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All Aboard the Hoy

During the second half of the eighteenth century, one of the most remarked-upon aspects of holidaying in Margate was the journey from London by hoy. Accounts of the passage on board these cargo vessels appear in early guidebooks such as *A Description of the Isle of Thanet* (1763), which was later reissued as *The Margate Guide* (1775). According to the *Description*, a ticket at this time cost two shillings and sixpence, for a voyage that could take from eight hours to 'two or three days', depending on the tides and winds. The same work contains one of the less caustic assessments of the hoy and its users: 'The Hoy, like the Grave, confounds all distinctions: High and Low, Rich and Poor, Sick and Sound, are here indiscriminately blended together'. To the author of this guidebook, the 'humours of such a motley crew' could only truly be captured by 'the pencil of *Hogarth*'. While the voyage itself was usually 'pleasant and agreeable', therefore, they 'would not recommend it too strongly to Ladies of great delicacy'.

Other writers were less restrained. In *The Balnea* (1799), a guidebook to various resorts, George Saville Carey highlighted both the physical inconveniences and the social indelicacies to be endured on the hoy: 'Should you be disposed to go by water to Margate, you will often be under the necessity of arming yourself with a great deal of patience, and a good store of victuals; you must shut your eyes from seeing indecent scenes, your ears from indecent conversation, and your nose from indelicate smells'. In Carey's account of this unappealing journey, the hoy is portrayed as 'a kind of small, much-crowded, and moving jails', whose passengers are treated more like prisoners than paying customers.

More broadly, as Harriet Guest has shown, representations of Margate in poems and novels, guidebooks and graphic prints expressed considerable anxiety about the mingling of classes at the resort. Along with the pier and its sociable promenading, the hoy and its passengers provided a focal point for a cluster of concerns about the erosion of hierarchies, behavioural indecorums, and lowering of the social tone that many associated with inter-status mixing. Recalling a visit to Margate in 1763, the poet William Cowper wryly noted that 'Margate tho' full of Company, was generally fill'd with such Company, as People who were Nice in the choice of their Company, were rather fearfull of keeping Company with'. Characteristically, this broad observation about the company's composition led Cowper into more specific reflections on the hoy: 'The Hoy went to London every Week Loaded with Mackarel & Herrings, and return'd Loaded with Company. The Cheapness of the Conveyance made it equally commodious for Dead Fish and Lively Company' (letter to William Unwin, July 1779). The hoy's penurious passengers, Cowper seemed to suggest, were fish out of water, whom more respectable coast-goers might well prefer to avoid.

Yet even the most barbed portrayals could incorporate nuance and mitigation. Guest, for instance, cites Hardwicke Lewis's sentimental novel, *An Excursion to Margate* (1787), which casts aspersions on both the 'dissolute' locals and the diverse grouping of passengers required to 'pig together' at close quarters on the hoy, many of whom are sick whilst on board. Noting their initially 'reserved' behaviour, though, Lewis's narrator also reflects that the passengers 'each endeavoured to be agreeable' during the course of the journey. Even George Carey, whose *Balnea* conveyed the strikingly 'heterogeneous' character of the Margate promenaders, acknowledged that his criticisms concerning the hoy were directed more at the manners of 'the Captain, *as he is called*, and his men'

than at the passengers themselves. For many holiday-goers, meanwhile, travel by hoy itself formed one of the rituals of the resort. As the epistolary *New Margate and Ramsgate Guide* ([1780?]) observed, 'the arrival or exit of a hoy is generally stiled *Hoy-fair*, as there are frequently above twice as many to see the passengers come or go, than the passengers themselves'. Moreover, as the guidebooks indicated, travel conditions and prices did not remain static. *A Guide to All the Watering and Sea-Bathing Places* records that, by 1815, the cost of the voyage incorporated price differentiation, 'the fare being only 9s. for the common cabin; 11s. for the second; and 18s. for the state cabin'. Although the hoy could still not entirely be 'recommended to persons of delicacy', the author of this travel guide was now able to make an exception for 'parties hiring the state cabin'.

Nevertheless, as Guest contends, writings about Margate during this period undoubtedly displayed the 'stance of horrified fascination which seaside jollities seemed to exert on so many metropolitan and educated spectators'. In particular, pointed reflections on the hoy, such as those discussed above, reveal many commentators' difficulties in coming to terms with the increasing number, and diversifying social complexion, of the visiting tourists. As the historian James Walvin observes, 'cheap transport, by ship' was what 'helped to democratize Margate as a resort'. While this process would become more pronounced from 1815, when steam packets began delivering even larger numbers of passengers from London, depictions of the Margate hoy during the second half of the eighteenth century were already registering the opening up of coastal leisure to this wider social demographic.

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