At the beginning of this story a crowded bus, on its way to “Farleigh” camp in Yorkshire, bumps along the coastal road between Flamborough and Bridlington. The year is 1947. On board a suited man with a thin moustache and greased black hair cadges a cigarette from a young brunette, neat in coat and gloves. “Have you ever been in this part of the world before?” he asks. “No, have you?” he says, “I was stationed here when I was on ops.” He is Squadron Leader Hardwick (played by Dennis Price) and, it turns out, an impostor. Not a war hero at all but a murderer on the run. The film, a B movie in black & white made for the Rank Organisation by Gainsborough Pictures, stars Flora Robson and Jack (later Dixon of Dock Green) Warner. It is called Holiday Camp. Few now remember the film and today the camp is a spoiled and deserted site. Once RAF Hunmanby Moor, it is better known in the memory of its many campers, as Butlin’s Filey.

William “Billy” Butlin (1899-1980) purchased the first 120 acres of the 400 acres site, with its six mile long flank of wide beach running north from Flamborough Head, in the summer of 1939 but construction of this, his third—and eventually biggest—holiday camp, was frustrated by the outbreak of war. The government was looking for coastal locations to build military bases and its spotlight fell on Filey. Seeing his chance, Butlin approached war minister Isaac Hore-Belisha and suggested that, as a condition of the sale, he should be allowed to finish construction of “hutment accommodation” at a cost of £75 a head (the going rate for service housing of this kind was then £125 a head). Butlin also offered to buy back the site for three-fifths of its original cost—no matter what its condition—at the end of the war. It was a gamble and it paid off. Hunmanby Moor survived World War II and, in 1945, Butlin wasted no time in turning it into his showpiece. No matter that some of the buildings still looked like barracks and armouries, this was going to be his number one dream camp, the “biggest in the world”. And soon it was, catering eventually for as many as 11,000 visitors a week. At peak, in the mid-sixties, Butlin had ten such camps including the crème de la crème, Butlin’s Bahamas.

Butlin provided holidays on an industrial scale to a workforce newly benefiting from the holidays-with-pay act of 1938. “A week’s holiday for a week’s pay” was his slogan. Each camp offered something unique and memorable. Filey had a main line railway station, a road train to deliver you to your chalet, and a chairlift. Other attractions included swimming pools (indoor and outdoor), a boating lake, a miniature railway.
DANIEL MEADOWS: BUTLIN'S BY THE SEA, 1972

FIELDSTUDY 14

There was a huge theatre, ballroom, sports fields, vast flower beds, a giant fountain—even a giant—and “the longest bar in the world”. There was child care and organised entertainment for all ages, including talent, beauty, bonny baby and glamorous granny contests, with hubbub, It’s A Knockout and donkey derby thrown in. There were review and revue shows, also wrestling kings, dancing, discotheque and roller skating. Even cabaret. I saw the comedian Bob Monkhouse perform at Filey.

I went there for the months of July and August in 1972. I was studying photography at Manchester Polytechnic and, when the summer term ended, Martin Parr and I—both of us twenty years old—joined Butlin’s Photographic Services as official “walkie” photographers. We needed paid employment to see us through the summer but we also wanted an opportunity to make a collaborative work of social documentation. We used two different cameras: theirs for the paid job, ours for the documentary. Theirs was a Leica M1, mine a Pentax Spotmatic. Parr and I collaborated on two projects while we were students: Butlin’s by the Sea was exhibited as the opening show at the new Impressions Gallery of Photography in York (November 1972); June Street, a study of families living in a street of terraced houses in Salford, was shown on BBC Television’s Look North (23 May 1973).

With a grim decade at boarding school and a vile stay on an RAF base as a cadet fresh in the memory, I can’t say that I was looking forward to a whole summer spent at Butlin’s and, when I arrived to find that inmates were tribally assigned to dining rooms (Kent, York, Windsor) and that the gridlike streets were strung with tannoy loudspeakers and patrolled by uniformed security men, my heart sank. As a theatre and cinema goer with an excitable imagination, my head was full of the many recent class satires I’d seen or read that were based in holiday or military camps and by the seaside: Arnold Wesker’s Chips with Everything (1962), Joe Orton’s The Erpingham Camp (1966), Richard Attenborough’s Oh! What A Lovely War (1969) and “Yowsa! Yowsa! Yowsa!” Sydney Pollack’s They Shoot Horses Don’t They? (1969). Fact or fiction, Butlin’s had me spooked.

In Holiday Camp it had Miss Harman (Esther Harman, a middle-aged spinster played by Flora Robson) spooked too. But, after a conversation with the blind camp announcer (played by Esmond Knight) she began to lighten up. Looking down from the clock tower on a huge parade of happy campers laughing and singing as they march along, the blind man asks: “Do you see what I see?” “What do you see?” says Esther. “One of the strangest sights of the twentieth century. A great mass of people all fighting for the one thing that you can’t get by fighting for it, happiness. When I first came here I thought I couldn’t stand it. The noise, the crowd, the frantic search for pleasures. Then I saw it wasn’t really a crowd at all, just separate individuals, each one of them with a different set of problems and worries, hopes and fears, each one of them tired and dispirited, eager for peace and yet hardened to be alert.”

We see what we expect to see. Photographers, though, can picture only what they notice and one of the things I noticed, during that glam rock summer of teeny boppers and popcorn, was the constantly unrolling, informal but nevertheless deadly serious, teenage fashion parade. It was something that happened on the edge: it happened in spite of the talent shows and the Miss She contest. And it happened in colour. Colour photography at that time was expensive, the materials were difficult to handle and the film was “slow” (that is, compared with monochrome, it was less sensitive to light) which made freezing action difficult. Serious documentarists avoided colour, quipping that that black & white was “the colour of photography. So, when I put that first precious
it was my inexperience. Perhaps it was the can't do with this set. Not altogether. Perhaps the events photographed. But it's something I images you choose match your recollection of edit a picture story is to make sure that the pictures would have stayed. But here they are, this PARC research project, that's where those bottom of a cardboard box. If it hadn't been for forgotten and, in time, invaded by fungus at the were broken up, I salvaged my colour prints and them on panels in groups of four. After the show a handful of them printed small and I mounted pictures. For the Impressions exhibition I had just had embraced.

And, in 1972, I too thought little of my colour pictures. For the Impressions exhibition I had just a handful of them printed small and I mounted them on panels in groups of four. After the show was broken up, I salvaged my colour prints and stored them safely but the transparencies were forgotten and, in time, invaded by fungus at the bottom of a cardboard box. It hadn't been for the FACC research project, that's where those pictures would have stayed. But here they are, now digitally scanned and restored.

One thing that's important to do when you sell a picture story is to make sure that the images you choose match your recollection of the events photographed. But it's something I can't do with this set. Not altogether. Perhaps it was my inexperience. Perhaps it was the

“Yowsa! Yowsa!” of all those stage actions still playing in my imagination but one of the things I recall from that summer was an underlying current of casual violence and I never photographed it. Maybe I should just forget about it but I can't. With their mums and dads away on package holidays, many teenagers were at Filey unchaperoned and, on the big wakes holidays and during Glasgow fair (the last two weeks of July), rival tribes of youths would skirmish. I have a vivid memory of learning a matinée performance early one day and stepping out of the theatre straight into the immediate aftermath of what must have been quite a battle. In the Fireside bed of my hotel lay a collapsed youth, a sharpened steel comb-sticking out of him. I legged it to the first old post, alerted the ambulance crew and, in minutes, we were screaming to the scene. But when we got there the lad was gone. Was this some kind of a practical joke? The medics were furious. Why was I wasting their time? If it happened, make photographer, where's the picture? Where indeed?

What there is no doubt about is that the holiday camp business did take a bad hit from package tour companies and, in that year of 1972, Butlin's was sold to the Rank Organisation, overseen (ah irony!) of that other holiday camp, the movie. The business was shaken but the story lived on. For, even when Filey did eventually close, at the end of its thirty-eighth season in 1983, Butlin's had once again been reinvented as fiction, not this time as Farleigh Camp in a B movie for the big screen, but as Mappin's, a hit sit-com for the small one, the BBC's cheery and nostalgic 26-Dec-79

The Butlins' brand (owned since 2000 by Bourne Leisure) continues. In 2011 it is celebrating its 75th anniversary. The three remaining camps—Bognor Regis, Minehead and Skegness—are restyled as “resorts” and, it seems, thrive. So, campers, never say die and remember the redcoat motto: “The sun always shines and Butlin's, so smile, smile, smile!”

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This edition of Fieldstudy explores the series of colour photographs made by Daniel Meadows at Butlin’s Holiday Camp, Bognor in 1972.

Daniel Meadows and Martin Parr became Robin’s editors for this special edition of Fieldstudy, which also acts as a publication of the Archive Research Centre’s project on Daniel Meadows and Martin Parr, a touring exhibition of Meadows’ work. Daniel Meadows Early Photographic Work created by Val Williams, will be at the National Media Museum, Bradford from 24th February until 12th May 2012 before touring to Ffotogallery, Wales: Birmingham Library and Archive Services and the London College of Communication. The Daniel Meadows Early Photographic Work project is an Arts and Humanities Research Council project managed by Brigitte Lardinois and supported by a partnership with the University of the Arts London and its College of Communication. The Centre has a core research team of PhD students. The Journal of Photographic Culture is co-hosted by the Centre and PARC also leads an online community of photographic research and practice. PARC’s interests span the history and culture of photography, with particular emphasis on post-war British photography, the documentation of war and conflict, the photography of labour and exile, the visualization of the counterculture, and photographers as filmmakers. PARC was founded in 2003 in partnership with the National Media Museum and the Photographers’ Gallery, London, the Imperial War Museum, the University of Sheffield, the University of Warwick, Birmingham Library and Archive Services, the Royal College of Art, the National Gallery, the V&A, the Imperial War Museum, the ‘Writing Photography’ seminar at the Photographers’ Gallery, the NAAM project and the xcctv design shorts project at the University of the Arts London.

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