

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Sea Change

Richard Girling

About the Book

The sea drives our economy, our lifestyle and our politics. It affects what we eat, how we travel, our use of the land and how we relate to our continental neighbours. Our love affair with our coastline inspires myth and legend, and influences our literature, our music and our art.

Yet we abuse and despoil our native waters as if we imagine they are infinitely resourceful and forgiving. Our once-grand seaside resorts now embrace some of the poorest neighbourhoods in Europe, while our management of our seaports is so inept that we bring chaos to our roads. And all the time our reckless consumption of fossil fuels pumps out greenhouse gases that accelerate climate change and guarantee a future of ever more violent storms, rising seas and destruction.

With passion and rigour, Richard Girling examines the history and consequences of the issues that confront us along our coastline. Outraged, bemused, despairing, he is also compelling and irrepressibly entertaining as he sifts for solutions along the sands.

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Acknowledgements

1 The Rim of Salt

2 The Monstrous Deep

3 Over the Edge

4 The Final Harvest

5 On the Ranch

6 Dishing the Dirt

7 Blocked Exits

8 'Inadequate Stakeholder Consensus'

Afterword

About the Author

Also by Richard Girling

Copyright

SEA CHANGE

Britain's Coastal Catastrophe

Richard Girling

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For Caroline

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made:
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell:
Ding-dong.
Hark! Now I hear them, - ding-dong, bell.

Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

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in the UK fishing industry (and time to spare), I recommend Defra's national fishery statistics, published annually and available on its website.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Rim of Salt

THERE IS SUDDEN silence, a moment of terror so primal that the synapses are closed to all but animal instinct. In this green, cold absence of light, no words can form. Even if they could, they would not translate into sound. I do not scream until I am rescued.

Two young fathers have been pushing their sons back and forth on an airbed. The airbed, like so much in the post-war era, is khaki; the swimsuits, of fathers and sons alike, of saggy, navy wool. On the beach, where mothers sit in their summer cottons, the needles clack like Morse over the humdrum murmur of speech. The waves themselves are like ribbed knitting, hardly waves at all, no louder than licked ice-cream. One of the mothers comes down to paddle, skirt hitched, shoulders hunched over her red box Brownie. The label in the family album will say 'Point Clear, Essex, 1953'.

The seaside then was a kind of bliss. Take away the war, join together the cut ends of the Thirties and the Fifties, and nothing much had changed. 'Summer holidays' still meant a windy week on a stony English beach. Railway compartments still tempted travellers with muted prints of cliffs and coves. Bank holidays still saw mass migrations of small black cars - Fords, Morrisies, Austins - and doughty, mackintoshed men piloting their families coastwards on motorbike and sidecar. In their Sunday suits they flew box kites, rode the dodgems and drove home again sticky with candyfloss and peppermint rock. Though the word 'charabanc' had fallen from use, its spirit was inextinguishable: Sunday school and works outings were little different from the one described by Laurie Lee in *Cider with Rosie*. Newspapers still promoted themselves with inky

silhouettes of trilby-hatted mystery men who were paid to lurk in seaside towns and wait for readers to spot them. All you needed was a copy of the morning edition and the nerve to call out: 'You are Lobby Lud. I claim my five pounds.'

Point Clear is at St Osyth, on the Colne estuary in Essex. In 1953 it is a wooden shanty town of balconied chalets, many of them rented by the week. They have chemical lavatories, Calor gas rings and chancy plumbing, all with unforgettable smells. Children catch green shore crabs with lead-weighted lines at high tide; parents grub for cockles on the ebb. Mid-tide, there is the airbed. The young fathers, soldiers not long demobbed, become more energetic, propelling their seven-year-olds faster and faster until we are bucking over the wavelets like rodeo riders. The capsize is the most shocking thing that has ever happened to me. I cannot swim; I have never before immersed my head in water. The fathers are only waist-deep but I go down and down through the cabbage-green sea, disconnected from time and thought, sinking to cold infinity. More than fifty years later, it remains the closest thing to a near-death experience I can remember. The fathers panic too, plunging into the streaming water, groping for arms and legs. Long seconds pass before I am hoisted by an ankle, gulping with terror, to be wrapped in a towel and calmed with barley sugar on the beach.

You can't live in Britain and have no feeling for the sea. It is the amniotic fluid in which our civilization grew and was shaped. In sub-Freudian ways it lubricates our dreams and fires our imagination. In its presence we are mute spectators at a demonstration of unanswerable power - Cnut could have chosen no more potent a metaphor for the impotence of kings. The Atlantic and its inlets, the Channel and the Irish and North Seas, are the most powerful drivers of our economy, culture and politics. Our rim of salt has

determined what we eat, how we use the land, how we relate to our neighbours, how and where we travel, even the thickness of our coats. Insulated by the Gulf Stream, our winters are 10 degrees warmer than Newfoundland's. The sea is what gives us our cherished landscape of oak and beechwoods. It's why we're so good at rain. It brought us the people - Romans, Vikings, Saxons, Normans - who filled our veins and shaped our culture, and kept out undesirables like Napoleon, Hitler and rabies.

Our national heroes - Nelson, Drake - have a nautical bias. The benchmark for commercial competence is the ability to run a whelk stall, and no town in the land escapes the odour of frying fish. We are, above all else, children of the ocean, never more than 72 miles from a coast. The family photographs are private extensions of the national psyche - hearts are of oak, horizons are blue, and Britannia rules the waves. If we had no other god we would probably worship it, for like a god it demands obedience, gratitude and fear.

My juvenile *memento mori* has left me with nothing worse than a lifelong determination to keep my head above water. But the North Sea earlier that same year had brought to eastern England a murderous devastation unparalleled in peacetime Britain. It will do the same again, and worse, for this most edgy and unpredictable of neighbours is growing more irascible. We have fouled it, plundered it, poisoned it, stripped it of fish and interfered with the climate. God-like it has given; and now, god-like, it will take away.

The international standard for the salinity of the sea is 35g of dissolved salts per litre of water, or 35 per cent. No surprise: the standard originates from Britain, though it was fixed not at one of our world-famous seaports - Plymouth, Dartmouth, Portsmouth or Southampton - but in the landlocked county of Surrey, at the National Institute of Oceanography at Wormley. In all, more than 70 dissolved

elements are traceable in seawater, but 99 per cent of the total is composed of just six – chloride, sodium, sulphate, magnesium, calcium and potassium. There is iron there, and manganese and gold, and plenty of other stuff too, but the concentrations are so weak that they are measurable only in parts per million. Salts get into the water in a number of different ways – from volcanic eruptions, chemical reactions between sea and rock, and the weathering of rocks into soils that wash into the water.

From this you would expect it to be getting saltier all the time, with marine life under pressure constantly to adapt, but strangely it isn't. The University of Saskatchewan is kind enough to make its geology class notes available on the internet, and from these I learn that, despite all the eruptions, leachings and grindings down, the chemical composition of the oceans, as deduced by geologists, has changed little over billions of years. Various mechanisms have been proposed to explain this. When an arm of the sea gets cut off from the ocean, the water may evaporate and leave the salts as a dry deposit. More is lost in sea spray blowing on to land, or by chemical interaction of seawater with sediment, or is absorbed into the skeletal frameworks of living organisms. Most importantly there is a constant circulation of seawater through the ocean crust that filters out magnesium and sulphate. Someone has worked out that the entire volume of all the world's oceans circulates in this way once every five or ten million years. This is fascinating in its way, but geology is not famous for sudden excitements and, as a science still in its infancy, it can't do much more than add a bit of labelling to what we already know. The sea is powerful, mysterious, salty, and very, very old.

Oceans have been washing the globe for 3,800 million years, chiselling the continents, alternately swallowing and regurgitating land, nibbling away at even the hardest rock. The process is constant but not always steady. Change may

be too slow to measure in human time-spans; or it may be sudden and cataclysmic. In June 1999, for example, Scarborough's four-star Holbeck Hall Hotel – grandiloquently timbered, gabled and lawned – collapsed like a fainting duchess when the South Cliff keeled away beneath. It made headlines, yet on England's volatile eastern flank it was just one more casualty on a very long list. Yorkshire's Holderness coast has fallen back by 32km (20 miles) in a million years, and 400m in 2,000. In the middle Stone Age, between 10,000 and 5,000 years ago when oceans of water were still locked in ice, much of what is now the North Sea was land roamed by hunters. For obvious reasons the volume of archaeological evidence is small, but enough stone tools – blades, scrapers, arrowheads – have been found under the water to show where and how they lived. Loss of land to the eastern sea is a *process*, not an event – a process that will influence our far-off descendants as much as it did our forebears. Drowned villages, whole medieval towns, lie on the seabed where – unless the government revises its policy on shoreline defence (see Chapter 2) – more will surely soon follow. The gradualness of the process does not preclude catastrophe. The loss of a church over a cliff edge is no less dramatic for being predictable; a great sea flood no less traumatic for being the cumulative effect of long-term change.

Such things are watermarked not only in our own culture, but on every continent on earth. More than 200 flood legends have been recorded, including most famously the Epic of Gilgamesh, the tale of a Sumerian king first written on clay tablets around 2000 BC. According to legend, a mortal, Utnapishtim, is warned by a god to build a great boat to protect 'all the living things of the earth'. There then occurs a flood so vast that even the gods are afraid. The parallels are obvious. Here, more familiarly, is Genesis VII, verse 23: 'And every living substance was destroyed which

was upon the face of the ground, both man, and cattle, and the creeping things, and the fowl of the heaven; and they were destroyed from the earth: and Noah only remained alive, and they that were with him in the ark.'

Every child is taught the story. A wrathful God sends a flood that takes 150 days to abate. Every creature is drowned except Noah, his family and the animals, 'two of every sort', that he has driven on to the ark. Give or take a few biblical fundamentalists in Kansas, no one confuses this with the actual story of the planet. On the other hand, the dramatic extravagance of mythology does not preclude the possibility of an underlying truth, for there must be a reason why flood myths have flourished in so many different cultures around the world. Is it not likely that legends like these, written down centuries after the catastrophes they describe and embroidered by generations of storytellers, were based on real events? That dramatic licence and superstition set off a chain reaction in which local floods swelled into great inundations drowning entire worlds? By this interpretation, Noah's Flood is much easier to accept.

During the last few millennia of the Ice Age there was indeed a flood so great that anyone might have thought it stretched from one side of the earth to the other. The cause of it was melting ice, which had been gathering in freshwater lakes. One of these covered part of the land that now lies beneath the Black Sea. From a small pool, this had grown slowly into a huge oasis, surrounded by settlements and, crucially, lying some 500ft below the level of the Mediterranean. As ice went on melting, so seas went on rising. What happened next, 7,500 years ago, was so sudden, so cataclysmic and terrifying, that only one explanation was possible. The gods had looked down from their window in the sky, had not liked what they had seen and were in a rage. To get a notion of what might really have happened, look at a map of the Aegean Sea. You will see that in the north-east corner, taking a snip out of

western Turkey, is a narrow inlet called the Sea of Marmara. At the time we are talking about, a narrow ridge of land separated this from the low-lying ground that contained the glacial lake. Higher and higher up this ridge crept the ice-fed waters of the sea. Heavier and heavier became the pressure on the land. Finally, with all the weight of the Mediterranean behind it, the Sea of Marmara burst through and drowned the country on the other side.

Ten cubic miles of seawater a day churned through the gap - the present-day Bosphorus - raising the lake by six inches a day and flooding 60,000 square miles in less than a year. The sea, as it had now become, rose 500ft. Settlements in modern-day Turkey, Bulgaria, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia and Georgia disappeared beneath the waves and their people fled to the mountains. It is easy to imagine them making rafts or boats, even driving a few animals on to them; and so, in these simple acts of self-preservation, was born a legend. In the orthodox version, Noah lands on Mount Ararat, near the Armenian border in north-east Turkey, but this now seems improbable. If any family washed up anywhere, then a low hill far to the west is much more likely. But it doesn't matter. It's not the postcode that interests us but the power of the legend - a legend with too many factual overlaps to be explained by imagination alone. We are prompted to look not so much into our conscious minds as into our natures, into the primal sources of instinct and fear. The romantic view of the sea as something sublime, supernatural and exotic was not a poetic invention of the 18th century. Stories of sea monsters, devils and gods are even older than the languages in which they are expressed, and there is no more powerful a symbol of divine and eternal power. Christ didn't walk on air, remember. He walked on water.

The creation of the Black Sea is a classic example of a process that did more than any other to etch the outline of the known world. The writers of Genesis could have placed

their mythical flood almost anywhere on the planet, including southern England. As the Ice Age dribbled to a close and the pulsating force of water replaced the slow grinding of ice, great rivers including the Rhine and the Thames (whose course had been shoved southward by the freeze) were pouring into a huge natural reservoir in what is now the southern North Sea. They were like taps filling a bath, held in by the wall of chalk - the so-called 'land bridge' - that joined Dover to Cap Gris Nez. Had Noah been English or French, now would have been the time to get busy on the ark. The bridge was too weak to stand against the mounting sea. One hesitates to call 'catastrophic' an event that would contribute so decisively to the character and self-image of the country to the north, but it must have felt like the wrath of god. When the chalk fell, water burst into the valleys beyond, hurling huge boulders against what would become the cliffs of France. Had the story passed down through a scribe, his account of it would have had the authentic, apocalyptic ring of the Old Testament. As it is, we must depend on the deductive skills of geologists.

With its umbilicus from the motherland thus severed, the infant island set about defining itself. We took, as we continue to take, pride in our insular state. It is said of England's villages - falsely, in my opinion - that it takes newcomers 10, 20, even 25 years to earn the right of belonging. In the 20th and 21st centuries we have struggled with our historical selves, wrestling with new concepts of Britishness that have drawn new boundaries as fast as they have wiped away old ones. Our attitude to the natural world, where extreme views are not tested for political correctness, amounts almost to eco-fascism. In the case of trees, for example, our idea of what belongs in Britain verges on the biblical, as if nature had been handed down perfectly formed and was immutable. There is an almost Kansan resistance to change that will be tested - and tested

far beyond its limit – as the climate warms, sea levels rise and species migrate.

To a purist, the word ‘native’ in this context has a precise and iron-clad meaning which, oddly, celebrates our apartness by predating the Flood. A native British tree is one that colonized the land *after* the retreat of the ice but *before* separation from the continent. It is an arboreal aristocracy of just thirty-three species:

alder, ash, aspen, bay willow, beech, bird cherry, black poplar, box, common oak, crab apple, crack willow, downy birch, field maple, goat willow, hawthorn, hazel, holly, hornbeam, juniper, large-leaved lime, midland thorn, rowan, Scots pine, sessile oak, silver birch, small-leaved lime, strawberry tree, whitebeam, white willow, wild cherry, wild service tree, wych elm, yew.

Anything that crossed the water thereafter – common lime, elder, English elm, fir, holm oak, horse chestnut, larch, laurel, London plane, mulberry, sycamore, walnut, weeping willow – is a foreigner whose fate in conserved ‘ancient’ woodland is to be grubbed out like a weed. In the most literal way possible, the sea was the cut-off point. Our pride lay in being different, and the difference was fixed the moment the waters closed. In one way or another, in everything from lapdogs to the royal family, we have been obsessed with pedigree ever since. As each new wave of seaborne invaders – Romans, Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Vikings, Normans – broke across the shore, so we wove their bloodlines into a bizarre tapestry of breeding. By the 19th century it had all but driven us mad. Bearded ideologues believed they could classify the entire human population into historical breeds, like sheep. They spoke of the Old Black Breed, the Sussex, the Anglian, the Bronze Age Cumberland, the Neolithic Devon, the Teutonic-Black Breed Cross, the Inishmaan, the Brunet Welsh . . . Some were dark and woolly; others fair and shorn. Some plump; some wiry. All were photographed for William Z. Ripley’s anthropological field guide of 1900, *The Races of Europe*.

Defined by a specific angle of brow, a roundness of head, a particular weight and stature, a length of nose, they gaze into the middle distance with the faraway, disinterested look of ruminants.

What the sea had brought us was snobbery. 'Native' Britons might be as old as the trees but, in the case of *Homo sapiens*, unlike *quercus* or *salix*, it was the latecomers who set the tone. 'The aristocracy,' said Ripley, then an assistant professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 'everywhere tends towards the blond and tall type, as we should expect.' The old British types, by contrast, tended to 'irregularity and ruggedness. The mouth is large, the upper lip broad, the cheek bones prominent.' Noses, too, were generally sizeable and 'not often very delicately formed'. A Victorian cleric, Bishop Whately, in his *Notes on Noses*, bluntly classified the British nasal standard as the 'anti-cogitative' type, as if the size of the snout were in inverse proportion to its owner's capacity to think. Most persistent of all, said Ripley, were the 'overhanging pent-house brows'.

This kind of stuff is unutterable now, but then it was as close to the scientific mainstream as the theory of gravity or movement of the planets. After Darwin, nothing lived that was not measured, classified and labelled, and this applied as much to dukes and swineherds as it did to orchids and finches. With calipers, rulers and weights, Victorian physicians and reverend gentlemen, gripped by the new science of 'anthropometry', toured the British Isles categorizing their fellow men with a zeal that stopped only just short of the specimen jar. The British Association for the Advancement of Science appointed an expert Anthropometric Committee, which in 1883 published a paper 'defining the facial characteristics of the races and principal crosses in the British Isles'.

After thousands of years of island living, we were still struggling with something very like tribalism. The human

field guide was *Crania Britannica*, a vast, double-volume survey of skulls by the craniologists Joseph Barnard Davis and John Thurnam, for whom racial classification was not just a matter of physical differentiation but of psychological, intellectual and moral pedigree too. In this cranial caste system, the very lowest status was accorded to those who were suspected of having been here the longest; those whose earliest forebears may have walked here rather than sailed.

All too clearly we can see where this was leading. Supremacy, it was argued, belonged to the seafarers. In 1924, in *The Phoenician Origins of Britons, Scots and Anglo-Saxons*, L. A. Waddell argued that 'civilisation properly so-called' began with the 'Aryanisation' of Britain in about 2800 BC, when, he believed, it was brought here by Phoenicians in the tin, bronze and amber trades. These great civilizers, he wrote, were 'Aryans in Speech, Script and Race - tall, fair, broad-browed and long-headed'. Ironically, in the light of what was to come, he dismissed the Germans as 'fair round-heads' and not 'Aryan' at all. The Germans, as would become all too horribly clear, had theories of their own. Hans F. K. Gunther, in *The Racial Elements of European History*, mourned the 'terrible contra-selection of the best blood' caused by the loss of officers in the First World War, and concluded that England had descended into a mongrelized pit of miscegenation. As a result, English skulls were growing shorter and rounder, less Nordic and less capacious. He quoted with approval a writer named Peters:

The healthy English strain of the time of Dickens is no more. The old fair Anglo-Saxon population of 'Merry England' that worked on the land, and were the mainstay of Wellington's army and Nelson's ships, no longer exists. In its stead there is making its way more and more every year into the industrial towns a small, dark strain, in the midst of which the old aristocracy and the gentry stand out like isolated blond giants.

You can imagine what he had to say about 'the Jewish problem'. And so, in less than 50 years, the hobby-science

of Victorian vicars brought us to Hitler and the greatest catastrophe of modern times. No longer could we speak innocently of 'race' and 'blood'. Racial history was not just politically incorrect; it was politically unthinkable. It was also, for the most part, just plain wrong. We are people enclosed by sea, across which our ancestors sailed at various times, from various points of origin and with varying degrees of bellicosity. But we are not tribes-people defined by our ancestry and bound by ancient bloodlines. We have history in our veins. The sea did not just bring us here; it made us what we are.

Just before sunset, by a creek in North Norfolk, I watch a family canoeing homeward after a picnic. They have left it late and are silhouetted against the water, two lithe figures bending at the paddles, two more lolling in between. The falling tide has exposed acres of salty mud, forcing them seaward and doubling their journey to the quay. The murmur of their voices ('fish and chips', I hear) is drowned by the piccolo piping of wading birds. Behind them a long, low spit of shingle, home to terns and seals, merges with the dusk. Their bright beachwear and the pillar-box red of their plastic canoe are neutralized by the shadow so that nothing remains but their shape. It is an image as old as history. Fragile boat; infinite sea; frail humanity. From this distance it would look no different if the canoe were a dugout and its crew a Mesolithic family in furs.

No one can say when the first vessel braved a British sea but, whenever it was, the boat will have been a protocanoe made from a hollowed tree. Its paddlers would have had no word for 'picnic', though food would not have been far from their minds. Like the modern family in its leisure-craft, they would have hugged the shore and been wary of pitting themselves against ocean swells. You don't get much freeboard with a log. The oldest surviving log-boat in Britain is a monster from the Iron Age, the so-called Hasholme

Boat, currently being conserved at the Hull and East Riding Museum, which is 41ft long and was hewn from a single oak in around 300 BC. In terms of prehistoric time-spans, this is almost modern. An example from the Netherlands pushes the log-boat tradition in Northern Europe right back deep into the Mesolithic, to at least 7000 BC. Who knows what they thought was beyond the horizon? To me, whose courage is tested by an airbed, the idea of launching into the unknown is ungraspable.

Given the evidence of trade and culture, there is no reason to suppose that British Stone-Agers were any less intrepid than the Netherlanders. Archaeologists now believe Mesolithic people took to the sea in pursuit of fish (they certainly had sea-fish in their diets). Barry Cunliffe, Professor of European Archaeology at Oxford University, argues that people who hunted on land were likely also to have developed the habit of following the shoals at sea. If so, it looks like a pivotal point in the development of world communication. 'Both activities [hunting and fishing]', Cunliffe writes, 'required navigational skills and it could well be argued that it was in the Upper Palaeolithic-Mesolithic period that communities learned to use celestial phenomena to chart their courses.' He goes further. The extraordinary similarities in Mesolithic culture around Europe's Atlantic coasts, he reckons, are explicable only if we assume people travelled by sea.

By the time Julius Caesar arrived, the local shipbuilding tradition was well established. Log-boats were still popular, but other technologies were not only flourishing but already had long histories of their own. Hides had been stretched over wooden frames to make boats for at least five centuries (Pliny in the 1st century BC mentions such vessels being involved in the cross-Channel delivery of tin), and the earliest known planked boat in Britain dates to between 1890 and 1700 BC. We have a habit of underestimating the imagination and skill of our early ancestors, while puzzling

over the enormity of their achievements. Like all manifestations of genius, it brings you up short and makes you wonder how rapid would have been the course of human progress if everyone had possessed brains and fingers like one's own. A Bronze Age boat found in the Humber estuary was over 43ft long, with a large, two-section keel and planked sides literally stitched together with twisted yew. The entire structure was internally braced; the seams caulked with moss and sealed with laths to protect the stitching and make them watertight. It is reckoned that 18 paddlers would have been able to drive it forward at up to six knots, carrying a total load, crew and cargo, of four-and-a-half tons. English modesty obliges us to confess that the workmanship was not up to the standard of, say, the ancient Egyptians, who had been building planked ships since at least 2600 BC, but modesty is a minor virtue, much overpraised. Think Bronze Age Britain. Think plank-built boat. Think maritime genius.

And so it went on. Subsequent refinements included oars, masts and sails, all of which appeared in northern Europe long after they were common in the Mediterranean. Caesar found a northern Atlantic confidently plied by nailed, plank-built square riggers heeling under the power of rawhide sails. The importance of markets was as well understood by the Roman Empire as it would be by Victoria's England or Bush's America. Early exports were based on tin, woollen cloth, leather and slaves. Wine and the Christian religion came in the other direction. As Vikings followed Saxons, Normans followed Vikings and sail turned to steam, the bones, sinews and organs of a maritime nation developed and went on growing. Trade meant wealth, and wealth meant power - a simple truth that has put wind in our sails, coal in our boilers, diesel in our tanks and muck on our beaches ever since. As we shall see in Chapter 7, the statistics of modern international trade and the ships that service it are almost meaninglessly vast, and our reliance on

them total. Almost everything you use or consume - including the words and fabric of this book - will have depended for its existence on something imported. As we shall also see, this has opened us to a new kind of raider, subtler than the Vikings but no less predatory, whose ransom demand is rather more than Danegeld.

The greatest indignity for a country with so much salt in its blood is that, no matter how lustily we sing, there is no meaningful way in which, in commercial terms at least, Britannia now rules the waves. For more than a century, Britain's ocean liners dominated the North Atlantic and brought film-star glamour and sex appeal to the business of travelling between continents. In the Cunard Line's *Queen Mary* (launched 1934) and *Queen Elizabeth* (1938), John Brown & Co's Clydebank shipyard built two of the most iconic passenger vehicles in the entire history of travel. The liners themselves were superstars whose celebrity was more than equal to the royal personages whose names they bore, and simply to step aboard was to be granted membership of a global elite. Even ashore, the Cunard house style drove architectural high fashion - the new Odeon cinemas looked less like theatres than landlocked ocean queens. At sea, repeated attempts on the Blue Riband transatlantic record were the maritime equivalents of modern F1 motor racing, using speed to keep a brand name in the public eye. These intercontinental dashes were gloriously gung-ho, in a way that would make 21st-century finance directors reach for the oxygen. The fuel cost of each extra knot of speed was equivalent to the total cost of the first 20. The writing, however, if not actually on the wall was certainly in the sky. By the time the *Queen Mary* claimed the Blue Riband in 1938 with a 30-knot Atlantic crossing in three days, 21 hours and 48 minutes, she was already facing her aerial nemesis. Eleven years earlier, Charles Lindbergh's *Spirit of St Louis* had completed the trip in just 33 hours.

The *Queen Mary* was withdrawn from service in 1967, and the *Queen Elizabeth* followed soon after.

It's very different now. Ocean liners still provide stately, dress-for-dinner holiday cruises for well-off middle-agers celebrating their retirements, but shipbuilding has gone the way of all other heavy industry in the UK. Working at only around 50 per cent capacity, it is more concerned now with repairs and conversions than it is with launching Atlantic record-breakers. There is utility in its output but little of the glamour that characterized its long reign as world market leader. According to the Shipbuilders and Shiprepairers Association, the primary market for British yards now is for fishing boats, dredgers, ferries, tugs, 'short sea mini-bulkers', gas and chemical carriers and other plain-faced daughters of toil. The direct workforce of 24,000 (plus 50,000 in support and supply industries) currently builds between 25 and 30 vessels a year, generating between £1.6m and £2.0bn. Like computers, televisions, trainers and jeans, the bulk of the deep-sea market has migrated to where labour is cheapest - to the Far East, and especially to South Korea, which has built its national economy on it. The one consolation is that it is not just the British industry that has suffered as the global economy has restructured itself over the last 30 years - the rest of Europe and the US have fared no better.

The sea impacts on our lives in more ways than we may realize. Our agrarian landscape, for example, in part is a legacy of the last war when German U-boats compelled us to raise our level of self-sufficiency. The vulnerability of merchant convoys to attack, and the food rationing that lasted well into peacetime, are sharp reminders - as if any were needed - of our reliance on seaborne trade, and the secure protection of a Royal Navy which, in the vanishingly improbable event of an invasion by sea, could be expected to honour the tradition of Nelson and Drake. (I recognize

that this one passing reference does scant justice to the history of Britain as a naval power, but it is a subject that has been so exhaustively chronicled by so many historians that I have no urge to compete.)

Yet these are not the images that come to mind when most of us – I mean we landmen – hear the word ‘sea’. We see penny arcades, buckets and spades, jellyfish, sand, plodding donkeys and the pier. The English seaside is less a geographical feature than a cultural construct – a salty stew of eternal childhood and innocent old age, impervious to reality. It is in trying to reconnect adult perception with childhood memory that I find myself, on a sunlit February morning, on Platform 3 at Fenchurch Street Station in the City of London. Pilgrimage maybe is an overly portentous word to attach to a day at the seaside, but I can think of none better. I travel as a pilgrim should, alone.

The 10.30 to Shoeburyness is as near empty as makes no difference. Of the few who climb aboard, I am the only one going as far as Southend Central (or anywhere else much beyond Basildon). Last time I rode this line I was in short trousers and in the care of my maternal grandfather. The queen was still the radiant young Princess Elizabeth and school stopped once a year for Empire Day. Like any ordinary London family, and despite the fact that it’s been 40 years since any of us actually paid it a visit, mine enjoys a historic relationship with Southend. My other grandfather earned his 15 minutes of fame there in the 1920s when, forgetting he couldn’t swim, he jumped into the sea after a girl who had slipped from a jetty. He earned also the displeasure of my grandmother, for spoiling his suit.

Yes, *suit*. Even as late as the 1950s, men dressed for the seaside in their best blue three-piece, stiff collar and tie, watch-chain and trilby. Those who possessed two pairs of boots might nod to informality by wearing the brown. Since then, for reasons seen every summer at the airports, the British seaside has been written off more times than the

English novel, and has just as often been reinvented. It is doing so again now, though each tweak scrapes off another layer of its identity. Ignore the decrepitude of Southend Central (the station has not grown old gracefully), and you could believe that you had indeed stepped off in Basildon.

The High Street – pedestrianized, brick-paved, bollarded – is a homogenized chunk of Anytown. Relics of the old, classically inspired grandeur survive on the upper floors, but street level is a mess of corporate liveries, indifferent to their context and lacking even the right kind of bad taste. Only the lozenge of sky at the seaward end, with its deep grey horizon, offers any clue as to place. It is not until you reach the Royal Hotel that you get the first hint of seaside style, the two-fingered salute of cheek against chic. A cut-price menu, and posters in the window offering live entertainment from ShitDisco.

It's not just Southend. Wherever land meets sea, the pressures are the same. The collapse of the fishing industry was balanced in part by tourism, which grew rapidly after the Holidays With Pay Act in 1938. (Ironically, both trends were driven by the railways. As their hunger for freight once encouraged overfishing, so now they brought the August hordes.) As it happened, there was little time for relaxation before beaches and piers were commandeered for very different purposes in the war, but the 1950s stirred themselves for a kind of last hurrah.

The coasts of England and Wales were crusted with resorts, each of which held the promise of escape, if not always of romance. The south coast offered Ramsgate, Hastings, Eastbourne, Brighton, Worthing, Bognor, Bournemouth, Torquay and Paignton. Round the toe end of Cornwall came Newquay; then Minehead, Weston-super-Mare and the Welsh fun-spots of Tenby, Aberystwyth, Barmouth, Bangor, Llandudno and Rhyl. The north-west had Southport, Blackpool, Morecambe. The long east coast, exposed and crumbling, was practically held together by its

piers and promenades, all the way from Whitley Bay to Broadstairs. All claimed to be of unique character – sunniest, cheapest, healthiest, poshest – and to be either the pinnacle of good taste (Torquay) or fun-on-a-budget (Clacton). They fought for trade as fiercely as national tourist boards do now, and inspired some of the earliest examples of consumer journalism.

In August 1951 the *News of the World* sent its reporter ‘in search of 20s worth of value for £1’. What with coach fares, sweets, fizzy drinks and ice-cream for the children (not even the *NoW* then had ‘kids’), the arithmetic was shocking. ‘Bless my soul,’ said our man, ‘we hadn’t got to the seaside yet and I had spent £1 18s 5½d [approx £1.92].’ By the end of the day, after pedal boats, speedboat ride, more ice-cream, a memorably awful lunch, paddle-steamer, deck chairs and a variety show on the pier, his expense account had been hit for £6 8s 4½d (£6.45). Even grossed up to its current equivalent of £137.13, this doesn’t look obviously bad value for a family of four on a binge.

A quarter of a century later, in June 1975, domestic holidays still merited a two-page banner. *Don’t let them diddle you by the seaside*, it urged. Round the coast went the paper’s investigators again, jotting down the prices of roundabout rides, Pepsi-Cola, fish and chips, gin and tonic, jellied eels, buckets and spades, silly hats, admission to the pier, cups of tea. It’s not so much the prices that suck you into the past (seven pieces of jellied eel at Southend’s Kursaal for 35p; gin and tonic at the Druid’s Head, Brighton, for a penny less); it’s the comparators themselves. Jellied eels! Halves of bitter! This was the year in which Queen’s ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ topped the charts, yet the seaside was stuck in the age of Gracie Fields, and Britain’s biggest-selling newspaper was raging about watery eel and a 10p hike in the price of Kiss-me-Slowly hats. Even nostalgia was beginning to show its age. The early 1970s had been a late and cruelly deceptive boom time for the English resorts.

Now, from the middle of the decade, they fell into steep decline.

Cheap-and-cheerful is the riskiest of all marketing ploys. Not only is fish-and-chip culture a bold call against the sophistication of 'abroad', but it's on a short, fast and direct route to end-of-the-line tawdriness. In targeting holidaymakers on lower and lower budgets, the resorts could no longer afford their own upkeep. Like every other sort of Victorian infrastructure, the ageing fabric of the seaside was finding it increasingly difficult to resist the ordinary depredations of daily life. This was nowhere more true, or more insidious in its progress, than in that proudest symbol of England-on-Sea, the pleasure pier. And no pier in the world has ever been more totemic than the object of my pilgrimage.

Southend.

Even now, you can see why people loved it. The line out of London tells its own story. There is a Hawksmoor spire or two as the train picks up speed east of Tower Bridge, and the metallic towers of Canary Wharf; but then comes West Ham and the heroic ugliness of the East End, its shallow sea of indigenous brick spiked with failed experiments in vertical living. Here and there you see a survivor, or perhaps a revivalist: net-curtained bay windows screening the kind of modest, wage-earning life that once found relief in a train ride along the estuary. London sprawls without a break deep into Essex, an octopus groping for the sea but finding only transport depots. Not until Benfleet do you feel confident of escape; and not until Leigh-on-Sea do your eyes meet the gleam of water. Then it's Chalkwell, whose station paddles its footings in the sea, Westcliff, and journey's end.

If you've not kept up with the architectural press, you're in for a surprise. From the High Street you emerge with shocking suddenness on to Pier Hill. Below, the world's longest pleasure pier begins its 1.34-mile journey out to sea.

I find no connection with my childhood memory of it, and am surprised by its frailty. 'Regeneration' is a big word in seaside circles, and on Pier Hill we see what it means. The 'gateway' between High Street and sea has gone all glass and stainless steel, as if some design-conscious department store had spilled its guts out on to the grass. There are walkways, viewing platforms and a 'scenic lift' down to the Esplanade. Tucked into the slope, a fish-and-chip restaurant offers 'Colossal Cod'. It looks inviting, but I wonder if this is what the borough council meant when it predicted that this new 'open, fluid and attractive area' would 'encourage a cultural shift towards a "Café Society"'. It is one of the mantras of seaside redevelopers that a new sort of visitor is needed - the kind with an eye for architecture, landscape and heritage.

The new pier entrance, too, gleams with high-tech portentousness. You might be entering an urban multiplex, a university engineering faculty or a merchant bank. Whatever is the polar opposite of vulgar (cool, perhaps?), this is it. The contrast with its neighbour - the gloriously uncool Adventure Island fun park with its traditional rides and amusements - is beyond stark, a joke almost, as if the 19th and 21st centuries had entered an Odd Couple contest. In mid-February the amusements are laid up and silent, but still they tug at that thin little cord of childhood. I need a toffee apple.

The pier just makes me sad. Sad in the usual, nostalgia-laden way to have outgrown the capacity for wonder (do even children have that now?). Sad, too, after paying my 50p, to find myself alone on the mile-long walkway. But sad most of all for the pier itself. Few landmark structures can have suffered as much damage. The first to assault it was a barge in 1891, followed by a ketch (1898), a Thames Conservancy vessel (1908), a 'concrete vessel' (1921) and another barge (1933). In 1939 the pier itself became a kind of honorary vessel when it was commandeered by the Navy

as HMS *Leigh*. By the time it returned to civilian use in 1945 it had dispatched 84,297 sailings in 3,367 convoys. The historic peak for visitors – more than 5m in 1949 – came shortly afterwards, when post-war belts were at their tightest. Thereafter the fortunes of the seaside would sink as fast as the nation's spending power grew. Oddly, visitors could often – and still do – look more like a liability than an asset. To local authorities who have to pay for the 'public realm' of clifftop shelters, sea walls, floral displays, lavatories and car parks, more visitors mean only more expense.

Southend Pier itself seemed jinxed. In 1959 the wooden pavilion at the landward end, a dance hall turned roller-skating rink, caught fire and marooned hundreds of people on the pierhead. No one doubted that the phoenix would rise again, but in what form? The answer was the most perfect emblem of the age. There would be no going back to roller-skating or to the dance-hall culture of yesteryear. People now were looking forward, not back, and forward meant surfing the wave of all things American. The future chewed gum and wore sneakers. The pier would have a bowling alley.

As ten-pins tumbled, so did profits. By 1970 the number of visitors had fallen to fewer than a million. In 1968, after ten years of loss for local ratepayers – £3m a year, it was said – there had been talk of a commercial takeover. In 1974 it was announced that the walkway needed rebuilding and the corporation seemed ready to abandon the thing altogether. The outcry could hardly have been louder if the councillors had abused the Queen Mother. John Betjeman wrote to *The Times*, London dockers signed a petition and the Shah of Persia was (probably falsely) rumoured to have lent £200m to a company that wanted to buy the pier and load it with hotels, conference centres, exhibition halls, theatres, casino and a North Sea ferry terminal. Faced with the concerted opposition of East End sentimentalists and connoisseurs of