

Selling the Seaside: 20th Century Holiday Posters

Background notes

Gill Saunders – 2 November 2022



Plate 1. *Skegness is SO Bracing*. Poster originally designed by John Hassall, 1908, and reissued by the London and North Eastern Railway, c.1925.
Collection: Victoria & Albert Museum

Sun, sand and sea – this formula for the perfect summer holiday was promoted in posters issued by the railway companies (which earned much of their revenue from holidaymakers) from the early 20th century to the 1960s. These posters encouraged the development of certain coastal towns as holiday destinations and helped to shape the ‘brand identity’ of each resort or region, emphasizing their particular attractions – beautiful landscapes, plentiful sunshine and bracing sea air, clean sandy beaches for children’s games, as well as hotels, golf courses, pools and piers.

These posters were not selling a product but an experience – they tantalized their audiences with escapism and aspiration, offering unspoiled landscapes and wild coastlines or the more sophisticated entertainments afforded by elegant resorts, with their Modernist architecture, their new lidos and sea-bathing pools, and their facilities for sports such as golf.

The role of the railway companies and their advertising directors was all important in shaping these visions of what a holiday could and should be. It was the railways who commissioned and directed the artists and designers, and though they worked in partnership with some of the resorts, they also promoted the wider regions they served – such as the east coast, the south coast, and the ‘English Riviera’ (Devon and Cornwall).

The earliest posters were dense with imagery and information, with the advertisers keen to enumerate every facility and opportunity on offer to the holidaymaker and the day-tripper. Early posters of Blackpool (Plate 2) - the first British resort represented in advertising posters - were so overwhelmed with detail that they could only confuse the message, especially when viewed on a billboard from a distance.



Plate 2. *Blackpool.* Poster issued by the Midland Railway, c.1895. Collection: National Railway Museum, York

The earliest travel posters were straightforward reproductions of paintings overlaid with descriptive text and advertising copy, but through the many posters which advertised seaside holidays we can chart the emergence of the poster as a distinctive art form which successfully married good graphic design with commercial considerations. Key to this development were the visionary art directors and the specialist designers who helped to elevate poster design in the 1920s and 30s, crafting appealing images of the British seaside which focused on the recreational pleasures available to the visitor.

Climate was promoted as the main attraction, with sunshine emphasized in the advertising slogans and in the imagery of elegant sunbathers – since by this time getting a suntan – once the mark of outdoor labour – had become a fashionable indicator of wealth and leisure. The south coast was badged as ‘the sunny coast’ and holidaymakers were urged to head ‘south for sunshine’ (Plate 3). Other resorts, such as Skegness (Plate 1), chose to make a virtue of their blustery sea breezes, and the Great North Eastern Railway’s posters branded the east coast of England as ‘the drier side’.



Plate 3. *The South Coast is the Sunny Coast.* Poster designed by Andrew Johnson and issued by the Southern Railway, 1933. Collection: Victoria & Albert Museum

The designers themselves, such as the prolific Tom Purvis and Edward McKnight Kauffer, were commissioned directly by the major railway companies, and each crafted distinctive and compelling images which drew on contemporary avantgarde art and design movements, such as Surrealism and Art Deco. Their aspirational imagery – fashion-plate sunbathers, hotels and pavilions in the Modernist style, golden beaches and blue seas – brought the allure and sophistication of the French Riviera to the British seaside.

Art Deco is the style we associate most strongly with the Modernism of the 1920s and 30s, and as coastal towns reinvented themselves to appeal to the needs and expectations of the modern holidaymaker, so the new facilities – lidos, hotels, even the trains themselves – were built in the Art Deco style. This was reflected in turn in the poster imagery, seen to dramatic effect in McKnight Kauffer's dazzling sunset evocation of the Cornish coast (Plate 4).

Families with children were an important market for railway companies and the resorts so many posters featured families on the beach, with children making sandcastles, riding donkeys, watching Punch and Judy shows, and paddling in rock pools. Posters such as those by painter Dorothea Sharp, who lived in St Ives, featured sun-dappled scenes of children enjoying such simple healthy pleasures (Plate 5). Several resorts promoted themselves as family friendly, with Rhyl calling itself 'The Children's Paradise' and Filey using the strapline 'Filey for the Family' on many of its posters in the 1920s and 30s.

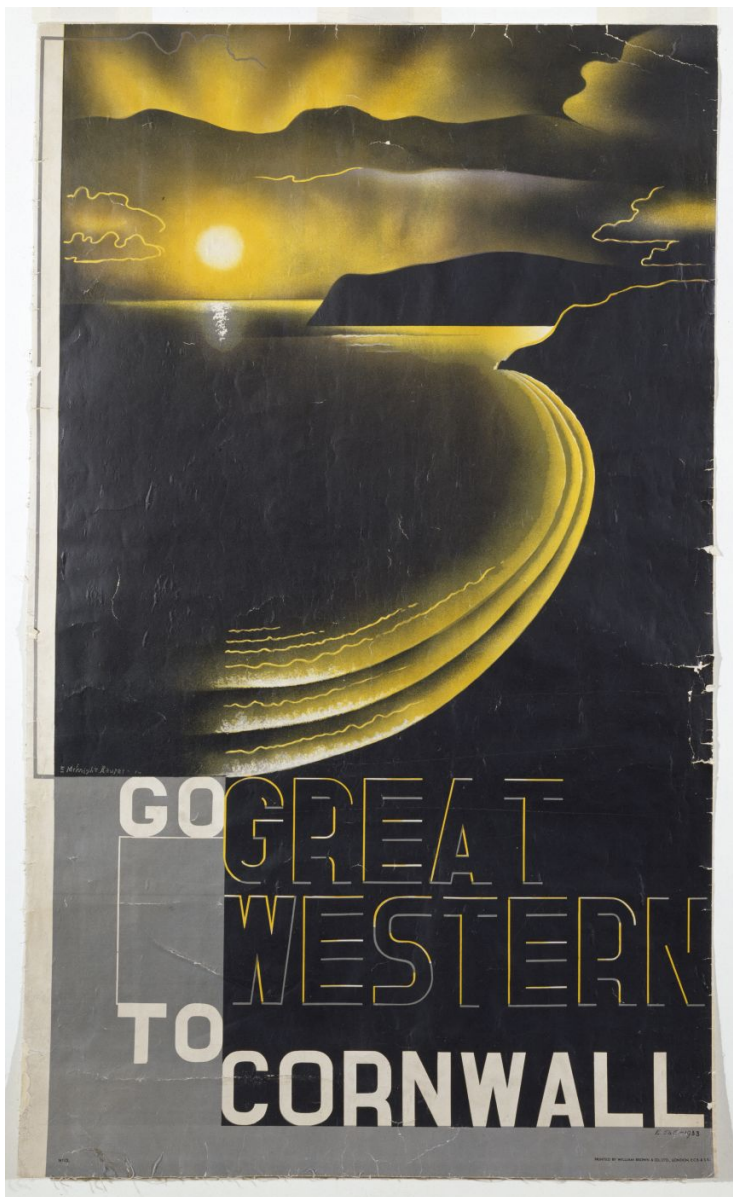


Plate 4. *Go Great Western to Cornwall.* Poster designed by Edward McKnight Kauffer and issued by the Great Western Railway, 1932. Collection: Victoria & Albert Museum



(Plate 5). *East Coast. It's Quicker by Rail.* Poster designed by Dorothea Sharp and issued by the London and North Eastern Railway, 1933. Collection: Victoria & Albert Museum

Posters regularly featured swimming pools, lidos and sea-bathing. A well-known poster promoting Southport focused on its newly opened lido, teeming with sporty swim-suited young women. Such posters were aimed at holiday makers who sought resorts with plentiful modern facilities for sport and entertainment. But posters for resorts everywhere featured the 'bathing beauty' with her come-hither smile and she became almost a cliché of the posters of period; she continued to appear well into the 1950s, when Blackpool, which offered the illuminations, the Tower Ballroom, and a host of other popular entertainments, partnered with the newly nationalized British Railways and issued this poster where a red-headed glamour girl in the obligatory red swimsuit tempts the viewer to enjoy a resort that was 'gay and bright, day and night' (Plate 6).



Plate 6. *Blackpool*. Poster designed by Dickens and issued by British Railways, c.1950-55. Collection: National Railway Museum, York

This contrasted with another trend in seaside poster advertising; a focus on unspoiled landscapes and empty beaches, and places off the beaten track, away from the crowds. Shell-Mex, the petroleum company, specialized in high-minded advertising, designed by renowned artists rather than poster designers. The painter Paul Nash designed several posters for them, featuring what we might call ‘the coast’ rather than ‘the seaside’ since these were places that lacked every amenity that might appeal to the general holiday maker. The audience for such posters was a discerning middle class who wanted to explore Britain for themselves as independent travellers in their new motor cars.

Not for them the crowds on promenades and piers; they headed for the remote and rural – places such as Kimmeridge Bay in Dorset, which appears in Nash's picture as quiet, bleak and windswept, despite the shafts of sunlight breaking through the clouds (Plate 7).

Shell's advertising was also notable for posters which simply reproduced paintings, a fact emphasized by the use of a pale border framing the image, and with an artist's name and the title printed below like a label in a gallery.



Plate 7. *To Visit Britain's Landmarks You Can be Sure of Shell; Kimmeridge Folly by Paul Nash.* Poster issued by Shell-Mex Ltd, 1936



Plate 8. *Ramsgate*. Poster designed by John Barker and issued by British Railways, 1954. Collection: Victoria & Albert Museum

By the 1950s and 60s, British seaside resorts were in decline, though holiday camps such as Butlin's at Clacton continued to appeal to one sector of the market, and as a result posters for seaside holidays at home changed their tone. They offered an increasingly nostalgic version of the traditional seaside pleasures and pastimes as holidaymakers were lured abroad by cheap packages and dependable weather. John Barker's poster for Ramsgate issued in 1954, is typical. It is a collage of vignettes featuring all the time-honoured seaside pastimes from the Punch and Judy show to the bucket and spade on the beach, alongside the illuminations on the promenade and the Regency terraces which had been turned into boarding houses. The nostalgic character of the place, and the poster design itself, is underlined by choice of 19th-century circus-style lettering for the name 'Ramsgate' (Plate 8).

Taken together, the many posters which have advertised the British seaside, from the 1890s to the 1950s, show us how the ideal and the experience of the seaside holiday developed, and how the appeal of sun, sand and sea was pitched to many different audiences, working-class and well-to-do, young and old, sporty and sedate. Once, they advertised an escape from everyday life, but now these posters offer us an escape into affectionate nostalgia at a time when the traditional pleasures of the British seaside are enjoying something of a revival.

Further Reading

Steven Braggs and Diane Harris, *Sun, Fun and Crowds: Seaside Holidays Between the Wars* (Tempus, 2000)

Laura Feigel and Alexandra Harris (eds.), *Modernism on Sea: Art and Culture at the British Seaside* (Peter Lang, 2009)

Kathryn Ferry, *The British Seaside Holiday* (Shire Publications, 2009)

Gill Saunders, *Vintage Travel Posters: A Journey to the Sea in 30 Posters* (V&A/Thames & Hudson, 2018)

Ghislaine Wood, ed., *Art Deco by the Sea* (Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, 2020)

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