



It's not just the kids returning to the Northwest's recreational waters.

Words Ian Herbert. Photographs Len Grant.

BATHING BEAUTIES

Michael Meacher's blue trunks matched his goose pimples when he kept a four-year old promise and ventured across Blackpool beach to brave the Irish Sea during the Labour Party conference last autumn.

'Taking the plunge' hardly describes the 200 yard paddle and the brief period of splashing that ensued after Mr Meacher's complete immersion. "It was a lot better than I thought it was going to be," spluttered the environment minister as he emerged from the swell. "It is not pleasurable. I did take a few mouthfuls, not deliberately, but I have to say I am hoping to stay healthy."

A small step for the minister was a seismic one for Blackpool, whose tourism efforts were not exactly helped by Mr Meacher's insistence, when

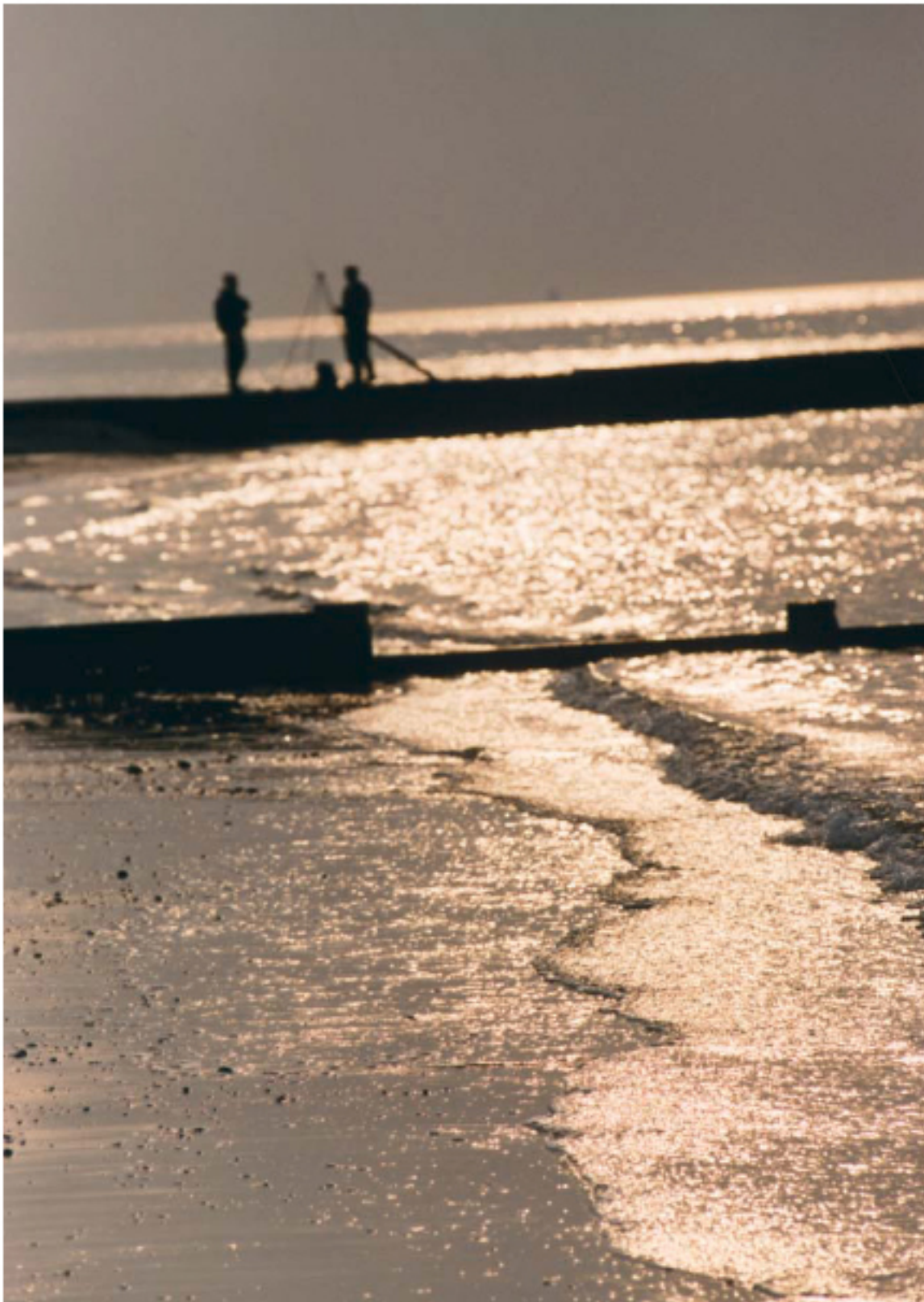
Labour last ventured to the Pylde coast for its conference four years ago, that the resort's beaches were filthy. He would swim, he told them, only when Blackpool's beaches met European cleanliness standards - a target eventually attained in 2001.

The strides the Northwest is taking to enhance its bathing waters - and make them contribute to sustainable economic development - make a brief stunt in the Irish Sea pale into insignificance.

Everybody knows that Blackpool remains one of the Northwest's economic jewels - but it's only a part of the rich, eclectic range of bathing waters offered by the region's estuaries and coastlines. Formby and West Kirby are the real jewels, Merseysiders will tell you. Cumbria loves Seascale. And in west Lancashire, they're especially fond of Ainsdale.

Problem is, we've not been shouting about some of our best bathing waters. Many fine waters are not even able to seek out the famous, coveted world standard blue flag which can help pull tourists in. That's because none was among the list of 34 coastal and three lakeside sites designated for regular checks by the EU, when a safe bathing waters monitoring regime was set up in the late 1970s. Many of the emerging popular spots remain relatively unsung as a result.





It is now widely accepted that the list of designated bathing waters is outdated. As well as omitting some important destinations, it includes some that are barely used.

It is an issue that has been exercising the Environment Agency (EA) for some time and now, in partnership with the Mersey Basin Campaign (MBC), it is using a key €8.6 million European grant to undertake a complete reappraisal of which bathing waters should have designation. It is an exciting project, part of Interreg, the European Community initiative designed to stimulate interregional cooperation by awarding funds to projects which involve a number of European partners. For this initiative, the Northwest is partnering up with Portugal, also examining its own designation system.

The complex, potentially contentious three-year project is destined to bring choppy waters of its own, but the aim is clear: establish where people want to bathe and help those locations to develop.

"We want to survey the coasts and inland waters," says MBC development manager Iain Taylor, the project leader. "We need to determine where people are going and if those places are safe. If they are, then let's promote them. Let's maximise the potential for renewal, economic regeneration and urban renewal. We've a lot of ground to cover - at the moment we don't even know which places people are using."

Re-designation will not happen overnight, Taylor admits. "Identifying them will be a challenge," he says. "We'll do flyovers of the coasts on busy days and literally work out where they are. Inland waters are more tricky. We'll survey places which are busy on warm, summer days, talk to people in those places. The whole process is about community engagement - identifying the key stakeholders. If we establish that a site is really rock-and-roll, then we will rank it highly."

A proposed list of designated beaches will be submitted within two years to the Department for Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) which has indicated that it is prepared to look at a re-designation, in time for an overhaul of the entire designation criteria, which is currently under active discussion in Europe.

Even before work begins, though, the MBC has made it quite clear that it's not just interested in places where tourists want a dip in the sea. The overall Interreg project - of which re-designation comprises only one part - is called Improving Coastal and Recreational Waters. It's important to distinguish between the two.

Recreational waters encompass all the emerging kinds of recreation that might involve being in the water, from kite

60-second expert

- eight Northwest beaches have Seaside Award yellow flags - Ainsdale, Haverigg, Lifeboat Road in Formby, Seascale, Silecroft, Southport, St Bees, West Kirby, Walney Island at Biggar Bank
- among the yellow flag criteria, resorts have to pass water quality tests, prohibit dogs on beaches, have bins every 25 metres or so, have lifeguard equipment to hand, phone boxes within five minutes and toilets
- the Northwest's big breakthrough in beach cleanliness came in 2001, when Blackpool's water quality passed the EU basic mandatory test. The Northwest shot up from a pass rate of 68% to 82%. This is a measure of lower grade sewage contamination as well as oil and chemical pollutants.
- Blue Flag status, marked in guidebooks and on beach billboards, is awarded after stringent tests on faecal streptococci bacteria. No Northwest beaches pass this test yet
- the Mersey Basin Campaign and Environment Agency have secured €8.6 million to establish which beaches and water courses should be designated as bathing waters. This is part of a wider EU project to improve bathing waters, bringing together five EU members - Britain, Spain, Portugal, Ireland and France

surfing and water-skiing to sailing. Those activities might take place inland or on coasts.

Sale Water Park near Manchester and Manley Lake, the hugely popular lake near Chester are both examples of the sustainable economic benefits offered by such waters - even if being thrown from a jet-ski at high speed doesn't fit the Edwardian concept of 'taking the waters'.

The potential of these locations to develop has been enhanced by vastly improved inland water quality.

As the MBC secured its grant, in April, the EA was preparing to publish monitoring data showing how, for the first time since the Industrial Revolution, oxygen levels are now high enough to support fish along the entire Mersey estuary. It's another triumph for the MBC's mission - and it is going to mean more of the regular angling matches already held in the estuary, not to mention sailing regattas, canoeing, rowing and windsurfing - all of which are increasingly popular.

Improved river quality also means improved coastal waters. An indication of just how much better our seas have become is provided by the Seaside Awards, the ten-year-old scheme operated by Wigan-based Encams (Environmental Campaigns), to highlight excellence among those locations (many of them small secluded coves and beaches in rural locations) for which the resort-dominated Blue Flag scheme is out of reach.

When the Seaside Awards were established in 1992, just 92 beaches were listed nationwide. Now a total of 332 qualify for the Encams Seaside Award yellow flag, by providing a good beach environment and waters to slightly less demanding

which, for obvious reasons, create untold bacterial pollution), or from cattle and sheep grazing beside a river.

The Ribble and Fylde coasts have particular pollution problems, owing to the proximity of major towns like Preston, Wigan and Southport and the use of the Ribble salt marshes for grazing and by birds. The EA has already undertaken a major study with Defra and Brighton University to identify where bacteria has come from. Another part of the Interreg project is examining the same issue.

For Blackpool, the renewed focus on bathing waters offers a sustainable development potential which has been overshadowed by the national headlines accompanying the town's deliberations over whether to metamorphose into a 'Vegas of the North.'

Plans for a £1 billion development, centred on a 200 hectare site at the centre of the resort and potentially creating 20,000 jobs over 15 to 20 years, were announced in the spring. They would capitalise on a possible liberalisation of gaming laws in the UK.

But the town, which has 5.1% unemployment in winter and a more marked seasonal variation in employment than any other resort in Britain, is only beginning to discover the true value of its finest commodity of all - water.

Examine the example of the Blackpool Light Craft Club. When established in the 1950s, it was for people who had small boats. In the last three years, it has transmogrified into a watersports club, complete with its Californian-style beach house on the Blackpool sandhills. Renamed BLCC, it provides jet-skiing, wake boarding and kite surfing - a formidably

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standard than the Blue Flag scheme, which Encams also administers in the UK.

The Northwest list of yellow flag destinations includes Ainsdale, West Kirby and Fomby, but the region is hardly afloat with them - we have just eight listed. 'There's a lot more work to do - but our awards have established the degree of hitherto 'unsung' bathing waters - particularly the rural Cumbrian ones,' said Ian Cole, who manages the Encams awards scheme.

Of course, there's a lot more to getting our bathing waters right than re-designation. Water quality issues still provide a myriad of problems, despite the exhaustive efforts of the EA to monitor bathing waters by taking weekly samples throughout the summer season.

'What we have been trying to do for some time is identify the cause and effect [of water pollution],' says the EA's strategic environmental planning manager in the Northwest, Clive Gaskell. 'If you have poor conditions on the beach, where does it come from?'

Much effort has been put in at sewage treatment works, but there are other sources of bacteria in rivers and seas. Sewage bacteria can come from a large bird population (like the population of 100,000 starlings on Blackpool's North Pier

exciting sport in which participants are pulled along by huge kites that are tied to surfboards. Membership has tripled to 150.

'We seemed to have forgotten that the Irish Sea is there for us to have a good time,' said organiser Brian Crombleholme. 'I've fallen off my jet-skis many a time and got a mouthful of sea. It's just fine. There's more and more to do out there - some of the local sailors have been out two or three miles and seen sea lions of late. So we're going to get out this summer to see them. It's all part of what we can offer.'

Renowned kite surfer Mark Connelly backs up the view. 'Eighteen months ago I'd never have gone in the water,' he said.

And nearby, mum Catherine Matthew, swimming in the sea with her children, said: 'Five years ago there was no way I'd have let the kids in the water but the improvement has been fantastic.'

Having secured the European cleanliness target for its water, another Blackpool target must be one of those famous blue flags - that means establishing a beach environment to match its clean waters. After that, who knows? Perhaps the entire Labour cabinet, kite surfing in full view of the prom.

MORE INFORMATION:
ENCAMS
www.encams.org
BLUE FLAG AWARDS
www.seasideawards.org.uk
ENVIRONMENT AGENCY
www.environment-agency.gov.uk
MERSEY BASIN CAMPAIGN
www.merseybasin.org.uk