

Good Clean Fun: A Social History of Britain's First Holiday Camp

The functional disguised as the fantastic - an artist's impression of The Great Pavilion in 1904. This was the first ever example of holiday camp fantasy architecture, built in the Indian style with oriental domes. Especially popular at later holiday camps were buildings in the international style with the 'cruising on land' idea. Designed to look like the upper half of a ship, these buildings came complete with portholes, mast, wheelhouse bars and space at the stern for deck games.

Picture credit: Mike Kelly



So how come the historians keep getting it wrong? asks the author, Jill Drower

Like so many Brits, I went to Butlins as a child, winning the fancy dress one year as The Invisible Man, and competing in a talent contest another. What I did not know was that it was my great-grandfather who invented the British holiday camp. He not only coined the term itself, but he also devised the exact template for infrastructure, catering and entertainment which was, in later decades, to be imitated by Butlin, Pontin and Warner. All this before the turn of the twentieth century!

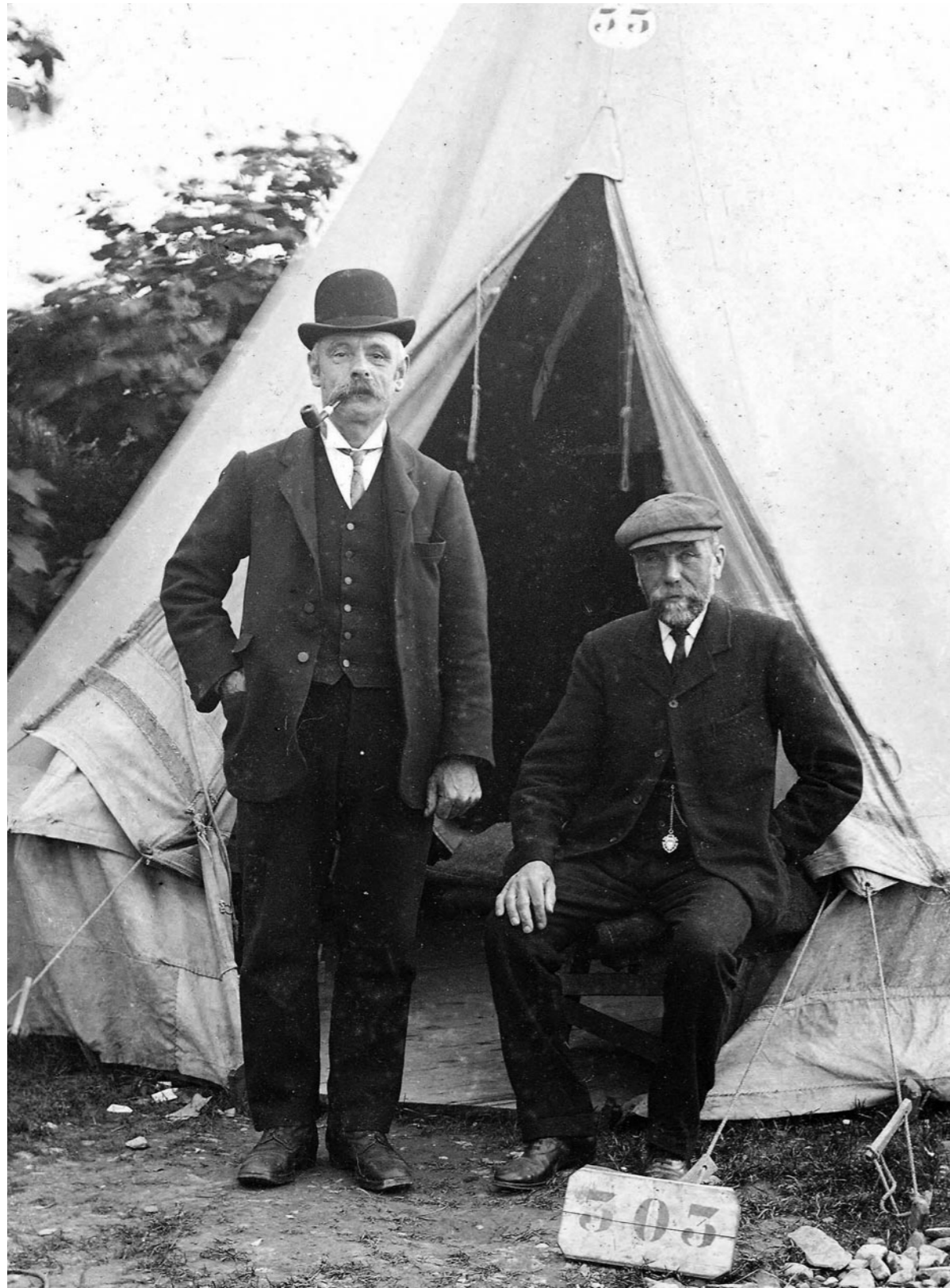
Victorian Liverpool was a city of contrasts. The 'jewel of the industrial revolution', it was described by Moby Dick's author, Herman Melville, as a sight to equal the old pyramids of Egypt. By 1850, the port had become a magnet, attracting a constant flow of those escaping famine or in search of a better life. Amongst the new arrivals were my great-great grand parents, who set up in business supplying bread to Cunard, Alan's and other steamship companies. A notoriously dangerous and deprived part of town, the North End was characterised by overcrowding, Gerry-built 'courts', severe malnutrition, epidemics and a shocking infant mortality rate. It was here that my great-grandfather, Joseph Cunningham, set up Sunday schools, reading rooms and prayer halls. His involvement with the establishment of the Gordon and Florence Working Lads institutes led Cunningham and his followers to take parties of working lads out to the countryside for sports days in the fresh air. One of those participating later

remembered an occasion in the 1880s when Cunningham took 500 lads on a trip ten miles out of town: 'How did he do it? He hired canal boats, took the hatches off, loaded up the holds with humanity and, with hired horses proceeded down the Leeds and Liverpool canal to Lydiate. A borrowed boiler for hot water, a field from a sympathetic farmer, plenty of assistance in the way of stewards and the thing was done. What a day we had! How we enjoyed it! Who but Mr Cunningham could have such a brain-wave?'

These outings soon became an annual summer camp at Great Orme's Head or at Laxey in the Isle of Man and by 1898 Cunningham's holiday camp had become a family business and a major commercial venture, offering holidays - 'a full week for thirteen shillings!' - throughout the season, with 'none of the inconveniences of roughing it under canvas'. Campers were encouraged to save weekly for their holiday through the Cunningham savings bank. Campers slept in bell tents, lit by candle, with wooden flooring and sprung beds.

Thus began Cunningham's Young Men's Holiday Camp. Rebuilt as a permanent holiday village above the Douglas seafront in 1904, the camp boasted a one hundred foot recreation hall, a heated swimming pool, barber's shop, valet service and an orchestra to play at every meal. From the early nineteen hundreds, Cunningham's was attracting 40,000 holiday makers every season

Jill Drower is author of *Good Clean Fun: A Social History of Britain's First Holiday Camp* (2018) £25.00 ISBN: 978-0-9927775-1-7 You may purchase the book through Speke's Volumes at Amazon.co.uk



RIGHT: Two Edwardian holiday campers in front of their 'chalet' (circa 1908) - a candlelit bell tent. As with the holiday camps of the thirties, campers competed to give their tents a good name. One example, 'They Toil not Neither do they Spin' points to the background of many of those Pre-First World War campers - factory workers from the cotton mills. Picture credit: Mike Kelly



and for the four following decades, a sea of bell tents could be seen above the promenade of this popular Manx seaside resort.

Catering was a military operation at Cunningham's, with 2,500 covers per sitting in 1907. Such was the demand that four farms were merged, and one vast model farm built, which operated following 1918. With no convenience foods, the kitchens were a logistical challenge. Every week, three and half miles of sausage and 600 hams were produced and 42,000 breakfast rolls baked. Gravy and custard was produced in 100 gallon pans. At mealtimes, campers were encouraged to have extra servings, which led to the famous Cunningham eating competitions.

Where the Cunningham Camp differed from its counterparts of the fifties and sixties was in the strictness of its rules. All campers had to sign a pledge on their booking form promising not to touch alcohol or use improper language during their holiday, and no women were allowed to stay at the camp. Despite the social changes that were brought about by the First World War,

Cunningham's remained a men-only, teetotal camp until its sale in 1945.

In the 1980s, I tried to find out more, but there was little in the British Library and academics were unanimous in believing that the British holiday camp as a mass movement only really got going after the Holidays With Pay Act of 1938. I advertised widely at that time and got a flood of replies that contradicted this. The staff or the campers themselves, their children and even their grandchildren made it clear that the memory of this extraordinary place had been passed down through several generations. These people knew that Cunningham's Young Men's Holiday Camp was a major phenomenon from the Edwardian period.

Recent academic publications still place the start of mass holiday camps in the late 1930s. I hope this book now puts the record straight by setting the holiday camp story in its rightful place - rooted in nineteenth century urban deprivation resulting from the Industrial Revolution. ■

ABOVE: One of the many cartoon postcards depicting life at the Cunningham Camp before the First World War. The joyful refrain 'Are we downhearted? Are we coming back?' continued at later holiday camps with the cry, 'Is everybody happy?'. Picture credit: Jill Drower



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