

Contemporary Photography



Shifting Sands: photographs by Stephen Clarke

John K Walton

I first encountered Stephen Clarke's work five years ago, when I wrote an accompanying text for his *Caravans of Contentment* exhibition. I enjoyed his celebration of the caravan holidays of his childhood in the 1960s and 1970s; a widely shared but deeply unfashionable experience, a cheap, informal, accessible, sociable kind of holiday, easy to mock, but testimony to the strength and capacity for unassuming enjoyment of so many families and local communities at this time. His exhibition at Colwyn Bay, on the North Wales coast, a portrayal of changing perceptions and experiences of the nearby resort of Rhyl between the 1960s and the turn of the millennium, offers a sharper, more obviously critical, more unforgiving angle of vision on what has gone wrong across parts of the British holiday coastline during those years. His approach communicates a sense of loss and desolation, through the juxtaposition of 'before' and 'after'.

'Before' is focused on the 1960s, and sometimes earlier, because the presentation through colour postcards includes images from the 1950s, signposted most obviously by the vehicles visible in street scenes, a reminder that postcards sometimes had quite a long shelf life in the shops. The cards are adapted to display textual insertions from the Ward Lock guidebooks of the time, providing demographic detailed information and eulogistic descriptions of the locality for the literate and self-improving holidaymaker; and certain images are carried over from one illustration to the next, to provide linkages and an impression of random continuity. They also contain images from the address and message side of the card, superimposed on the picture. 'After' takes the

form of a separate series of black and white photographs, taken from the early 1980s onwards, presented in isolated clusters running below the unbroken run of much larger postcard representations. They show facades and frontages of buildings, alongside occasional beach scenes and isolated advertising figures of promotional fantasy, but with the colour and most of the life leached out. The contrasts are arresting and disturbing.

The postcard pictures are lush, soft and alluring in their bright colours. They depict scenes from the traditional family holiday which reached its apogee and the climax of its democratic popularity in the post-Second World War generation, adapting nineteenth-century motifs for the new working-class markets of holidays with pay, in the final flush of the long heyday of Victorian and post-Victorian industrial certainties. There are beach donkeys and an oyster bar, bandstands and cafés, the Pier and Gaiety Theatre, Botanical Gardens, Floral Hall (displaying Victorian decorative opulence), and a miniature steam railway, together with a bowling green and tennis courts, and a paddling pool enjoyed by children with shorts and skirts hitched up above the rippling water, all carryovers from that earlier era. Efforts to embrace post-war modernity slip into the pictures too, most obviously an early monorail, a land train, a shopping centre, and young women wearing bikinis. There are good luck motifs (a Scottie dog, a black cat, a horseshoe), as befitted the seaside's liminal associations with chance and fortune telling; and ladies in Welsh costume haunt the postcards, to conjure up the special spirit of this locality.

The original postcards were sent, every year, to the same family members in St Helens, on Merseyside, a particularly unlovely, hard-working, Victorian manufacturing town of coal mines, glassworks and breweries whose working class had come late to these seaside delights, by dint of a combination of hard work, industrial paternalism and the advent of the Welfare State. Clarke's father mass-produced the messages, setting up a kind of assembly-line at a café table, variations on a cheerful theme of good times and good wishes, with minimal content. They share the treasured banality associated with working through the year to exchange one routine for another, less taxing one, away from the strenuous workplace, returning to the same resort, doing the same things, as the weather varies and the children grow older year by year. The car and the caravan, as symbols of mobility and leisure, were new but quickly assimilated alongside the other little luxuries and shared enjoyments of working-class life.

Clarke's black and white photographs contrast starkly with this sense of comfort and security. They were taken in the summer, but the sunlight is harsh, the shadows sharply defined. Buildings are bleak, desolate and deserted, even where their ostensible purpose is gregarious pleasure and comfort. The old pleasure palaces, such as the Floral Hall, are visibly on their last legs, while once-alluring decoration is tawdry and fly-blown. The rectangular windows of chalets and shelters gaze blindly back at the camera, offering nothing. People are few and far between, even on the beach, and play is tentative and desultory.

This suggested contrast reflects widespread perceptions of the decline of the British seaside, along with the industries, which supplied its reliable contingents of annual holidaymakers since the 1970s, as old ways

of life fragmented and the lure of cheap flights to the Mediterranean prevailed. We know that this was not a universal story; that resorts are still capable of some regeneration. A historian – this historian – might argue that Clarke's postcards edge over into the disastrous 1980s, that the vantage points and perhaps the timing of the photographs provide a selective set of images. On the other hand, his images commemorate the lost world of 1960s Rhyl, and mourn the decline of so much of provincial holiday Britain.

Shifting Sands by Stephen Clarke showed at Oriel Colwyn, Colwyn Bay. 22 December 2012 – 15 March 2013. <http://orielcolwyn.org/shifting-sands/>

Further Reading:

1. Patrick Browne and John K. Walton (eds.), *Coastal Regeneration in English Resorts – 2010*, Lincoln: Coastal Communities Alliance, 2010.
2. Fred Gray, *Designing the Seaside*, London: Reaktion, 2006.
3. John K Walton, *The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the Twentieth Century*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.
4. P. Williams, *The English Seaside*, Swindon: English Heritage, 2013.

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Postcard images are digital collages, originals mounted on aluminium. Black & white images are vintage gelatin prints.





