

Beside The Sea



MABLETHORPE, ENGLAND ● WORDS & PICTURES BY TONY SUTTON

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Welcome to Mablethorpe, Lincolnshire, seaside destination for generations of holidaying Britons. Fish and chips, silly hats and cheap souvenirs; sandy beaches, sea – and sunshine, if you're lucky. For almost a century, this east coast resort has been a one-week-a-year escape for thankful refugees from the dark, dingy and often dangerous industrial mills, coal mines and factories of Nottingham and Sheffield and from the market towns and agricultural villages in the hundred-mile hinterland between industry and coast.

Mablethorpe was lucky. It never grew too big like Blackpool, the resort that dominates the opposite, west coast of England, or Skegness – Skeggy – its brash neighbour a few miles to the south. But, despite its size, it's still a key part of the

summer oasis that is Lincolnshire's Sunshine Coast, a wonderfully sandy 30-mile stretch from Cleethorpes to Skegness that, for a dozen weeks each summer, is transformed from sleepy, rural tranquility into a throbbing temporary metropolis of thrill-seeking citizens lodged in thousands of guesthouses or jammed into mile upon mile of caravan parks.

Their dream is for a week of sunshine, but most will settle for the next best: a rain-free week away from home ... believe me, it's no holiday if you're trapped inside a caravan's thin aluminium walls with an restless spouse, surrounded by whining kids.

When the sun peers from behind its cloudy refuge, it's playtime. Never mind that the weather's not what the brochures promised, the beaches are big enough to accommodate everyone and, if you're stout-hearted – or a masochist – the grey-



green North Sea beckons. Okay, it's not as inviting as the perfect blue Mediterranean beaches you'd worship if you could afford the fare, but if it's all you're going to get, you'll enjoy it just as much.

And fun – more accurately, the potential for fun – is all around, although the windswept amusement park is almost deserted: a solitary dodg'em car is driven in ever-more-aimless circles by a thrilled child and tolerant father; the big wheel is static, no one foolish enough to brave the chill at its apex high above the beach; and world-weary sideshow barkers slouch at their coconut shy, skittles, ghost train, roundabouts and other faded seaside amusements, waiting – no, praying – for the sun and the crowds they know it will bring.

Hardy holidaymakers pace the seafront. Some dip their toes into the water, but few will discard more than socks and shoes. Skegness became one of the

country's top resorts largely on the strength of a smart marketing slogan: *Skegness is So Bracing*, and John Hassall's classic Jolly Fisherman logo. But, in truth, Cleethorpes and Mablethorpe and Sutton-On-Sea and Ingoldmells and Skegness and the sandy beaches between the coastal resorts of Lincolnshire, aren't always bracing. They're usually damn cold ... thanks to the chill winds that sweep down the North Sea from Scandinavia.

Still, the kids don't mind; they've got slot machines to play, sand to dig and donkeys to ride, the patient, ever-obliging animals gladly walking up and down the beach a hundred times a day, laden with squealing infants, often accompanied by reluctant older siblings, sulkily grateful their schoolpals aren't present to witness the humiliation.

On days like this, when the beaches are almost empty, the action is in the

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narrow streets below the sand dunes, where the winds are gentler. Tourists, mostly middle-aged or elderly, flit from shopfront to shopfront, seeking a memento of another visit, or they try to strike it lucky on the garish sideshows that beckon with flashing lights and ear-splitting klaxens. It's all part of the fun, though there are few bargains and fewer big wins. This, after all, is Lincolnshire, not Monte Carlo ...

Where there's a holidaymaker, there's food. Lots of it. Heart attack country. Sticks of sweet, sugary rock candy; bags of sticky toffee; airy, blowaway candyfloss and, best of all, the pungent, vinegary aroma of fish and chips drifts down the street from a nearby arcade. Fish and chips and the seaside have a mouth-watering resonance; add a plate of bread and butter, a dollop of green, mushy peas and a pot of steaming hot tea and you've got what most Englishmen consider – in their northern hearts, if not their southern gourmet magazines – culinary perfection. But,

to reach the source of that tantalising smell, the visitor must negotiate a path through a nightmare of jangling slot-machines and video games, past clusters of kids clamouring to squander their parents' hard-earned cash on aimless rides that zoom in dizzy circles.

Finally, there's the restaurant. That's what the sign on the wall says, but restaurant's too grand a title: there's a frier against the wall, menu scrawled at each end, while in front ("*No Pushchairs In The Aisle. Please!*") is a cramped collection of mismatched chairs and tables. But the tables are clean, the service swift and cheery, the fish fresh, the chips crisp and golden brown, the tea hot and sweet. And it's cheap. What more could anyone ask?

Food is quickly consumed in the midst of an electronic bedlam: neon pulses, music rages, while above it all a dull monotone drones – "*Red, Downing Street ...*



Number Ten”, “*Green, two-and-six ... twenty-six...*”

The disembodied sound emanates from a lethargic bingo-caller, microphone in hand, who straddles a shabby, futuristic-looking console at the opposite end of the arcade. Around her are clusters of electronic terminals, about 50 glaring screens. A dozen women and their offspring sit at well-spaced intervals, shuffling shutters as the bingo mantra is repeated ... “*White, on its own, Number One*”, “*Red, two fat ladies, Number Eighty-eight...*” Then, a shout. A hand shoots up and a hopeful winner fidgets in embarrassed anticipation as a sluggish assistant ambles over, checks numbers and palms a grubby card. The session repeats itself: All day ... two hours a shift for the caller ... five minutes a game, ten pence a screen for the player. One win earns a bar of chocolate, ten a small stuffed toy. Top prize? What every Yorkshire housewife dreams of: a washing machine! Majestic on a dais, frozen in

position all summer, it will almost certainly be there at the same time next year. Only a truly heroic player will have the constitution to amass the 225 wins necessary to transport that baby home. There’ll be no big wins here ... “*Eyes down ... Green, four-and-forty. Forty four*”.

So, welcome to Mablethorpe. It’s cheap – and no one’s going to say it’s not tacky. But, at its best, it’s a golden place away from the troubles and bothers and the stresses and strains of real life. It’s a place of dreams: The sun will shine, the breeze will be warm, the girls will be pretty, the fish and chips crisp and delicious. And the amusement park will resound to the thrill of people enjoying their leisure. When that happens, Mablethorpe – and the whole of Lincolnshire’s east coast – will be just perfect. Well, as perfect as any sensible, god-fearing person could ever expect this life to be. ●

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