



Howell's early studio.

Charles Howell Photographer of Pleasure

By Colin Harding

Continuing our summer theme, we look at the national capital of the seaside holiday, Blackpool, and one of its photographers.

FOR OVER a century, Blackpool has been the epitome of the popular British seaside resort. Brash, loud and vulgar, it is a magnet for those in search of a good time. As *The Guardian* observed in 1950 (8 August 1950, p3): 'When visitors here step out of the station into the liberating smell of the sea, or into the mingled odours of shellfish, vinegar and fried onions on the promenade, they can forget most of the restraints, the reticences, the respect for appearances that have dogged them throughout the year.'

This lack of restraint also extended

to their holiday portraits. For many holidaymakers, it wasn't enough simply to have fun - one had to be seen to be having fun.

More importantly, family and friends back home had to see what a good time you had. Photographic studios did a brisk trade at seaside resorts, producing souvenir portraits that parodied the conventions of formal portraiture. Blackpool, of course, had its fair share of studios. The most successful were owned by Charles Howell, who photographed

generations of Blackpool pleasure-seekers.

In 1913, Charles Howell opened a studio in Bank Hey Street, Blackpool - just behind the promenade and only a stone's throw from the Tower. Here he specialised in producing novelty caricature portraits using so-called 'grotesque foregrounds'. Introduced in America during the 1880s, these were a variation on the popular 'head-through-the-hole' comic canvases that first appeared at the British seaside in the 1890s. In his book,

'Photographic Pleasures', first published in 1896, Walter E. Woodbury described how they were used: 'The card containing the grotesque drawing is held by the sitter on his knees and arranged by the photographer in such a way that his head rests just above the neck of the painted body. A white background is arranged behind and when the negative is made all traces of the edges of the foreground are removed by careful retouching.' Grotesque foregrounds were still in common use in the 1950s:

'Camouflage screens represent browned limbs and torsos in the briefest of bathing suits. You stand behind these, place your head in position as if for the guillotine, smile as roguishly as possible, and wait for the click. Yours is the face; the rest is fantasy.' (The Guardian, 27 March, 1951, p3). In Howell's studio you could choose to be photographed as a wide range of characters, including bathing belles, policemen, strongmen or hairy-kneed, kilt-wearing, Scotsmen. Howell was keen to embrace new technologies and his studio was among the first to use electric illumination - he named it 'The Electric Studio'. Electric lighting meant that he could extend the studio's operating hours into the evenings. No matter what the weather outside was like, the sun always shone in Howell's studio.

In the early 1920s, Howell opened another photographic studio, just down the road as part of the attractions at Blackpool Pleasure Beach. What is now Britain's most popular tourist attraction, with over six million visitors a year, developed at the southern end of the resort at the beginning of the twentieth century. Its founder, William George Bean, wanted to create an amusement park 'to make adults feel like children again and to inspire gaiety of a primarily innocent character'. By the 1920s the Pleasure Beach had expand-



A punter using a 'grotesque foreground' - here, a copper.

ed dramatically to include a range of rides and sideshows. Paying a visit there was seen as an essential part of any trip to Blackpool: 'Whether the visitor is young or old, I beg he will not fail to spend an hour or two on the South Shore Pleasure Beach. If he is young, it will be his very element. If he is old it will take him back to those days when he was not yet old and will, for a time at any rate, give him back his youth.' Howell, as the Pleasure Beach's

'Official Photographer', tapped into this temporary state of youthfulness by offering playful portraits incorporating an assortment of novelty props. In Howell's studio, you could be photographed wearing a top hat, playing a banjo or holding a giant bottle of beer. You could be photographed on a papier maché horse or a real, live donkey. However, Howell's trademark was a less traditional form of seaside transport - a motorcycle (a Coventry Eagle motor



A cheerful bunch of lads with all the props they could squeeze in - rural background, motorcycle, sidecar, toy wagon, and a really big beer bottle.

cycle, to be exact). 'Be Photographed on the Motor Cycle' coaxed the sign above the entrance to his studio and, indeed, many thousands of visitors did just that. Snotty-nosed children, groups of Jack the Lads, shy young newlyweds, Darbys and Joans, and stately matrons - all were happy to sit astride Howell's famous motorcycle. 'Six postcards for a shilling - Ready while you wait'

William Bean's inspiration had been American fairgrounds. The Pleasure Beach advertised itself as 'England's greatest American amusement park'. In 1931, while on a visit to America, the Pleasure Beach's new managing director, Leonard Thompson, saw and, was greatly impressed by, parks designed in an Art Deco style. He commissioned an American architect, Edward Schoeppe, who worked for an amusement park in

Philadelphia, to give the Pleasure Beach a modernist makeover. One of the first attractions to receive the Schoeppe touch was Howell's studio. In 1932, Howell's original studio - a plain, functional building - was demolished to make way for an Art Deco extravaganza. Now, the building's function was broadcast to the world by a bold architectural jeu d'esprit. It was topped by three huge representations of cameras, their bellows extending at right angles, seemingly poised to capture the crowds who thronged below.

Whilst its exterior might have changed dramatically, activity inside the studio exhibited a reassuring sense of continuity. Through the 1930s, the passing years are revealed through the changing number plates on Howell's motorcycle, as 'CH 1933' gradually gives way to 'CH1939'. Howell's studio remained a microcosm of Blackpool itself. A place where people could escape the cares of the workaday world; a place where, if only for the fleeting moment, the boundaries between fantasy and reality become blurred; a place where, in the words of W.H.Auden, 'Lulled by the light they live their dreams of freedom.'

References:

For a general history of Blackpool Pleasure Beach, see John K.Walton, *Riding on Rainbows: Blackpool Pleasure Beach and its Place in British Popular Culture*, Skelter Publishing, St Albans, 2007. Surprisingly, this publication contains no mention of Charles Howell. The Blackpool Pleasure Beach website - www.blackpoolpleasurebeach.com also contains some historical notes.

Howell's studio - Gillian Jones, *Lancashire Professional Photographers 1840-1940*, PhotoResearch, Watford, 2004. p109.



The Art Deco studio designed by Schoeppe for Howell at the Pleasure Beach.

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The Beach Photographer.

Commercial portrait photographers were once commonplace wherever people gathered for leisure or pleasure - especially at the seaside. They were a frequent sight for over a hundred years, sometimes using equipment and processes that had changed little since the previous century. However, despite their prolific output, they have been largely written-out of photographic history.

This exhibition celebrates the work of these once familiar, but now largely forgotten, photographers