advice about their sex primarily visited private practices, however, and there were new diagnostic techniques such as the palpation of the inner organs of generation through penetration of the anus and vagina and catheterisation using a speculum were only very hesitantly introduced. Hermaphrodites who were willing to expose themselves in exchange for money, therefore, provided precious educational 'material'.⁴⁹²

The medical profession in Britain continued their curiosity and research into intersexuality in the twentieth century. Physicians were interested in understanding the effect of a more equal society and culture on the female body in the 1920s, when there was fervent interest in female equality. Walter Heape, a medical practitioner, believed that 'emancipated female activity could also lead to a physiological sex reversal in which the properly dominant female sexual physiological atrophied and the properly latent and vestigial male physiological developed.'⁴⁹³ Medical professionals argued that through engaging with masculine activities, such as pursuing an extensive education, women might cause their

⁴⁹² Mak, 'Hermaphrodites on Show: The Case of Katharina/Karl Hohmann and its Use in Nineteenth century Medical Science, pp. 65-83.

⁴⁹³ Lisa Carstens, 'Unbecoming Women: Sex reversal in the Scientific Discourse on Female Deviance in Britain, 1880-1920' *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20:1 (2011), p. 76.

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female bodies to spontaneously change sex. The research on spontaneous sex change was published in the *British Medical Journal*, exposing the continued fascination with and research conducted into, ambiguous gender and sexuality. James Vernon demonstrates how such ideas were evident within popular entertainment pursuits. He notes, 'The apparent fluidity of gender and class roles following World War I and the greater uncertainty that consequently began to haunt social exchanges, especially in cities, may well help to explain the proliferation of cheap novels that plotted the adventures of those who masqueraded (usually) across class or occupational boundaries in pursuit of love.'⁴⁹⁴ Similarly, Alison Oram argues, 'Swapping around with gender was surely dangerous and transgressive, however theatrical, in a period when gender identity was deemed to be fixed by nature and gender relations were politically contested.'⁴⁹⁵

This chapter situates displays of 'half-men, half-women', within contemporary anxieties surrounding the significance of heteronormative relationships, the belief of the medical profession that women could extemporaneously change sex, and the mounting concerns about 'mannish women' and 'effeminate men' in British society. The period between 1900 and 1950 was one of burgeoning medical and scientific knowledge of male and female bodies, as well as transforming principles on both heterosexual and homosexual behaviour. Displays of ambiguously sexed people encapsulated the discourse on marriage,

⁴⁹⁴ James Vernon, "'For Some Queer Reason": The Trials and Tribulations of Colonel Barker's Masquerade in Interwar Britain' *Signs* 26:1 (2000), p. 47.

⁴⁹⁵ Alison Oram, *Her Husband Was A Woman! Woman's gender-crossing in modern British popular culture* (London, 2007), p. 13.

sexuality, and gender stereotypes, against a backdrop of monumental societal change. Within the coastal environment, such debates were particularly pertinent, as sexual licentiousness was more acceptable than within urban locations. Removed from their everyday lives, people were permitted to engage in a variety of activities which were less acceptable in their daily routines. The seaside space became almost synonymous with experimental sexual activity as ‘the usual constraints on behaviour are suspended, however provisionally, to give a broader acceptability to or at least tolerance of, a variety of sexual partners and practices, or unscheduled bodily exposure or drink-fuelled raucousness, ribaldry or indelicacy, or the consumption of greasy food with the fingers in the public street.’⁴⁹⁶ As Charlotte Charteris posits, ‘The seaside renders literal the spatial metaphor...’, demonstrating that the marginal coastal space made acceptable marginal social behaviour.⁴⁹⁷

The court cases featuring ‘half-men, half-women’ at the centre exposed a larger struggle between the legal profession, the medical establishment, and popular culture. Vernon argues, ‘The law has long occupied a central position in histories of sexuality, not least because its processes have provided a rich and rare source of reclaiming the “experience” of subjugated “homosexual” subjects.’⁴⁹⁸ Thus, the displays of ‘half-men, half-women’ at British seaside resorts, disclosed

⁴⁹⁶ John Walton, *The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the Twentieth century* (Manchester, 2000), p. 3.

⁴⁹⁷ Charlotte Charteris, ‘Sun, Sea, and Sexual Deviance: The British Noir Thriller of the Long 1930s’ *Critical Quarterly* 57:3 (2015), p. 25.

⁴⁹⁸ Vernon, “‘For Some Queer Reason’: The Trials and Tribulations of Colonel Barker’s Masquerade in Interwar Britain’, p. 39.

contemporary attitudes to sexual deviance in the period, as they provided a space in which the public could better comprehend sexual 'normality' and 'abnormality'. Consequently, by portraying the 'half-man, half-woman' as a freak, they reinforced that maintaining a heteronormative sexual life, would both ensure and emphasise the social normality of those who adhered to such principles.

Gender and Sexuality in Interwar Britain

Deviant gender and sexuality caused substantial anxiety and tension amidst the British public in interwar Britain. Emma Vickers suggests that the turn of the twentieth century marked '...a time when 'the enemies of modern, normative masculinity seemed everywhere on the attack: women were attempting to break out of their traditional role: "unmanly men" and "unwomanly women" ...were becoming more visible.'⁴⁹⁹ This exposed the binary between gender and power, and the unsettling of the public and private spheres in the immediate interwar period.

There were increasingly indistinct boundaries between men and women; men were perceived as becoming more feminine, and women, it was argued, were becoming more masculine. Although, at the outbreak for the First World War, Emmeline Pankhurst suspended the activities of the Women's Social and Political Union, the female involvement in the war effort did much to transform the traditional perceptions of the place of women in British society. In 1918, the

⁴⁹⁹ Emma Vickers, *Queen and Country: Same-Sex in the British Armed Forces, 1939-1945* (Manchester, 2013), pp. 25-26.

Representation of the People Act permitted women over 30 years old, who met specific property criteria, to vote. Nonetheless, the anxieties surrounding indistinct boundaries between men and women was reflected in the labelling of female suffragettes, campaigning for the right to vote, as 'unsexed', due to displaying supposedly unfeminine characteristics. Undoubtedly, the twentieth century marked a change in the role and position of women in British society. The First and Second World Wars brought women out of the domestic sphere, and into the working environment. Many women operated munitions factories, which led to them working in sectors formerly reserved for men; they became bus conductors, engineers, worked on farms, and gained employment in the civil service. However, women were not granted equal voting rights to men until 1928. Nevertheless, the ability for some women to vote marked broader changes in the perception, representation, and status of women in British society.

As women became more involved in the public sphere, there was concern about the lack of distinction between men and women, which, it was believed, might progress into further societal and moral degradation. For example, sexual inversion, the belief in an inborn reversal of gender traits, was manifested in men inclined to traditionally feminine pursuits and dress.⁵⁰⁰ These beliefs were exacerbated as women began to dress in a more masculine way throughout the 1920s. Thus, they were not only behaving like men, but dressing like them too.

⁵⁰⁰ Sexual inversion was termed as such in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and was a theory which suggested that gay men and lesbians were sexual "inverts", people who were physically male or female on the outside but who internally felt that they were the opposite sex. Same-sex attraction was, therefore, regarded as "latent heterosexuality".

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'After the First World War, the fluidity of class and gender boundaries allowed women to experiment with masquerading as a discourse and cross-dressing became *de rigeur* for the fashionable woman about town.'⁵⁰¹ Moreover, Lisa Carstens notes, 'Within popular discourse it largely meant that she looked and acted in ways counter to normative feminine behaviour – whether because she spurned such conventions as feminine dress, marriage, and motherhood or because she did so symbolically by her right to pursue male education, professions, and politics.'⁵⁰² In fact, a plethora of newspaper articles commented on the rising number of 'mannish women' and the affect this might have on the nation. An article in the *Leeds Mercury*, published in 1920 revealed that men should be concerned about the growing propensity that some women had towards masculine traits and activities; it revealed the apprehension about women asserting gender equality. Their entry into the male space led to an assumption of masculine character and behaviours.

The mannish woman is with us, we are told, and man must look out, lest he be shouldered out of the way. Feminism making for the identical training and employment of the sexes is tending to produce a race of women in whom the male characteristics are preponderant. What is more, it is declared that the songs of these mannish women are emasculate, the otherwise of inferior type. The result is the sexes are changing their

⁵⁰¹ Vickers, *Queen and Country*, p. 34.

⁵⁰² Carstens, 'Unbecoming Women: Sex reversal in the Scientific Discourse on Female Deviance in Britain, 1880-1920', p. 63.

characteristics, and there would seem to be some prospect that instead of two noble sexes of manly men and womanly women we shall have in time no estimable sex at all, but two inferior sexes consisting of womanly men and mannish women. Who would regard this as a gain? What a price it would be to pay for woman's so-called emancipation to have half-he and half-she freaks of hermaphrodite mentality! What a world it would be! The sexes play their own specific part in life, and any interference with this must react upon succeeding generations. Whatever natural process of evolution may be at work, it is not towards the absorption of one sex by another. Woman enjoys new-found scope and openings, but if this involves her in the loss of womanly attributes it will be so much the worst for the world. There appears to be a tendency on the part of certain feminists to regard the facts of sex as imposing a needless handicap. But there is surely danger in all attempts to ignore or minimise these.⁵⁰³

The article exposed the anxiety caused by women infiltrating the public sphere, declaring that there would be no distinct sexes if women were to become more masculine, leaving men feeling (or, worse, becoming) emasculated. The report reasoned that this was not evolutionary and that, while it was not to be condemned that women had new opportunities, they should not lose their femininity in the process. Similar sentiments were expressed in the *Nottingham Journal* in 1928.

⁵⁰³ 'Mannish Women', *Leeds Mercury*, Tuesday 27 April 1920, p. 6.
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But in the fact that there was but one moral law for men and women there was the danger that some might say there was no distinction between men and women, and thus they would get the terrible tendency of women wanting to be like men. If there was a thing to dislike more than a womanish man it was a mannish woman... Men take their hats off: Women put their skirts on.⁵⁰⁴

The paper reported, with some condemnation, that women transforming into men was perilous and ordered the public to maintain gender boundaries.

Similarly, *The Shields Daily Gazette* revealed,

It has been well said that God has made the sexes distinct; let not the tailor confound them; but that modern institution, the man-milliner, with jacked, waistcoat, knickerbockers, gaiters, with the supplement of a pot-hat, stick-up collars, tie, and pin, has laughed law and precept to scorn. Add a dog-whip and whistle, a ball dog, a case of cigarettes, and a book for bets, and behold, a hermaphrodite... the demolition of a woman the, the caricature of a man, ridiculed as 'our friend from Middlesex, toasted as 'The ladies, once our examples, now our imitators; once our superiors, now our equals.' I would have every woman take Angelo's advice to heart: 'Be what you are – that is, a woman; if you are more, you're none.'⁵⁰⁵

⁵⁰⁴ 'The Mannish Woman', *Nottingham Journal*, Saturday 19 May 1928.

⁵⁰⁵ 'The Mannish Woman', *Shields Daily Gazette*, Monday 11 November 1901, p. 3.

Utilising a more sentimental tone, the writing encouraged women to be themselves, providing they were appropriately feminine. However, it also used humour to incite shame in an individual displaying both masculine and feminine characteristics, in turn promoting the same strict gender boundaries as other publications. Emma Vickers points out, 'Just as popular imagination mapped same-sex desire onto the male body through effeminacy, queer women were conceptualised through the lens of masculinity.'⁵⁰⁶ The mannish-woman was perceived in comparison with masculine traits; failing to live up to such standards, facilitated their construction as people who could be laughed at. The *Yorkshire Evening Post* condemned women who imitated men,

One need not be an anti-feminist in order to sympathise with the Dean of Durham in his advice to girls not to imitate men. The best and the most enlightened women, we feel sure, will agree with him. Perhaps the Dean went a bit too far when he condemned smoking. If a cigarette soothes a man's nerves, it ought to be still more soothing to a woman's and we see no good reason, either in morals or propriety, for denying her the solace. Nor do we agree with the Deans (unintentional, of course) recognition of the "gentlemanly damn" as excusable in the male sex, yet unpleasant on the lips of a woman. A good deal turns there on one's conception of what is essentially manly. I was a male poet who wrote that 'to swear is neither brave, polite, nor wise.' But, whether we can define it or not, there is a type

⁵⁰⁶ Vickers, *Queen and Country*, p. 34.

of womanly excellence as distinct from manly excellence; and most of us know it when we see it. Everybody looks down on the effeminate man; and we believe that, even among women themselves there is a secret contempt for the mannish woman. Some women, no doubt, have some man-like qualities born in them. When these show themselves naturally, they are not offensive – rather the reverse. It is the aping by a woman of manners and a nature that are not her own that is at once ridiculous and disgusting. As the Dean well put it, it is far better to be a first-rate woman than a second-rate man; and second-rate is all the mannish woman can ever be.⁵⁰⁷

The report revealed the differentiation between acceptable behaviour in men and women. While smoking or swearing was acceptable for men, it was less appropriate for women. Although the writer appeared to repudiate this as a myth, it was evident that some believed it to be true. Such newspaper reports had one clear message; that effeminate men and masculine women were substandard people; it was better to be a feminine female and a masculine male. Consequently, the promotion of gender stereotypes in this way gave heterosexual society clear embodiments of difference and something to work towards in their pursuit of gendered normality.⁵⁰⁸

However, not only was there a concern that women were masquerading as men but there was a twofold apprehension that women could either spontaneously

⁵⁰⁷ 'Women Who Imitate Men.', *Yorkshire Evening Post*, Saturday 10 December 1932, p. 8.

⁵⁰⁸ Vickers, *Queen and Country*, p. 30.

become men, or could choose to become men through surgical procedures. Carstens argues that medical professionals in the early part of the twentieth century believed that the pursuit of masculine activities could damage women physiologically.⁵⁰⁹ She analyses the radical claims that ‘unwomanly pursuits could affect a literal, physiological sex reversal.’⁵¹⁰ These ideas were spread within a context of developments in reproductive physiology, educational reform, scientific advancements, and evolutionary theory in relation to sexual difference. Moreover, they were associated with a moral, economic, and military decline tied to physiological and reproductive degeneration. ‘This persisting ideology of female difference set up women as more susceptible than men to the most radical perceived implications of the new science of reproductive physiology.’⁵¹¹ ‘The consequence... implied, was that the unnatural modern life of women could trigger physiological sex regression with reproductive implications far beyond the individual women’s health.’⁵¹²

Concerns were further exacerbated in 1937, when a sex-reversal was reported in the *Daily Mirror*. It noted,

A double sex change in a single woman, aged thirty-two, is reported in the “Lancet” from Vienna. And she changed from woman to man and back again to a woman in a remarkably short time. One of the most unusual cases on

⁵⁰⁹ Carstens, ‘Unbecoming Women: Sex reversal in the Scientific Discourse on Female Deviance in Britain, 1880-1920’, p. 64.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid., p. 64.

⁵¹¹ Ibid., p. 64.

⁵¹² Ibid., p. 76.

record was that of a Warsaw ex-soldier who, a year after he had changed from male to female, gave birth to a 9lb. baby.⁵¹³

Nevertheless, it was unlikely that either the spontaneous sex change, or the ability to surgically transform from a male-to-female, or female-to-male, caused widespread concern. However, the anxiety surrounding blurred gender boundaries progressed into more evident discomfort and fear regarding homosexual behaviour.

Ross McKibbin deconstructs the strict attitudes towards sexuality in Britain between 1918 and 1951, noting that English society had rather strict guidelines regarding sexuality in the period. He states,

Notionally, for example, their rules about premarital and extra-marital sex were very strict. In the early 1950s half of the married population claimed to have had no sexual experience with anyone other than their spouses; 52 per cent were opposed to men and 63 per cent opposed to women having any premarital sex; only a small number believed that premarital sex was 'natural', and most denied that sex had a therapeutic function.⁵¹⁴

However, despite the valorised ideals the public had regarding sexuality, they often failed to uphold those standards, and criticised themselves for being unable to maintain them.⁵¹⁵ Joanna Bourke argues,

⁵¹³ 'Man-Woman A Woman Now' *The Mirror*, 1937.

⁵¹⁴ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (New York, 1998), p. 296.

⁵¹⁵ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p. 296; Moreover, families would often over exaggerated their virginity.

...their period was the 'dawn of a new era of sexual freedom'. Who, or what, was responsible? Some blamed the disruptions of two world wars: under the upheaval of the world upheaval, men and women departed from the old standards of sexual morality and began to exercise their elemental urge without the sanction of a priest or registrar. In the face of the horror and deprivations of war, people felt justified in grabbing as much pleasure as possible – including sexual pleasure...Other blamed the cinema for feeding the 'sex interest' and allowing it to 'run riot in an undisciplined way'...⁵¹⁶

Thus, McKibbin suggests, 'If heterosexual relations, however conventional, were problematical, 'deviant' sexuality, of whatever form, was doubly so. Male homosexuality was not only socially unacceptable – in the early fifties almost half the population found it 'disgusting' – it was illegal. Lesbianism was not illegal but was subject to increasingly unfavourable stereotyping and widespread dislike.'⁵¹⁷ Furthermore, 'Although a greater willingness to talk about sex after the First World War and an observable easing of sexual tension within society as a whole should have benefited them, there were contrary influences which tended in reality to make life more precarious for both male and female homosexuals.'⁵¹⁸ Thomas Fahy reveals, 'Many assumed that homosexuality could be seen on the body, relying on "signs" such as male effeminacy, cross-dressing, and tomboyish behaviour in women to reinforce prejudice.'⁵¹⁹ McKibbin agrees, stating, 'The development in

⁵¹⁶ Joanna Bourke, *Working class Cultures in Britain 1890-1960* (London, 1994) pp. 28-29.

⁵¹⁷ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p. 321.

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

⁵¹⁹ Fahy, *Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination*, p. 107.

the interwar years of the notion of a homosexual personality, as someone easily marked out, encouraged further legislative and legal actions against homosexuality which now embraced lesbianism, hitherto exempt.⁵²⁰ Therefore, women dressing and behaving like men, and men dressing and behaving like women, was considered evidence of deviant sexuality. Homosexuality was regarded as problematic as it would negatively affect the reproductive health and morality of the British public. It was believed that the institution of marriage would disintegrate, and with it, traditional family life. Therefore, there were fundamental concerns about the wider moral degradation of British society.

The First and Second World Wars had already destabilized the family, as men had suffered under the conditions of war and women had to fill the roles previously untaken by men, rather than maintaining their traditional role as homemaker and mother. 'This separation of families not only had women new levels of economic and social freedom, but same-sex working environments also opened up greater possibilities for expressing and experiencing homosexuality.'⁵²¹

The social instability of the war years sparked efforts to define stability and security more closely through the family. By the 1950s the heterosexual family – with its implicit whiteness and stabilized gender roles – embodied the financial and social successes of postwar' society.⁵²²

⁵²⁰ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951*, p. 324.

⁵²¹ Fahy, *Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination*, p. 110.

⁵²² *Ibid.*, p. 110.

However, while the family had become a symbol for political and social conformity, 'Gay culture threatened society by challenging many of the ideas it held sacred – particularly the importance of raising children in a heterosexual environment. The queer body, therefore, had to be vilified. It had to be seen as a kind of freakish spectacle – an unattractive alternative to heterosexual life.'⁵²³ Fundamentally, heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships were a signifier of conformity to traditional gender stereotypes.⁵²⁴ Those who were perceived to be engaging in homosexual relationships or behaviour were subsequently regarded as deviant people, and ostracized from British society. They were evidence of moral, social, and physical deterioration in Britain. Sexuality became a method of social control; a way of preserving white, middle-class hierarchies.⁵²⁵ Fahy argues that,

By the 1940s and 1950s, homosexuality was being seen as an increasing threat to heterosexual values and the nuclear family. Images of sexual ambiguity such as cross-dressing and freak exhibits displaying bearded ladies and hermaphrodites were considered dangerous in that they could seem to validate non-heterosexual desire. Few would want to change places with those onstage, but these figures often embodied freedoms that mainstream society persecuted... the queer body had become an image for

⁵²³ Ibid., p. 123.

⁵²⁴ Ibid., p. 115.

⁵²⁵ Fahy, *Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination*, p. 123.

something that had gone wrong...the breakdown of binaries held sacred by the white middle class.⁵²⁶

Nevertheless, it was precisely the potential validation of non-heterosexual desire and fear of the queer body that caused simultaneous fascination and controversy directed at the 'half-man, half-women' in British seaside resorts.

Displays of 'Half-Men, Half-Women'

Freak shows experimented with gender restrictions in a multiplicity of ways; bearded ladies and hermaphrodites were two obvious examples of freak show performers who transgressed traditional gender boundaries.⁵²⁷ However, gendered ideals and deviance were clear in numerous displays of difference, including midgets, fat ladies, and thin men. Exhibitions of 'half-men, half-women' were a fascinating and risqué form of entertainment at British seaside resorts. The displays placed sexual ambiguity as freakish through embodying severely contrasting perceptions of masculinity and femininity, in line with the challenges to gender boundaries that characterised twentieth century Britain. The displays offered a cultural commentary on gender norms and deviance. Performers were constructed as freaks; however, they also represented the binaries between male and female, heterosexuality and homosexuality, right and wrong.⁵²⁸ Nonetheless, '...freakishness not only reflects contemporary anxieties about sexuality and

⁵²⁶ Fahy, *Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination*, p. 16.

⁵²⁷ This was also evident in the cross dressing of Vesta Tilley, who, born a biological female impersonated men on stage at various music halls and in numerous pantomimes.

⁵²⁸ Fahy, *Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination*, p. 107.

marriage, but it also provides a tool for condemning social imperatives that try to enforce desire.⁵²⁹

As seen in Figure 5.1, exhibitors would dress half of their body in masculine clothing and half of their body in feminine clothing to increase their sexual ambiguity for spectators.⁵³⁰ The hair on one side was slicked back and, on the other, was styled in a similar way to the fashion-conscious women visiting the show. Sometimes, the person on display would insert an artificial breast to enhance half their body to look more womanly. Furthermore, on half of the face of the exhibitor makeup would be applied to make her look appropriately feminine. The physical construction of the display portrayed that the sexuality of the individual on show was indiscernible, neither male or female. This simultaneously exploited and repudiated the public belief that those with deviant sexuality would be easily identifiable from the way that they looked. As Fahy reveals, 'Hermaphrodites, or half-and-halves, appeared to be divided in two (with a male right side and a female left side), clearly displaying characteristics of each gender. Like most freak exhibits, bearded ladies and hermaphrodites reinforced the idea that difference was visible, that ambiguity could not go undetected.'⁵³¹

⁵²⁹ Ibid., p. 109.

⁵³⁰ Figure 5.1 'Half-man, half-woman' Josephine-Joseph, c. 1930.

⁵³¹ Fahy, *Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination*, p. 107.

Figure 5.1. Pamphlet of 'Half-man, half-woman' Josephine-Joseph.



However, this generated significant anxiety for the public visiting the booths which housed those with sexuality ambiguous bodies. ‘... the freak violates sexual norms that seem to threaten society. It represents possibilities that are dangerous and exciting, restricting and freeing. But its place in the sideshow is an image for the cost of difference, for the costs of not being like everyone else.’⁵³² The displays represented the potential consequences for people engaging in unusual activities, not typically associated with their gender, or, those participating in deviant sexual relationships. Although Fahy argues, ‘Even though sexually ambiguous freaks played with questions of authenticity (“Is it a man or a woman?”), they never explicitly challenged accepted gender roles’ they indirectly reflected the ideas which permeated British newspapers about the ‘mannish woman’.⁵³³ Moreover, he suggests that,

The incompatibility of these exhibits with contemporary sentiment (particularly attitudes that equated homosexuality with effeminate behavior and lesbianism with masculine behavior) made these performers particularly off-putting – giving many people another reason to stay away from the sideshow.⁵³⁴

However, whilst the supposed indecency of hermaphroditic characters may have led to outrage from some sectors of society, others were drawn to stare at the ‘half-man, half-woman’ through their fascination in the unusual. For the viewing

⁵³² Fahy, *Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination*, p. 123.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁵³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

public, displays of freakish sexuality represented the societal marginalization of those who chose to engage with such behaviour. Nevertheless, some may have found an affinity with those on display.⁵³⁵

Many displays of 'half-man, half-women' resulted in court cases that focused on the supposed 'indecent' of the exhibition. The court cases are significant because they acted as a locus of discourse for deeply embedded concerns surrounding deviant sexuality, such as homosexual relationships; within the secure surroundings of the court room, lawyers could debate the blurred boundaries between men and women, as well as the possibility of homosexual tendencies. Furthermore, the outcomes reinforced the values and principles most esteemed in British society; they strengthened the belief that heteronormative marital relationships were the *only* socially acceptable form of relationship in twentieth century Britain. Thus, the freakish nature of 'half-men, half-women' was utilized to condemn homosexuality, offering an explanation of why there were so many court cases associated with these displays.⁵³⁶

The case of Josephine-Joseph was published in the *Lancashire Evening Post*, on Friday 22nd August 1930; the case revealed the broader societal beliefs about gender and sexuality in the interwar period. Outside the exhibition room were four large posters bearing the inscription, 'Josephine-Joseph. Half woman Half man. The Most Sensational Freak of Nature' The posters were an attempt to show potential

⁵³⁵ Fahy, *Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination*, p. 109.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

visitors what they could see if they paid the fee and entered the booth; photographic plates, showing the person as both a man and a woman, were intended to arouse the interest of holidaymakers. George Waas, the showman in charge of the exhibit,

introduced her as 'Josephine-Joseph Half man half woman Brother and sister in one body.' He stated that she was 27 years of age, and he drew the attention of the audience to the difference in the two sides of her body – the right side, he said, being that of a perfect man. The right arm, he declared, was three and a half inches longer than the left arm and had more muscles.⁵³⁷

The woman flexed her muscles, and Waas struck the muscles two or three times with his fist. He then lift the left arm, and remarked that it was like the arm of a female, soft and flabby.⁵³⁸

He also drew the attention of the audience to the physical formation of the face, declaring that the right side had the appearance of a man, and that the left was fuller and like that of a female. He indicated a difference in the two eyebrows, and in the two sides of the skull. As he did so, the woman again flexed her muscles and extended her arms and legs.⁵³⁹

⁵³⁷ *Lancashire Evening Post*, Friday 22nd August 1930.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*

The detailed description of the display reveals the public fascination with the features of 'half-men, half-women' displays. However, the show was visited by officers concerned about indecency of the display. They wished to ensure that, firstly, the public were not being duped by showmen who were looking to make money from unsuspecting holidaymakers and secondly, that they were protected from lewd, immoral, or indecent performances. Even within the relaxed social boundaries of the seaside, there were some behaviours (or, indeed, performances) that were unacceptable for the public to view.

Detailing a visit to defendant's premises by police officers, the Superintendent stated that at about 7.40 p.m. on Saturday, August 16th, Inspector Elliott called there was P.S. Pye and P.C. Johnson. The defendants were on the premises when the police entered. The man was touting for an audience, shouting, 'Step this way and see the half-man half-woman.' Eighteen adults, men and women, paid for admission. Inside the exhibition room was a small platform raised about 3ft. from the ground with a curtain hung in front of it. Waas drew up the curtain, and the woman was seen on the platform. She removed the dressing gown she was wearing. The right side of the body, alleged the Superintendent, was represented to be that of a male, and the left side of the body as that of a female.⁵⁴⁰

Inspector Elliott, who visited the exhibition, said that the woman's right leg was bare, and she was wearing a sandal on the right foot; she was wearing a

⁵⁴⁰ *Lancashire Evening Post*, Friday 22nd August 1930.
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black stocking on the left leg and ladies' shoe on the left foot. The hair was brushed from the right side to the left, giving the appearance that it was cut short on the right side. The right side represented a male and the other a female. Her husband introduced her as 'Josephine Joseph, half-woman, half-man, brother and sister in one body.' He said the breast on the right side was of a female. He said there was a difference in the eyebrows, and that one side of the skull was larger than the other. He also said that one of her arms was longer than the other, adding: 'There is no artificial padding used: what you have seen, ladies and gentlemen, is the work of the Almighty.'⁵⁴¹

The paper exasperatingly declared it to be yet, 'Another "Half-Man Half-Woman" Case', which presented 'Woman With Two Voices and Different Muscles' to paying audiences. George and Josephine Waas were summoned before the court for 'false pretences and conspiracy'. Waas pleaded guilty to 'false pretences', whilst the 'conspiracy charge' was dropped. The pair were required to pay £25 and they were no longer permitted to promote the display. The court case attempted to ascertain whether or not the exhibition was created 'with intent to cheat and defraud'. It presented interesting insight into public attitude towards both freakery and sexual ambiguity; there seemed to be a genuine attempt to establish whether Josephine-Joseph was an authentic hermaphrodite. This was worrisome due to the widespread concern about the health and morality of the British nation; a

⁵⁴¹ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, Saturday 23 August 1930.

hermaphrodite was the physical embodiment of the degeneration of both, which exposes why there was so much concern surrounding the displays.

George Waas applied for an adjournment of the case, on the grounds that he had only one day to prepare his evidence, and he needed more time to provide x-ray photographs and documentary evidence for submission to the magistrates to prove that he was not defrauding the public visiting his exhibition. The police objected to such a ban, as they stated that the x-ray would not be sufficient evidence to prove his innocence. Rather, they advocated that a medic examined the woman and that a doctor testified in the case, so that it would be closed on the grounds of medical testimony. This demonstrated the continued power that the medical profession held over hermaphrodites in the twentieth century, as they had in the nineteenth century; they were the only group of people who could honestly state that a person was an authentic hermaphrodite.

Waas resisted the offer of submitting his wife for examination by a doctor, until he could consult his solicitor. The Superintendent associated with the case argued that if a

‘medical man is called for the defence and he will swear that he has examined this woman and found her as such, then this prosecution may fail. But I want to point out that the male defendant has had this course pointed out to him, and he could have brought a doctor along if he had wished. This prosecution has not been brought about in any vindictive spirit, but simply to protect the gullible public who pay for admission to these shows [...] I

have no idea what the medical testimony may be, but I do say this, that the woman as far as I know does show to the public certain muscles on one side of her body which are more developed than those on the other side. She also has a male voice and a female voice. She may be without breast on one side, but this does not make her half man and half woman, as it can be brought about by an operation or by physical exercises. Muscles can be developed on one side of the body and not on the other.⁵⁴²

The woman defendant, proceeded the Superintendent, had boasted to the public that certain muscles on one side of her body were more peculiar than on the other side; also that she had a male voice and a female voice. 'She might be without a breast on one side, but that does not make her half-woman, half-man,' said the Superintendent, 'as breasts can be removed by operation and muscles can be developed by physical exercise. The only person who could be called half-woman half-man is a hermaphrodite.'⁵⁴³

The court room drama turned almost farcical, as the Superintendent remarked that he could 'see she is smiling', as he looked at the female defendant. The women asked, 'Can you stretch bones, Superintendent?' The article noted that laughter filled the court room but that the Superintendent refused to respond to the question. The trial found Waas guilty and he was forced to pay a fine of £25 as a punishment for deceiving the public.

⁵⁴² *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, Saturday 23 August 1930.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*

Legal cases relating to freaks were not limited to this example, a similar case was published in the *Western Daily Press* in August 1930,

Phil-Phyllis who is stated to have claimed to be half-man and half-woman and who is alleged to have told Blackpool audiences that when he died his body will go to an American research hospital has, according to the police, the body of a normal man. Holiday crowds have been flocking to see him. Their counsel described the business as “just showmanship.” He said the magistrates must at one time have enjoyed freak shows, knowing that they were being ‘done in.’⁵⁴⁴

Cox introduced himself as ‘Phil-Phyllis,’ and said he was born in America. He described the differences in each side of his body, and extended the left arm and leg on the so-called female side, and flexed the muscles of his right limbs. He said his abnormalities were first noticed in boyhood, and said that when he died his body would not be buried or cremated, as it had been sold to an American research hospital. As the audience was leaving Gibbs offered for sale at 2d. each a pamphlet enclosed in an envelope, which described the supposed abnormalities of Cox, with photograph reproductions, and pseudo-scientific dissertations on hermaphroditism. One statement in the pamphlet said counsel, seemed to have been designed in anticipation of

⁵⁴⁴ *Western Daily Press*, Saturday 09 August 1930.

possible prosecutions. That statement read: "I am on exhibition for what I look like; not for what I am."⁵⁴⁵

Cox refused, smilingly, to show his breast and Chapman said to him 'You know very well it is false.' Cox also admitted that he wore full male dress when he walked out. Counsel submitted that the exhibition was a fraud and a trick. Inside the exhibition was large post exhibiting what purported to be comments by American doctors on the exhibition, and outside was a large notice painted on the wall describing 'Phil-Phyllis' as 'one of the seven wonders of the world.'⁵⁴⁶

Phil-Phyllis, described as the 'mystery of the age' argued, in defence of the display, that the public enjoyed being fooled by showmanship; therefore, it did not matter whether they were being deceived or not, as part of the humour and fascination with the display was not knowing whether Phil-Phyllis was a man, a woman, or something in between.⁵⁴⁷ Holidaymakers paid to see the individual on a small platform from which a curtain was drawn aside.

His left side was covered in woman's lingerie from shoulder to knee. On his left foot were a sock and a woman's shoe. His right side, which was purported to be that of a man was bare over the right breast to the knee.

On his right foot he wore a sock and a man's shoe. A dressing gown covered

⁵⁴⁵ *Lancashire Evening Post*, Friday 29 August 1930, p. 10.

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

the whole of his body... There was no hair on the left arm and left leg, and he was wearing a false breast on his left side. He had a band round his head and a quantity of hair protruded on the left side. His hair was closely cut on the right side. Cox introduced himself as 'Phil-Phyllis,' the half-man half-woman whereas his body was that of an entirely normal male person. He told his audience that his abnormal condition was first discovered when he was a boy and that when he died his body would not be buried or cremated as he was being sold to an American research hospital.⁵⁴⁸

These descriptions are fundamental for a number of reasons; firstly, they exposed what holidaymakers viewed inside the exhibition and demonstrated that the newspapers also acted as a form of prurience, as people could continue to indulge their interest in the unusual through following the legal case. Secondly, they revealed the relationship between physical normality and social normality, as defined by the court cases. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the reportage of the court cases in local newspapers condemned the 'showmanship' that appeared to be promoting acceptance of gender fluidity.

The declaration that 'Phil-Phyllis' was to submit their body to a research hospital, for the education of future medical professionals, ensured that the public remained convinced that this was, potentially, an authentic hermaphrodite that they were viewing. Thus, it gave credibility to the individual on display. However, the barrister argued that there was no case to answer in the case of Phil-Phyllis,

⁵⁴⁸ *Western Daily Press*, Saturday 09 August 1930.
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stating that it was 'just showmanship' and that 'the greater the showmanship the better the performance was enjoyed'.⁵⁴⁹ However, one objectionable feature of the show was the admission of children, as it was thought it would penetrate vulnerable minds and lead to widespread acceptance of moral degeneration.

The prosecution argued that the charges fell into two classes; first that defendants conspired together to cheat and defraud the public by a false exhibition, and second, that they conducted and took part in an indecent exhibition.⁵⁵⁰ 'The prosecution contended that by making up and dressing up Cox so as to trick people who paid for admission into the belief that he was physically an abnormality of nature, half male and half female, they were guilty of conspiracy and fraud. The question of whether the exhibition was indecent or not was something that the jury were to decide. However, the counsel added an interesting point that the grounds of the objection to the show were not that it was a freak show, but that it was not a genuine freak show; it was acceptable to display genuine abnormalities provided that the exhibition was properly conducted. However, in the case of the 'half-man, half-woman show' it was contended to be a sham and trick, intended to cheat the public out of money.⁵⁵¹ Nevertheless, the defence claimed that showmanship was an 'art', and that for many years, freak shows which were constructed for public entertainment were available at circuses, fairgrounds, and seaside resorts.

⁵⁴⁹ *Lancashire Evening Post*, Friday 24th October 1930, p. 10.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*

‘It seems to me that Blackpool is making somewhat of a mistake in proceeding against these side-shows,” said counsel. ‘It is said that people are being gulled, but it is fortunate in this case we are being tried by a jury, who have all been “done” and have said so, but have enjoyed the show all the same and thought it was worth the money. May we go on doing it, as generations have done before us.’⁵⁵²

Thus, it was evident than rather than being concerned about the displays of unusual bodies, that the authorities were troubled by the showmanship of the exhibition. However, the showmen retaliated with the excuse that the showmanship was part of the entertainment of the displays and that the public enjoyed being amused by such entertainment. They regarded the showmanship of the exhibition as a traditional and integral aspect of the seaside experience, and one which they suggested should continue for generations to come. They argued that,

Male and female impersonators had given shows on the stage for centuries. This case was unique in the history of crime, and there was no parallel to it in cases decided at the Bar. The false pretences complained of were nothing but showmanship, no more exaggerated than ordinary advertising of goods for sale in a shop window. No single word of indecency was hinted at when the case was heard at the police court and some of the charges under that head were based on a Statute of 1857, at a time when a lady would have

⁵⁵² *Lancashire Evening Post*, Friday 29 August 1930, p. 10.
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found herself in the police court if she had gone down the street in a modern short skirt.⁵⁵³

In any case, they questioned whether there was evidence to suggest he was not a 'half-man, half-woman'. 'There are such people. It is not for the defendants to satisfy you that he is as he was described, but for the prosecution to show that he was not, and if there was any doubt in the minds of the jury, defendants were entitled to acquittal. As to the alleged dressing up, was it any more than the powdering and making up that every lady practised in these days.'⁵⁵⁴ The number of legal cases associated with 'half-men, half-women' reveal the concern that authorities had with such exhibitions. However, none was more notorious than that of Colonel Barker, the most famous 'man-women' in Britain.

Colonel Barker Sideshow

The case of Colonel Barker was the most well-publicised instance of a 'half-man, half-woman' in British legal history, and exposed similar sentiments to those expressed about other 'half-men, half-women'. The *Western Times* described Barker as an 'Unprincipled, mendacious, unscrupulous adventuress' and a 'woman who outraged the decencies of nature'.⁵⁵⁵ Barker was born a biological female in 1895 and was christened Lilius Irma Valerie Barker by her parents. In 1918, she married Lieutenant Harold Arkell-Smith before having two children by a lover

⁵⁵³ *Lancashire Evening Post*, Friday 29 August 1930, p. 10.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁵ 'Colonel Barker', *Western Times*, Friday 26 April 1929, p. 16.

named Earnest Pearce-Crouch. Subsequently, Barker began life as a man, marrying a woman named Elfreda Haward. However, the relationship did not last long and was followed by a series of relationships with other women. Barker was charged with two counts of perjury for falsely signing the register at his marriage to Haward, and the case made public a debate about gender, sexuality, and the place of women in British society.⁵⁵⁶ James Vernon argues,

The extant accounts provide contrasting ways of understanding Barker as, variously, a woman seeking to empower herself by passing as a man, a mannish lesbian radically fashioning herself as a desiring subject, or a transvestite.⁵⁵⁷

Furthermore, he suggests,

Barker did not disrupt essentialist notions of gender and sexuality by force of will; rather, he was forced to work with the discourse of the masquerade and the narrative forms through which others had sought to render him knowable. His is a history that demonstrates not only how regulation of the sexual domain helps constitute individual subjects but also how these subjects inform the policing of the sexual itself. Yet that history also suggests that, insofar as we can retrace a historically situated queer

⁵⁵⁶ James Vernon, "'For Some Queer Reason': The Trials and Tribulations of Colonel Barker's Masquerade in Interwar Britain" *Signs*, 26:1 (2000), p. 37.

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

subjectivity, such an account must begin from the recognition that it was forged from the very discursive regimes that sought to disqualify it.⁵⁵⁸

Colonel Barker was displayed as part of a seaside freak show throughout the 1920s and 1930s; as with other displays of half-men, half-women, it reveals an ongoing concern about gender and sexuality following the First World War. Matt Houlbrook argues that 'It was in the 1920s and 1930s... that [there was] an unprecedented number of legal files and newspaper reports' in relation to men masquerading as women.⁵⁵⁹ He suggests that understanding such a phenomenon can 'tell us a great deal about both the historically specific nature of understandings of sexual difference and British culture after the Great War.'⁵⁶⁰

Mass Observation writings on holiday activities revealed the centrality of Barker's exhibit to the seaside exhibition scene. 'From the top of the Tower the whole of Blackpool can be seen, sea, sands, piers, and the mile-long line of stalls and teeming crowds round the side-shows, Colonel Barker, the Headless Woman, La Celeste, Gypsy Lee, Waxen Buck Ruxton, Belisha Beacon Shies...'⁵⁶¹ Figure 5. 2 shows the outside of the display, including the sinage used to intrigue holidaymakers walking by.⁵⁶² The sideshow featured Colonel Barker in a pit 'separated from a woman wearing a nightdress in another bed by a row of Belisha

⁵⁵⁸ Vernon, "'For Some Queer Reason": The Trials and Tribulations of Colonel Barker's Masquerade in Interwar Britain', p. 59.

⁵⁵⁹ Matt Houlbrook, 'The Man With the Powder Puff' *The Historical Journal* 50:1 (2007), p. 152.

⁵⁶⁰ Houlbrook, 'The Man With the Powder Puff', p. 147.

⁵⁶¹ Mass Observation, *Holidays 1941*, p. 17.

⁵⁶² Figure 5.2. Carte de Visit of 'Half-man, half-woman' Josphine-Joseph, c. 1930.

Beacons. Tourists could view the scene from above, often verbally abusing the two individuals.

Figure 5.2. *Carte de Visit* of 'Half-man, half-woman' Josephine-Joseph, c. 1930.



Figure 5.3. Colonel Barker Exhibit, *Photographs from Mass Observation*.



Advertising claimed that the Colonel was watched in the pit, day and night, but there is evidence to suggest this was not the case and Barker had lodgings elsewhere in Blackpool.

Another description of the show revealed,

You pay at a circular pen-desk to a middle-aged female. Ticket, 2d., yellow. Up two steps, then anticlockwise between wooden walls decorated with cardboard cupids and Richard Coeur de Lion in red war-suit who is blessing the bride and bridegroom. Through glass, you look down on the couple in pit below. Two beds, and beside each a Belisha Beacon; between the beds is a broad track marked out with metal traffic studs on the floor. Traffic lights at red. A table and stand are beside the beds, covered with papers and novelettes. Craven A cigarettes, comb, etc. In each bed is an alive woman. Holidaymakers pass in an almost continuous line queuing during peak periods, staring down, kept on the move by attendants.⁵⁶³

Luke Gannon, the showman responsible for the exhibit, explained the symbolic imagery in the display, in writings from the British Mass Observation Archive,

During Whit I had a couple fasting here and those are the signs I made for them. The Belisha beacons are a sign of futuristic love. People go so fast now in their courting and the beacon is a sign for them to pull up and go a

⁵⁶³ Gary Cross, (ed) *Worktowners at Blackpool, Mass-Observation and popular leisure in the 1930s*, (Oxford, 1990) p. 193-194.

bit slower. I expect you recognise the words. I am taking this step for the woman I love. And I suppose you think I took them from King Edward. The police thought that too, and at Whit many people were saying that I was commercializing the pathetic words of his late majesty. But what would you say if I told you I wrote these words three years ago, I was able to show the police a receipt for my order for those words to be printed by the Gazette office. They were staggered when I said to them, now don't you think it's the King who should be apologizing to me for using my words.⁵⁶⁴

Outside the exhibit posters revealed something of the female interest in the display and are evidence of the way in which Barker was understood by contemporaries. They stated, 'He's the secret hero in many women's lives' and 'A woman marrying a woman! Incredible! Yet it is true'. Additionally, they made clear that Barker had transitioned, 'From a woman to a man.'" This demonstrates that the entire purpose was to satisfy the curiosity surrounding Barker's gender and sexuality.⁵⁶⁵ However, the exhibition maintained the intrigue, allowing audiences to make their own decision about the people on display.⁵⁶⁶

Although the court case surrounding the exhibition of Colonel Barker and his 'wife' was not directly linked to their display at Blackpool, it gives us insight into the reasons why the public were interested in and concerned about other displays of

⁵⁶⁴ Mass Observation, Box 58, p. 50.

⁵⁶⁵ Vernon, "'For Some Queer Reason": The Trials and Tribulations of Colonel Barker's Masquerade in Interwar Britain', p. 53.

⁵⁶⁶ Figure 5.3. Colonel Barker Exhibit, *Photographs from Mass Observation*. <http://boltonworktown.co.uk/colonel-barker/> [accessed 10th August 2014].

'half-men, half-women'. The case received attention from the Home Office and legal authorities. Scotland Yard began an investigation and the report was referred to the Director of Public Prosecutions.⁵⁶⁷

The *Dundee Evening Telegraph* reported that,

The defendant came into the dock, eyes bandaged and led into the dock by a friend. It was explained to the court that Captain Barker had suffered temporary blindness owing to war nerves and the strain had brought on the temporary blindness again.⁵⁶⁸

The Colonel's 'wife' commented on the case in the *Yorkshire Evening Post* on Tuesday 07 March 1929. She revealed that the pair had been in a courtship for two years and that Barker had not indicated that she was a biological woman. She was concerned about her position within the relationship, questioning 'What can I say or do?... Am I a married woman, or am I single?'⁵⁶⁹ She detailed the masculine occupations which Barker had held since their marriage in 1923, including a farm overseer, and a juvenile male part on the stage. The paper noted that 'She had been considering leaving 'him,' so she decided to put 'him' out of her life. Even now she could not bring herself to realise that 'he' was not a man.'⁵⁷⁰

⁵⁶⁷ 'The Law and The "Colonel Barker" Case', *Nottingham Evening Post*, Tuesday 12 March 1929, p. 6.

⁵⁶⁸ *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, Wednesday 24 April 1929, p. 1.

⁵⁶⁹ *Yorkshire Evening Post*, Tuesday 07 March 1929.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Colonel Barker's former spouse was concerned about how the general public would react, fearing that she may be shunned for marrying another woman, who was masquerading as a man. 'We have been living in this district only a short time. That makes it all the worst. If we were well known here, as we were at our former home, people might be inclined to take a charitable view. But what will they think when the persons concerned are strangers to them, I can only imagine.'⁵⁷¹

This revealed how homosexual relationships, or even homosexual sentiment was shunned in twentieth century Britain, and how those who experienced it were considered outsiders in their communities. The anxiety experienced by Colonel Barker's wife was common to many who were concerned about issues to do with their sexuality becoming public knowledge. As there was no pre-requisite to such a case; therefore, it was unclear whether or not the marriage was legitimate, whether it could be annulled, or whether a divorce needed to take place. The case forced the legal profession to take a stance homosexual marital relationships, and unveiled societal concern about female homosexuality.

When questioned on her inability to see that Barker was, in fact, a woman, she stated,

I never for a moment imagined that my husband was anything but the person he always appeared to be. He always seemed neurotic and suffered from fits of depression. He was of a nervous, excitable disposition. I put all this down to his supposed war services. I thought it was the result of shell-

⁵⁷¹ *Yorkshire Evening Post*, Tuesday 07 March 1929.
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shock. The back of his neck and shoulders was covered with scars. He told me they were old shrapnel wounds. I never doubted it for a moment.⁵⁷²

Similarly, newspapers reporting the court case repeatedly focused on Barker's masculine appearance. They described her as 'Tall and broad, she had on a fawn raincoat over a light grey costume and a soft black felt hat of a type usually worn by men. Her hair was cut close, and she had golf stockings and flat-heeled shoes.'⁵⁷³ Thus, as Barker looked masculine, his wife was forgiven for believing that he was actually a man, rather than a biological woman. The case of Colonel Barker reflected the wider crisis of masculinity that was established following the First World War. While Barker was exhibiting signs commonly attributed to women, hysteria and neurosis, they were explained away due to his masculine appearance and the number of men who presented with signs of shell shock after the onset of war in 1914.

Joanna Bourke argues that the First World War 'provoked a major crisis in the lives of the great majority of men in Britain.'⁵⁷⁴ She asserts,

The period following the Great War is portrayed as the end of Victorian certainties. Society was less secure. World-wide economic depression and labour unrest undermined men's roles as breadwinners. The gains they made in the political sphere were offset by those made women. Indeed,

⁵⁷² *Yorkshire Evening Post*, Tuesday 07 March 1929.

⁵⁷³ 'Colonel Barker', *Western Times*, Friday 26 April 1929, p. 16.

⁵⁷⁴ Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain, and the Great War* (London, 1999), p. 13.

feminism came to be regarded by many men as a direct hit below their belts... the new masculinity of the inter-war years have been seen as a response to the perceived need to reassert manliness in a society undergoing rapid change.⁵⁷⁵

Furthermore, she notes, 'there is considerable ambiguity about what constitutes 'masculinity''.⁵⁷⁶ The case of Colonel Barker revealed the ambiguity of what constituted masculinity after the First World War.

However, while Barker reflected a plethora of issues associated with a crisis of masculinity, the case also became one of interest to twentieth century feminists. The *Sheffield Independent* reported that the court case featuring Colonel Barker was of particular interest to women who viewed him as pushing traditional female boundaries, thus demonstrating that women could do the same things that men could. Therefore, the paper argued, that Barker became a figurehead for feminism in the 1930s.

'Colonel' Barker's masquerade as a man is hailed as one of the finest victories for feminism for many years by the French newspaper 'La Liberte'. The fact that a woman successfully passed as a man for six years paradoxically advances as a reason for giving French women the vote. 'Colonel Barker has shattered one masculine argument for ever,' says the newspaper. "How many times have we heard: 'There is one thing they

⁵⁷⁵ Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, p. 14.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid.

cannot do – military service,’ and now ‘Colonel Barker comes along with a slashing contradiction” Not only has a “frail” woman for many years assumed the guise of a man without exciting the slightest suspicion, but she successfully maintained a military role, one which is farthest from the feminine character. ‘If you don’t find in this escapade the most striking proof of the equality of the sexes, then you are adopting an unfair attitude,’ adds ‘La Liberte.’⁵⁷⁷

A similar report was published in the *Derby Daily Telegraph*,

Fashionably dressed women crowded the Old Bailey, today, when Lillias Irma Valerie Arkell-Smith, the woman who for several years lived as a man, passing as ‘Colonel Barker’ pleaded not guilty to committing perjury in an affidavit but guilty to the charge of having caused a false statement to be entered in a register of marriage.⁵⁷⁸

Both newspapers focused on the female attendance at the court case, and how it appealed to women. It was evident that Barker challenged the perception that women were inferior to men, revealing that Barker went to war and people did not suspect that he was biologically female. Thus, Barker exposed the inability to categorize British people into two distinct genders, which had been so incredibly important in the Victorian period. James Vernon argues that, ‘At each trial the

⁵⁷⁷ ‘Through a Woman’s Eyes’ *Sheffield Independent*, Wednesday 13 March 1929, p. 9.

⁵⁷⁸ ‘Women Rush To “Colonel Barker” Trial’, *Derby Daily Telegraph*, Wednesday 24 April 1929, p. 7; 12.

ambiguous legal position of Barker's masquerade was dramatized, the law addressing it differently on each occasion as it struggled to remove the indeterminacy that surrounded Barker's gender and sexuality.⁵⁷⁹ The Justice of the Peace and Local Government Review 'was anxious to reaffirm the importance of prosecuting those who masqueraded either to commit an immoral act punishable by law or to obtain material advantage.'⁵⁸⁰ Thus, '...Barker's 1929 and 1937 cases were invoked, acknowledging that the publicity that they attracted had served as a catalyst in the attempt to clarify the law as regards cross-dressing.'⁵⁸¹ The press characterized Barker's life as a man as a 'masquerade', 'a mask that hid a deeper reality'.⁵⁸²

Moreover, Barker's case reflected numerous debates in British society; it embodied the narrative surrounding the crisis of masculinity, as well as female emancipation and empowerment.⁵⁸³ However, it also revealed concerns around homosexual marital relationships and the need for legal clarification on such issues in the twentieth century, as there became more sexual freedom than ever before. A report published in 1929 noted the significance of the case, 'Several interesting and unusual points of law are raised in this case. In the first place, it is apparently no offence for a woman to masquerade as a man, although it is a criminal offence for a

⁵⁷⁹ Vernon, "'For Some Queer Reason": The Trials and Tribulations of Colonel Barker's Masquerade in Interwar Britain', p. 40.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁵⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁵⁸³ It also poses questions about how to read historical subjects against twenty-first century ideas about gender fluidity and sexual categorization.

man to masquerade as a woman.⁵⁸⁴ Furthermore, it raised questions female homosexuality; whilst it was never illegal for two women to be in a relationship, it was legally condemned for two men to be in a relationship. It was argued that a marriage between two women was not a marriage and therefore, they were unsure whether they could prosecute on the legal documents.

The ambiguity surrounding the reasons why Barker wished to dress as a man continued throughout the case, as the lawyer for the defence stated, 'The defendant instructs me that she has a reason which she does not at the moment propose to divulge for wearing men's attire. If I could tell you the reason I am sure you would feel some sympathy with her.'⁵⁸⁵ The lawyer pleaded for leniency due to the intimate and embarrassing reason for Barker's masquerade as a woman. However, there was no confirmation of this reason; neither Barker, nor her attorney, revealed the secret reason why he wished to dress as a man. However, they alluded to something that was too embarrassing to share with the public, leaving them wondering the real reason why she was dressing in masculine clothes, and continuing the mystery around the exhibition. The embarrassment Barker had already faced was used to encourage compassion from the prosecution, 'One of the great punishments which this defendant has already had to suffer...is that members of the public come to gaze upon her wherever she goes.'⁵⁸⁶ Therefore, the case was

⁵⁸⁴ 'The Law and The "Colonel Barker" Case', *Nottingham Evening Post*, Tuesday 12 March 1929, p. 6.

⁵⁸⁵ *Dundee Courier*, Tuesday 23 March 1937, p. 4.

⁵⁸⁶ *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, Wednesday 24 April 1929, p. 5.

used to highlight the shame placed on those who deviated stereotypical gender norms or heteronormative sexuality.

Conclusion

Displays of 'half-men, half-women' at British seaside resorts reflected the contemporary discourse surrounding gender and sexuality in twentieth century Britain. Between 1900 and 1950, traditional gender roles were challenged by the effect of the First and Second World Wars, which took women out of their traditional roles in the home and into the public sphere. The fight for female emancipation and equal rights with men, culminated in females over 30, with a property, receiving the right to vote in 1928. However, as the war left men, suffering from its strains, including diseases of the mind such as shell-shock, and women becoming more 'mannish' in looks and decorum, there was concern about the effect of the blending of genders. This transcended the medical profession, as doctors thought that women could spontaneously become men, if they took part in masculine pursuits. Moreover, there was inherent concern about sexual deviance and the rise of homosexuality; the seaside space was one in which sexual deviance was more likely to occur. This made displays of 'half-men, half-woman' a pertinent part of the seaside environment. Therefore, such displays, including the display of Colonel Barker, must be understood in relation to the concern about blurred lines between men and women, and increasing concern about the rise of homosexuality in the twentieth century. This was evident in the Barker case, as there was no law against female homosexuality. Both the exhibitions and the court cases reflect the

changing conceptualization of gender and sexuality in the period. Furthermore, they gave the public an opportunity to discuss such issues, as the legal professional attempted to clarify the law surrounding sexual deviance.

Conclusion

In 1947, *British Pathé* film revealed the continued popularity of freak shows with British holidaymakers throughout the first half of the twentieth century. It stated, 'for all the mechanical gadgets invented for an antidote to boredom, the human heart still thrills to the pleasure of unusual sights of freaks and monsters.'⁵⁸⁷ Freak shows were a cultural institution of the Victorian period, and entertained people from all social backgrounds in various spaces for entertainment across Britain. Developments in science and medicine in the latter years of the nineteenth century altered the perception of staring at unusual people for entertainment; it was no longer a widely accepted pastime for Britain's upper classes. However, the working classes continued to attend freak shows as part of their summer holiday entertainments at seaside resorts such as Blackpool, Margate, and Southend-on-Sea. Within the confines of the summer seasons, the public were permitted to stare at those with unusual bodies, as part of the traditional programme of entertainment.

This thesis has combined the history of the seaside and the history of the freak show to understand the continuation of freakery in Britain throughout the first half of the twentieth century. There has been significant scholarly attention

⁵⁸⁷ 'Blackpool Issue Title Pathé Pictorial Goes...' *British Pathé* Film 1947 < <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/blackpool-issue-title-pathe-pictorial-goes-to-the/query/blackpool+freak+shows> > [Accessed 26/06/17, 14.46pm].

given to freak shows in the nineteenth century, with much of this work concentrated on displays of unusual bodies in America. Nadja Durbach's seminal work *Spectacle of Deformity* provides interesting and important insight into the history of freak shows in Britain and, thus, provides the foundation for this work. However, this thesis argues against Durbach's assertion that the freak show ended following the influx of many disabled ex-servicemen in Britain in the aftermath of the First World War, the introduction of legislation that restricted the employment of foreign workers, the emergence of the beauty industry, and the rise of the disability rights movement.⁵⁸⁸ Instead, it offers a more nuanced understanding of attitudes towards difference in the first half of the twentieth century. It argues that, despite burgeoning scientific and medical knowledge of disability, people continued to be curious in human variation. The public indulged this interest through visiting freak shows on their summer holidays to the coast.

The thesis suggests that although visiting freak shows became less accepted in modern urban spaces, it remained a popular form of summertime entertainment, within traditional British seaside resorts. Therefore, it tracks the transition of freak shows from metropolitan areas to coastal locations. It suggests that the migration of freak shows from urban centres to the geographical peripheries of Britain reflected the changing place of freak shows in British culture, as they moved from a central mode of entertainment to one which was only acceptable during summer

⁵⁸⁸ Nadja Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture* (California, 2010), p. 171.

seasons. Holidaymakers behaviour altered as they travelled between the city and the seaside, and they engaged in pursuits that they would not normally partake in during their everyday lives, including staring at unusual bodies for entertainment. Moreover, the thesis conceptualises the continuities and changes in public attitudes towards staring at those with unusual bodies for entertainment. While the freak show of the Victorian period was a form of amusement for upper and working classes alike, the freak show in the twentieth century became a peripheral form of entertainment on the margins of British life. Therefore, they primarily took place in seaside resorts that were popular with the working classes. The thesis has demonstrated the class shift between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; no longer was it acceptable for people from the upper classes to stare at those with anomalous bodies for entertainment, but the working classes continued to enjoy freak shows as part of their summertime excursions. Therefore, the thesis has shown the changing tastes and sensibilities of the British public throughout the period 1900 to 1950; although in the Victorian period all classes were interested in those with unusual bodies, as a form of entertainment and education, freak shows became a form of entertainment most popular with the working classes in search of cheap thrills and titillating amusements.

Furthermore, this thesis has situated freak shows within the history of health and normality. It demonstrates the similarity between the freak shows of the Victorian period, and the freak shows in the first half of the twentieth century; it examines the ways in which displays of freakery continued to utilise

conceptualisations of health, wellness, normality, and abnormality, in the construction of those with unusual bodies for entertainment. It was the unique and complex creation of coastal locations on the margins of British life from the 1920s onwards, which were simultaneously spaces of health and entertainment, that enabled the continuation of freakery at British seaside resorts. Housed in booths and stalls along the seafront, this thesis has assessed the different bodies that were displayed at seaside resorts including midgets, starvation performers, fat people, and 'half-men, half-women'. It has contextualised these bodies within the social and cultural environment, to fully comprehend how audiences understood displays of freakery as a form of summertime entertainment. It has specifically situated these exhibitions within contemporary ideas surrounding health, wellness, and nationhood, to understand how British holidaymakers conceptualised themselves and their bodies in relation to those on display.

As Britain became an ever more industrial nation, seaside resorts and holidays grew with unprecedented popularity. Chapter One demonstrated that the tourist experience was a distinct spatio-temporal event that altered the societal expectations placed on the public, and transformed them into holidaymakers, as they visited British coastal resorts from 1900 to 1950. The seaside space provided the physical context for the different events and experiences associated with seaside holidays. However, it also reflected the socio-cultural significance of those events. Seaside spaces were complex and unique environments; they were affected by a multiplicity of different elements, including their geographical development,

the influence of the holidaymaking crowds, and the competing ideals of local authorities and entrepreneurs. 'Carnavalesque' resorts, that were typically near large cities, and most popular with the working classes (namely Blackpool, Margate, and Southend-on-Sea), were associated with wider debates about the function and purpose of leisure in Britain. Nevertheless, 'carnavalesque' seaside spaces provided the physical context for the continuation of freak shows in the twentieth century. The construction of a 'tourist gaze' meant that the public expected to see unusual sights on their summer holidays. This thesis argues that the unique seaside space, which facilitated the creation of the 'tourist gaze' and permitted the continuation of freak shows in British culture until the mid-twentieth century. Moreover, Chapter One showed that seaside freakery performances were constructed with concepts specific to the seaside environment, as well as wider contemporary social and cultural debates. Seaside freaks gave the public the freedom to renegotiate their identity, both as British citizens and as holidaymakers. These different facets of seaside resorts worked together to shape the understanding of freaks in seaside locations.

Holidays in the twentieth century to British seaside resorts were popular with the public. Fathers and mothers brought their children for an enjoyable time together by the coast. Against a backdrop of the changing role of men and women in British society, a move from patriarchal to companionship marriage, and a rising level of divorce as the century progressed, there was concern surrounding the degeneration and immorality of the British race. Nevertheless, following the First

World War, there was a move back towards domesticity and the home became central to constructing a national identity. Part of this, was ensuring that the public were keeping their bodies and minds healthy. Through the analysis of images, film clips, and newspapers, Chapter Two argued that midget troupes reflected many prominent ideas surrounding marriage, domesticity, and recreation in the first half of the twentieth century. Midget weddings were some of the most spectacular forms of entertainment in the summer season and thousands of people gathered to see the bride and groom, alongside their freak show entourage, leave the church. The ceremonial traditions and spectacle were similar to weddings that the public was acquainted with. However, they had additional factors, which associated them with the freak show. The celebration of midget weddings promoted marriage in the wake of its decline. It endorsed matrimony to the younger, single population. Furthermore, it encouraged married people to consider the sanctity of their own wedding vows. The widespread use of birth control and the rising rates of illegitimate births signified greater liberation and sexual freedom amidst the British public. Midget weddings promoted the consideration of sexual relationships only within the confines of a marital partnership. Their association with childlikeness and naivety demonstrated to onlookers that the midgets did not engage in premarital sexual relationships. Subsequently, this encouraged holidaymakers to consider domesticity, particularly with many of the displays placed in specialist midget villages. Domesticity conveyed the meanings associated with a stable family unit, namely happiness and healthiness. Therefore, when midget troupes were depicted taking part in wholesome seaside activities, they promoted the ideas of wellness

and recreation that dominated coastal locations. Midget troupes, as miniature versions of average-sized British people, conceptualised the complex attitudes towards national identity, marriage, sexual experiences, and healthiness in their displays, permitting audiences to consider themselves in relation to those with unusual bodies, who both performed and were present in seaside spaces.

The seaside space had many unique freakery performers; Chapter Three assessed the display of starvation performers, who were exclusive to coastal locations from the 1930s. Fasting has been part of history since the medieval period to the present day. In medieval tradition, it was a sign of religiosity, demonstrating the piety of the people who could go without eating for an extended period. It is important to note that the female relationship with self-starvation was an extremely pertinent one. The case of Sarah Jacobs, demonstrated the continued relationship between self-starvation and religion, as many flocked to see the human miracle. Her fast revealed the tensions between religion and medicine, as both sought to explain the phenomenon. However, Jacobs also exposed self-starvation as an entertainment and some travelled to see her for amusement or pleasure.

Self-starvation continued as a spectacle into the twentieth century. Starvation exhibitions were a prominent and intriguing part of the seaside freak show. Holidaymakers were confronted with starving brides, or indeed, vicars, as part of the itinerant freak show which continued until the 1950s. In the seaside space, ded-

icated to health and wellness, the starving brides garnered people's interest, particularly amidst contemporary issues such as the 'Hungry England' debate and the rise of dieting in the middle classes. The performers directly contradicted the health advice of the time, which advocated a nutritious and wholesome diet, complemented by regular exercise such as swimming or walking. Starvation exhibits warned spectators of the consequences of not maintaining a healthy physique, through the physical representations of deterioration associated with the displays. However, as the starvers were putting their lives in danger for their craft, they increased anxieties from local corporations who were concerned about the reflection on seaside locations. Vandereyckn and van Deth suggest that,

After 1930 they [fasting artists] almost completely disappeared from the scene. They lost out increasingly to other forms of entertainment (film, television) and the improved social security system prevented them from having to earn their living as freaks. In addition, they were widely regarded as human beings with psychological disorders and defects, whose public exhibition was no longer deemed ethically justified.⁵⁸⁹

Nevertheless, it is evident that fasting people performed in coastal locations until the mid-twentieth century. Fasting men and women continued to exhibit

⁵⁸⁹ Walter Vandereycken, and Ron Van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls: The History of Self-Starvation* (London, 1994), p. 76.

themselves regularly at seaside resorts and there was sustained debate in local newspapers regarding the appropriateness of the exhibitions. They remained popular until the 1950s there was greater awareness of the risks of purposefully starving and when coastal locations became a less prominent part of British cultural life.

As the twentieth century progressed there was an awareness of the effect of excess weight on personal health and wellbeing. While the 'Hungry England' debate raised concerns about the malnutrition of the British working classes there were also anxieties surrounding the rising obesity rates of the middle classes.

Through 'enfreaking' the fat body, medical professionals brought together medical discourse and popular culture, and employed it to educate the public on the reasons why they should commit to losing weight. Obesity was condemned because of the physical risks associated with being overweight. However, there were numerous social sanctions that faced those who were too fat, including not being able to find clothes to fit. Chapter Four has argued that displays of fat people in freak shows were understood in relation to the contemporary health discourse surrounding the rising obesity rates in the middle classes. Comparable with the exhibitions of starvation performers, Miss Rosie and Lenny Mason were the epitome of what the British public should not be. Fat people gave audiences a tangible example of what was considered physically unhealthy. They had significant social meaning as well. For instance, a fat woman exposed their inability to control her sexual appetite, whilst a fat man showed himself to be effeminate and

emasculated. However, through the construction of the fat person as funny, and the association of fatness with humiliation and shame, being overweight became a stigmatized and embarrassing problem. The display of fat freaks encouraged the understanding of fat people as 'abnormal' and 'humorous', both reflecting and reaffirming the promotion of physical and social 'normality'. Through learning about body management and partaking in healthy activities, such as those provided by the *Women's League of Health and Beauty* and *The New Health Society* men and women were encouraged to cultivate a 'normal' body, for the health and strength of the British nation.

The promotion of 'normality' in seaside freak show exhibitions extended to normal sexual behaviour. Displays of 'half-men, half-women' at British seaside resorts reflected the changing beliefs surrounding gender and sexuality in twentieth century Britain. Between 1900 and 1950, traditional gender roles were challenged by the effect of the First and Second World Wars, which took women out of their traditional roles in the home and into the public sphere. The fight for female emancipation and equal rights with men, culminated in females over 30, with a property, receiving the right to vote in 1928. However, as the war left effeminate men, suffering from the strain of war, including diseases of the mind such as shell-shock, and women becoming more 'mannish' in looks and decorum, there was concern about the effect of the amalgamation of genders. This transcended the medical profession, as doctors thought that women could spontaneously become men, if they took part in masculine pursuits. Moreover, there was inherent concern

about sexual deviance and the rise of homosexuality; the seaside space was one in which sexual deviance was more likely to occur. This made displays of 'half-men, half-woman' a pertinent part of the seaside environment. Therefore, such displays, including the display of Colonel Barker, must be understood in relation to the concern about blurred lines between men and women, and increasing concern about the rise of homosexuality in the twentieth century. This was evident in the Barker case, as there was no law against female homosexuality. Both the exhibitions and the court cases reflect the changing conceptualization of gender and sexuality in the period. Furthermore, they gave the public an opportunity to discuss such issues, as the legal professional attempted to clarify the law surrounding sexual deviance.

Through assessing a variety of people who were exhibited as part of the seaside freak show, this thesis has illuminated and embellished the freak show story to effectively show its continuation through to 1950. Due to the confines of this study, it has not analysed every form of bodily difference that was part of the seaside freak show. For example, it has not dealt with the racial freaks that were displayed at the front, as this has been the focus of many scholarly works on the history of freakery and they were not a prominent aspect of seaside entertainment.

However, through the analysis of a selection of the people who were displayed as part of the seaside entertainment environment, the thesis has ultimately argued freak shows were embedded with meaning and significance for the British public and has analysed both with early twentieth century constructions

if nationhood, class, and gender. Running through has been a discourse about healthy and unhealthy bodies, co-constituted both by freak show actors and by those with the tourist gaze. Through their attendance at the freak show, holidaymakers learnt about their own bodies, health, and normality through staring at those who possessed an abnormal physical frame. As such, freak shows encompassed many broader debates about health, wellness, and national identity.

The images and newspaper reports that were associated with the exhibitions revealed multiple layers of performance at work, as displays were constructed for the education and entertainment of the public. This thesis has ended its coverage in 1950, a reflection of both decline of the seaside holiday and of the rise of other forms of entertainment in Britain, further investigation and analysis is required to further comprehend the continued human fascination with physical and mental difference. With the rise of film and television, it would be beneficial to assess whether or not the British public continued to indulge their interest in the unusual in discrete and darkened cinematic spaces, which were both public and private, or latterly, within the privacy of their own homes. This thesis has argued that the construction of freak spaces and performers in the first half of the twentieth century reveals complex narratives of gender, class, and citizenship, in sites given over to idle and whimsical occupations.

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