

What is Place identity?

A study in Great Yarmouth

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Introduction

When you think of any place in the world you assign it with an identity. This research project aims to look at how that identity is formed and what influences its creation. To allow for an in-depth examination of this topic I will be looking at the borough of Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, UK. For the past 27 years I have lived here and feel I have a good understanding of its facets, including its history and public perceptions.

Before I can make any informed conclusions I need to fully investigate and expand on certain core questions and ideas including; What is place? What is identity? Why do we emphasise certain aspects of a place over others? What role does space, time, and your own experiences in life play in the formation of place identity?

My interest in the subject is twofold. As a Graphic Designer for the local authority, it is my job to represent the borough to the best of its ability. By understanding how people assign identity to a place, I hope that I can establish what resonates with individuals and use this in my professional practice. In addition, I feel this research project will set out certain parameters which will help others in establishing place identity in different locations around the world.

The intended audience, therefore, is quite a varied one. It is for anyone who has leverage on a place's identity. It is for locals, professionals and, I suppose, because of my own creative bias, those from a graphic design background. If you have ever wondered why a place has a certain feeling or identity to it, read on.

What is identity?

Identity is a 16th Century word derived from the Latin 'idem' or to be the same. I believe that the word and term identity have developed in the modern world to mean two different things and each of these are at polar opposites with one another. One describes a 'sameness' or a belonging to a group, while the other, describes a uniqueness strived for in terms of brand, visual or place identity. Whilst this research paper seeks to explore the notion of place identity and therefore what contributes to a location's 'uniqueness', it is imperative to remember that this new definition of identity comes from a place where it means to share qualities with others to reflect who you are.

So when did identity start to be used to highlight difference and refer to an ever increasingly smaller aspect of a person or a place?

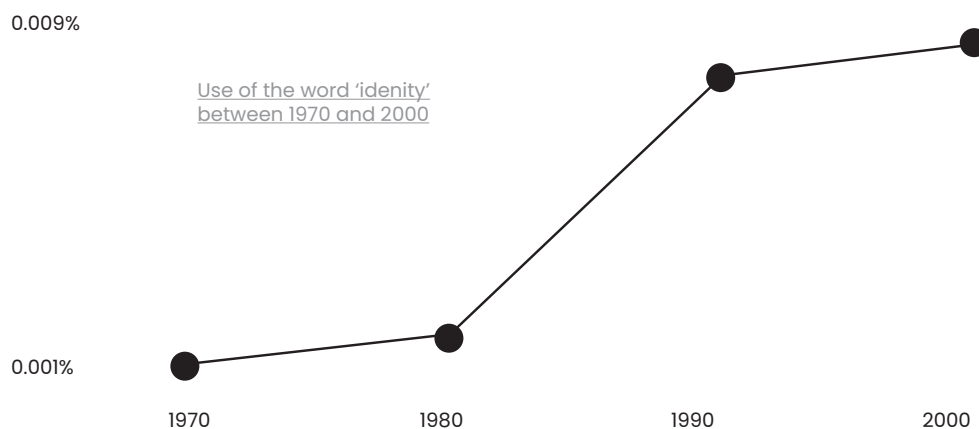


Figure 1 above shows that the word identity is used almost 8 times more now than it was in the 1960s. As with many other facets of society, things are changing at an ever increasing rate. Following the end of World War II people wanted to express themselves in new and different ways. In art, there was the Art Nouveau movement, in music, the Beatles, Punks, Goths. It goes on. The explosion of new ways to identify became aligned with a more communicative world meaning the number of ways you could identify became limitless. This both had the effect of making the world feel closer and further away at the same time. When the community you identify with are on the other side of the world it makes sense for you to use technology to communicate with them. However, this can be an isolating venture and when you realise some of these communities exist purely online it makes you start to think of place as an interesting concept.

'Place identity' **can** mean the area where you identify with other people, usually geographical. For example, I could identify as a human on planet earth – in the northern hemisphere. A European, a Brit. Someone from Norfolk or Great Yarmouth. So a place identity is a location which also shapes a person's identity. Can it be digital? Not sure. And maybe the answer to that one is not yet. I have no doubt that people will visit virtual spaces and those spaces will become a defining as part of their personal identities in the not-too-distant future. For the purpose of this project, I will be referring to place as a physical space which can be quantified.

The phrase "place- identity" is actually a relatively modern concept and has only been used since the late 1970s. (Proshansky, 1978), describes it as a "potpourri of memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas, and related feelings about specific physical settings, as well as types of settings" (1983, p.60).

identity (n.)

c. 1600, "sameness, oneness, state of being the same," from French *identité* (14c.), from Medieval Latin *identitatem* (nominative *identitas*) "sameness," ultimately from Latin *idem* (neuter) "the same" (see *idem*). [For discussion of Latin formation, see entry in OED.] Earlier form of the word in English was *idemptitie* (1560s), from Medieval Latin *idemptitas*. Term *identity crisis* first recorded 1954. *Identity theft* attested from 1995. *Identity politics* is attested by 1987.

What is place?

A place can easily be identified by its quantifiable features – its population, geography, demographics etc. What is more intriguing, and harder to determine, are the immeasurable aspects. The feeling you get when you are there, its cultural influence and how the passage of time has influenced people's ideas of its identity. Tim Cresswell, in his book 'Place: an introduction', struggles to find a definition of the word 'place' and remarks, " it is a problem that no one knows what they are talking about when they are talking about place...Place, then, is both simple and complicated."

Quantifiably then, "The borough of Great Yarmouth is a diverse coastal area, focused around two urban centres – Great Yarmouth and Gorleston – and surrounded by a rural hinterland of small villages on the edge of the Norfolk Broads."

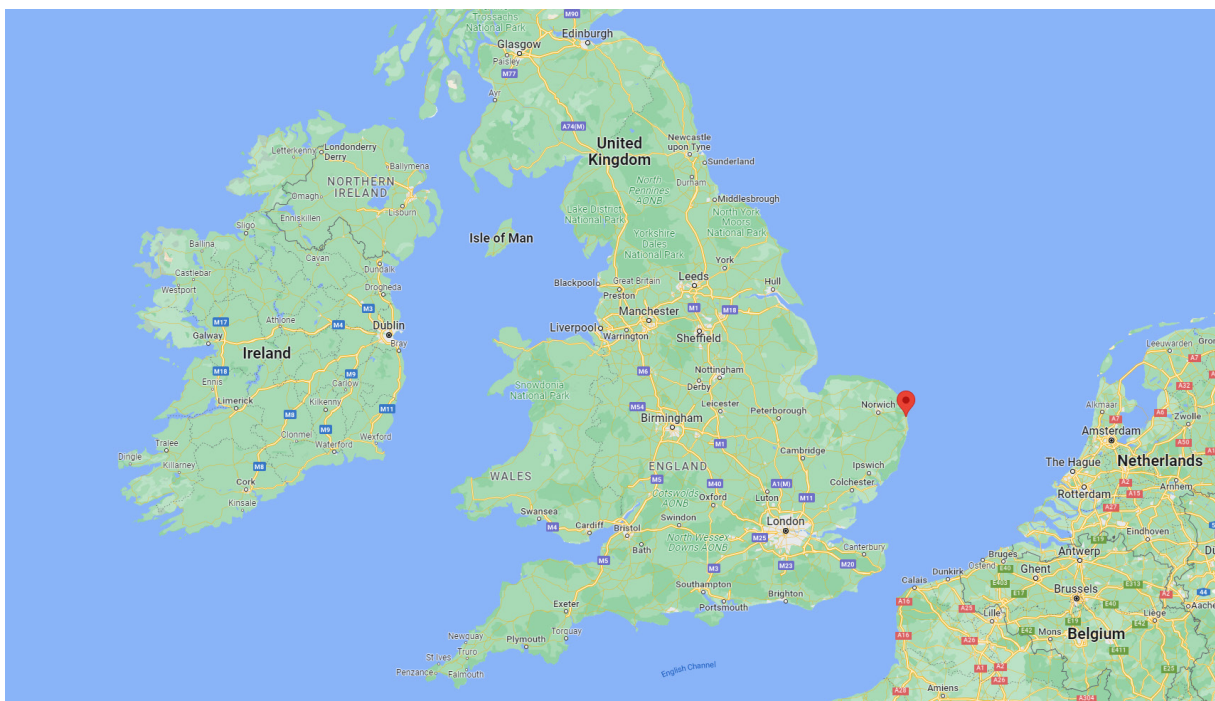
Other key facts include:

- population of 99,370 residents
- The proportion of people aged over 65 is relatively high
- 25th most deprived district in UK (out of 309)
- The economic value of tourism is worth in the region of £635m each year to the borough
- 96.9% of the borough's population identify as ethnically white.
- Traditional tourism remains a key element of the local economy.
- The urban area covers 8.3 sq mi (21 km²)

Chinese-American Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan differentiates space and place by our experience of it. He says, "Space becomes place when we get to know it and endow it with value". A beach, for example, is just a space until it becomes that place you, 'had your first kiss'. Then it becomes a location of significance. I suppose that this could also be applied to unvisited, or spaces unencoded with meaning. Copenhagen looks a great place to visit,

however, until I go and create memories the space will remain relatively insignificant. It's identity will also be formed in my mind by its identifiable characteristics and key locations.

It goes without saying that, just because you haven't personally experienced a space, it doesn't mean that it is not a place of significance for someone else. I recently visited a food festival in the most culturally diverse section of the Town. It was amazing to experience a small part of the place they have created for themselves and the importance they put on their cultural impact. Creswell claims, "People are creating places at all scales and everywhere in a myriad of different ways." And I believe that to also be true of identity. Depending on who you are and how you experience a place determines the resulting identity you associate with it. How then, are key themes intrinsically thread through a place to create a personality and character which is assumed by an outsider?



A map of the UK highlighting Great Yarmouth

Psychogeography

This is a relatively modern term which originates from an organization of social revolutionaries known as the Situationist International. Led by Guy Debord, he described Psychogeography as, “The study of the specific effects of the geographic environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviours of individuals.” The situationists’ wanted to highlight the way in which everyday life is controlled through the geographical environment and not through individual desires and behaviours.

I like to think of it in this way – Imagining you are transported to the centre of an unknown city in an unknown part of the world. Where do you go? What do you notice? What do you do? I don’t think these decisions are fully our own and that is down to the designed landscapes we inhabit. This is what the situationists’ describe as ‘The Dérive’, or drift, the “technique of locomotion without a goal”.

With that in mind, in its simplest terms, Psychogeography is where psychology and geography meet and how one affects the other. The term has been used by many researchers, authors and explorers since the 1950s and they have reappropriated that word, playing with its meaning to establish new ways in which we engage and interact with our environment. And you know what? That’s OK. Even Debord described the word as having a “pleasing vagueness”.

A key characteristic of psychogeography is that of walking or wandering. Most psychogeographers are concerned with walking in urban environments – mainly cities – and this is because it is there where walking is the “main, and quickest, mode of transport.”

Places where pedestrianism is an active choice means people ‘look up’ more. They are more affected by the environment and are more intrinsically part of the world around them. I think it is this “street-level gaze” which increases the directional and emotional subversion.

Conversely, are those who don’t want to be affected by the world around them. How often have you seen a commuter with their nose stuck in a book or their phone, briefly looking up to acknowledge they are on the right track before returning to their own, controllable environment? Psychogeography

barely registers in their minds.

Coverley continues to describe psychogeography as having a “history of ironic humour.” – Sounds right up my street! I suppose if you don’t notice the ignored the world around you can seem quite banal and by highlighting the unusual and ‘unseen’ in a humorous way, you create a sense of interest that “reveals the true nature that lies beneath the flux of every day.”

With a variety of psychogeographers providing slightly different viewpoints and approaches to the phenomenon, Coverley looks at some of the most influential characters and how they differ.

When talking about JG Ballard, “an English novelist, short story writer, satirist, and essayist”, Coverley says that his work, “clearly demonstrate(s) that it is the novelist rather than the theoretician who is best able to capture the relationship between the urban environment and human behaviour.” Although Ballard shares similar thoughts to the Situationists – in that they both believe in the “banalisation of everyday life” or “loss of emotional sensitivity” – He seeks to challenge this idea of ‘boring’ by focussing on the extremes in behaviour that can result from people trying to feel again.

For me then, I think of psychogeography as a method of primary research. Two people walking down the same street at exactly the same time will notice different things. By writing down how they experience their expedition allows us to identify their connected journey. I believe that it is this ‘collective convergence’ of ‘the noticed’ which creates the identity of place when seen from the outside.

Maybe the best way to look at identity of a place is to take on and research differing personas of people who have experience of the place? This list, of course, can be endless. However, I will be looking into several generic viewpoints to establish the extent of this difference in experience to highlight their own ‘collective convergences’ and what they notice.

Primary Research

As part of this project, I felt it imperative that I received input from others. I therefore created a survey which can be seen [here](#) . 76 responses were gathered over period of one month and the below analyses the data that was received.

Interestingly, it appears that most people focussed on the tourism side to the resort with words such as, “fun”, “seaside”, and “beach” being used most often. Conversely, some of the other used common words were, “dirty”, “deprived”, and “challenging”. Can these two depictions of a place coexist? From a lifetime of living and visiting Great Yarmouth, it appears there are two trains of thought here. Those who have lived here for a long period of time and those who have visited the location as a tourist. One of the entrants even described the place as “Schizophrenic” or having multiple identities.

Another submission chose to highlight their own experience with Great Yarmouth, “In my opinion the heydays of the 70s for me even the weather seemed better then. And life seemed less complicated.” It makes me wonder if the weather was better in the 70s? Was this just an illusion brought on by the innocence of youth? Maybe life was less complicated because the submitter was a child and yet to go to work, pay bills and have the stresses of life? Maybe the inter connectivity of society has lead to an identification of just how hard life can be and that it is different depending on where you live in the world and the socioeconomic state of the country you live in? There are lots of variants here and I would like to the reasonin behind that initial sentiment.

Who are you? Who am I?

I feel it important at this stage to tell you about myself. I can only write this essay from my own perception and my own experiences of the place and by knowing me better you will understand how I perceive the place of Great Yarmouth.

I am 35 years old. I was born at St George's Hospital London on Saturday 31 January 1987 and lived in Croydon until I was 8 years old. Great Yarmouth was only a 3-hour drive away and was a destination we as a family would visit often. In 1995 I moved to Caister-On-Sea, a village in Great Yarmouth, with my mum, dad, brother, and nan. I met my future wife here when I was 15 years old at the local high school and remained living here until I went to university to study Graphic Design at Norwich School of Art and Design in 2005. I joined the Police in 2007 and moved to Norwich, the nearest city. We stayed living in Norwich until 2009 when we decided that family life and links to our roots were an important aspect we were missing, and we moved back to Caister. In 2014, I returned to my true passion of graphic design, slowly working my way up until I started my most recent job in 2019. As Graphic Designer for Great Yarmouth Borough Council I distinguished myself as a respected professional in my field and am now responsible for the Print and Design teams for the local authority.

To me, Great Yarmouth holds special memories. It is where I holidayed as a child with family. It is where I met the love of my life and where I choose to raise my children. It does have its negative aspects and has been through some tough times. However, it is seeing a resurgence with investment from many areas. It has an amazing history based in tourism and maritime and has many historical secrets which numerous visitors and residents are unaware of.

Maybe this is the key for effecting perception? Making it obvious and known where the town and borough comes from and where it is heading? A hidden past and hidden future will not impact public perception.

Walkabout in Great Yarmouth

Psychogeographers often find themselves in cities or places of intense geographical variance. Can the same approach be applied to any location? As stated previously, most psychogeographers walk in urban environments because it is where walking is the main and quickest mode of transport. I would also argue that places of tourism also fit into this category and that walking can take place in any location. Instead of walking in a linear fashion it may prove prudent in these cases to select environments of differing atmospheres and intents.

The borough profile of Great Yarmouth mentions tourism, the wards of Nelson and Northgate and the offshore energy sector. Three locations which represent these areas are; The Golden Mile, Nelson Road and the Outer Harbour. I would also add King Street to this mix as I feel it is a site of cultural importance within the borough which highlights the mix of ethnicities that have chosen to reside in Great Yarmouth.

Drop Spots

I ran an exercise with family and friends where they were asked to visit certain locations, or ‘drop spots’ as I called them, to see what they noticed – What they saw, what they heard and what they could smell. By standing on these ‘drop spots’ the Derive was forced on the back bench and all of their senses were put on standby and encouraged to notice things. By collating their responses and measuring their collective convergences, I believe a true insight into place identity is found. As with most primary research methods, data is king. Due to time limitations, I have only been able to gather a handful of responses. However, I feel that they in themselves are telling and begin to reveal the story of each place a drop spot was used.

	Golden Mile	Nelson Road	Outer Harbour	King Street
1				
2				
3				
4				

Space, Place and Time

When we visit a place sometimes its history is so fundamentally linked with that place it forms part of its identity. A trip to Barcelona would be strange to experience without visiting the Sagrada Familia, for example. But everywhere has a history. What happens when that history is not in your face? It hides in little details which may be missed if not noticing every small piece of architecture, signage, and accepted ways of life.

Novelist, biographer and poet Peter Ackroyd developed a notion of 'chronological resonance', this is the idea that space is somewhat governed by history. Although in his own words, "The nature of time is mysterious.....Sometimes it moves steadily forward, before springing or leaping out. Sometimes it slows down and, on occasions, it drifts and begins to stop altogether."

Maybe like the derive of the Situationist International, it should be the role of those influencing place identity, to highlight where the place has come from and how its identity has been formed. This could be done by highlighting the parts of history which are still evident in everyday life.

Edward Casey, an American Philosopher, described place as having "the ability...to make the past come to life in the present". For me, this quote can be expanded to give deeper commentary on how we experience a place and how that has a future effect on how we continue to experience it. For example, I visited Great Yarmouth up until I was 8 years old. It represented a place of magic, family and fun. Now I work in the place I visited as a child, it still holds that magic for me. This results in a passionate outlook and fondness for Great Yarmouth. Others, who may have grown up here, or moved here out of lack of money or choice may view Great Yarmouth in a completely different way.

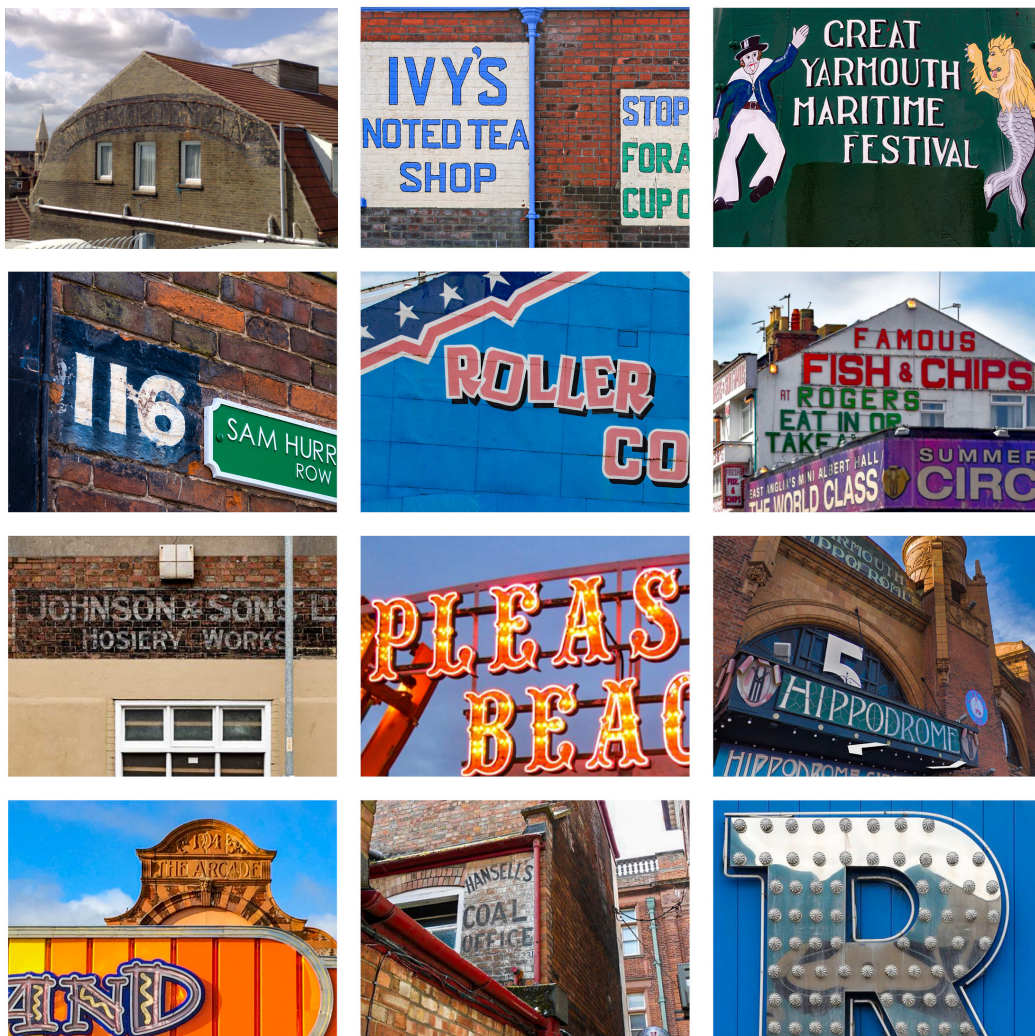


The Influential Type (history)

Whilst walking through Great Yarmouth and trying to notice the often-overlooked aspects of its history, I stumbled across this ghost sign. A ghost sign is defined as, “an old hand-painted advertising sign that has been preserved on a building for an extended period of time.” During a recent workshop with the National Saturday Club on ghost signs, one of the children suggested a possible definition of a ghost sign as, “a sign written by a ghost.” I like this explanation because the person who created it is probably no longer with us. It also pays homage to the time in which it was created that is now also a ‘ghost’. As discussed previously, people look back at their own history with reverence because it reminds them of their childhood, families, and innocence. The ghost signs, therefore, give us an insight into that time-period, those memories and what the world was like when ‘the paint was still wet’. Amusingly, the ‘Pork Shop’ on Northgate Street (pictured above), is now a pet shop.

Due to a banning of hanging signs in 1762 because of injuries caused by poorly secured signs falling on pedestrians, the art of advertising directly on buildings was born. With the development of literacy and brand, signwriting became a profession in its own right. This afforded businesses and the signwriters themselves the opportunity to experiment with typography and form to denote feeling, tone of voice and style.

To me, there is a clear pathway from the signwriters who were taught as labourers in a school to those creating funfair graphics and branded elements on the side of buildings to the Graphic Designer I am today. As part of this course, one of the tutors, Stuart Tolley, said this of typography – “[it] is ubiquitous – Omnipresent and ever-present. They are like clothes for the words which can influence tone of voice and interpretation.” So, what clothes has Great Yarmouth decided to adorn? And how does this effect its identity?



Continuing the clothing metaphor, I feel that it is important to focus on the first time that a place picked up that item of clothing. Why did they do this? When did it happen and does the fashion change over a period of time or stay relatively similar?

Looking round at the ghost signs of Great Yarmouth, it became apparent there were two main styles. One which represents a clear conveyance of message and one that has been created to evoke feeling of holiday, fun and joy. With the redundancy of hanging signage, proprietors wanted a sign that was easy to read, stood out and got them noticed. From what I can tell, it is how this type of signage developed. Initially created to be read by passers-by, then stylised to stand out and eventually developed into brands that people would associate with certain emotions, standards, and products.





Another technique applied at the time was use of architectural features which were developed into a brand. An example of this is the Arnolds Department Store at the top of Regent Street. "A customer visiting the Arnolds Department Store could ride in a large, windowed cage lift with a visible counterweight (situated in the building that is now 181 King Street). The lift, which was operated by an attendant, carried customers to Arnolds Grand Restaurant, a top floor dining area where 1920s customers could enjoy table d'hôte luncheons, afternoon teas, and daily live music. For gentlemen, a smoking lounge was provided. In the 1950s, the richly furnished restaurant remained, greeting customers with dark red patterned carpets, brocade curtains with valances, heavy oak tables and chairs, pillars, and starched white tablecloths. The waitresses dressed in uniforms fashioned on those worn by 'Nippies', who were serving staff at J. Lyons & Co. tea shops (London). The Arnolds restaurant was also host to off-season dinner dances."

The department store used the letter 'A' as a tool for notoriety. With big windows engulfing the lower level to showcase their wares and sophistication. For that reason, they did not have a requirement for wall painted signage, nor did it promote the right image. Instead, they integrated the owners' initials in the building's façade. This initial was then used to advertise the store in newspapers and magazines. At its height, Arnolds Department Store was the biggest and best in East Anglia and had a reputation for a high-class shopping experience. The 'A's' adorning the architecture, can still be seen today if urban explorers have the mind to look up.

Tourism Posters and Signage

During World War Two, the Holidays with Pay Act 1938 was introduced which was “legislation of the Parliament of the United Kingdom which provided for paid holidays for working class employees.” I can’t even begin to image what it was like during the war or indeed the relief and adulation of succeeding in 1945. Add to that the ability to now holiday without losing pay and the atmosphere and excitement of journeying on a train or boat to spend a couple of weeks near sun, sea, and sand, and you can start to understand the importance of the Great British holiday. Great Yarmouth was one such popular destination and, in an attempt, to stand out from the crowd illustrators, designers and typographers were employed to create marketing collateral.

Often hand painted and then replicated digitally, this allowed designers to really experiment with type and style. I was fortunate enough to look in the Tourist Information’s archive before the centre closed to the public and found the below images. You might think it strange to use elephants to advertise Great Yarmouth. That is until you find out the Hippodrome Circus used elephants and they would often be seen walkin on the beach. This makes me question how the wall written adverts, now ghost signs, link with this development of tourism marketing?



Performance

It would be neglectful of me to not fully address the role performance plays in the makeup of Great Yarmouth's Identity. In the words of their 2020 Culture, Heritage and Tourism strategy, "Our Borough is a place that welcomes people and organisations where opportunities to perform, develop and thrive are created by providing support, making connections, investing in facilities and infrastructure and through collaborations." They have realised the importance of historic performance and how it can be utilised today to create a unique aspect to a place.

Great Yarmouth has been renowned for performing arts ever since the early 1900s when the Hippodrome was built, "[it] has been dubbed one of the seven wonders of the British seaside. The Historic Hippodrome is Britain's only surviving total circus building, built in 1903 by the legendary circus showman George Gilbert." The circus continues to put on seasonal performances for visitors and residents alike and has been ingrained in what it means to be from Great Yarmouth.

The town also boasted an amazing number of venues for watching entertainment including, The Regent Theatre, The Empire Theatre, The Royal Aquarium, The Pavillion Theatre, The Gem Theatre, The Gorleston Pavilion, and the Theatre Royal (later the Regal and ABC). It attracted legendary performers including the Beatles who visited twice in one year.

"Great Yarmouth's cultural landscape is broad and encompasses our society and our values. It is represented in our heritage, our art, our buildings and dance, our folklore and cuisine, our songs and dialect, it is in our customs and our timeless connection with the sea and the land." **2020 Culture, Heritage and Tourism strategy**

Today, performance is still seen in Great Yarmouth. The acrobats and jugglers are still playing for audiences at the Hippodrome, stars of screen are still getting raucous laughs at The Pavilion Theatre on Britannia Pier and thousands of visitors come each year to see the spectacle which is the Out There Festival.

"Out There has established an international reputation for its exceptional, innovative and diverse programme. Regularly attracting more than 60,000 people to Great Yarmouth each year."



In addition to the Out There Festival, Out There Arts, supported by the Arts Council England, provide learning opportunities for local communities which include circus skills and performances. This has informed a wider strategy as part of the Town Deal funding where the historic Ice House will be transformed into a National Arts and Circus Centre by April 2024. This all links with the Culture, Heritage and Tourism strategy which says, "In Great Yarmouth you can watch it and you can be part of it!"



Conclusions

Place itself is quite difficult to define and therefore the parameters of 'place identity' are also tricky to pinpoint. Great Yarmouth is a borough. It's also a town. But it is also made up of an endless amount of 'places' of varying scales created by its inhabitants. For the purpose of this research project I have decided to focus on the borough and more specifically, the town of Great Yarmouth. With just shy of 100,000 residents, the borough is made up of a relatively aging, white and deprived population. In addition to the residents, Great Yarmouth enjoys an abundant tourism sector which is worth more than half a million pounds each year. For that reason, a clear divide has presented itself in terms of how people experience the place and what value they endow it with.

Guy Debord and his 'situationists' concept of the derive is something which takes most control of us when we are strangers to a place. As we continue to experience a location, we learn about its hidden and lesser seen aspects. The derive is therefore an important in the generation of a places identity. It pays for Great Yarmouth to point visitors towards the glitz, glamour and spectacle of its Golden Mile and tourist attractions and away from the less desirable areas that come with depravity. From personal experience, the local community falls into two further subsets of society, those who actively engage with tourism and those who avoid it. Many events and festivals held across the borough are free to enjoy, for example, the Out There Festival, meaning wealth does not have to be a contributory factor. Another aspect to Great Yarmouths' identity, which is vital and free to experience, is its rich cultural heritage. Again, I would like to split this into two categories; tourism and residential. People in my survey referred to a 'heyday' of Great Yarmouth. I believe this recalls a time when the Great British holiday was new, and the norm. People actually enjoyed the British weather and 'kiss me quick' atmosphere as they didn't know any different. This romanticised viewpoint of children of the 1950s remains in the mindset of adult residents today. If the beach of Dubai was down the road, wouldn't you be there all the time?!

Makes me wonder if globalisation has a negative impact on place identity? People now have a direct comparison they can make with destinations across the world. This, of course, also seeps into other parts of our everyday lives, including work, economics and politics. Perhaps the world knowledge we have today can sometimes be overwhelming? I

honestly think the best way to address this is to be proud and enjoy your own environments. Make your place a little bit smaller. For example, take Great Yarmouth's history and heritage, why not look into the stories of the places around you? In some cases this can be as simple as looking up and noticing the ignored. I have had great enjoyment from looking for ghost signs and then finding out where it came from, why it was used and learning the story of its creation. But I suppose you have to be open to this as a notion. For every year you live in a location, you seem to step away from the *dérive* and head down a road where noticing things is not a priority. In fact, when a place becomes somewhere you purely exist, you have little recognition of its identity, history or atmosphere. With that in mind, I believe that Great Yarmouth, as a place, has many identities and these are primarily based on who you are – for me, I am a lover of Great Yarmouth. I have experienced its tourism offer, I am a resident and I work to make the place better for all. Absolutely everyone experiences Great Yarmouth in a different way, at a different age, with different reasons motivating them. Throughout these journeys people will experience certain things in a similar way and it is this 'collective convergence' which creates a generic personality. I believe that this collection of 'noticed things' fall into three categories which make Great Yarmouth unique. They are; heritage, performance and tourism. If you take these three core themes out of Great Yarmouth you lose its sense of place. But don't take my word for it. Come to Great Yarmouth. Experience everything it has to offer. The tourism *dérive*, the unnoticed, the show. Only then will you be able to understand what Great Yarmouth is.

