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TWO FAT LADIES AT THE SEASIDE: THE PLACE OF GAMBLING IN WORKING-CLASS HOLIDAYS

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Introduction

That gambling was a popular pastime among the working classes is clear with even the most cursory search through the Mass Observation index. The file report, Mass Gambling (M-O, FR 2560), is an obvious response to the prevalence and ubiquity of the pastime, but in fact the search term “gambling” using the Mass Observation Adam Matthew digitised archive picks up large numbers of responses in (amongst others) papers on sport, work, pubs, home and family life, social class and holidays. In-depth exploration of the physical archive in held at the University of Sussex reveals many other passing references to the pools, greyhound racing and street betting, providing evidence of the routine place of gambling in many (although certainly not all) working-class lives. Both the documentary archive and the Humphrey Spender Worktown archive (<http://spender.boltonmuseums.org.uk/index.html>) include accounts and images of gambling opportunities ‘at home’; venues included the family home where pools coupons were filled out, the pub or club (a venue for placing bets or collecting winnings, pools syndicates, housey-housey games and sweeps) dog racing (on-course betting), street betting, street gambling games, work-based gambling (sweeps, pools and cash betting) and betting while on the terraces watching football. However in the period under consideration here, a more visible face of gambling was seen at the seaside, in the mechanised palaces of pleasure that attracted hundreds of thousands each summer for their annual week away from work — and again Mass Observation was there too, recording the Worktowners gambling whilst at play. For Tom Harrison, Humphrey Spender and other observers, gambling was a curious, prevalent and perhaps irrational pastime of the masses that could be watched, described and noted down. In fact, Mass Observation also defended the gambling behaviours of

the masses during the Second World War (M-O, FR 1632) and concluded in the Mass Gambling file report that for poorer people gambling was not necessarily an irrational choice (M-O, FR 2560). However, gambling amongst the masses has also long been a target of social reformers, designated as a vice that leads to moral degradation; and that attitude prevails: even among people who gamble, gambling is rarely described as a hobby. It is perhaps for this reason that the open adoption of very public gambling at the seaside reflects the attraction of the pursuit both to those who routinely gambled but also to people whose 'home' persona was of non-gambler. Certainly gambling at the seaside provided a very different, non-routine, type of gambling experience for regular 'home' gamblers, and the relaxation of social norms on holiday may have been the key to encouraging those whose daily life did not include gambling as a leisure activity to access the pursuit, while both types of gamblers allowed seaside entertainment entrepreneurs to cash in on the first commercial gambling boom in the United Kingdom.

Background

Although the legal status of gambling during the inter-war period was complicated, gambling was a noticeable part of the leisure lives of ordinary people. Cash betting was illegal under the provisions of the Street Betting Act (1906), although bookies' runners could be found in most places of employment and on street corners in working-class areas (Chinn, 1991; Clapson, 1991; Dixon, 1991; Laybourn, 2007; Miers, 2004). The first successful football pools started in 1923 and rapidly became part of everyday life for millions of people, despite a number of legal challenges that attempted to have them banned. The rapid rise of greyhound racing was almost contemporaneous with that of the pools; Belle Vue in Manchester opened in 1926 and started a boom in dog racing and associated gambling. As tracks were easily accessible, being located in urban areas, this allowed the working classes access to on-course betting and a form of tote gambling; accompanied by a raucous moral panic as the press and parliamentarians bemoaned the desire of the masses to go, after work, to bet, to drink and to waste time (Laybourn, 2007). There were a number of legal challenges to this type of gambling too, but the activity flourished for several decades (Laybourn, 2007).

Social observers of the inter-war period often commented on the prevalence of gambling amongst the working classes. Liverpool Women's Aid had noted in 1926 that "Fifty percent of women have the betting habit" (Chinn, 1991: p. 171) while the Second Social Survey of York concluded of gambling that "A vast number of men and women indulge in this form of amusement" (Rowntree, 1941: p. 400). The Mass Gambling report observed that those who filled in pools coupons were "predominantly thinking in terms of winning" (M-O, FR 2560: p. 102). Rowntree's 1941

survey of York provided a unique insight into the role of the pools in providing families with entertainment as they sat together on Thursday evenings and decided on the permutations they would use to fill in the coupon and the pleasure gained by the hope of a win as they decided together how any winnings might be spent (Rowntree, 1941: p. 425–429). The pools did provide a very real hope of a win, for apart from the winners of large prizes there were many people who won a small amount on a regular basis (Hilton, 1936; M-O, FR 2560) and these wins were widely reported and commented on in popular culture and urban mythology (Downs, 2008).

The *Pub and the People* (1943) was the first Mass Observation study to offer extensive insights into working-class gambling, and concluded that there were two motives for gambling, “of being the winner...and of getting something for nothing” (Mass Observation, 1943: p. 312). The subsequent Mass Gambling report is the first concentrated effort at establishing both how much gambling was taking place and the social attitudes towards gambling amongst those who gambled. Mass Observation found the activity was hugely popular and that 86% of respondents were “past year’ gamblers (M-O, FR 2560: 116). A more rigorous methodology was applied by the sociologists Kemsley and Ginsberg who were commissioned in 1951 to conduct the first UK-wide survey for the Royal Commission on Betting, Lotteries and Gaming (1951). This study found that 60% (71% of men and 51% of women) took part in one or other of the three forms of betting included in the survey, a figure not too dissimilar to the 68% of people who were found to take part in gambling in the 2007 UK Gambling Prevalence Study (Gambling Commission, 2008). A comparison of the surveys shows participation rates for male gambling prevalence remaining almost static over the period while numbers of women gambling has increased. Possible reasons for increases in numbers of women gambling include the development of commercial bingo after 1961 and the introduction of the National Lottery in 1993, and perhaps also more relaxed social attitudes towards gambling. However, as no reliable prevalence data was collected between 1951 and 1999 it is difficult to know anything about variations in patterns of gambling behaviour in that period with any certainty.

Gambling at home

While the football pools were the most easily accessible gambling activity in the period 1923–1961 there were a number of types of gambling both popular and prevalent in this period. Off-course cash betting, via illegal bookmakers and their networks of runners, was considered to be a social nuisance and even the authorities admitted it tended to encourage police corruption (Dixon, 1991). After World War Two, the law on cash betting was increasingly viewed as untenable (Dixon, 1991; Downs, 2009; Miers,

2004). The temptation to ignore the law was considerable: there was significant money to be made from running a cash betting business (and tax was not paid on such illegal earnings), employment as a runner was steady and offered the chance of good rates of pay, albeit with the risk of gaining a criminal record, while laying a bet could generate both winnings and hope (Hilton, 1936). Although the prevalence of women's gambling was lower than men's in the period up to 1951, women were involved in illegal cash betting, as both bookmakers and gamblers. One female bookie in East London who worked over the period 1933 to 1956 had "more than a score of bookmakers' and paid more than £5000 in fines over the period (Parliamentary Papers, 1955/56 dxlix Parliamentary Debates Hansard, c.2523). Apart from Mass Observation records there are accounts of book-making and betting amongst men and women in the Rowntree Studies of York (1901; 1941) and the Birmingham Lives Carl Chinn Archive (<http://lives.bgfl.org/carlchinn/>). The Elizabeth Roberts Archive of women's lives in Lancaster, Barrow-in-Furness and Preston has accounts of women both betting and working as bookmakers as do other sources such as Lillian Beckwith's autobiography (Beckwith, 1971) and the biography Elizabeth Dawson wrote about her bookmaker mother (Dawson, 1962).

Bingo was often referred to as tombola or housey-housey in this period, although there are records of illegal commercial bingo as early as 1939, with police reports referring to 'bingo parlours' and 'bingo players' rather than to tombola or housey-housey. The police noted that the game was extremely popular, and played "mostly by women of the poorer class" (PRO Mepol 3/765 1939). Bingo was certainly played in 'Worktown' and referred to as housey-housey or tombola. It was a staple of the ex-services and workingmen's clubs and also used as a fund-raiser by picnic clubs based around pub regulars (Rowntree, 1941; Mass Observation, 1943). While the pools and off-course cash betting were routine gambling, commercial or quasi-commercially organised, the place of gambling in all varieties of sport, especially football, boxing and horse racing was widely acknowledged and even welcomed as providing sporting occasions with excitement and lustre:

Then there are the incorrigible gamblers, the book-makers, "George" of T. Webster fame, the vast organisations: Littlewoods, Vernons, etc ... This is the exploitation of partisanship, of the faith in a favourite, of the love of gambling and, last but not least, of the dazzling hope of colossal gain. Parasites, yes. But would organised sport be the same without them? (M-O, FR 13: 32)

While there was little public space available for working men to gamble legally, with the dog track really the only leisure venue where gambling with cash was (more-or-less) legal, for women who wanted to gamble there were even fewer options. Illegal gambling took place on back streets via bookies runners, in pubs and clubs or in the workplace. Games of pitch



Figure 1 Football spectators — Bolton Wanderers at home
Humphrey Spender, ©Bolton Museum and Archive

and toss were popular and prevalent amongst young men, groups would utilise waste ground or go up onto the moors to avoid the police. Private betting was probably as prevalent on the terraces of a 1930s football match as it is today, but the terraces of the football ground (**Figure 1**) were not considered a suitable place for respectable women in the inter-war years.

While the illegal and public bingo parlours of East London were populated by the poorest women, the option for women who wanted to maintain their respectability and enjoy a flutter was the pools. These could be filled in at home then posted discreetly, or collected from the home by an agent of the pools company. Workplaces also commonly had pools syndicates, often with women workers running their own rather than joining with the men's groups (M-O, FR 2545). Women also sometimes set up and ran the 'picnic clubs' in Worktown pubs and clubs (Mass Observation, 1943). These were lotteries or housey-housey games that funded activities during Wakes Weeks or Whitsun celebrations. That women who were not discreet in their gambling activities were targeted for particular odium is evidenced in the reactions of the 'chattering classes' to the later 'bingo boom' of the early 1960s when the game was labelled 'a cretinous pastime' (*Times*, 1961a), while leader writers fulminated on the consequences for children of having a gambling mother and being "Sent after a hasty tea to hold their mother's places in the queue" (*Times*, 1961b).

Responses to women visibly gambling once bingo moved from the social margins of working-class venues, such as the seaside, holiday camps and social clubs in 1961 suggest that the issue of gambling was not just one of vice, but also of gender. Certainly there were clear conventions driving what it was considered respectable for women to do. Whilst there were feckless, loud, improvident and openly drinking and gambling working-class families, such as that described so vividly in Viv Nicholson's autobiography of a pools winner, *Spend, Spend, Spend* (Nicholson and Smith, 1978), there were many working-class families to whom respectability was a virtue. The role of Methodism and Fabian-influenced Labour party politics in this debate as it relates to gambling is significant (Downs, 2008). A respectable woman in the period 1930–1960 was unlikely to go into a public bar, and would generally be found in a saloon bar only if accompanied by her husband, father or brother. The types of drink that could be accessed were similarly gendered. Nice women did not drink pints. As with Ena Sharples and her cronies, doyenne of that archetypal working-class soap opera *Coronation Street* for many years, half pint glasses of milk stout (which was reputed to have medicinal properties), port and lemon or, after 1953, Babycham: these were the drinks for respectable women.

The question must therefore be; why did women who were in all other respects pursuing a path that labelled them as respectable, defy convention to gamble in town centre locations once this option was available to them? The answer appears to be complex, involving the familiarity of the game of bingo, the utility of the regular, if small prizes, the pleasure gained from gambling, the fact that the majority of other players were women 'like us' and the increasing likelihood that women would have some discretionary income. For contrary to popular opinion that women were gambling away housekeeping money, earned by husbands, Cornish (1978: pp. 44–48) showed that most bingo players were spending money they themselves had earned.

Holidays and gambling

It has been argued that the familiarity of bingo to the majority of the working classes, and especially to women, provided an important aspect of the development of a successful commercial leisure product; this aspect of the game was spotted and exploited by Mecca, leading them to become the most significant provider of commercial bingo in the 1960s (Downs, 2009; Downs, forthcoming). The seaside holiday as a subject for serious historical scholarship has been led by the seminal works of John Walton (Walton, 1978, 1983, 1992, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2004, 2007). Walton has shown that working-class holiday-makers were travelling to the seaside, where it was accessible, from the late 18th century (for example, accessing Margate, from London, via a regular and chap boat service) and that from

the very beginning the incursion of working-class holiday makers into areas considered reserved by and for more middle class revellers caused conflict, with the choice of leisure activity by the masses at the seaside being a particular issue. For the working classes at the seaside were:

Crowded, noisy, vulgar, unbuttoned, uninhibited enjoyment, for better or worse. They epitomised carnival, saturnalia, the temporary triumph of the periphery over the core, the world turned upside down, the suspension of dignity and inhibitions, the temporary reversal of the civilising process, the reign of gluttony, extravagance and licentiousness. (Walton, 2004: p. 51)

From the 1850s numbers of working-class holidaymakers at the resorts they favoured increased (Walton, 1994: p. 30) with the granting of Bank Holidays (after 1871) leading to further expansion of the numbers able to take a trip to the seaside. The masses continued providing opportunities for the leisure market to expand in the twentieth century. In inter-war Britain there was a huge growth in demand, both for leisure time and for activities to fill that leisure time, met by increased range of commercially provided products and facilities, many that attracted significant numbers of working-class customers. New or expanded forms of commercialised leisure in inter-war Britain included the cinema, football pools, dance halls, bowling, dance halls, greyhound racing and the holiday camp, all of which were incredibly popular with the masses (Clegg, 1993; Laybourn, 2007; Nott, 2002; Richards, 2010; Ward and Hardy, 1986). During this period, existing forms of mass leisure such as the working-class seaside holiday were further developed with the advent of the Holidays-with-Pay Act (1938) allowing increasing numbers of the working classes to access a week away (Walton, 1994: p. 25). During the inter-war years entrepreneurs of leisure increasingly realised that pennies *en masse* could provide significant profits and there was acceleration in the number of venues and attractions targeting working-class holidaymakers (Walton, 1998).

The people of Worktown, and the industrial North West in general, largely took their holidays during the traditional Wakes Weeks, and the activities that were central to these customary holidays remained very much an element of the holiday culture of the working classes at the seaside (Walton and Poole, 1983). Customary leisure had included an annual round of fairs, wakes, and itinerant entertainers. Drunkenness, gambling, sports and dancing were always a major part of pre-industrial holidays (Poole, 1982). Poole argued that the Lancashire Wakes survived well into the nineteenth century and were transformed into the great cotton holidays whose timetable came to dominate the seaside resorts of the North West: "Industrialisation tended not so much as to obliterate the customary holiday as to incorporate it within the new order" (Poole, 1982: p. 72). Seaside carnival processions had elements of older religious and

rush-bearing processions, carnival week entertainments were not too dissimilar to old fairs, the travelling entertainers plying gambling games migrated to the coast, the pubs were full and there were plenty of opportunities to gamble. Fortune-tellers and illicit romance happened on and under the pier instead of at the fair or in the harvest haystack (Walton, 1978: p. 53).

For the urban working classes a trip to the seaside offered an opportunity to experience a world set-apart from the everyday. This transformation of place was facilitated by the ornately extravagant pleasure piers and pleasure palaces that leisure entrepreneurs provided to offer entertainment to the hordes of visitors in Blackpool: a stark contrast to the close-set terraces of often grimy mill towns that were home. Similarly, seaside gambling was set-apart from the ordinary; different and even special. Gambling at home was routine and mundane, sometimes furtive, often hurried. The work of Rowntree showed how families budgeted for their weekly 'investment' in the pools. The valuable collection of extracts from letters about the pools collated by John Hilton in 1936 illustrates very clearly both the planned nature of the expenditure but also the routine and mundane aspects of the experience; a similar facet to regular gambling amongst the working classes has more recently been observed by Casey in her study of lottery play by women (Casey, 2008).

Seaside gambling offered a very different and set-apart from the norm experience. Slot machines were available in Worktown, but not widely accessible, Bryan's gambling machines including the *Clock* and a roulette-type game were located in the men-only areas of some Worktown pubs, although this somewhat furtive form of gambling on machines, with limited choice of game and often a queue waiting for their turn could not compare with the experience on offer at the seaside. Here the arcades were open to the main street, well-lit, brightly decorated, brash and exciting. There was the chance to win and display a prize, generating a certain level of envy in peers who had not dared to risk the gamble, or had not been lucky in their playing of the game. The majority of the prizes on offer were small and of poor quality but superior and attractive prizes were on display and arcade operators would employ 'barkers' to encourage players into endeavouring to win one of these prizes. While the application of psychology to the design of slot machines is of relatively recent origin, manufacturers in the 1930s incorporated features that nowadays are known to encourage players to gamble on machines. These include increasing the level of noise made by falling coins, rapid rates of play and games that, when lost, appeared to be nearly won. The near-miss sensation has recently been found to be critical in maintaining and encouraging gambling and this feature is common in even the earliest Allwin-type machines that filled the arcades at Blackpool and other seaside resorts (Chase and Clark, 2010).

The development of specific places for leisure at the seaside, based indoors and where a package of easy-to-access entertainment was available, albeit at a price, was noted by Mass Observation, when it followed the Worktowners to Blackpool: “The whole trend of holiday activities at Blackpool seems to be turning away from the natural, the sea, which gave Blackpool its start, towards the artificial” (M-O, FR 685). Alongside the theatres, end-of-pier shows and fairgrounds there was a near 49% increase in amusement machine arcades in Blackpool between 1931 and 1939 (M-O, FR 2247). The Blackpool pleasure landscape was and remains distinctive in many respects. An ornate and decorative approach was applied to any building that wanted to attract paying customers which meant that oriental domes, cupolas and Italianate arches jostled with ornamental ironwork and vivid enamel signage, all adding to the visual feast greeting eyes more accustomed to rows of terraced housing in the smoky industrial towns from which the masses escaped to the seaside. The amusement arcades filled with the mechanized gambling games that were so popular with the visiting workers were equally enticing. Machines were bright and beautiful; coin chutes were designed to maximize the sounds of falling pennies to encourage the sensation of significant winnings, local men employed as ‘gees’ encouraged visitors to enter the arcades, extolling the chances of winning one of the prominently displayed prizes while the ‘bracing’ Blackpool weather also enticed holidaymakers into the warmth and dry of the arcades and their offer of a quick profit on a penny staked (M-O, FR 2509).

Humphrey Spender’s Worktown photographs show that Blackpool’s pleasure palace attracted large crowds and that there were often as many non-players watching people play the machines as there were players engaged in gambling (**Figure 2**). It seems that the public, loud and open nature of gambling at the seaside offered the power of spectacle, adding to the draw of the arcades, with the rows upon row of gambling machines themselves a sight that was out-of-the-ordinary. As has been noted, “The power of leisure to create new landscapes, to shape patterns of activity and to generate new social and economic relationships should not be under estimated” (Towner, 1996: p. 167).

In the case of arcades at Blackpool during the inter-war period, Towner’s analysis seems to hold true. The rapid increase in arcades noted by Mass Observation (see above) and the willingness of significant numbers of holiday makers to gamble their hard-earned cash as part of their holiday experience are two sides of the same issue. It is impossible to tell whether demand for gambling led to the expansion of arcades, or whether the expansion of arcades led to an increase in the demand for gambling; what is certain though is that acting together the relationship between activity and holidaymaker altered the physical landscape and generated new commercial opportunities. These encouraged the technical



Figure 2 *Blackpool — Golden Mile gambling machines*
Humphrey Spender, ©Bolton Museum and Archive

development of gambling machines that fitted better the demands of seaside arcades and the combination of these factors made seaside gambling an integral part of the holiday experience even for people who would not consider gambling at home.

Blackpool was a place for leisure and pleasure, a place where holiday behaviour could be exhibited by holiday makers and inhibitions could be relaxed. However, in Blackpool and other North West resorts such as Morecambe, the fact that holidays were tied to traditional Wakes Weeks patterns meant that people were on holiday at the same time and in the same place as their neighbours. This ensured that acceptable holiday behaviour retained many of the trademarks of 'respectability' that were considered important when at home (Walton, 1978). Nevertheless holidays also offered significant elements of escape from the mundane and in many respects public gambling was one of the activities that represented a traditionally accepted lapse from the behaviour norms current in the remainder of the year for, as Poole (1982) showed, gambling was one of the accepted Wakes activities. Rojek has noted when commenting on the cultural significance of places used mainly for leisure, that "the relaxation of inhibitions [makes them] attractive to people and often challenging to orthodox and official social values" (Rojek, 2000: p. 148).

In the case of gambling, although the majority of people gambled, the largely illegal status of the pursuit and its place in public discourse as a vice to be discouraged rather than leisure activity to be enjoyed, ensured that gambling in public 'at home' was an activity that could only be

engaged in by the disreputable. Gambling with a street bookie was necessarily covert; works syndicates were private not public affairs, the pools were a house or work-based activity. If there were any doubt of the pariah status accorded to those who gambled in public 'Worktowners' had only to see the opprobrium heaped upon those who went to the newly popular pursuit of greyhound racing. Mass Observation wrote several reports on greyhound racing and commented that dog racing was unique in drawing hostility targeted at those who attended the tracks rather than those who raced the dogs (M-O, FR 1149, 1632, 2995).

In contrast, holiday gambling, taking place within the limits of respectability, but still offering an experience of risk, excitement and difference that was set apart from the everyday, is just the sort of activity that Turner's theories of *liminality* (1969, 1982) and Lyng's (1990, 2005) of *edgework* seek to place into the context of leisure lives. Liminality refers to a type of leisure that occupies the space between two recognised cultural loci, occurring in a break in the continuity of life or a gap between the real world and a self or group-created world. That is, leisure that takes the individual out of the everyday and mundane and into a new, different world, either through physical experience of that world, through the imagination (cinema) or through the use of drugs or alcohol. Liminal leisure is not a simple construct; it is a diverse set of behaviours that varies between cultures and sub-cultures. Turner (1982) noted that, "In liminality new ways of acting, new combinations of symbols, are tried out, to be discarded or rejected" (p. 27); and "In liminality people 'play' with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarize them" (p. 28). Gambling in public, at the seaside offered just such an experience. For the gambler armed with cash that had been set aside for discretionary spending, the mundane and sometimes furtive gambling available at home could be transformed into an exciting and potentially dangerous activity (the loss of all discretionary spending money). All to the accompaniment of lights and sound that enhanced the activity and the frequent 'near win' sensations and the public space allowing gamblers the chance to demonstrate to others from within their community their willingness to partake in a risky pursuit .

Amusement arcades in Blackpool fit the part of places where a liminal leisure experience could be gained. Arcades were places full of light, colour and noise, and although open to the street at the front were set out so that for players the view of outside was in general extremely restricted. There were no clocks to mark the passing of time and the arcades were open from 7am until midnight each day. Loss of time is found to be a significant element in leisure, and research has shown how in gambling it is easy for players to lose all sense of time (Wood, Griffiths and Parke, 2007). One of the Mass Observation observers reported a player coming into the arcade he was watching at 7.45 and spending 30d without a win. The player changed some more money into copper and was still playing

without a win at 8.30 (M-O, FR 2560: p. 213). Similarly important in providing an exciting leisure experience is the sensation of 'nearly' winning (Parke and Griffiths, 2004). The early machines were designed to provide a fast and exciting game, that players would feel would pay out if only they risked another penny.

Blackpool by the 1930s had positioned itself as a working-class seaside resort, and the town council was in general very favourable to any activities that encouraged visitors to spend money in the resort (Walton, 1998). However, there were tensions in Blackpool as a result of the proliferation of arcades and easy opportunities for gambling, and councillors faced pressure from those wishing to attract more middle-class holiday-makers to visit the resort. The use of 'gees' to drum up business by encouraging people into the arcades was illegal and Mass Observation reported that while they were aware of the existence of 'gees' and knew that the police had a permanent campaign against the practice, the 'gees' themselves were elusive (M-O, FR 2509). It took the observer weeks of patient effort in trust-building to get access to some 'gees' so that "enquiries could be made into their way of work and role in ensuring the profitability of the arcade they worked for (M-O, FR 2509). The 'gee' would point out to the punter any special or unique features of the game, might 'demonstrate' how easily a prize could be won or emphasise the skill elements of the game and how the punter possessed the skills necessary to win (punters were considered susceptible to flattery), or encourage people to stay on and play some more if they looked like leaving, perhaps offering some free-play tokens as an inducement. Floorwalkers were also employed in seaside arcades, and were much less evasive than the 'gees'. They gave change, prevented abuse of machines (shaking, banging on the glass) and highlighted wins amongst the players, "Ah, the lady here has just got 12", "10 pence won here" (M-O, FR 2560: p. 208). The observer drily commented that floor walkers' primary purpose was to make it sound like "people winning often is a good sign but the floorwalkers shout of 10 pence won apparently masks the fact of 11 pence lost, at least to the players" (M-O, FR 2560: p. 210). Certainly, even in venues where the machines were only one element of the attraction, such as Blackpool Tower or the piers, observers noted that players were always on the machines.

Although adopting practices that might be considered dubious in their attempts to make as much money as possible from gamblers, arcade owners were very conscious of their poor reputation and organised themselves into a trade association to present a united defence of their business activities. One Blackpool arcade owner told Mass Observation, "We aren't a bunch of sharps. We try to give the public a square deal, but everybody thinks we are out to rook them. We have an association and see the arcades are run decently" (M-O, FR 2509). Mass Observation noted that the trade association would fine operators who failed to comply

with the standards they had set on issues such as rates of payout and opening hours (M-O, FR 2509).

Certainly the arcades were very popular, with women and children taking part in equal number to men. One woman said “I remember spending every evening gambling at slot machines” (M-O, FR 715: p. 6) while the photographs taken by Humphrey Spender are illustrative of the numbers of machines and the popularity of the arcades amongst both genders and all ages. An account of holiday gambling in Blackpool describes how a mother:

Inserts the penny in the machine, ball is released, she pulls spring and watches ball shoot round the face of machine and disappear in hole marked LOST. Next the little daughter has a go: “Put it in 'ere luv, in 'ere, like this, that's right, now push it, push it, that's right” (M-O, FR 2509: pp. 16–17).

As File Report 2509 noted, the typical English summer was helpful here, “Large arcade on seafront, occupies two floors. Raining outside and arcades all fairly full” (p. 15). The majority of the machines were made in the United Kingdom by Bryans Allwin, although imported US slot machines, mainly Chieftains, were also popular in Blackpool as well as significant numbers of such machines being found in Weston-super-Mare and Margate. However, there was an advantage to sticking with the British Allwin machines in their wooden cases; these were designed to be wall-mounted, saving space; the larger, chrome and stainless steel American imports took up more space, which in Blackpool was at a premium. In order to stay within the letter of the law arcade machines had to claim to be skills-based, otherwise the operator of the arcade was running illegal gaming. “Holidays” (M-O, FR 2509) noted this in relation to the work of the ‘gees’. While the ‘gees’ encouraged people into arcades on the grounds that they had a good chance of winning money the operators relied on showing the police that “people patronise these machines not though in inducement to win a prize, but in order to enjoy the game, then no offence has been committed” and were thus mainly (but not always) able to avoid prosecution (M-O, FR 2509: p. 22).

The succinct description of the operation of an Allwin provided by collector Melvyn Wright is worth including in full here:

The basic Allwin operates like this: Upon inserting a coin in the slot at the top right hand side of the case, the ball is released from inside the machine, and falls onto the spring-loaded hammer at the bottom right. Using all his skill and judgement (!) the player operates the trigger to shoot the ball up and around the spiral tracks. If the ball lands in one of the winning cups, the player turns the knob at the bottom of the case and the machine pays out a pre-determined number of coins. Some Allwins pay out

varying amounts depending upon which hole the ball lands in. After a win, the ball is sometimes returned to the player for another shot ... The trick was to make the game look much easier than it actually was. This is the hallmark of a good design. (Wright 2010)

However, although there was an element of skill for players to use and develop in the initial set-up of these machines when they left the factory, the mechanism was purposely designed to be customised by the arcade operator. As machines could be altered very quickly and without any tools required for the job it was not difficult for arcade operators to make certain that payout rates were extremely low (Wright, 2010). Commenting on the Allwin type of machines after spending a day in an arcade one Mass Observation observer stated, "The machine is built so that it is impossible to win more than one penny less than you put in" (M-O, FR 2247: p. 24). The Chieftain fruit machines required tools for alteration, but a using a screwdriver and a small lead weight allowed operators to ensure that the jackpot always *almost* came up but never *actually* did. The simple technique involved gluing a small lead weight, strategically placed on one of the reels, a technique known as 'lumping' the machines. In addition, arcade operators could 'trip' the jackpot using the screwdriver, thus even on unlumped machines a jackpot win might not amount to very much.

Alongside the slot machines in seaside arcades and pleasure palaces holiday bingo was an important another form of holiday gambling that women and children could participate in without attracting social opprobrium:

In the arcades the bingo was for all ages as long as you had some money to play. There was a bingo caller in the middle of the play area in any given arcade circled with a wooden bank of bingo cards and a stool for each section where bingo players could sit and get comfortable. (Gambling Joey, 2004)

Indeed, it seems possible that holiday bingo was important in introducing women in particular to the game and providing a ready market for the rapid and widespread commercial bingo after the Betting and Gaming Act (1960). An early account of a 'tombola' stall at the seaside is provided by Roger Bingham who described a stall owned by Mr Ashworth of Morecambe, which attracted significant numbers of players from 1926 onwards, and offered typical seaside prizes of cigarettes, sweets, sunhats, vases and teapots (Bingham, 1994: p. 230). Seaside bingo required an investment in staff, as apart from the caller employing at least one, and preferably two, floorwalkers was essential; they organised the random number generation, collected the stakes, checked claims and gave out prizes. As seaside bingo was prevalent in resorts from the 1920s, despite

its far higher staffing requirements than running an arcade with machines, the game must have attracted large numbers of players in order to generate sufficient profits to make it worthwhile for leisure entrepreneurs. The players would sit on stools around an open square with a wooden bingo board or two on the shelf in front of them. The open centre of the square had sufficient room for a large shallow box and one or two operators to walk round. The box would be divided into numbered compartments (usually 1–75 for seaside arcade games), and players would be supplied with one of a number of small wooden or rubber balls that they would take turns to throw into the box to generate the number played. It was for this reason that rhyming calls were essential, as play was necessarily slow. The reason for this method of play was to show that the game was not fixed. Players were often reluctant to play games where the numbers were drawn out of a bag or box, as there was a suspicion that cheating was taking place. In fact, it was perfectly easy for the unscrupulous operator to fix even this apparently open type of number generation by making some of the numbered compartments slightly too small for the ball; it was difficult for players to see whether the ball had fallen into the compartment cleanly or had wobbled over to the next compartment. A player joining a game in the 1950s would put 3d (or 6d for two boards) on the side and the floorwalker would switch on a light above the player to alert the caller. Typical prizes would be “tin cars, soft toys, kiss-me-quick and straw hats, water pistols and feathery things” (Mr Mervyn Cooper of Skegness, interviewed 9 Nov. 2001). While the prizes were small or even non-existent the arcades were generally pretty full, and “Players seldom go away dissatisfied” (MO FR 2560).

Barrow-in-Furness in Cumbria, about 80 miles north of Blackpool, is not thought of as a typical seaside resort, but Walney Island also attracted visitors and the Elizabeth Roberts archive noted the presence of a bingo arcade as an attraction for women during the holiday season: “In the mid 1930s to late 1930s there was a fair running for a while, a semi-permanent fair at West Shore and that included the equivalent of bingo ... She always spent modestly, but she was lucky” (Elizabeth Roberts Mr S4B ER RSC/88/655). The relaxation of normal social constraints on the gambling of women and children during holiday times is also evidenced in the memoir of author Lillian Beckwith (born in Ellesmere Port in Cheshire, 1916). Her family were Methodist and generally opposed gambling and the drinking of alcohol. However, when the fair came to town during the autumn holiday normal rules were relaxed and playing housey-housey was permitted:

Towards the end of October the throbbing, juddering steam engine arrived pulling a train of high piled wagons and the caravans of the attendants, and within hours the waste ground was enclosed by hoopla stalls and booths of every description...I rode on the

roundabouts and the cakewalk and I played 'housey housey'.
(Beckwith, 1971: pp. 134–135)

On winning games she at first chose presents for her parents, but found that the prizes she thought extremely attractive were not appreciated:

Once it was a purple and gold vase; another time it was a black teapot resplendent with pink and blue and yellow daisies which father described as being a 'bargee pot'; yet another time it was a mirror so profusely painted that you couldn't see your face in it except through a clump of bulrushes... The next time I won I chose a large tin of toffees for myself. When I opened the tin I found it was only half full so I took it back to the stall and complained. The Clarkson girl gave me what looked like an enormous box of chocolates in exchange but when I opened that it wasn't chocolate at all, it was coconut candies which tasted of soap.
(Beckwith, 1971: pp. 135–136)

The accessibility of an exciting and interactive form of gambling to children as part of their holiday time (via bingo and arcade machines) is noticeable in the primary sources, from Mass Observation, autobiographies and even the messages on postcards sent from Butlins holiday camps in the 1950s (available online via the website <http://www.butlinsmemories.com/>) and may indeed be more responsible for familiarising children with the thrill of gambling than the routine filling in of pools coupons by families described by Rowntree (1941) or the furtive placing of a bet with the local runner on behalf of a parent. As an online memoir notes of holidays on the Isle of Sheppy:

Those days when I was young my mum and dad used to play bingo in the various holiday social clubs and pubs which regularly held bingo tournaments for quite high prizes. At those clubs the rule was no under 18's were allowed to join in I just got to watch from the kids arcade room normally located fairly nearby. The atmosphere around the whole bingo game in general was something I couldn't get enough of. Alcohol was on sale before the bingo players even got to play one game of bingo which lent itself to the tipsy parents letting go of a few more pennies before the bingo games began in earnest... I remember my dad winning £147 pounds on holiday once while playing bingo which was a lot of money in those days. (Gambling Joey, 2004)

Cash bingo as an attraction for holiday makers took place illegally at the Classic Theatre in Morecambe in the late 1950s, when more than 200 players were furious at having their game broken up by the police, who confiscated the prize fund of £428 (Bingham, 1994: p. 271). As these examples show, by the post war period holiday bingo was increasingly

splitting into prize bingo as played in seaside arcades, an aspect of the holiday leisure experience open to whole families, and cash bingo for holidaymakers; a game for adults only that was hugely popular despite having an anomalous legal position until 1961. Between 1934 and 1956 the playing of cash bingo (games with a cash prize) was regulated under the Betting and Lotteries Act (1934) whose provisions intended to allow small, charitable lotteries; so long as the proceeds (or at least some proceeds) could be seen going to charity the organiser (whether charity, company, individual or group) was pretty much left to carry on. In 1956 though the Small Lotteries and Gaming Act, a private members bill, provided a more stringent framework for those operating cash bingo games and limited the potential for earning money from holiday bingo over the period 1956–1961. Despite the new regulations cash bingo operators, such as the Classic Theatre in Morecambe, cited above, carried on offering the game as the profits outweighed the risks of legal action.

Butlins and Warners holiday camps were significant holiday gambling venues. Although the earliest holiday camps had opened in the 1930s and were immediately popular they really took off after the war. Demand for this type of holiday far outstripped supply in the 1950s; an indicator of the increase in disposable incomes that was to drive the development of commercial and mass leisure through the post-war period (Ward and Hardy, 1986). The Butlins bingo games were an activity recognised as being popular with women campers and highlighted as such on the programmes of activities. Being freed from childcare by the availability of organised games and professional care for their children, and often with their own discretionary income to spend whilst on holiday, allowed women to access gambling on an equal footing with men. With gambling, as with other consumer spending during this period, increases in the numbers of married women working outside the home was a factor recognised as significant in changing women's spending and leisure patterns. The impact of such changes was noted in 1962, when a report based on census data found that:

From 1952 to 1962 the number of single women in jobs fell by 6 per cent, and the number of married women in jobs rose by 39 per cent. By 1961 one out of every three married women was at work outside her home. The whole industrial and commercial structure of Britain would be severely jolted, perhaps temporarily dislocated, if all the working wives gave up their jobs and went home. (Boyd, 1962: p. 31)

With space provided for up to 300 campers to be playing at one time bingo was clearly popular in the holiday camps, whatever the weather; timetables of the activities offered to campers holidaying at Butlins in the mid-1950s detail two Tombola sessions daily, each running for three hours (Butlins Memories, 1955) commencing Monday 29th August 1955,

<http://www.butlinsmemories.com/entertainment.htm>). Some contemporary (middle-class) observers were cynical about the motives of the holiday companies running the games, "The camps use it [Bingo] to keep the campers from wrecking their quarters or trying to seduce the redcoats during bad weather" (*Economist*, 24 June, 1961, p. 1346). As the playing of housey-housey could not be conducted for private profit, Butlins and Warners had to donate all of the considerable proceeds from the games to charity:

Last year [1958] upwards of fifty thousand pounds...went to the National Playing Fields Association from the playing of Housey-Housey throughout the camps. (Parliamentary Papers, 1959-1960 dcxxiii House of Commons Debate William Rees-Davis, col. 225)

However, once profits made from activities associated with playing bingo could be kept, the charitable games at the holiday camps became commercial ventures, and other means were used to raise funds for the charities supported by Butlins:

There are many holiday camps in this country catering or many thousands of people. Among the amusements provided, especially on wet days, there is a game known as tombola, or housey-housey. The practice has been for many hundreds of people to take part in a single session of this harmless form of amusement. (Parliamentary Papers, 1959-1960 Standing Committee D Betting and Gaming Bill c.1149)

Although William Rees-Davis (the Conservative MP who commented on the popularity of bingo) was aware, bingo was a popular leisure activity amongst the masses. However, the significance of his comments (for he and Bob Mellish (Labour) MP) raised the issue on a number of occasions, were not realised by their colleagues as the Betting and Gaming bill proceeded through parliament in 1960.

The popularity of housey-housey in Britain, most particularly as part of the leisure activities of the working classes when they were on holiday, and well before commercial bingo was established in 1961, is apparent. There would be no three-hour-long twice-daily sessions of bingo in holiday camps were there not a substantial demand for the game. Seaside arcade operators would have concentrated on slot machines, which took up less space and required less staff, were there not substantial sums to be made from bingo. Bingo at the seaside was an important part of the working-class holiday experience, and was popular with women who had less opportunity for gambling at home than men. The sums of money raised from holiday gambling were equally substantial, both for commercial operators of seaside arcades and for charity from bingo at holiday camps. Furthermore, a significant proportion of holiday gambling spending was

by women taking the opportunity to gamble without attracting adverse comment. What is perhaps less obvious is that the game was popular in settings that were almost exclusively populated by the working classes, most particularly at holiday camps and seaside; places where catering for the pleasure of the masses was central to the commercial success of the enterprise.

The attitude of town councils, who traditionally held positions of authority over the working classes, towards holiday gambling illustrates that the development of holiday gambling, both in seaside machines and bingo arcades and holiday cash bingo, was an arena for class conflict. At stake even in Blackpool, noted for its liberal treatment of seaside entrepreneurship (Walton 1983), were the issues of ownership of leisure time, the morality of certain popular leisure choices and the role of commercial leisure providers in filling leisure time.

Nevertheless, holiday gambling was a significant factor in changing attitudes towards public gambling, especially by women. Debates about commercial bingo and its huge and immediate popularity in 1961 (Downs, 2009) reflect the arguments of Rojek that leisure, and especially the leisure settings of the working classes, offer spaces where “the relaxation of inhibitions [makes them] attractive to people and often challenging to orthodox and official social values” (Rojek, 2000: p. 148). On holiday there may be a willingness to try something slightly shocking; the observers did not find the licentious behaviour that received wisdom said took place on holiday (except between observers!) but noted that those who were apparently teetotal at home might drink on holiday; while a willingness to relax usual mores of behaviour might account for the popularity of vulgar postcards at the British seaside. The non-gambler might play the machines in the arcades on the seafront, even though they would not bet with the street bookies in their hometown.

Interviews conducted by author

Mr. Mervyn Cooper of Skegness (retired bingo hall owner) interviewed on 9 November 2001

Mr Daniel Mursell of Ramsgate (fairground and arcade assistant) interviewed February 7 2004

Archives other than Mass Observation

Centre for North West Regional Studies, Lancaster University Elizabeth Roberts Archive Mr S4B ER RSC/88/655

National Archives PRO Mepol 3/765 1939

‘Programme of Entertainments Butlins Phwelli Camp 1955’ [Online] Available at: <http://www.butlinsmemories.com/entertainment.htm> [Accessed 26th June 2010]

Birmingham Lives Carl Chinn Archive <http://lives.bgfl.org/carlchinn/>

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