

Pleasure Brand: Material Culture and Experience at Butlins Bognor Regis Dr Roni Brown

As the name of Fox's exhibition of work commissioned by Pallant House Gallery suggests, the articulation of what stands for the Butlins experience is a complex matter. It is a brand with significant social history and heritage, that must reflect contemporary attitudes to leisure in a high-wire act that continually balances what is current in the brand (its heritage and family values) with that which it must eschew (the 'camp,' knobbly knees and 'hi de hi!'). Replacing *Camp* with *Resort* in the Butlins lexicon (something the marketing team have ensured) prepares us for an encounter with this resilient brand: derived from 18th Century French *resortir*, a place frequently visited to restore oneself (the basis of the royal patronage of Bognor Regis in 1929) the Butlins brand evokes a wholesome experience, a retreat away from the everyday.

Its persistence as a leisure brand since its creation by Billy Butlin in the 1930s provides its audience with an unusually coherent narrative on the production and consumption of working class leisure in Britain.

Leisure is a relatively recent subject matter in both art practice and scholarship. The study of modern industrial society was practiced in continental Europe in the nineteenth century, expanding significantly in the USA and Britain in the twentieth century producing inquiries into the social relations brought about by industrialisation, including the production and consumption of leisure (for instance the British Journal of Leisure was established by the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1950).

Observers of modern life, including the French anthropologist Henri Lefebvre (2002:129) make the observation that 'leisure is both a continuation of the alienation of work and also its critique.' The space of leisure provides freedom from work – the opportunity to break from the monotony of work, to be creative and playful, to re-connect with the self, others and nature and to affirm aspects of humanity that industrial work and urban life cannot accommodate. In this way leisure becomes part of the totality of modern everyday life (sustaining industrial forms of work) and at the same time must represent a break from it – or at least appear to do so. Just as the nature of work and its social relations becomes the subject of contemporary thought in the nineteenth century, the sociology of leisure becomes integral to the analysis of everyday life in the twentieth century.

In the post war period leisure becomes a growing aspect of the economy. Shivers and DeLisle (1997:105) refer to the importance of leisure in providing opportunities to 'surmount the obligations of work, family and citizenship, to renew his or her own identity.' The conception of leisure as a transforming space is not a universally held perspective but is attributed to certain kinds of leisure for example 'committed' or 'serious' leisure (Argyle 1998:45) that demand perseverance, knowledge or skill acquisition, but may include even reflection or creating relationships. In contrast, other scholars perceive all kinds of leisure as driving an essentially Western economic system (for instance in Jameson's *Postmodernism, or the logic of Late Capitalism*, 1991) where

our social needs are re-produced through images and symbols of leisure (and being leisured) as a way to stimulate consumer behaviour. We participate in these constructions – we willingly buy into the idea of an *adventure* holiday because we believe activity is good for us and we wish for a self-conscious representation of our family as healthy and active. Further, we see this as *compensation* for work and absolving of the guilt we may feel that everyday family life is in ways, inadequate. Butlins has contrived an effective and particular construction of leisure, associated with freedom and pleasure that has inspired generations of British holidaymakers to participate in sustaining the ideas of the brand. The story of *Resort* reveals the dynamic ways that participation in the brand occurs which is not simply reducible to formulations of consumers as passive or manipulated.

Billy Butlin was a pioneer of the idea of the mass production of leisure in the 1930s capitalising on legislation passed by Government in 1938 (the Holidays with Pay Act) to provide paid holiday entitlements to workers. Although Billy Butlin was not the only champion of mass produced leisure (his competitors were Harry Warner and Fred Pontin), he is credited as having most fully exploited the model in the UK in the post war period. The visual and material culture of the brand, skilfully deployed to convey ideas about leisure, are clearly rooted in his empirical knowledge of consumer psychology developed during his years as a travelling showman and from his early enterprises in amusements and fairgrounds at seaside locations around the UK and at winter fairs in London, Edinburgh and Glasgow during the 1920s. It appeared to Butlin that little was understood about the creation of pleasurable experiences. The premise of the typical 'hoop-la' stall was to ensure that the blocks upon which prizes stood were large enough to make winning very difficult. 'Alarm clocks and metal vases, for instance, were kept so long that they went rusty, and had to be constantly cleaned with metal polish' (From Dacre, *The Billy Butlin Story: A Showman to the End* 1982:63). Butlin made his blocks smaller (a mistake he'd made with the measurements) and as a result all his prizes were won on the first day. As a consequence of this more rewarding experience his turnover was twice that of other hoop-la stalls. His autobiography also recalls the nature of typical seaside holidays for working families during the 1930s. 'We had to leave the premises after breakfast and were not encouraged to return until lunchtime. After lunch, we were again made not welcome until dinner in the evening. When the weather was fine the 'routine' became acceptable, but when it rained, life became a misery.' The inspiration for the subsequent holiday camps was to create a distinction between the nature of work and the nature of leisure as essentially pleasurable and free from the routines that define work.

The first Butlins Holiday Camp was built at Skegness in 1936 to provide holidays for working families in the Midlands and the North of England. This first camp included provision of 600 'Elizabethan' chalets (later extending to 2,000 chalets) with electricity, hot and cold running water, dining and recreation halls, theatre, gymnasium, swimming pool and boating lake. All meals were provided on site and the level of comfort and provision of on-site entertainment was a significant departure from the type of 'camps' that proceeded Butlins resorts with visitors staying in huts or tents. The price of a weeks

stay at Skegness in 1936 was pitched at the cost of a week's wages making these breaks affordable to working class Britons.

Butlins camps grew in numbers and sophistication following the war years and at their peak catered for approximately one million visitors each summer. Despite successive acquisitions and re-branding exercises, the Butlins brand (owned by Bourne Leisure since 2000), maintains many of the original 1930s characteristics. Fox's photographs explore the construction of the leisure spaces at Butlins and how visitors experience and consume leisure on the resort.

The organisation and design of the Butlins Bognor Regis resort has connections historically with the popular culture of the fairground and the circus alongside imported leisure experiences (the theme park). However, while the location of the Butlins Bognor Regis resort is on the seashore the design of the resort, its access and boundary ensures that the resort is discrete from the town of Bognor Regis, its daily life and other topographical features. In this sense the resort is a timeless creation. With the exception of the new hotels where rooms look out to sea, the resort faces inwards, onto its own community and recreational facilities. Clearly there are economic reasons why this is so given that the activities and entertainments are for the provision of guests and the business model in large part depends on guests spending their time and resources on the activities that are provided for them on the resort. The spatial separation of the resort from its locality is central to the concept of the production of leisure in that it must create a reality that is fundamentally different from everyday life. The French philosopher Michel Foucault describes these types of space as heterotopias having the 'function of forming another space, another real space, as perfect, meticulous and well arranged as ours is disordered, ill-conceived and in a sketchy state.' (Foucault, 1986: 22-27). At Butlins Bognor Regis the sand is fine and impeccably clean, the environment is safe and entertaining, with more attractions and activities than its 'real' or natural counterpart – the seaside. The landscape inside the resort is sculpted, immaculately maintained, the planting of palm trees and alpines is meticulous and large pebbles are carefully positioned to signify the idea of the seashore. In contrast the beach at Bognor Regis is pebbly and exposed and despite the faded grandeur of the Regency buildings there are obvious visual clues to the economic realities of the town. Butlins Bognor Regis is designed in ways that provide the means to escape daily life and to inspire different kinds of behaviour. W.G. Bean on the opening of Blackpool's Pleasure Beach in 1896 describes the principle that still has resonance in the way the design of Butlins is conceived: 'we wanted an American Style Amusement Park the fundamental principle of which is to make adults feel like children again and to inspire gaiety of a primarily innocent character' (in Philips, 2012: 22).

The characterisation of the Butlins brand as one based on traditional family experiences is clearly an imperative and the material culture of the resort is conceived to convey this message (and restrain others). The homespun pleasures of the hoop-la, the merry-go-round and beachside-style activities reside alongside the more intense and exotic pleasures witnessed in the carnivalesque setting of the 'skyline pavilion'. This huge tensile structure, situated in the heart of the resort is reminiscent of the circus tent

where spectacle and theatre and large-scale celebrations take place. This is a highly sensory and in many ways, disorientating space that provides an extreme otherworldliness. In here we meet the larger-than-life figure of Bob-the-Builder, see Billy Bear emerge from his tower, eat candy in a neon bar, play pinball machines to synthetic sounds, dress-up and perform. The inchoate fusion of colour, sound and movement represents an extreme contrast to the visual and behavioural codes of everyday life and yet provides continuity with traditional forms of leisure (the carnival, circus and travelling fair) that offer illusion, gaiety and the suspension of self associated with the social throng. Continuity with traditional forms of popular culture lends the material culture of Butlins a particular authenticity.

Contrasted with the more exotic aspects of the material culture of Butlins are those that are singularly everyday. Conspicuous consumption (and the influence of the mass media) are integral to the scene: Bob-the-builder, Burger King, market stalls and pay as you go activities means that the line between the mall and the amusement park is obscured. Kids need money to engage in the social as well as the retail experience producing a highly commercialised environment that focuses on the consumption activities of children as a discrete social group and as the key stimulator of the economic success of the resort. The focus on young people and families is entirely in keeping with the rhetoric of the Butlins brand – and is explicit in the Butlins welcome and the role of the Redcoat: keeping children entertained and active will ensure that mothers in particular get a break and that families will return. Boredom is structurally eschewed and families choose the degree to which their relaxation is dependent on time together or time apart as the resort gears itself to manage the spaces between the two. The social infrastructure that is supplied to the visitor is a deliberate and key feature of the Butlins brand. The Butlins experience is one that provides spaces for new social encounters and freedoms, facilitated by professionals whose role it is to monitor and mediate as well as to entertain. These are complex and skilled roles that are essential to maintaining the liberties as well as the order of the social life of the resort.

As with the material culture of the Butlins resort the social environment too is created to suppress the deficiencies of real life and its social setting. However, it seems this too is illusory and it is in the moments in which we see ordinary life asserting its presence over the highly organised and researched approach to leisure (and vice versa) that we understand the achievement of Butlins. Fox's images of Butlins Bognor Regis document her insights about the corporate difficulty of creating a coherent idea of a holiday. "A Fairy Make-Over costs £18.00 and so many small girls seem to want to be fairies... customers are passive and active, they watch and consume" (Fox 2012).

The making of *Resort* was an extremely challenging experience for Fox aside the many complex technical and practical difficulties of creating work in a dynamic and commercially sensitive environment. Most challenging of all was the need to respect the Butlins brand but at the same time provide a meaningful inquiry into its construction of contemporary working-class leisure. There were areas and activities of the resort that Fox was not permitted to photograph because of corporate sensitivities, or subsequently not permitted to exhibit, because in doing so it would create a more complex and diverse understanding of the Butlins brand than the company wishes to promulgate. The

Butlins brand, history and experience provide an immensely valuable research environment. Butlins have developed their own archive of the history of the holiday camp (there are circa 80,000 items of music, costume, photography, film and ephemera) alongside a highly accessible oral history. However there are few critical inquiries that undertake a serious appraisal of the contribution of Butlins to the commercialisation of leisure and associated entertainment industries. In assisting to fund the commission *Resort Bourne Leisure* made a commitment to this idea – to the difficulty of critical evaluation, interpretation and appraisal.

References

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