

Whitby as a seaside resort: from the eighteenth century to the twentieth

The northern English port and seaside resort of Whitby might seem easy to dismiss as remote, provincial, stagnant and of little interest outside its own locality. On some kinds of evidence, indeed, it would be easy to assimilate it to what has become a standard set of assumptions about the inexorable decline of the 'traditional' British seaside resort since the 1960s, in face of competition from new holiday destinations at home and abroad and new patterns of consumption, fashion and desire.¹ Even the relatively optimistic revision of the bleakest assumptions, provided in Beatty and Fothergill's recent analysis of the 'seaside economy' over the last thirty years of the twentieth century, had little economic, demographic or labour market comfort for Whitby itself. Its population at a spring census, standing at just under 13,000 in 2001 on the boundaries used by Beatty and Fothergill, perpetuated more than a century of stagnation alternating with gentle decline. Its low season claimant unemployment rate in January 2002, at 7.0 per cent, placed it third among the 43 largest British seaside resorts, two-thirds higher than the national figure for this kind of town. Taking hidden unemployment into account, the figure rose to 15.1 per cent, and on this basis five other seaside resorts were worse off than Whitby. This was in spite of a recorded growth in employment of 29 per cent in the town between 1971 and 2001, which put Whitby thirteenth from the top of a similar league table: this was one of the unexpected positive findings from the Beatty and Fothergill study as regards seaside resorts in general. But, although most seaside resorts were also net importers of migrants of working age, another indication of relative economic health, Whitby featured at the very foot of this table, with a net loss of 8 per cent over the thirty years. Only two other resorts, in deeply depressed areas of Britain, showed a net loss on this basis.²

These are, on the whole, depressing economic and demographic indicators. But they are far from being the whole story. Indeed, they hide a contrasting dimension to Whitby's fortunes at the turn of the millennium. It has enhanced an existing reputation

¹ G. Shaw and A. Williams (eds.), *The Rise and Fall of British Coastal Resorts* (London: Cassell, 1997), especially chapters 4 (Chris Cooper) and 5 (John Urry); John K. Walton, *The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the Nineteenth Century* (Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 163-5.

² C. Beatty and S. Fothergill, *The Seaside Economy: the Final Report of the Seaside Towns Research Project* (Sheffield Hallam University: Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, 2003), especially pp. 16, 23, 27, 51.

as a popular week-end destination for seekers after a measure of distinctiveness and ‘authenticity’, and its established day-tripper markets from Middlesbrough and the old industrial areas of North-East England and West Yorkshire have been augmented by regular visits from touring coach parties and by more affluent visitors from further afield, keeping its tourist industry buoyant through times which were much harder in other resorts during the late twentieth century. In 2006 it won the title ‘Best Seaside Resort’ from the British consumer magazine *Holiday Which?* The resultant newspaper publicity was very supportive, referring to the town’s 550,000 visitors per year, its tourism employment running at one in five of the population (a statistic that may be open to interpretation), its sandy beaches, quaint harbour, abbey ruins, picturesque cliffs, fossils, jet ornament manufacture, smoked herrings (‘kippers’), folk festival, regatta, literary and historic associations (especially with Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, which draws the distinctively black-clad Goth cult to the town at such evocative anniversaries as Hallowe’en and Walpurgis Eve,³ and with the explorer Captain James Cook, who is the subject of a coastal Heritage Trail)⁴, together with, according to fashionable restaurateur Rick Stein, ‘the best fish and chips in England’ at the Magpie Café. The report in the regional *Yorkshire Post* newspaper emphasized that this public relations triumph represented a considerable recovery from doldrums in the mid-1990s, when there were very high unemployment rates; and there was certainly a good deal of new investment, most visibly in the harbour area, over the intervening period. But the dissonance between Whitby’s gloomy economic and demographic record, and its generally positive image and trans-class popularity as a seaside resort, suggests that, with all their virtues, the statistics assembled and critically processed by Beatty and Fothergill represent only part of the story.⁵

Whitby’s success at this time was part of a wider renaissance of small British seaside resorts which were perceived to have distinctive character and atmosphere, and to be the bearers of attractive, evocative traditions from the history of the English seaside,

³ Paul Hodkinson, *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture* (Oxford: Berg, 2002); Gavin Baddeley, *Goth Chic* (London: Plexus, 2006).

⁴ John K. Walton, ‘Captain James Cook, tourism and memories of empire in North Yorkshire, England’ paper presented at International Commission for the History of Travel and Tourism, sessions on ‘Touring the Empires’, 20th International Conference of the International Commission for the Historical Sciences, Sydney, Australia, July 2005.

⁵ <http://www.enjoyengland.com/> accessed 5 January 2007; <http://www.whitbycottages.com> accessed 5 January 2007.

into the beginning of the new millennium. The other resorts in the top ten were all small and presented some claim to distinctive character: Wells-next-the-Sea in Norfolk, Frinton in Essex (with its reputation, dating from its inter-war heyday, for exclusivity, snobbery, bowls and lawn tennis), expensive and equally exclusive Swanage and Sidmouth in Dorset and Devon, artistic St Ives (home of the Tate Modern gallery, on the site of the old gasworks) in Cornwall, the little Welsh resorts of Tenby and Abersoch, Rothesay on the Isle of Bute in western Scotland, and Portrush in Northern Ireland. Only Sidmouth, St Ives and Swanage joined Whitby among Britain's '43 principal seaside towns' as defined by Beatty and Fothergill; and they all featured among the six smallest, with census populations between 10,200 and 13,800.⁶ They were all relatively difficult of access from major population centres: even Frinton, easily the nearest to London, tried to discourage visitors with alien values by suppressing attractions deemed 'inappropriate' and using its rail crossing as a kind of unofficial frontier post.⁷ The others were far from the nearest motorway, and any rail journey, if available, necessitated connecting with a rustic branch line. Wells-next-the-Sea, Swanage and Portrush were not only 'remote', especially from a London media perspective, but also had close connections with steam railways, a particularly popular and evocative form of 'heritage' attraction in Britain; while a visit to Rothesay involved a short sea crossing, although it had a long history as a popular destination for Glasgow area holidaymakers travelling down the Clyde estuary, initially by paddle steamer.⁸

Small resorts with 'character', and offering, in the 'top five' cases at least, large numbers of beach huts, that fashionable accessory to holiday living at the seaside in the early twenty-first century, were clearly of the essence.⁹ A measure of eccentricity and the capacity for catering for niche markets also seemed to help: Rothesay's website proudly showed off the complex of Victorian urinals that graced its pier head,

⁶ Beatty and Fothergill, *Seaside Economy*, p. 16.

⁷ Laura Chase, 'The creation of place image in inter-war Clacton and Frinton', Ph.D. thesis, University of Essex, 1999, provides historical context.

⁸ Ian Carter, *Railways and Culture in Britain* (Manchester University Press, 2001); Alastair J. Durie, *Scotland for the Holidays: a History of Tourism in Scotland, 1780-1939* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2003).

⁹ For the current popularity of beach huts, and of seaside nostalgia generally, http://www.seasidehistory.co.uk/beach_huts.html accessed 6 January 2007; for historical background, Laura Chase, 'Public beaches and private beach huts: a case study of inter-war Clacton and Frinton, Essex', in John K. Walton (ed.), *Histories of Tourism: Representation, Identity and Conflict* (Clevedon: Channel View, 2005), pp. 211-227.

‘the most impressive surviving late Victorian public conveniences in Scotland’, which were apparently a particular attraction to ‘leisure sailors’.¹⁰ Above all, what mattered was to be able to connect with a sense of nostalgia for a secure, rich and interesting past which could be transmitted to a new generation through the revival of an idealised family holiday in a ‘traditional’ and evocative seaside destination, relieved of all the associations of dullness, dampness, incompetence and poor service that had plagued the British seaside in the late twentieth century, but were no longer seen as inevitable, as the predominant tone of media coverage began to shift from mockery towards celebration, from denigration towards affection.¹¹

Whitby itself was very well placed to capitalise on these trends and preferences. It was hard to reach but not inaccessible, at the end of the only one of its four meandering through rail routes to have survived the branch line closures of the 1960s, and of winding, hilly road access routes across moors that challenged without deterring. It was close to a particularly spectacular preserved steam railway, and timetabled steam services ran into its station during the summer. Its long line of beach huts under the West Cliff, reached by an Art Deco cliff lift and with a café of similar vintage half way along, also ticked a relevant box, as did the long sandy beach itself and a plenitude of rock pools, fossils, shells and marine fauna for secure children’s play, exploration and education. But what really marked it out as distinctive and attractive was its topography, its architecture, its patina of history and aura of legend, and the ambience that these attributes generated for the town as a holiday destination, as illustrated by its popularity as an atmospheric setting for children’s fiction featuring fantasy, crime and witchcraft.¹² A rendering of this kind of tourist identity, in the celebratory language of local history and civic pride, comes from Colin Waters in 1992: ‘Few towns of its size in Britain can match the diversity of Whitby’s historical connections or its impressive list of local residents and visitors. Their deeds throughout the years have created an atmosphere which pervades every street and alleyway of this quaint red-bricked town. In their wake they have left a legacy of

¹⁰ <http://www.isle-of-bute.com.victoriantoilets/> accessed 5 January 2007.

¹¹ Walton, *British Seaside*, pp. 1-3; Bill Bryson, *Notes from a Small Island* (London, 1995), pp. 124-5.

¹² Robert E. Swindells, *Room 13* (London: Doubleday, 1989); Robin Jarvis, *The Whitby Witches* (London: Hodder Children’s Books, 1991); Robin Jarvis, *A Warlock in Whitby* (Hemel Hempstead: Simon and Schuster, 1992); Robin Jarvis, *The Whitby Child* (Hemel Hempstead: Simon and Schuster, 1994); Mike Smit, *All Tied Up* (London: Corgi Yearling, 1998); Theresa Tomlinson, *Night of the Red Devil* (London: Walker, 2000).

historical worth and achievement which permeates all aspects of the town's community to this day.¹³ Whitby's success as a tourist destination can be largely ascribed to its perceived membership of a particularly attractive category, the historic seaside resort with literary and artistic associations.

Whitby's dual identity as ailing urban economy and successful seaside resort thus owes much to its capacity for presenting and marketing its own history, architecture and atmosphere to visitors who seek quaintness, customs and authenticity. The two sides of the equation are, of course, intimately connected: it was Whitby's lack of economic and demographic dynamism that enabled it to preserve enough of these desirable characteristics to offer its seductive combination of the standard attractions of a seaside resort (beaches, parks, putting greens, amusement arcades, music, pubs, fish and chip shops and more recently surfing) with those of a historic maritime town offering small, specialist shops in narrow, crowded, atmospheric streets. This interim outcome was not achieved without a measure of conflict, which still persists, between the resort interests and other elements of Whitby's economy; and there were also sustained struggles during the 1930s and the immediate post-war decades between advocates of modernization who urged the demolition of many of the old buildings by the harbour, and the relocation of their inhabitants, and preservationists who already recognised the value for tourist purposes of the courts, alleys and stairways which climbed the valley sides above the harbour in an eccentric intricacy that delighted some as much as it affronted others. The remainder of this paper will trace the relationships between Whitby's maritime past and its tourist present, with particular reference to the development since the late nineteenth century of its image as a romantic, historic, quaint place to visit, and to the working out of the conflicts between the advocates of preservation and modernity, with a spectrum of positions in between, during much of the twentieth century.¹⁴

¹³ Colin Waters, *Whitby: a Pictorial History* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1992), Introduction, unpaginated.

¹⁴ For more detailed analysis of these themes, see J.K. Walton, 'Fishing communities and redevelopment: the case of Whitby, 1930-1970', in David J. Starkey and Morten Hahn-Pedersen (eds.), *Bridging the North Sea: conflict and cooperation* (Esbjerg, Denmark: Fiskeri –og Sofartsmuseet, 2005), 135-62; idem., *Tourism, fishing and redevelopment: post-war Whitby, 1945-1970*, University of Cambridge: Institute of Continuing Education, Wolfson Lectures, Occasional Paper No. 5, 2005.

Whitby might conceivably aspire to the status of the first fashionable and commercial British seaside resort, based on the survival of a poem detailing the apparently established role of sea-bathing alongside the consumption of spa water in effecting a cure for jaundice for a gentleman who visited the town as early as 1718, nearly a generation before firm evidence of commercially organised medicinal sea-bathing emerges elsewhere. The prior claim of Scarborough, just over thirty kilometres to the south, has obscured this possible distinction, which has never been part of Whitby's tourist narrative. Scarborough's early medical propagandist Dr Wittie had recommended (with uncertain results) sea-bathing as a cure for gout to genteel visitors to the town's spa, in the 1667 edition of his book promoting the medicinal virtues of the town, and it is Scarborough, since 1974 part of the same local government district as Whitby, that celebrates the glory of being the first modern seaside resort.¹⁵

Whitby's attractive distinguishing features had more orthodox roots. The town's economic heyday, in terms of obvious dynamism and comparative advantage, came in the later eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century, when it was home to a group of wealthy ship-owners who benefited from the expanding coal trade between north-east England and the capital as well as from buoyant overseas trade. It participated successfully in the north Atlantic whale fishery (commemorated by an arch formed from a whale's jawbone, on display above the harbour on the West Cliff), as well as sustaining an inshore and middle water fishing fleet, establishing a prosperous shipbuilding industry and maintaining a role as a significant commercial port in its own right. It was by this route that the town's associations with the navigator and explorer Captain James Cook were established, although efforts to locate and commemorate his place of residence in Whitby with precision have been based more on assertion than on convincing research. Examples of the enduring architectural legacy of these expansive times can be found in the opulent Georgian houses for merchants, ship-owners and master mariners that climb the hill from Bagdale on the western side of the harbour; in the diminutive Georgian market hall and surviving terraced cottages (built of stone as well as brick) on the more plebeian East Side of the River Esk; in the impressive stone piers of the 1820s, with their

¹⁵ John Travis, 'Continuity and change in English sea-bathing, 1730-1900', in S. Fisher (ed.), *Recreation and the Sea* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), p. 12; Jack Binns, *The History of Scarborough, North Yorkshire* (Pickering: Blackthorn Press, 2001), pp. 93-104.

lighthouses standing sentinel, which protect the dangerous entrance to the harbour on either side; and in the neat classical station of the Whitby and Pickering Railway, which opened as early as 1836, reflecting the town's continuing economic importance, but soon became an anachronism in its use of horse traction until the belated advent of steam locomotives in 1847.¹⁶

Whitby had much deeper historical roots than this as a settlement, with the ruins of the medieval abbey and, nearby, the engagingly eccentric parish church dominating the East Cliff, together with the seventeenth-century Cholmley House. The abbey had been re-founded in the eleventh century, after the Vikings had destroyed the original buildings where, in 664, the Synod of Whitby had decided the religious adherence of medieval England, and where Caedmon is said to have declaimed the first English poem. There was evidence of a local fishing industry from at least the fourteenth century. Whitby's rural hinterland of heather moors and deep valleys added a further array of romantic landscapes and stories to those associated with the cliffs, the sea and the abbey, reinforced from the mid-1880s by the late Victorian literary endeavours of local author Mary Linskill, whose moralistic fiction appealed to an important sector of Whitby's visiting public and reinforced the town's imagined identity as a secure and romantic setting where the heather moors met the rugged coast.¹⁷ The town also benefited from the mid-Victorian vogue for ornaments carved and polished from the local jet deposits, which generated considerable local employment between the 1860s and 1890s (as late as 1890 a local trade directory listed 168 'jet ornament manufacturers' and ten 'jet (rough) merchants'), and, even in decline, contributed to the construction of a distinctive and attractive artisan identity for the town, based on 'traditional' crafts.¹⁸ Such attributes became staple themes of the Victorian guide books that responded to and reinforced the early development of the seaside holiday industry in the port from the early Victorian years.

¹⁶ Stephanie K. Jones, 'A Maritime History of the Port of Whitby, 1700-1914', Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1982; Andrew White, *The Buildings of Georgian Whitby* (Keele: Ryburn Publishing, 1995).

¹⁷ Andrew White, *A History of Whitby* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1993); Mary Linskill, *In and About Whitby* (Whitby: Culva House, 2000, reprinted from *Whitby Gazette* articles of the 1880s); Cordelia Stamp, *Mary Linskill* (Whitby: Caedmon, 1980); Jan Hewitt, 'The Haven under the Hill: landscape and identity in Mary Linskill's fiction', paper presented at the conference on 'Regional Identities, Shifting Boundaries', Manchester Metropolitan University, September 2000.

¹⁸ M. McMillan, *Whitby Jet through the Years* (Whitby: Mabel McMillan, 1992); T. Woodwark, 'The rise and fall of the jet trade', *99th Annual Report of the Whitby Literary and Philosophical Society* (Whitby, 1921), pp. 25-34; Bulmer's *Directory* for the North Riding of Yorkshire, 1890.

Perhaps more important than all this to the development of Whitby's reputation as a quaint, old-fashioned settlement in which 'history' was accessible, tangible and democratic, an identification based on the emotions rather than the formal cultural capital of detailed historical and architectural knowledge, were the narrow streets, yards and stairways of what was often referred to as the 'old town', on either side of the harbour, and especially those of the East Side, where warrens and honeycombs of houses (these were favoured metaphors) had been built up the valley sides, piled up one on top of another in memorable confusion during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and gave the visitor a strong sense of being part of 'living history', a continuum between past and present.¹⁹ The Victorian (and post-Victorian) tourist and holiday guides had little or nothing to say about all this: Black's in 1862, for example, dismissed the area around the harbour thus: 'The streets are generally narrow, and the older parts of the town present nothing remarkable.' On the other hand the West Cliff, the recently-developed focal point of the new seaside resort at the top of the hill, 'has many very handsome buildings, affording excellent accommodation to visitors.'²⁰ The overwhelming bulk of the text was allocated to the Abbey, Parish Church and surroundings, and to the West Cliff and its sea-bathing activities, as well as to an account of the economic history of the town.²¹ The locally-produced Horne's guide-book had similar priorities as late as 1934, with substantial sections on local legends and customs, and on the work of Mary Linskill, but not a word of description of the streets and vistas of 'Old Whitby'.²² The great architectural historian and topographer, Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, could find nothing at all of technical architectural interest at the seaward end of Church Street, the heart of 'Old Whitby' leading to the famous 199 steps by which the parish church and abbey were reached from the harbour, when he wrote it up for his *Buildings of England* series in 1966; but he acknowledged that the town was 'delightful in three ways at least: for the abbey, which, as a ruin, is sublime as well as picturesque; for the parish church, the like of which is not to be found anywhere in the country; and for the busy quaysides with the long irregular rows of

¹⁹ Stephen Bann, *The Inventions of History* (Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 125-6.

²⁰ Black's *Picturesque Guide to Yorkshire* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1862), p. 355.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 353-9; *The Guide to Whitby and the Neighbourhood* (Whitby, 1850); Silvester Reed, *Reed's Illustrated Guide to Whitby and Visitors' Hand-Book* (Whitby: Silvester Reed, first edn. 1858); Martin Simpson, *A Guide to Whitby and the Vicinity* (Whitby: Forth and Son, 2nd edn., 1887); Horne and Son, Limited, *Official Guide to Whitby* (Whitby: first edn., 1890).

²² Horne's *Official Guide to Whitby* (Whitby: Horne and Son, 1934).

houses, picturesque in so different a way from the picturesqueness of the abbey.²³ From at least the 1880s onwards this irregularity and informality of layout and presentation, on both sides of the harbour, together with the activity of the fishing and commercial ports, was at the core of what made Whitby attractive to a growing proportion of its visitors, reinforced by the expansion of artistic representations of 'old Whitby' and its people through paintings and photographs; and the negative aspects of Pevsner's own verdict may have been influenced by the large numbers of demolitions which had taken place in the area since the mid-1930s, as we shall see.²⁴

The early development of the seaside resort, as such, took place at a distance from the harbour, and expressed the standard assumptions of the Victorian family holiday. The grid pattern of tall terraced lodging-houses on the West Cliff, giving easy access to the longest and most family-friendly sandy beach, had nothing distinctive about it; and nor did the similar, but smaller and more down-market, streets of mid-Victorian houses that came to form Fishburn Park, above the harbour and station and (at times) uncomfortably close to the smuts and whistles of the locomotive shed.²⁵ The West Cliff development was originally a speculation by the railway promoter George Hudson, and it has been suggested that his allocation of the North Midland Railway's resources to upgrading the line from York to Whitby for steam traction in the late 1840s owed more to his desire to sell building plots there (and to secure election as Whitby's MP) than to any currently recognised duty to get the best return on investment for the shareholders. It was certainly useful to Whitby's development as a seaside resort.²⁶ But the extent to which the project had overestimated potential demand in this competitive market is still visible on the ground, as the self-made Durham coal-owner and Atlantic cable entrepreneur Sir George Elliot, Hudson's successor in ownership of the building estate, did not complete the Crescent which was to be the climax of the development, with the result that only the eastern half is extant.²⁷

²³ N. Pevsner, *Yorkshire: the North Riding* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 388.

²⁴ Walton, 'Fishing communities', pp. 143-5.

²⁵ *Whitby Gazette*, 3 Sept. 1937.

²⁶ R. Beaumont, *The Railway King* (London: Review, 2002); S. McCartney and A.J. Arnold, *Audit Investigations, Personal Responsibility and Stewardship at George Hudson's Railway Companies* (University of Essex: Department of Accounting, Finance and Management, 1998).

²⁷ Pevsner, *North Yorkshire*, pp. 398-9; Colin Griffin, 'Elliot, Sir George, first baronet (1814-1893)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* on-line (2004-6), which mentions Elliot's property ownership in Whitby but not his role as estate developer.

As was often the case with British seaside resorts, as with (for example) Brighton and Margate in the mid-eighteenth century, Whitby began to develop its tourist functions in earnest as a counterweight to incipient decline in the economic activities on which the town's Georgian and early Victorian prosperity had been based.²⁸ This invariably gave rise to tensions between the older activities of port and harbour and the new requirements of the holiday industry, although in Whitby these were muted for many years by the physical segregation between the tourist accommodation district and its dedicated amenities on and beneath the West Cliff, and the older harbour area, which was somewhere to pass through and inspect with interest while visiting the shops just off the harbour, or walking through to the Abbey and parish church on the East Cliff. It was therefore easy to construct as something attractively rather than threateningly 'other', the object of the 'romantic' or at least the 'picturesque' gaze, at a time when the quaintness and picturesque qualities of such places were becoming firmly established, especially among middle- and upper-class visitors with artistic or bohemian pretensions, at various points on the coastline where old fishing settlements were developing resort functions, from Cornwall to East Anglia.²⁹ At Whitby these were unofficial and (fittingly) informal perceptions, as their absence from much of the local guide-book literature makes clear; but they were increasingly important to the town's popularity as a tourist destination.³⁰

This process began in earnest in Whitby and district from the 1880s, with the development of artists' colonies in and around the nearby fishing villages of Staithes, Runswick Bay and Robin Hood's Bay, the growing popularity of the fiction of Mary Linskill, who gave Whitby its romantic label of 'the Haven under the Hill' and turned the town's red roofs into an enduring symbol of refuge, comfort and hospitality, and the emergence of the evocative naturalistic photography of Frank Meadow Sutcliffe, who (like many of the artists of the numerous and significant Staithes Group) moved to this coast from the industrial West Riding of Yorkshire, setting up a photographic

²⁸ Sue Berry, *Georgian Brighton* (Chichester: Phillimore, 2005); John K. Walton, *The English Seaside Resort: a Social History 1750-1914* (Leicester University Press, 1983), pp. 48-9.

²⁹ For example, R.H.J. Crook, *Walton-on-the-Naze, Essex: an Appreciation of a Picturesque, Old-World Seaside Resort* (London: Frederick Warne and Co., 3rd edn., 1911).

³⁰ John Urry, *Consuming Places* (London: Sage, 1995); and see, for example, Bernard Deacon, 'Imagining the fishing: artists and fishermen in late nineteenth century Cornwall', *Rural History* 12 (2001), pp. 159-78.

studio in a favoured family holiday haunt. He began in a former jet workshop in Waterloo Yard, in the old part of town, before moving to more orthodox premises in Skinner Street at the top of the hill on the West Side, and he was particularly successful at capturing harbour scenes and evocative groups of fishermen and their families, who were willing to co-operate in the necessarily contrived process of presenting the illusion of spontaneity through the stillness required by a long exposure. By 1890 the local trade directory listed four artists and seven photographers (Sutcliffe included, and alongside four fossil dealers and three antique furniture dealers) in Whitby itself. This was a time of transition in the local economy, when 75 master mariners, fourteen ship-owners, five boat builders and two shipbuilders were enumerated alongside 168 lodging-house keepers (most of whom would be catering for summer holiday visitors), nine pleasure boat owners and a bathing-machine proprietor, the wonderfully-named Mr Argument. At this time 27 fishermen were listed as owners or part-owners of boats, ten of whom lived in the old tenement and cottage areas of the west side of the harbour, 16 in the Church Street area of the East Side, and only one in the recently-built mid-Victorian terraced houses of Fishburn Park. The perception of 'Old Whitby' as a romantic and attractive location was greatly enhanced by its proximity to the harbour and association with the fishing industry and 'community', whose presence conjured up virtuous images of courage, risk and hard work, and associations with the Royal Navy, the lifeboat service and Britain as island and seafaring nation. Fishing families might be a small minority among the inhabitants of the small houses and tenements of the West and East Sides of the harbour, but their presence coloured perceptions of the whole area. But, as befitted this complex and changing local environment, representations of 'Old Whitby' featuring fishing, harbour scenes and local inhabitants of 'character' in traditional garb were only part of the output of these photographers and painters. Portrait photographs, mainly but not exclusively for middle-class 'sitters', probably accounted for most of Sutcliffe's income; but the depictions of townscapes, maritime landscapes and local people became strongly associated with a 'spirit of place' identified with tradition, character and authenticity. The existence of this body of work helped to direct the tourist gaze towards the appreciation of such images and of their immediate context, not least through the developing picture postcard market at

the turn of the century, and to heighten the attractiveness of the ‘fishing quarter’ as a place to visit.³¹

These positive reactions to ‘Old Whitby’ became increasingly widespread among visitors in the late nineteenth century, at a time when the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings was beginning its campaigns against the destructive ‘restoration’ of medieval churches, and opposition was being organised in Whitby’s regional hinterland to threats to evocative medieval religious buildings in Leeds and York.³² The poet and man of letters James Russell Lowell, United States diplomatic minister to Britain between 1880 and 1885, was a regular Whitby visitor during the 1880s, enjoying it as a ‘very primitive place’ which reminded him of an earlier, more simple United States, and writing to friends, ‘I wish you could see the yards, steep flights of stone steps hurrying down from the West Cliff and the East, between which the river... crawls into the sea.’³³ A guide-book published for the North Eastern Railway in 1904 emphasised the town’s ‘ancient and picturesque character’ and its appeal to the artist, especially when the fishermen animated the quay in the early morning.³⁴ Such perceptions had become commonplace by the early twentieth century, and when Sutcliffe, who had done a great deal to further them, retired from his photographic business in 1922, he was almost immediately taken into the bosom of the local artistic and antiquarian establishment and made curator of the Whitby Museum. The position Whitby acquired within the canon of romantic topographical and naturalistic maritime painting was well illustrated by the *Whitby Gazette* at the end of 1936: ‘From time immemorial Whitby has been one of the most attractive beauty spots around the English coast for all members of the painting fraternity, and seldom does a year pass but one finds pictures of it on the walls of the Royal Academy or other London exhibitions.’³⁵ For ‘from time immemorial’ we should read ‘over the past half century’; but the point was made. Three years earlier, just as fierce controversy was

³¹ B.E. Shaw (comp.), *Frank Meadow Sutcliffe, Hon. F.R.P.S.: Whitby and its People* (Whitby: Sutcliffe Gallery, 1974); M. Hiley, *Frank Sutcliffe: Photographer of Whitby* (London: Gordon Fraser Gallery, 1974, reprinted Chichester: Phillimore, 2005); Peter Phillips, *The Staithes Group* (Nottingham: Phillips and Sons, 1993); Bulmer’s *Directory* (1890).

³² Charles Dellheim, *The Face of the Past: the Preservation of the Medieval Inheritance in Victorian England* (Cambridge University Press, 1982).

³³ *Whitby Gazette*, 28 Feb. 1919; Brendan Rapple, ‘James Russell Lowell and England’, *Contemporary Review*, July 2000.

³⁴ Frank J. Nash, *The Yorkshire Coast: its Advantages and Attractions* (York, 1904), pp. 11-12.

³⁵ *Whitby Gazette*, 24 Dec. 1936.

breaking out over demolition and ‘improvement’ proposals for the ‘old town’, J.S. Miller of London provided what was by now an utterly conventional eulogy of the romantic appearance of ‘old Whitby’ as seen from the West Cliff: ‘The smile of Whitby viewed from the Khyber Pass on a sunny day, when the light beats through the haze of smoke that seems to hang perpetually over these crazy, red-roofed cottages clustered up the sides of the East Cliff like the seeds in a ripe pomegranate.’³⁶ Nor was this just the province of the self-consciously ‘cultivated’ practitioner of artistic appreciation, as was indicated by a manuscript letter from A. Halliwell of Bury after listening to a radio broadcast on the issues surrounding the preservation or demolition of ‘old Whitby’: ‘I think that visitors to Whitby would agree with me that the medeval (*sic*) atmosphere of the place is its greatest attraction... although I am no artist but just an ordinary working man I can appreciate (*sic*) the beauty of your town... and would not like to see any of it disturbed.’³⁷ At a more frivolous level, H.L. Gee contributed an article to the *Whitby Gazette* in 1937 on how to compose pictures of groups of old buildings which carefully excluded signs offering pots of tea and people who looked as if they had just stepped out of a car.³⁸ But the importance attached to vistas and to ‘atmosphere’ in commentaries of this kind, especially the ones that suggest that this kind of appreciation had become as conventional as the vocabulary of the picturesque a hundred and fifty years earlier, is crucial to understanding the attraction exerted by this unassuming but compelling environment on its visiting public.³⁹

Even as this version of the ‘tourist gaze’ became more influential, and more important to the local economy, in Whitby as in similar historic resort locations during the early twentieth century, an alternative discourse of denigration was developing in parallel, seeing dirt, untidiness, squalor and disease where others were drawn to the quaint, the organic, the complex and the weathered. The emergent planning profession was enjoined, in the Housing (Etc.) Act of 1923, to take account of sites of ‘special architectural, historic or artistic interest’; but where this injunction was not forgotten, it tended to be expressed in elitist form. The eminent architectural writer Sir John

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 13 Oct. 1933.

³⁷ North Yorkshire Record Office, Northallerton (NYRO), MIC 1826, Bewlay Report and associated correspondence.

³⁸ *Whitby Gazette*, 3 Sept. 1937.

³⁹ Jane Austen, *Sanditon* (Everyman Edition, London: J.M. Dent, 1978).

Summerson's fear of a relapse into sentimentalism and 'the nostalgic tendency of popular tastes' remained dominant among policy-makers in the years after the Second World War, although in the case of Whitby the protective nostalgia was more middle-class, while significant strands of 'popular' opinion actually favoured redevelopment. Planning orthodoxy favoured sweeping comprehensive redevelopment and regarded inconveniently sited old buildings as obstacles rather than challenges.⁴⁰

Housing reformers in Whitby during the early decades of the twentieth century shared this frame of mind, seeing the labyrinthine alleys and yards of the East and West Sides as irrational, unplanned and dangerously unhealthy blots on the landscape, ripe for clearance and replacement. A Local Government Board inspector, Reginald Farrar, reporting in 1907, used the language of 'slums' in attacking overcrowded and insanitary housing, especially on the East Cliff, while denouncing the local authority for spending on holiday attractions rather than sanitary improvements. His report went on the record for future reference when housing became a live issue in local politics after the First World War.⁴¹ At the time, the local Medical Officer of Health's perspective was less apocalyptic, pointing out that some improvements were being made, that many houses were not bad enough to condemn but likely to become so if neglected, and that the infant mortality rate remained below the national average. The report for 1914 speaks of a need for compulsory purchase and demolition in some places, but explains that sanitary reform was proceeding through the abolition of open channel drainage and the conversion of privies to water closets as part of the extension of a modern sewerage system.⁴²

Criticisms of housing conditions in 'Old Whitby' came to the fore in earnest during the housing crisis in the aftermath of the First World War. In 1919 a correspondent to the local newspaper stirred up controversy by claiming that conditions were worse than in the slums of the East End of London, with piled-up tenements, water running down walls and no fresh air or sunlight in the houses. The 'unhealthy houses (should be) pulled down, the streets widened, and that Whitby shall be made into a place of

⁴⁰ J. Delafons, *Politics and Preservation: a Policy History of the Built Heritage 1882-1996* (London: Spon, 1997), pp. 37-8, 62-4.

⁴¹ *Whitby Gazette*, 24 Jan. 1947.

⁴² NYRO, Annual Reports of the Medical Officer of Health, Whitby Urban District Council, 1909 and 1914.

health and beauty... Then will be the time for artists to paint Whitby with its red-tiled roofs that are watertight.’⁴³ This awareness of the artistic (and tourist) dimension to the question continued to haunt subsequent debates, and a reply from ‘Owd Native’ not only argued that the real East End slums were nothing like airy Whitby, with its clean and virtuous inhabitants, low death rates in the old town and ‘fine specimens of humanity’ who were brought up there, but also pointed out that if the old streets and alleys were demolished, ‘Whitby would soon be marked off the artist’s programme.’⁴⁴ References to red roofs as justification for preservation, alluding to the sentimental imagery associated with Mary Linskill, were particularly calculated to arouse the ire of the kind of housing reformers who repudiated nostalgia and emotion while taking pride in the scientific purity of their statistical analysis.

The question then faded into the background for a decade, as the local authority retreated from building new council houses on cost grounds. Towards the end of the 1920s a new programme of drainage improvements and water-closet installations in the yards of the East Side began to make headway. Meanwhile in 1928 the Rector of Whitby paid a personal visit to the offices of the Ministry of Health in London to draw official attention to the deplorable condition of the town’s housing stock.⁴⁵ The Medical Officer of Health’s report of 1929 recorded that although only 10 of the 361 houses inspected in that year were ‘unfit for human habitation’, a further 220 were ‘not in all respects reasonably fit...’, and a plea for the belated development of a municipal house-building programme recognised that ‘the existing conditions are a menace to the health of the occupants’.⁴⁶

These stirrings presaged a bitter and sustained set of conflicts which lasted through most of the 1930s, as the advent of a new Medical Officer of Health, Dr Dale Wood, coincided with the election of a new group of energetic reforming councillors to the Urban District Council, led by the highly committed Kenneth McNeil, a boot and shoe dealer and crusader for clearance and redevelopment. This change in the local balance of power acquired added significance when central government began, through the Housing Acts of 1930 and especially 1933, to push a ‘slum clearance’

⁴³ *Whitby Gazette*, 31 Jan. 1919.

⁴⁴ *Whitby Gazette*, 21 Feb. 1919.

⁴⁵ NYRO, Medical Officer’s Report, 1930; National Archives, HLG 48/844., April 1928.

⁴⁶ NYRO, Medical Officer’s Report, 1929.

agenda which threatened the wholesale destruction of 'Old Whitby'. The Council responded to the collapse of several houses on the East Side in 1930 by inaugurating a small municipal house-building programme, and to the legislation of that year by ordering a report on the condition of a small area to the west of the harbour; but what precipitated a burst of unwonted activity was a central government circular of May 1933, which required a survey of the town's housing stock and a full report on the extent of the need for demolition, reconditioning and re-housing. The Medical Officer of Health completed what a Ministry of Health inspector described as a 'model report', well within the six-month deadline; but its proposals, which envisaged the demolition of 450 houses, three-quarters of them on the East Side, created a storm of controversy within the town which soon spread across a wide area of northern and midland England.⁴⁷

Debate within Whitby reached a climax when the Urban District Council discussed and rejected the report at the end of October 1933, despite the best efforts of Councillor McNeil. Much of the discussion concerned the rights of property-owners, the unfairness or otherwise of evicting people from cheap housing to which they were attached and which was not demonstrably unhealthy (there was much praise for the cleanliness of the houses under difficult conditions, and the robustness of the children who were raised there), and the cost to local taxpayers of demolition and replacement housing; but the aesthetic and tourism issues were never far from the surface. In letters to the local press 'A Common Bricklayer' complained that the rhetoric of 'Old Whitby' was being used to protect slum landlords and perpetuate the exploitation of tenants living in unacceptable conditions, while 'Light and Air' asserted that, 'The persons... for whom I have the most contempt are those poisonous sentimentalists who persist in moaning over the proposed demolition of "the old red roofs of Whitby." Through some of these roofs the rain trickles, sometimes freely...', while rents were unacceptably high.⁴⁸ Councillor McNeil argued that conditions on the East Side actually repelled tourists, claiming that on his visits to Church Street 'over and over again he met visitors who turned back in disgust at the conditions they saw.' The Medical Officer of Health was a little more equivocal, emphasizing the unacceptability of current conditions while recognising the problems posed by

⁴⁷ Walton, 'Fishing communities and redevelopment', pp. 146-9.

⁴⁸ *Whitby Gazette*, 20 Oct. 1933, 27 Oct. 1933, 10 Nov. 1933.

wholesale demolition: 'The red roofs of Whitby, which are so well known, and have for many years been an attraction for artists and other admirers, in reality cover some very unsavoury conditions, which are far from beautiful... without any preconceived plan... It is difficult to deal with such conditions in any hope of bringing them into conformity with present-day requirements, whilst, on the other hand, it is unthinkable to clear away a whole town.'⁴⁹

As the report and its implications became more widely publicised, external comment flowed in to oppose the demolitions. Mrs Janet King of Bedford Park, London denied the imputation that there were slums in Whitby, and claimed that she had never spoken to a single visitor who was disgusted by the East Side: she had encountered nothing but 'admiration expressed for the old place, so beautifully kept'. The current proposals would destroy 'the most picturesque seaside town in the whole of England.' Bertha Doyle of Boston Spa near Leeds, a minor artist, argued that visitors returned to Whitby because of its beauty and charm, and that, '...real modern Progress preserves and treasures the heritage and beauty of the past', such as the red tiles, 'so cheerful in our grey climate, and so marvellously glowing at sunset time'. She pointed out the dangers of creating all seaside resorts in the same modernised concrete image, and denied that there was any health risk now that the Old Town's sanitation had been dealt with. Whitby was 'an ancient monument, and should be jealously guarded as such'. Rowland H. Hill of nearby Hinderwell, another artist who painted industrial scenes as well as (for example) Whitby's Flowergate, emphasised the 'character and colour for which Whitby has become so deservedly famous... Both on aesthetic and commercial grounds it would be a suicidal policy to mar this beauty in haste'; and he pointed up the importance of 'a widespread loyalty to its picturesqueness' among a large number of regular visitors.⁵⁰

This marked the beginning of a long process of negotiation, as local interests within Whitby, for a variety of motives, sought to reduce the number and impact of the demolitions and (in some cases) to preserve the character and atmosphere of the town, for its own sake and as an attraction for tourists. Divisions on the Urban District Council paralysed all attempts to designate redevelopment areas, as efforts were made

⁴⁹ *Whitby Gazette*, 3 Nov. 1933.

⁵⁰ *Whitby Gazette*, 17 Nov. 1933.

to reduce the number of affected houses and no single programme commanded agreement, while Councillor Campion was one of several to deny the relevance of experience elsewhere to evaluating the special case of Whitby. A few small demolitions were agreed on the West Side in 1936, but an impasse had been reached.⁵¹

At this point, and almost certainly through the good offices of Vivian Seaton Gray, the clerk to the Urban District Council and a local solicitor with good external contacts and an interest in town planning, the Council sought advice from the Royal Institute of British Architects. They recommended E.C. Bewlay, a Birmingham architect with suitable artistic interests and experience of Whitby (he had painted harbour views there himself), as a consultant, and the Council agreed to hire him at the considerable fee of 300 guineas plus expenses. This was a remarkable decision for a generally parsimonious local authority, and demonstrates the importance attached to the issue.⁵² Bewlay's brief was to provide a workable reconciliation between the sanitary and the picturesque by providing recommendations on what could be kept or reconditioned, what would have to be demolished, and how the lost buildings could be replaced with minimum damage to the character, atmosphere and townscape of 'Old Whitby'. He reported in August 1936, providing a new figure of 229 dwellings to be demolished (alternative proposals had ranged as low as 150), praising the cleanliness of the inhabitants and the impact of recent improvements, and paying particular attention to preserving the pictorial quality of the urban landscape, especially seen at a distance, from the cliffs across the harbour and from the harbour bridge. He emphasised that rebuilding, where appropriate, 'should take place so as to retain unspoilt as far as possible the collective beauty of clustered roofs which is Whitby, and which no Town Planning Acts will ever allow to be repeated.' Detailed reports on particular areas paid overriding attention to whether the roofs and clusters of housing were visible at a distance and affected the visual experience of the onlooker, and by judicious intervention he hoped to achieve '... an increase rather than a decrease in the beauty of the unrivalled views from across the river,' as well as

⁵¹ *Whitby Gazette*, 19 Jan. 1934; Walton, 'Fishing communities and redevelopment', pp. 149-50.

⁵² *Whitby Gazette*, 25 March 1937; Walton, 'Fishing communities and redevelopment', pp. 150-1.

providing new accommodation for fishing families that was in keeping with their surroundings.⁵³

The *Whitby Gazette* picked up on this with immediate approval, recognising that a literal-minded statistical approach would bring needless destruction of ‘buildings that by their delightful grouping and setting were a joy to anyone possessing any sense of beauty,’ and noting a sympathetic response in the *Birmingham Post*, which used the words ‘disaster’ and ‘vandalism’ to describe the consequences of indiscriminate demolition and ‘improvement’. Over the previous two years the attitudes of central government had become more sympathetic to the preservation of such urban environments, and the Whitby campaigners benefited from similar resistance in the fashionable Cornish resort of St Ives, where the artists’ colony was especially influential and well-connected. But the Bewlay report itself helped to shift the terms of debate against wholesale demolition, while his architectural practice continued to be influential in the design of new and replacement housing for another generation.⁵⁴

As a result of these developments, and of the interest taken in these issues by the influential Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, whose reputation for power was used by Bewlay to put pressure on the housing reformers on the Urban District Council, debate on particular proposals for demolition and renewal was strongly coloured by questions of urban aesthetics.⁵⁵ The CPRE’s own Whitby branch was inaugurated in November 1936, and Seaton Gray reported on discussion at its Torquay conference: ‘... the individuality of resorts should be preserved as far as possible – a matter of particular importance to them at Whitby, that they should preserve the particular atmosphere they had at the present time...’⁵⁶ When formal inquiries began into specific demolition proposals in 1937 and 1938, however, Seaton Gray found himself in his official capacity supporting the Council’s policy (telling the hearing that, ‘The Council considered that all the property was absolutely hopeless’ in one case), while solicitors and builders speaking for owners and tenants borrowed the rhetoric of

⁵³ Scarborough Town Hall, Whitby UDC archive, Bewlay Report, August 1936; also at NYRO, MIC 1826.

⁵⁴ *Whitby Gazette*, 14 Aug. 1936; Walton., ‘Fishing communities and redevelopment’, pp. 151-2; NYRO, MIC 1826, Bewlay Report correspondence.

⁵⁵ NYRO, MIC 1826, Bewlay Report correspondence.

⁵⁶ *Whitby Gazette*, 27 Nov. 1936.

preservation and the picturesque in the hope of saving their homes and investments. When New Way Ghaut, on the East Side, came up for consideration, Mr Graham, for the Council, argued that, 'From a congestion point of view, it would not be possible to reconvert. It was old property, with old-fashioned bay windows,' to be met by Mr Kidson's rejoinder: 'Artists come and paint that class of property, and photographers take photos.' In nearby Blackburn's Yard, Mr Bagshawe spoke eloquently about how conspicuous the site was in the townscape, in the centre of the view of the old town from the bridge, with 'buildings of very artistic interest', red-roofed and indeed including the birthplace of Mary Linskill herself. T.H. Brown, speaking for a group of threatened East Side owners, commented scathingly that, 'The most searching inquiries should have been made to see what the East Side would be like if demolition orders were made and enforced... before they destroyed Whitby's beauty, which was a great asset to the town. The general standard in Whitby was to be found in its narrow, steep yards, and he suggested that it was wrong to punish property owners because they owned such property.'⁵⁷

This might be thought a little unfair to Seaton Gray and Bewlay, whose concern to preserve as much as possible of 'Old Whitby' was apparent, even if views at times appeared to have a higher priority than people. Bewlay was, however, also benefiting from rebuilding contracts, which raised potentially sensitive issues. Seaton Gray emphasised a dominant concern to avoid 'the too self-consciously picturesque' in replacement houses, but Councillor Jackson expressed widespread concern when he worried about the expense of the rebuilding programme, urging that it be done 'without any of the ancient buildings and fancy style' that he associated with Bewlay.⁵⁸ Resolving the contradiction was more difficult because the Ministry itself, while happy to pay lip service to the ideals of preservation where possible, and of rebuilding in keeping with picturesque and historic surroundings, was less than eager to support the increased costs, and Bewlay himself expressed his concern that new municipal housing on the East Side skyline, at the top of the cliff, would be too uniform (and too dominated by the emblematic red tiles).⁵⁹ All these issues helped to delay the start of the contested demolition programmes until 1938, just in time for

⁵⁷ *Whitby Gazette*, 27 Aug. 1937, 15 July 1938.

⁵⁸ *Whitby Gazette*, 5 March 1937, 25 March 1937.

⁵⁹ NYRO, MIC 1826, Bewlay Report correspondence.

them to be interrupted by the Second World War, which (together with its austere aftermath) then prevented any significant further progress on this front until the mid-1950s. Meanwhile, the Whitby fishing fleet had been quietly modernising its activities, especially through the use of motorised cobs, without any complaint from the guardians of quaintness and the picturesque, while, in a further irony, Dr Dale Wood announced in 1938 that Whitby's infant mortality rate was below the national average and that there had been no maternal mortality since 1930.⁶⁰

The war broke out at a point where demolitions had begun and other houses earmarked for disposal had been vacated. Wartime housing shortages saw families moving back into the empty properties, while the cleared sites remained as ugly gaps in the urban landscape. In 1943 Seaton Gray looked forward to Whitby's post-war future as a fishing port and tourist resort, based on a combination of judicious improvement and the safeguarding of its distinctive attributes and atmosphere. His 'Plan for Whitby' identified the 'essential requirements for the advancement of the town': 'First and foremost, must be the preservation of the unique atmosphere of the old-world Whitby, so that it doesn't become just one more concrete and plaster imitation of hundreds of other resorts... a great many inhabitants, and... members of the Council, do not realise that in its relics of the old time days of sailing ships, in some of its old buildings, even in its mountingblocks in the street, Whitby has something that *no other place has got*, and these things, so familiar to residents as to be regarded with a sort of affectionate contempt, are of the very essence of the place and of the very greatest interest and attraction to visitors.'⁶¹ He was particularly exercised by the current problems of the East Side: 'This looks nearly as picturesque as ever it did, but behind its distant façade of beauty, there is a great deal of decay. A large number of houses are empty, having been condemned as unfit to live in – some 289 in all. There are many more which now show serious signs of decay... With so many empty and derelict houses behind the frontage, and a transfer of considerable population to the Housing Estate, the trade of Church Street has declined, and many of the prosperous little shops are now empty...' Some of the older and more

⁶⁰ Ander Delgado and John K. Walton, 'La pesca y los pescadores en Inglaterra y el País Vasco, siglo XIX-1930: los casos de Whitby y Bermeo', *Itsas Memoria: Revista de Estudios Marítimos del País Vasco* 4 (2003), pp. 563-82; *Whitby Gazette*, 6 Nov. 1938.

⁶¹ V. Seaton Gray, 'Plan for Whitby', typescript dated 31 Aug. 1943, in Scarborough Town Hall, Whitby UDC Archives, pp. 8-9.

picturesque housing on the West Side of the harbour was also effectively derelict.⁶² But Whitby had become ‘by far the best known of the smaller resorts’, due to successful advertising and exposure on the radio, not least through its municipal orchestra, and there were plenty of picturesque and historic buildings to be preserved, including both Tin Ghaut, a popular alleyway that ran down to the harbour, and Grape Lane, the supposed residence of Captain Cook: ‘I should like to see them both owned by the town. No alteration should be permitted to the few remaining old shop fronts, and when Grape Lane requires resurfacing, it should revert to cobbles or sets.’⁶³

Seaton Gray lived long enough to collect a decoration, the MBE, in the post-war New Year’s Honours List of 1946, but he did not survive to see how the ‘Old Whitby’ question worked out during the post-war generation.⁶⁴ The post-war decade saw the completion of the interrupted demolition programme of the 1930s, and the construction of a small number of new houses on the East Side to Bewlay’s designs. Some of these were so successful that, as Kenneth McNeil later remarked, they were capable of deceiving many onlookers into believing them to be authentic relics of ‘Old Whitby’.⁶⁵ But for more than a decade after the war, housing and materials shortages meant that further demolitions were a practical impossibility, and complaints about the eyesores that the cleared or partially cleared sites had become rose to a crescendo in the spring of 1955.⁶⁶ At this point, the programme resumed, as new municipal housing became available to evicted tenants, and the arguments of twenty years earlier were reprised, with some of the same *dramatis personae*, including McNeil himself. The Housing Act of 1954 gave the advocates of clearance a new target by identifying a further 400 ‘sub-standard’ houses, as the frontier between acceptable and unacceptable continued to be redefined in ever more demanding terms. The eventual fate of Grape Lane matched Seaton Gray’s wishes, but Tin Ghaut was demolished and replaced by a car park, after a tremendous conflict and a public inquiry which revisited all the issues of the 1930s. This followed closely on the heels of the demolition of the unique group of galleried houses on Boulby Bank, also on the East Side, which Bewlay had failed to recommend for preservation;

⁶² Ibid., pp. 2-3.

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 8, 10.

⁶⁴ *Whitby Gazette*, 11 Jan. 1946.

⁶⁵ *Whitby Gazette*, 12 April 1957.

⁶⁶ *Whitby Gazette*, 18 March 1955.

but it also marked the high tide of the wave of demolitions. The town's Chamber of Commerce and tourist industry joined hands with the conservationists, who were themselves organising more effectively through the Literary and Philosophical Society and the Whitby Preservation Society, and the clearance and redevelopment party was driven back. External opinions, this time in the form of urban geographers recruited by the Marquess of Normanby, of nearby Mulgrave Castle, and in that of the Royal Fine Art Commission, provided qualified but useful endorsement in the manner of the Bewlay Report, but without explicit reference to it.⁶⁷

The crucial issue, however, was the failure to sustain the building of new municipal housing through the early to mid-1960s. This bought time for the preservationists through an effective moratorium on further demolitions, while the post-war decline of the 'traditional' holiday industry on the West Cliff placed greater weight on the kinds of tourists who were attracted to the harbour. Meanwhile the fishing fleet continued to modernise, the late summer herring fishery fell away after a boom in the mid-1950s, and pleasure boating grew in comparative importance; but the idea of a 'fishing community' by the harbour had always been more a matter of romantic image and rhetoric than of hard demographic reality, as Kenneth McNeil had always emphasised. Nevertheless, by the end of the 1960s it had become clear that new markets for housing in the harbour area, for holiday cottages and retirement homes, together with improving home improvement technologies, the easing of overcrowding (through smaller households and the knocking together of cottages), and the availability of improvement grants for reconditioning, had transformed the prospects of 'Old Whitby'. It had survived long enough to become viable again in a new incarnation which sustained most of its picturesque appeal, while allowing its urban economy to revive, shopping included, in new but recognisable forms.⁶⁸

Here is, then, the key to the survival of Whitby as a distinctive seaside resort with its own atmospheric sense of history and identity, which brings visitors back over and over again and enabled it to be nominated as Britain's 'Best Seaside Resort' in 2006 by members of, it should be noted, a well-established middle-class consumer

⁶⁷ Walton, *Tourism, Fishing and Redevelopment*, pp. 15-24; G.J. Daysh (ed.), *A Survey of Whitby and the Surrounding Area* (Windsor, 1958).

⁶⁸ Walton, *Tourism, Fishing and Redevelopment*, pp. 24-8.

information organisation.⁶⁹ Its current popularity with seekers after history, authenticity, atmosphere and the urban picturesque was not inevitable, but has been the outcome of a series of conflicts and accidents, which resulted in the survival of enough of the 'Old Town' to sustain a sense of romance and mystery among a broad spectrum of visitors, some more historically and architecturally informed than others, and to provide an appropriate environment for the proliferation of an array of small-scale shopping outlets, tailored to the setting, over the last quarter of the twentieth century. This has benefited from the survival of a local fishing industry, serving local outlets, alongside the development of pleasure boating in the harbour and a history of intermittent conflict between different harbour users, and a belatedly successful effort to remove sewage pollution from the harbour itself.⁷⁰ Nor were the renewed popularity of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and the revived interest in Captain James Cook, inevitable components of Whitby's high visibility on tourist maps of the new millennium: they might easily have gone the way of Mrs Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers*, also set in the town, or of the works of Mary Linskill herself, and remained the preserve of a small literary coterie. But that is another story. The purpose of this paper has been to delineate the processes by which the Whitby of the late twentieth century was able to overcome (or make a virtue of) its geographical isolation and economic and demographic stagnation, and to take its place among a significant group of British seaside resorts which have defied prognostications of doom and decay, and emerged as twenty-first century success stories. Whitby still has its problems, some of which are reflected in the valuable statistical analysis of Beatty and Fothergill with which we began; but it is also a remarkable case-study of the resilience and adaptability of the British seaside when it has a past to embrace, celebrate and exploit. It is not just an isolated case-study, but an important example of a much wider and continuing trend.

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⁶⁹ M. Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2003); M. Hilton, 'The organised consumer movement since 1945', in A. Chatriot, M.-E. Chessel and M. Hilton (eds.), *The Expert Consumer: Associations and Professionals in Consumer Society* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

⁷⁰ Walton, 'Fishing communities and redevelopment', p. 142.