Ilfracombe and the Elements of Tourism during the 1920s

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THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ILFRACOMBE

Topography

Located on the exposed Bristol Channel coastline astride the River Wilder, the town of Ilfracombe developed as a significant safe port with two distinct bodies of residents living in the same locality: one of farmers spread out around Holy Trinity parish church, dating from the twelfth century, on land owned originally by the Champernowne family; and the other a traditional fishing community situated close to the natural harbour, which belonged to the Bouchier family: the Earls of Bath. The parish ran the length of the hilly North Devon coast eastwards from Hele Bay along the seven crested ridge of the Torrs, encircled by the hills of Lantern, Compass, Capstone and Hillsborough towards Lee Bay in the west; the highest point being Hore Down Gate at 860 feet above sea level, some two miles inland.[1]

Figure 1: Herrings being brought ashore by fishermen in 1925.[2]

During the nineteenth century, Ilfracombe was a mainly commercial town, but with a growing sideline in the holiday trade because it was a pleasant place for bathing with clean air, and was much visited by the gentry and literati.[3] Thereafter, although the transition from

[1] 'Ilfracombe', *Wikipedia*, <http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Ilfracombe> [accessed 17 July 2023].

[2] Sue Pullen and Jane Harding, *Images of England: Ilfracombe* (The History Press, 2003), p. 14.

[3] See John Walter Cross, *George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals* (William Blackwood, 1885); Frances Eliza Kingsley, ed., *Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memories of His Life* (Henry King, 1879); and Leslie Linder, *The Journal of Beatrice Potter from 1881 to 1897* (Frederick Warne, 1966).

an agricultural and fishing community (see Figure 1) – reliant on traditional maritime activities – was gradual, by the beginning of the 1920s Ilfracombe had made considerable steps towards evolution as a prominent seaside holiday resort, and its previous functions slowly became merely of secondary importance. This development, constrained yet promoted by the beautiful, rugged coastline and countryside as its hinterland, reflected the fortunes of other North Devon towns at the time. Also, the influence of a mainly Victorian neo-Gothic style of architecture (see Figure 2), characterised the town: 'What distinguishes Ilfracombe is not a claim about the individual buildings (mostly modest against national criteria) but the consistency, architecturally speaking, of its Victorian personality.'[4]

Figure 2: The Gables, Belmont Road – a late Victorian neo-Gothic house.[5]

In common with other North Devon towns, Ilfracombe over time became part of the Bristol Channel socio-economic and recreational zone, comprising Tenby, Barry and Penarth; and those towns along its southern coastline – notably Clevedon, Weston-Super-Mare and Minehead. It drew upon the larger populations comprising the families of miners, and copper and steelworkers of the South Wales valleys and coastal plain, together with the dock and ship workers of the urban areas of Swansea, Cardiff and Bristol, who enjoyed making the sea crossings to Ilfracombe.

Population

The 1921 census showed that the county's total population continued to increase at about 3.3% each year during the 1920s, well below the national average rise of 5.5%. This was achieved mainly as the result of industrial expansion and immigration. In Ilfracombe, in comparison to almost every other Devon resort during the decade, the population declined (see Table 1). The 1921 census also showed a fall in the male population to 4,622 for Ilfracombe. This decline resulted partly from the loss of 157 men on active service during the war (4.3%); and because those who returned home found there was a lack of job opportunities in Ilfracombe and had decided to seek work in other Devon towns, in Wales or elsewhere in Britain.

[4] Foreword by Peter Beacham to Michael Laithwaite, *Victorian Ilfracombe: Origins and Architecture of a North Devon Holiday Resort* (Devon Books, 1992), p. 8.

[5] Lois Lamplugh, *Britain in Old Photographs: Ilfracombe* (Alan Sutton Publishing, 1996), p. 46.

This post-war decline, as disclosed by the census, brought about a significant difference in the ratio between men and women in the town: 1:1.76 for those between the ages of 15 and 49 years, and 1:1.66 for those between 15 and 64 years. This ratio closed a little by the time of the 1931 census (see Tables 1 and 2 below).

Resort	1911	1921	% Change in population 1911–21	1931	% Change in population 1921–31
Dawlish	4,099	4,675	14.0	4,580	-2.0
Exmouth	11,962	13,606	13.7	14,591	7.2
Ilfracombe	**8,935**	**11,772**	**31.0**	**9,175**	**-22.1**
Paignton	11,241	14,451	28.6	18,414	27.4
Seaton	1,694	2,295	35.5	2,349	2.3
Sidmouth	5,612	5,668	1.0	6,126	8.1
Teignmouth	9,215	10,970	19.0	10,017	-8.7
Torquay	38,771	39,431	1.6	46,165	17.0
Devon	**699,703**	**709,614**	**1.4**	**732,968**	**3.3**

Table 1: Population changes for Devon's seaside resorts, 1911–31.[6]

Also, the trend towards an ageing population – a feature in other parts of the county's demography at the time – was not so greatly apparent in Ilfracombe, with 9.37% in 1911, 10.48% in 1921 and 14.16% in 1931 over the age of 65 years. No-one was shown as being older than 94, yet two slate tablets outside of the east wall of the parish church showed there had been ten centenarians by 1913.

Age groups	1921			1931		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
0–14	926	981	1,907	858	813	1,671
15–39	1,722	3,034	4,756	1,373	1,959	3,332
40–64	1,513	2,362	3,875	1,135	1,737	2,872
65–94	461	773	1,234	442	858	1,300
Total	4,622	7,150	11,772	3,808	5,367	9,175

Table 2: Population of Ilfracombe by sex and age from the censuses for 1921 and 1931.[7]

[6] GB Historical, University of Portsmouth <www.visionofbritain.org.uk> [accessed 14 July 2023].

[7] Ibid.

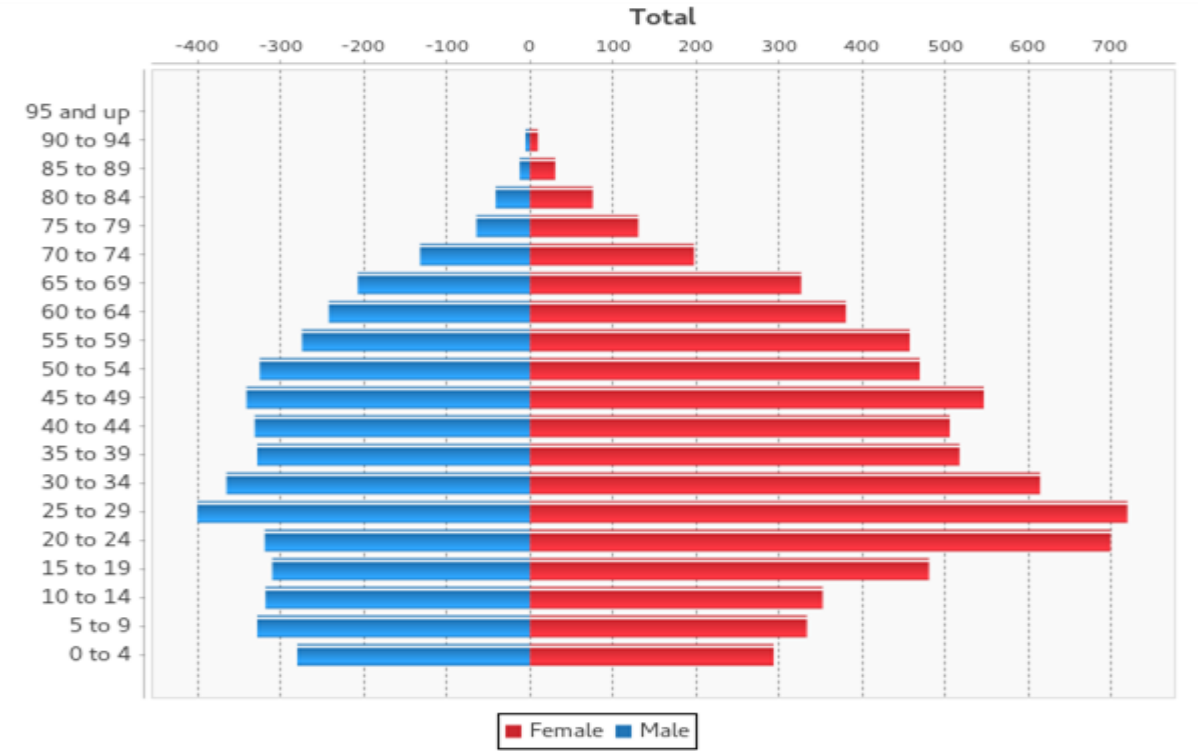

Figure 3: Age and sex structure for Ilfracombe in five-year bands up to age 95 (1921 census).[8]

Resort	Enumerated population	Visitor population	Visitor population as a percentage of enumerated population
Budleigh Salterton	2,624	223	8.5
Dawlish	4,675	318	6.8
Exmouth	13,606	816	6.0
Ilfracombe	**11,772**	**3,097**	**25.8**
Lynton	2,587	882	34.1
Paignton	14,451	1,965	13.6
Seaton	2,295	450	19.6
Sidmouth	5,668	731	12.9
Teignmouth	10,970	1,722	15.7
Torquay	39,431	5,757	14.6

Table 3: Visitor populations of Devon resorts in 1921.[9]

The 1921 census was taken on the later date of 19 June owing to serious and sustained industrial disputes, before the full summer season had got under way. This was at a crucial point in the inter-war economy and the revival in domestic holidaymaking, and visitors were enumerated by re-allocating them to their usual place of abode. Hence resorts close to Exeter like Dawlish and Exmouth near a sizeable urban catchment area attracted many day trippers who would not be included in the census. It was notable that the census also showed a much higher percentage for visitors in Ilfracombe (and Lynton).

[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

Employment

The occupations recorded at the time of the 1921 census were as shown in Table 4:

	Sex	
Occupation	**Male**	**Female**
Fishermen	17	0
Agriculture	216	18
Mining and quarrying/Quarry products	11	0
Chemicals	5	0
Metal workers/Precious metal	172	3
Electrical apparatus	39	1
Watches, clocks and instruments	10	1
Skins and leather	6	0
Textile workers/Goods and clothing	72	119
Foods, drinks and tobacco	71	10
Wood and furniture	118	3
Paper, printing	56	9
Builders/Painters and decorators	186	2
Other/Mixed or unidentified material	16	2
Gas water and electricity	23	0
Transport and communication	492	83
Commerce and finance	493	256
Public administration and defence	189	68
Professional occupations	150	154
Entertainments and sport	37	20
Personal service	253	1,384
Clerks and draughtsmen	325	297
Warehousemen	16	13
Stationary engine drivers	11	0
Total	**3,120**	**2,443**

Table 4: Persons of working age (twelve or above) by occupation and gender (1921 census).[10]

Notably, those employed in Ilfracombe in fishing and agriculture had together by 1921 been reduced to 4.5% of the population. Also, a large number of women were employed in the

[10] Ibid.

personal services, including landladies, housemaids, parlourmaids, chambermaids, kitchen maids, waitresses and hairdressers.

Unemployment

The 1920s have often been given the journalistic epithet of 'the roaring twenties', but economically it was a period of depression, deflation and steady decline compared to the country's former world pre-eminence; and one major result was the issue of unemployment (see Table 5).

After the war, an economic boom lasted from March 1919 to April 1920, when the national unemployment rate was 3.9%. This was followed by a slump, and an historically high rate of unemployment in Britain, which reached 23.4% in May 1921. It remained at over 10% for the rest of the decade (with poorer numbers in the 1930s). An analysis of the census for Ilfracombe in 1921 – taken in June, during seasonal employment – and in 1931 has shown that in 1921, unemployment for males was 16.1% and females was 55.2%; and in 1931 the figures were 28.3% and 67.3% respectively.

Year	United Kingdom					South West
	Employees at work	Unemployed		Percentage unemployed		
		Insured persons (aged 16 –64)	Total workers	Insured unemployed as a proportion of insured employees	Total unemployed as a proportion of total employees	Insured unemployment rate for the South West
	000s	000s	000s	%	%	%
1921	15,879	1,840	2,212	17.0	12.2	Not known
1922	15,847	1,588	1,909	14.3	10.8	Not known
1923	16,068	1,304	1,567	11.7	8.9	10.7
1924	16,332	1,168	1,404	10.3	7.9	9.1
1925	16,531	1,297	1,559	11.3	8.6	8.5
1926	16,529	1,463	1,759	12.5	9.6	8.4
1927	17,060	1,142	1,373	9.7	7.4	7.2
1928	17,123	1,278	1,536	10.8	8.2	8.1
1929	17,392	1,250	1,503	10.4	8.0	8.1
1930	17,016	1,979	2,379	16.1	12.3	10.4

Table 5: Unemployment in the United Kingdom and the South West, 1921–30.[11]

[11] Adapted from C. H. Feinstein, 'Statistical Tables 1855–1965', Table 8 in *National Income, Expenditure of the United Kingdom* (1972); and British Labour Statistics, Historical Abstract Appendix E, (HMSO, 1971), cited in W. R. Garside, *British Unemployment 1919–1939: A Study in Public Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 5 and 10.

After the war, the government was concerned to provide employment to the fullest possible extent for ex-servicemen and those disabled in the war. Up to that time, the Employment Exchanges had devoted special attention to finding them work, which led in August 1919 to the establishment of the King's National Roll. Thereafter, from June 1921, all firms seeking local authority or government contracts, or financial assistance towards projects, would have to engage the unemployed to be included on the Roll. In this respect, for example, Ilfracombe gave preference to those on the Roll for road building projects, in particular their widening and chamfering of corners, and measures to reduce traffic congestion. Improvements to the roads made Ilfracombe a more accessible town, which thus brought about economic benefits; but an opposing view was that this chipping away of the town destroyed the characteristics which had made it special in the first place.

In 1928, because the town was prone to seasonal unemployment, a reply to a government circular stated that having regard to the amount of unemployment prevailing in the town during the winter months, it would be unable to engage such men from other areas.[12] Seasonal women workers from Wales were known to refer to Ilfracombe as 'El Dorado', but such was the concern at times over the high amount of unemployment among them that in 1924 a Social Help Society was formed for them in Ilfracombe (and remained in operation during the depression years of the 1930s).

In addition, during the 1920s the government recognised the need to maintain employment for juveniles, many of whom had been engaged in industry as part of the war effort for long hours and at high wages in occupations that taught them little, and would certainly not be available to them in peacetime. Consequently, initially as a temporary measure in 1919, Juvenile Employment Centres were set up to foster the employability of those over sixteen in receipt of unemployment benefit through participation in various non-vocational handicrafts or homecraft, and physical training and games.[13] No centre was established in Ilfracombe; not surprising since in many areas there was no comprehensive index of the degree of juvenile unemployment, even though after 1927 100% grants were available to those where it was known to exceed 7%.

Moreover, the Education Act (1918), followed by subsequent legislation in 1921, set the school leaving age at fourteen, and obliged local education authorities to establish a sufficient supply of continuation schools for those under sixteen. Sadly, despite this aim, severe national economic problems resulted in large budget reductions[14] and caused plans to be curtailed or abandoned. Hence, Devon County Council could mostly only pass schemes where a local employer was involved (for example, in Tiverton). The issue of further raising the school leaving age to fifteen remained very contentious throughout the 1920s, even though influential supporters such as R H Tawney[15] and the 1927 Hadow Report[16] argued strongly that this could result in a reduction of expenditure on unemployment at a time when businesses, including those in Ilfracombe, were unable to find jobs in or out of season for adult workers.

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[12] Minutes of Ilfracombe Urban District Council meeting, 4 September 1928.

[13] W. R. Garside, *British Unemployment 1919–1939: A Study in Public Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 95.

[14] The 'Geddes Axe' in 1921 reduced national expenditure on education from £50 million to £43.5 million.

[15] R. H. Tawney, 'The possible cost of raising the school leaving age' (1927), published as 'Unemployment and the school leaving age' in *New Statesman*, 18 November 1933.

[16] Board of Education Consultative Committee, 'Report on the Education of the Adolescent (the Hadow Report)', *HMSO* (1927), p. 144.

Social tone

Becoming more pronounced during the 1920s, there developed a clear difference between those resorts in Devon that sort to provide for 'exclusive' visitors (Sidmouth), 'semi-exclusive' (Torquay) or 'popular' such as Ilfracombe. As has been commented:

> Seaside resorts were often crucibles of conflict over lifestyles, as visitors from differing and sometimes incompatible backgrounds with divergent expectations about holiday enjoyments and environments competed for access to and use of valued space within resorts, although by the beginning of the century sophisticated patterns of social segregation between and within resorts had emerged to mitigate these tensions'.[17]

Not only was the presence or absence of elites significant, but so too was the quality of a resort's hotels and types of attractions and entertainment provided.

Striving to include these ingredients, Ilfracombe attempted to cater for all classes of holidaymaker: a diverse appeal that demanded the provision of something for those who wanted, for example, to enjoy dancing and other less highbrow amusements, and others who wanted something of more intellectual or cultural interest. The result was that more wealthy individuals, middle- and lower-class visitors holidayed together relatively happily. Nevertheless, there were numerous criticisms, often reflected in the local press, about the resort's 'social tone', and over whether or how the town should welcome lower- or middle-class visitors: the attraction of more of the former bringing about potentially rowdy and disruptive behaviour, while middle-class visitors were fewer but spent more per head. In effect, Ilfracombe's 'social tone' eventually resulted from the normal interaction between the local population and the town's visitors, and after much debate, a successful balance was achieved both between residents and visitors, and within the community itself.

[17] J. K. Walton, 'The Seaside Resorts of England and Wales, 1900–1950' (1997) in Gareth Shaw and Allan Williams, eds., *The Rise and Fall of British Coastal Resorts: Cultural and Economic Perspectives* (Cassell, 1997), p. 24.

THE ELEMENTS OF TOURISM

By the 1920s the elements of tourism – transport, accommodation, attractions and marketing – had become well-established in Ilfracombe, but for each there was a challenge towards future development.

Transport

(a) Railways

After the railway line north from Exeter had reached Barnstaple in 1854, the extension of the 14 miles to Ilfracombe was completed in 1874. Thereafter, during the 1920s, by far the greatest number of annual visitors arrived in the town by train.

From about 1870 the Barnstaple and Ilfracombe Company, in effect a subsidiary of the London South West Railway (LSWR), was met with delays caused by land ownership issues, difficulty in raising funds, and slow and difficult construction conditions.[18] For example, standing on thin wrought iron piles filled with concrete, each sunk into the riverbed, the bridge over the River Taw was extremely fragile, limiting the line there to a single track with weight restrictions on locomotives. Also, north of Braunton the line started a six-mile climb at an inclination of 1 in 40, reaching Mortehoe at 600 feet above sea level. This required back up from locomotives parked in sidings to assist long or heavy trains, and from here the line descended to Ilfracombe down a hair-raising gradient of 1 in 36.

Deep local resentment and apathy had caused a low level of subscriptions to the railway, and just like other train services in North Devon (see Figure 4), by the 1920s it was only just viable. Compared to the South Devon resorts, the railway's late arrival to Ilfracombe had lowered its public image, and for most of the 1920s timetables showed up to only four daily return trains to Waterloo and two to Paddington.

[18] Stan Yorke, *Lost Railways of Devon* (Countryside Books, 2007), p. 101. (Amazingly, the purchased track bed had enough space for a double track, but initially a single track light railway line was constructed in the centre. However, in 1880, at much additional expense, a second track of normal status was laid, but first the original track had to be removed.)

Figure 4: Sketch map of the North Devon railway system in the 1920s.[19]

Figure 5: Trains ascending the line, 225 feet uphill to Ilfracombe Station from Mortehoe.[20]

Like others in Devon, the station was sited some distance away from the community it served. Therefore, on arrival at Ilfracombe Station (see Figure 5), two-thirds of a mile from the town centre, passengers usually needed to hire a horse-drawn cab or motor coach – for which special byelaws, and strict rules of conduct and prices were in force – in order to continue their journey 225 feet downhill, and have their luggage transported to their accommodation (see Figure 6).

[19] Ibid., p. 96

[20] Peter Dale, *North Devon's Lost Railways* (Stenlake Publishing, 2001), p. 48.

The journeys uphill and downhill required stout performances from the horses drawing carts, and in the 1920s these were replaced by motor coaches (see Figure 7). Also, considerable time had to be taken to get families and their luggage – such as large suitcases, hatboxes and prams – off the train, so it was known to take a whole hour for a long train with holidaymakers to disembark and clear the platform at Ilfracombe Station.[21]

Figure 6: Initially, horse-drawn cabs would be made available for each train.[22]

Figure 7: Later in the 1920s, passengers were transported from the station by motor coach.[23]

[21] Stan Yorke, *Lost Railways of Devon* (Countryside Books, 2007), p. 107.
[22] Lois Lamplugh, *Britain in Old Photographs: Ilfracombe* (Alan Sutton Publishing, 1996), p. 46.
[23] Ibid., p. 94.

With the Railways (Grouping) Act (1921) the government tried to stem the losses being made by most of Britain's 123 railways – often locally in competition with one another – by grouping them all into a network of just four companies for England. In this way the government hoped to retain many of the benefits achieved by national state control during the First World War, without resorting to nationalisation. As a result, from 1923 the LSWR became absorbed into the Southern Railway. Thereafter, starting in 1926, a service mainly for holiday traffic left London Waterloo for Plymouth with fourteen or more coaches, and by dividing them up along the route they could be destined for different seaside resorts. Coaches for Ilfracombe were normally the largest section and would be allocated as the last in the journey.

Following a naming competition, won by a guard working at Waterloo Station, the train was given the attractive name of *Atlantic Coast Express*, although because of speed restrictions it took over five hours to complete the 226 mile journey from London via Barnstaple to Ilfracombe. Trains from further north, such as Liverpool, took over ten hours.[24] The Great Western Railway (GWR) also competed by working a shorter and quicker line via Taunton to Barnstaple and then on to Ilfracombe.

Although the railway companies retained their monopoly for the carriage of heavy bulky products, the increasing competition from motor transport resulted in a decreasing number of train passengers to Ilfracombe during the late 1920s and inter-war years (see Table 6):

	1928	**1930**	**1932**
Passenger tickets issued	69,218	46,245	30,628
Season tickets issued	44	413	492
Tickets collected	151,641	125,717	99,736
Parcels forwarded	6,669	5,681	4,846
Parcels received	54,572	56,854	56,080
Horses forwarded	1	1	-
Horses received	4	1	-
Milk forwarded (cans)	-	3	504
Milk received (cans)	1,797	1,599	18,033
Fish/meat forwarded (cwt)	898	1,154	991
Fish/meat received (cwt)	4,248	3,962	3,393
General merchandise forwarded (tonnes)	1,265	1,346	1,018
General merchandise received (tonnes)	7,026	7,705	6,645
Coal forwarded (tonnes)	1,878	1,919	1,916
Coal received (tonnes)	1,474	2,740	3,518
Other minerals forwarded (tonnes)	387	430	315
Other minerals received (tonnes)	2,232	3,912	1,380
Livestock forwarded (trucks)	8	5	1
Livestock received (trucks)	30	73	10
Other loaded wagons forwarded	2,159	2,221	2,363
Other loaded wagons received	4,093	4,356	3,779

Table 6: Southern Railway statistics for Ilfracombe, 1928–32.[25]

[24] Stan Yorke, *Lost Railways of Devon* (Countryside Books, 2007), p. 106.
[25] John Nicholas, *The Ilfracombe Line* (Irwell Press, 1998), p. 44.

(b) Steamships

The railways were the first transport mode to provide speedy mass travel facilities to the seaside resorts – and thus able to play a key role in their development – and from 1874 arrivals in Ilfracombe during the peak summer season were dominated by those travelling by steam trains. But they were also significantly augmented by those arriving on (paddle) steamers, or steamships, from across or along the 85 mile Bristol Channel. These trips began as early as 1817, and during the Victorian and Edwardian eras, the crossings on daily excursions – or for weekend or longer holidays – played a noteworthy role in the recreational impact on Ilfracombe during the peak season, April to September.

Ilfracombe already had the safest and deepest harbour along the North Devon coast, but the introduction of a promenade pier in 1873 – a year before the arrival of the railway – meant that passengers would no longer be ferried off by rowing boat, but could simply be disembarked through the pushing up of a gangplank. However, after the building of the promenade pier, several steamers would arrive at the same time and tie up side by side, so that passengers had to cross from ship to ship to disembark or re-embark (see Figure 8).

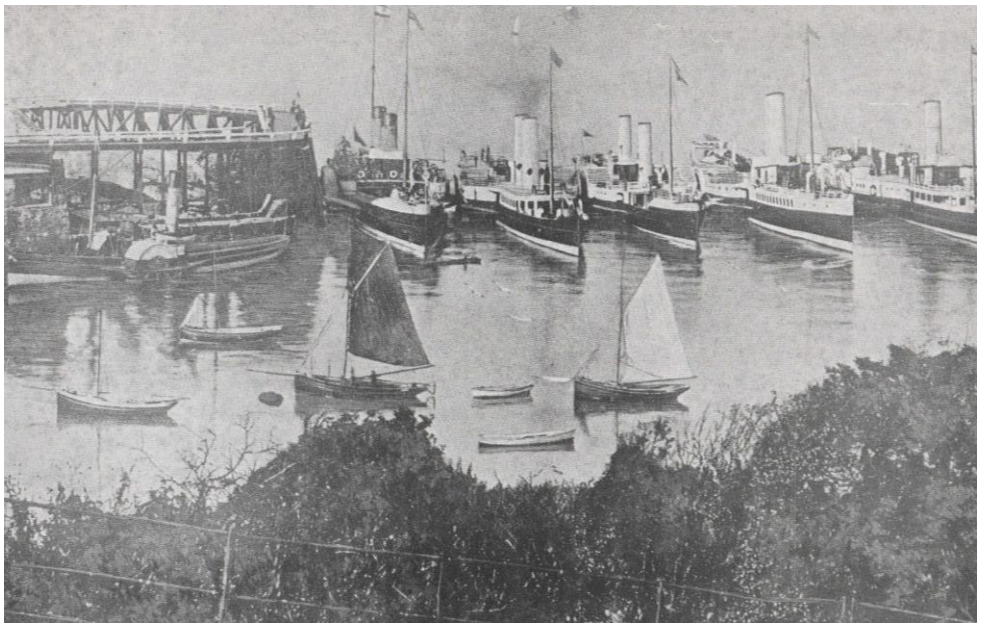

Figure 8: Steamships tied up closely on the promenade pier.[26]

The most important characteristic of steamships was their greater reliability, for unlike sailing ships they were dependent neither upon wind strength and direction, nor tides and currents. By being able to steam directly against the wind, a smoother, more even passage was obtainable such that passengers could travel on deck and take refreshments while on the move, despite sometimes suffering from the emission of smuts and sparks from the funnels. Compared to sailing ships, steamship arrival and departure times could be posted with a higher probability of achieving them, while being faster than sailing ships a wider range of destinations were accessible within a given time period. For day outings, passengers could be confident of reaching time-specific attractions and returning at a known time.[27]

[26] Glenn K. Horridge, *Ilfracombe: A Pictorial Record* (Ammonite Books, 1986), photograph 90.
[27] John Armstrong and David M. Williams, 'The Steamboat and Popular Tourism' in the *Journal of Transport History*, vol. 26, issue 1 (March 2005), p. 61.

Overall, the thrill of a steamship journey as a recreational activity during the 1920s was the sensation of speed, travelling comfortably and safely, while passing and observing the attractive scenery. The steamship passengers arriving at Ilfracombe were for the most part miners and industrial workers and their families from Swansea, Barry, Newport and Cardiff, also being carried across to Bristol, or along the coast to Weston-Super-Mare.

Particularly popular were day trips on Sundays, because on-board saloons or bars served alcoholic drinks, banned in Wales following the Sunday Closing (Wales) Act (1881), which had required the shutting of all public houses in the province on the sabbath. The speaking of Welsh by visitors – and women wearing their 'national costume' – was commonly heard in the town, and newspapers in their language were made widely available for sale.

By the 1920s the most predominant role among the steamship companies was played by P (Paul) and A (Alexander) Campbell, whose White Funnel Line had been originally founded by their father Robert (Bob) Campbell in 1873 for journeys along the River Clyde to Glasgow. During the war their thirteen ships were among the fifty steamships requisitioned by the Royal Navy for transportation, patrolling and auxiliary minesweeping duties. After the war, Ilfracombe welcomed back Welsh visitors, and the steamship business flourished again from 1919 onwards. Such was its welcome resumption that a new steamship, the *Glen Gower*, was built for the Swansea to Ilfracombe journey (see Figures 9 and 10). She made a record passage on 26 August 1926 from Ilfracombe to the Mumbles Pier (about 6 miles south of Swansea) in 1 hour and 17 minutes, which has never been beaten.

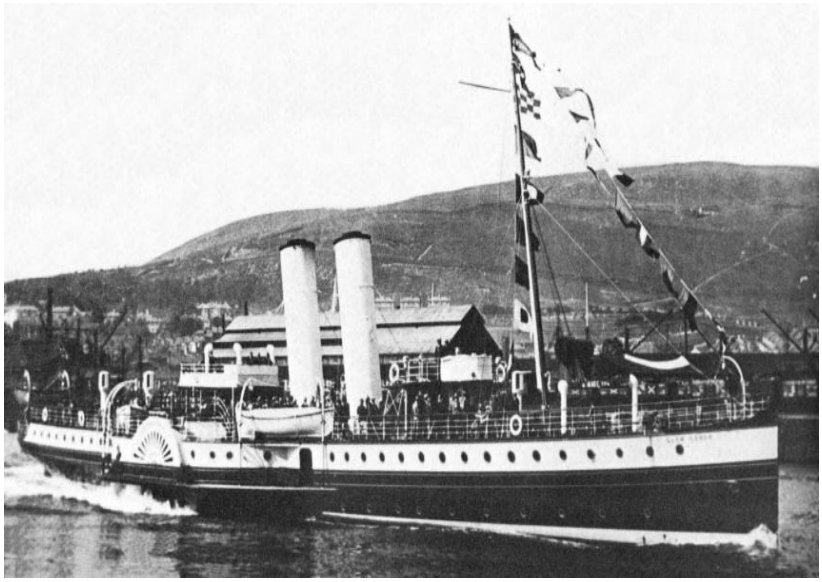

Figure 9: The 'Glen Gower' (553tg.) leaving Swansea in 1924, able to travel at a useful (if not spectacular) speed, of 17½ knots.[28]

[28] The Swansea and Port Talbot Docks History Website, <http://www.swanseadocks.co.uk> [accessed 17 July 2023].

Figure 10: Passengers arriving by horse-drawn and motor coaches to board the *Glen Gower* and *Lady Moyra* in 1926.[29]

During the 1920s the safety record of steamships across the Bristol Channel was excellent. Just one accident occurred in the story of the P & A Campbell line during this period (see Figure 11), when on 12 July 1926 the *Cambria* went aground at Rilledge Point on leaving Ilfracombe during thick fog.[30] The water was calm with very little danger for the steamship's on-board lifeboats, so that together with the Ilfracombe lifeboat and local motor boats the ninety passengers were safely landed in a very short while, and the Cambria was re-floated on the next tide.

Figure 11: The *Cambria* on the rocks, with a passing local ketch looming out of the mist.[31]

[29] Robert Wall, *Bristol Channel Pleasure Steamers* (David and Charles, 1973), page 24.
[30] Grahame Edgar Farr, *West Country Passenger Steamers*, 2nd edn (T Stephenson and Sons, 1956), p. 247.
[31] Ibid.

In May 1920 a new pier was opened at Swansea, and on the August Bank Holiday Monday alone 10,046 steamship passengers were landed at Ilfracombe, a number second only to that for 1911 and never repeated. However, coal strikes, and in particular the General Strike of 1926 – which also adversely affected rail services – caused passenger numbers to decrease. There was concern too among residents about the increasing abuse of intoxicating liquor among the large numbers of daily visitors by steamship, again bringing to prominence the issue of 'social tone'.[32]

From 1922 eleven either refurbished or new steamships were in service (see Table 7), some of which were redirected to the Brighton or Southampton stations (see Table 8) to provide a service for more numerous and wealthier passengers along the south coast, which included trips to Calais or Boulogne, from where an uninterrupted supply of coal could be obtained:

Name of steamer	Tonnage	Years served	Fate
Barry, renamed *Waverley II* (1926)	497	1911–41	Sunk by enemy aircraft, 5 July 1941
Brittania	459	1896–1956	Popular flagship. Sailed from Bristol along N Devon Coast. Broken up 1956.
Cambria	420	1895–1946	First World War called *Cambridge*. Last ship to leave Dardanelles. Broken up 1946.
Devonia	420	1911–40	Abandoned at La Penne, France 31 May 1940.
Glen Avon	509	1912–44	Foundered during war service on 2 September 1944.
Glen Gower	553	1922–56	Transferred to south coast in 1934. Second World War called *Glenmore*. Broken up 1960.
Glen Usk	524	1914–56	Broken up 1963.
Lady Evelyn, renamed *Brighton Belle* (1923)	594	1922–40	Wrecked during war service on 28 May 1940.
Lady Moyra	519	1922–40	Mined during Second World War on 1 June 1940.
Ravenswood	391	1891–1955	Most successful ship over 64 years. Broken up 1955.
Westwood Ho!	438	1894–1946	Broken up 1946.

Table 7: Service record of the eleven steamers of the P&A Campbell White Funnel Line during the 1920s.[33]

[32] Nigel Coombes, *Passenger Steamers of the Bristol Channel: A Pictorial Record* (Twelveheads Press, 1990), p. 59.

[33] Grahame Edgar Farr, *West Country Passenger Steamers*, 2nd edn (T Stephenson and Sons, 1956), pp. 243–265.

Name of steamer	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929
Barry, renamed *Waverley II* (1926)	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	South coast	South coast	South coast	South coast
Brittania	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel
Cambria	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel
*Devonia**	South coast	South coast	South coast	South coast	South coast	South coast	South coast
Glen Avon	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel
Glen Gower	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	South coast	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel
Glen Usk	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel
Lady Evelyn, renamed *Brighton Belle* 1923**	South coast	South coast	South coast	South coast	South coast	South coast	South coast
Lady Moyra	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel
Ravenswood	South coast	South coast	South coast	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel
Westwood Ho!	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel	Bristol Channel

* Came back to the Swansea to Ilfracombe service in 1933.
** Employed on the South coast until return to the Bristol Channel in 1936.

Table 8: P&A Campbell steamers who served on the Bristol Channel or the South coast.[34]

(c) Motor transport – cars, coaches and buses

An elite activity before the war, the ownership of cars thereafter became gradually but significantly diffused among the population as a novel yet still quite expensive consumer durable. There incurred many changes and improvements in technology hastened by their use during the war, and for owners it enabled an undisputed sense of freedom, passion, excitement and desire. Moreover, the increasing prevalence of cars among the middle classes meant that their notions of taste and status were among the social-cultural factors that most affected the overall behaviour of consumers, credit providers and manufacturers. As purchasers they heavily influenced the setting of a limit or increase in the speed of manufacturers' market growth, and their economic decisions with regard to the type of car made, and for whom and how and when it would be used. Moreover, it soon became clear that whether as a creator of wealth and employment, or as a phallic symbol or means for conspicuous consumption (by usually gentlemen of education and position), the 1920s was to be the era when society began to capitulate to the mixed blessing of the motor car.

At the beginning of the decade there were some 187,000 motor cars in Britain, which increased to over one million by 1930. Together with the increasing use of buses and goods vehicles, as well as motor cycles, this incurred considerable government expenditure on maintaining roads (see Table 9).

[34] Geoffrey Grimshaw, *British Pleasure Steamers, 1920–1939* (Richard Tilling, 1945), pp. 178–196.

Year	No. of cars	No. of vehicles	Amount raised from motor taxation (£ million)	Road expenditure (£ million)		
				Central	Local	Total
1920	186,801	650,148	4.3	3.5	23.1	26.6
1925	579,901	1,509,627	16.5	15.2	41.3	56.5
1930	1,056,214	2,273,661	41.4	20.5	44.9	65.4

Table 9: Number of cars, amount of taxation and expenditure, 1920–30.[35]

Following the Development and Road Improvement Funds Act (1909), the Roads Act (1920) established a Road Fund, and introduced driving licences and an excise duty on road vehicles to pay for the building and maintenance of the country's roads. It was a hypothecated tax dedicated solely to road building on the basis that no other claims would be made on the government for this purpose. It also required county councils to register all new vehicles and to allocate each one with a separate number. An initial allocation of £2 million was made available for road expenditure on two schemes, from 1920 to 1925 and 1929 to 1930, to relieve unemployment in necessitous areas, which was used in Ilfracombe to improve accessibility to the town from the north and cope with increased traffic demands.

From the outset, the rise in car numbers began to cause serious problems. It would probably not be possible to gauge the general attitude towards the car at the time by Ilfracombe residents, other than that which occasionally was written in the local press, or expressed through public policy – for example, criminal sanctions – but from the earliest days difficult questions were raised about dust, fumes, pollution, noise, lighting, road accidents and, in particular, fatalities. In 1926, after the first publication of national figures for fatalities resulting from road accidents there was considerable and growing concern over their number and annual increases (see Table 10). Pedestrians found it difficult to judge the speed of moving vehicles, and children were used to playing happily in village streets. Across Devon in 1919 there were 253 road accidents with 20 deaths, with numbers rising to 1,262 and 66 respectively in 1928.[36]

	Deaths	Injuries	Total
1926	4,886	Not recorded	
1928	6,138	164,338	170,976
1930	7,305*	177,895	185,200

*Although the highest number in peacetime was 7,985 in 1966, by 2022 this had been reduced to 1,760 fatalities.

Table 10: Road accident numbers in Britain 1926 to 1930.[37]

It was realised that faster-moving motor cars required control over their speed, insurance against injury, and increased police time to bring about prosecutions for motorists when there were differing attitudes towards them among magistrates and jurors. The laws were

[35] William Plowden, *The Motor Car and Politics in Britain* (Penguin Books, 1971), p. 479.
[36] *Western Times,* 1 March 1929.
[37] William Plowden, *The Motor Car and Politics in Britain* (Penguin Books, 1971), p. 483.

considerably out of line with technical developments, and although cases were fully investigated, at the time courts were often finding it difficult to unravel witness's statements and allocate blame.

Among the manufacturers, Ford had a head start before the war, producing 7,310 cars in 1913 in Britain at Trafford Park with the Model T, each costing £133 and capturing 25% of the market. In the same year, the new Morris Motors factory at Cowley produced the two-seater Oxford 'Bullnose', competitively priced at £165, but only 303 were produced. Morris Motors continued to grow very rapidly, and by 1925 it had overtaken Ford to become Britain's largest car manufacturer, with 42% of cars produced and 51% in the value of home market sales (see Table 11).

	1921	**1923**	**1925**	**1927**	**1929**
Morris	10	28	42	37	35
Austin	7	8	10	23	25
Ford	22	11	2	6	4
Rootes, Standard and Vauxhall					8

Table 11: Car production in Britain, 1921–29 (%).[38]

Morris Motors had achieved lower production costs by operating against the trend of vertical integration by assembling cars entirely from brought-in components, at prices which reflected the economies of scale secured by the suppliers.

But the continual model changes with increased accent on styling and accessories on even the cheapest cars, together with those in several price and horsepower categories, kept costs high and hindered the industry's ability to reduce them. This mixture of high production costs and middle-class consumer status affected the diffusion of car ownership, and brought about payment for cars by hire purchase, considered to be a 'not quite nice' and lower-class way of buying a car: the motto was 'No-one wants to keep down with the Joneses'. Consequently, to keep local deals confidential they were made in secret with London loan companies.[39]

Ownership of a car at the time also accelerated the trend away from a stay in a hotel or lodging house in a single centre to the increased mobility offered by a motoring holiday on a tour of several places, although the accommodation still tended to be resort based. In addition, the luxury image of owning a car in some cases ensured that accommodation providers would take the opportunity to charge motorists excessive or more expensive prices for meals and accommodation, anticipating richer pickings from this type of business than would be expected, for example, from cyclists, whose often dusty or muddy apparel did not improve their image or desirability as customers. Also at the time, a small but significant number of lower-class buyers began to create a second-hand market, with some owners prepared to share between family and friends.

[38] 'Morris Motors', *Wikipedia* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morris_Motors> [accessed 14 July 2023].
[39] Sean O'Connell, *The Car in British Society: Class, Gender and Motoring 1896–1939* (Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 24–32.

Overall, the inter-war period saw a massive penetration by the different forms of motor transport (as shown in Table 12) and opened up travel to resorts like Ilfracombe to lower-class families. The many rail strikes from 1919 onwards, and the trebling of fare prices, were gradually demonstrating the advantage of road transport, such that the railways viewed with some alarm the inroads being made on their passenger traffic.

	1920	**1929**
Railways	19,214	18,912*
Trams and trolley buses	8,058	9,494
Buses and coaches	3,457	11,307
Taxis and hire cars	1,624	929
Horse-drawn vehicles	216	63
Total	32,569	40,705

*Although the Southern Railway fared much better than the other three groups.

Table 12: Estimated number of passenger miles (millions) for transport in the UK, 1920–29.[40]

In the late 1870s Sam Colwill's excursion coaches, one of several companies in Ilfracombe, were until 1910 drawn by handsome greys. These were a familiar sight in the area when he took holidaymakers on trips to towns and villages in North Devon. They were gradually replaced by motor coaches – many of which were purchased as ex-army vehicles used during the war – and known colloquially as char-a-bancs or charas (see Figures 12 and 13). Popular week-long tours to Ilfracombe were priced between 14 and 18 guineas, including first class accommodation.[41]

Char-a-bancs produced their own style of travel, filled often with local people – from a church, street or pub – in a distinctively lower-class type of holidaymaking which kept them securely among friends and neighbours, relatives or workmates. They thus remained on familiar social territory miles from home, experiencing and reinforcing a collective identity among those whose lives were measured out in such terms.

[40] Richard Stone and D. A. Rowe, *The Measurement of Consumers' Expenditure and Behaviour in the United Kingdom*: *Volume 2 (for 1928 and 1929)* (Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 71.
[41] *Ilfracombe Chronicle*, 24 July and 18 September 1920.

Figure 12: Colwill's smart chara-a-banc, with solid tyres and a hood if it rained, outside the head office at 96 High Street, next to the LSWR's ticket office.[42]

Figure 13: The main rival to Colwill, a Copp's chara-a-banc ready to leave for the daily trip to Lynton on 22 June 1921, departing at 9.45am for a return fare of 7s 0d.[43]

[42] Ilfracombe Museum photographic collection.

[43] Lois Lamplugh, *Britain in Old Photographs: Ilfracombe* (Alan Sutton Publishing, 1996), p. 94.

Their arrival provoked differing reactions:

> The scope of the democratic tourist has been immensely widened of late years, and there are now very few places, however remote, that do not look forward to some sort of summer invasion…and a quiet haven becomes the goal of char-a-bancs.[44]

This new influx of the lower classes into the county's hitherto 'inaccessible' interior was followed by considerable hostility from among ruling elites. As a result, the press gave much publicity to the problems of litter, rowdiness and drunkenness leading, for example, to bans on char-a-bancs arriving at roadside inns around London during their journeys. In 1921, Devon County Council also passed a bye-law imposing a fine not exceeding £5:

> on any person who, on any public coach or other public vehicle hired or used for the conveyance of pleasure parties, used noisy instruments or made any loud singing or outcry while in or passing through any town, village or hamlet to the annoyance or interruption of the residents.[45]

A year after Colwill's death in 1919, aged 93 years, his fleet of twenty grey motor coaches was left to his widow. Having sold them for £3,500 she saw their resale for almost four times this amount to Hardy Central Garage of Minehead. Operating from a head office in Barnstaple, the company adopted the name of Hardy-Colwill.[46] Meanwhile, the Devon Motor Transport Company, founded in December 1919 as a road haulage business based in Okehampton, was taken over from January 1929 by the National Omnibus and Transport Company, having already acquired, among others, the motor coach services provided by Hardy-Colwill. In December 1929, the Company joined with the GWR to create the Western National Bus Company, and teamed up with the Southern Railway to form the Southern National Bus Company to improve co-ordination of road and rail services in their respective areas. One regular route was that from Ilfracombe to Westward Ho! via Braunton, Barnstaple and Bideford (the route now served by the Stagecoach number 21 bus).

(d) Cycles and motorbikes

The last years of the Victorian era were the heyday for recreational cyclists as the bicycle represented a means of independent transport for most societal classes prior to the mass production of motor vehicles. Cycling continued to be popular during the early 1920s, especially among youngsters, although by this time motorcycles and cars had begun to become affordable to the upper and middle classes. Thus, during the decade they slowly fell from prominence as more motorised travel was embraced. Recreational cycling activities ranged from a day's, or part of a day's, casual outing to a planned long-distance touring holiday, and were an integral part of a visit. For cyclists visiting Ilfracombe, the word 'Devon' conjured up leg-quaking visions of steep hill, after steep hill, after steep hill.

There were strong links between the recreational activities of cycling and camping, popularised by organisations such as the then Association of Cycle Campers (formed in 1901 from the earlier Bicycle Touring Club started in 1878, now the Camping and Caravanning Club) with a range of activities by organised youth groups such as the Boys' Brigade from 1883 and the Boy Scout movement, set up along similar lines in 1907. Leading the path to the

[44] *The Times*, 6 August 1923.
[45] Bye-law passed by Devon County Council General Purpose Committee, 29 September 1921.
[46] Lois Lamplugh, *A History of Ilfracombe* (Phillimore, 1984), pp. 108–109.

forming of the Association, the founder of modern recreational camping was Thomas Hiram Holding, a Congregationalist minister and tailor from Prees, Shropshire who wrote the first edition of *The Camper's Handbook* in 1908. He developed lightweight fabrics for tents used for camping, which were specially designed to be carried on a bicycle.

The 1920s saw developments on the original pioneer motorcycles, going from bicycles with engines to full-on motorcycles. Having previously acquired and fitted a commercially available engine in 1905 to a bicycle frame, the Birmingham Small Arms (BSA) Company, for example, discovered at first hand the problems that motorcycles needed to overcome. A 3½hp engine was added to their bicycles in 1910, and its entire production was sold out in the years 1911 to 1913. Later a 770cc, 6–7hp, v-twin engine motorcycle with a three speed gearbox was launched in 1920 at a retail price of £130. The popular two-stroke 1.74hp motor cycle, with a two-speed gearbox, was produced in 1928 (becoming a three-stroke model in 1931, the last year of production). As the leading British manufacturer, BSA sold affordable motorcycles with reasonable performance for the average user of the 1920s stressing the reliability of their machines, the availability of spares and dealer support.

Later in the decade, no longer producing cheap bikes for the masses, the larger motorcycles in production were priced at more than a decent sized detached house in Ilfracombe (about £200). Just like cycles, they for many also provided a cheaper form of transport to enable a camping holiday.[47]

(e) Air transport

The war had further accelerated the development of aviation, and following the introduction of commercial flights by Imperial Airways in 1924, Sir Alan Cobham (1894–1973), a pioneer of long-distance flight, sought to promote further 'air mindedness' among the British public. Between May and October 1929, he mounted a ten-week tour of Britain in his De Havilland D61 'Giant Moth' (G-AAEV, named 'Youth of Britain'), visiting 110 towns and cities in order to persuade them to establish their own local aerodromes, which by that time had been achieved in many parts of Europe.

His aircraft toured North Devon during August 1929, when his idea was favourably received by The Ilfracombe Urban District Council (IUDC) and Chamber of Commerce, who indicated their willingness to meet Cobham to ascertain where there could be a suitable site in the locality of Ilfracombe.[48] (Interestingly, counter to the logic which could also be applied to air travel, when a Parliamentary Committee sought the IUDC's views on the construction of a tunnel under the English Channel, it was opposed by seven votes to six, in the belief that it would provide easier access for a greater number of English people to travel to the continent than enable foreigners to visit resorts like Ilfracombe.)[49]

[47] 'BSA Motorcycles', *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BSA_motorcycles> [accessed 18 July 2023].
[48] *Western Morning News*, 28 August 1929; and Christopher Derrick, ed. *A Time to Fly: The Memoirs of Sir Alan Cobham* (Shepheard Walvin, 1978), pp. 150–151.
[49] *Western Times*, 15 March 1929.

Accommodation

Unsurprisingly, the holiday habits of the different social classes and their history impacted on the type of accommodation that was provided at seaside resorts like Ilfracombe during the 1920s.

In 1860 a local group of entrepreneurs sought to make Ilfracombe the 'Brighton of the South West' by building luxury villas rising four or five stories with steeply pitched roofs on the slopes of the Torrs. They envisaged buyers with ample incomes and a supply of locally recruited servants content with low wages. However, by the end of the century most had been converted either into hotel guest houses or schools.

In anticipation of the arrival of the railway, the Ilfracombe Hotel on the seafront overlooking Wildermouth and the Capstone was opened on 15 May 1867. It was designed in the French Gothic style with coloured bricks, and was 150 feet long with 210 rooms. It had a telegraph office (with the telegraph address 'Bestotel'), smoking room, library and reading room and, indicative of the era, a ladies' coffee room, a dining and drawing room. A later addition was a covered swimming pool, 160 by 50 feet, filled daily by pump with sea water, and sixty dressing rooms were open 7.00am to 7.00pm, but reserved for ladies only from 10.00am to 2.00pm.[50]

Figure 14: The Ilfracombe Hotel – imposing but not picturesque French Gothic architecture with a promenade later opened up to the public.[51]

Although the year 1920 was successful for the Ilfracombe Hotel, and placed it on its soundest financial footing since 1903, by 1925 it was forced to reduce charges because of a fall in the number of guests, and strong competition from other hotels in the town who had become more modernised (see Table 13). In addition, by 1927 the number of guests who arrived by car at the hotel had reached 90%, a reflection of the shift in business from residential to touring visitors. Grand hotels were no longer being built in the town, while family guest houses prospered.

[50] Lois Lamplugh, *A History of Ilfracombe* (Phillimore, 1984), p. 79.
[51] Sue Pullen and Jane Harding, *Images of England: Ilfracombe* (The History Press, 2003), p. 32.

ILFRACOMBE HOTEL COMPANY PROFITS			
Year	**Profit (£)**	**Year**	**Profit (£)**
1920	4,372	1924	2,830
1921	2,387	1925	748
1922	3,445	1926	3,234
1923	3,735	1927	3,040

Table 13: Annual profits achieved by the Ilfracombe Hotel, 1920–27.[52]

In the spring of 1928, following negotiations to sell the whole interest of the hotel at an offer price of £43,000 to the IUDC, agreement failed; but the IUDC agreed to lease the western part of the building, together with the tennis courts, swimming baths, and part of the promenade on the north side for £1,250 a year, with a further option to purchase. The acquisition of this property increased public enjoyment of the seafront by the opening up the promenade from which they had hitherto been excluded (see Figure 14).

Guidebooks of the period showed advertisements for some twenty medium to large hotels ranging from 40 to 200 rooms. An equal number of smaller ones operated either as hotels or guest houses, and nearly 200 offered furnished apartments or bed and breakfast. Bed and breakfast would cost between 3s 0d and 5s 0d, a stay in a guest house with a week's full board two to five guineas, and at the Ilfracombe Hotel four and a half guineas, according to the season and type of room. Because holiday accommodation as a percentage of dwellings in Ilfracombe had long been the highest in Devon, indicating a high proportion of dependence on tourism, the devastating period for Welsh industrial and coastal communities caused seasonal unemployment and stagnation for this sector in Ilfracombe (see Table 14).

Resort	**1910**	**1919**	**1930**
Dawlish	33	45	29
Exmouth	27	34	30
Ilfracombe	**67**	**73**	**42**
Paignton	34	41	28
Seaton	35	17	35
Sidmouth	25	44	23
Teignmouth	36	41	35
Torquay	32	37	31

Table 14: Holiday trades as a percentage of all commercial directory entries.[53]

[52] Reports of annual shareholders' meetings in the *Ilfracombe Chronicle*.

[53] *Kelly's Directories for Devon* (1910–30 editions) cited in Nigel J. Morgan and Annette Pritchard, *Power and Politics at the Seaside* (University of Exeter Press, 1999), p. 113.

Camping began to proliferate during the 1920s, mainly on the outskirts of the resort (see Figure 15). It was strongly opposed by boarding house proprietors and organisations such as the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE). The CPRE was set up in 1926 for 'steps to be taken to prevent the further destruction and disfigurement of rural England', for whom camping was regarded as environmentally detrimental.[54] However, farmers were often content to allow a few campers to settle on their land for a small fee, providing milk was not taken from cows, or eggs stolen from chickens.

Figure 15: Camping on Hillsborough in 1920.[55]

Between 1924 and 1928 the local population were encouraged to believe that the challenge of the depression could be confronted by the adoption of a progressive policy to make the town a winter resort. Hence, during the winters of 1925 to 1927, hotel, guest house and boarding house keepers were encouraged to remain open. However, the Ilfracombe Hotel decided to close during these periods, therefore there was little hope that smaller establishments would seek to agree to this proposal, and it was not surprising that the attempt to capture this new market failed.

Attractions

As long ago as the 1870s Ilfracombe's municipal government, even at this early stage, was highly involved in the development of tourist facilities to enhance the town's attractions, which included the remains of an Iron Age fort. In 1887 the construction of the Victoria Pavilion, modelled on the Palm House at Kew, and the centrepiece of Ilfracombe's seafront facilities, was also met with stiff opposition that had come to be expressed locally as residential and commercial interests clashed. At the time, the newly formed Ratepayers' Protection Society[56] exerted substantial influence and opposition to the pavilion preferring expenditure restraint to investment. But by 1894, the new IUDC was formed with greater

[54] During the 1920s the CPRE became a powerful lobby group, and for the 1929 general election managed to get each leader of the three main political parties to support the abolition of ribbon development surrounding British towns. CPRE <https://www.cpre.org.uk/about-us/who-we-are/our-achievements-and-history> [accessed 17 July 2023.

[55] *Illustrated Guide to Ilfracombe* (Ward Lock & Co., 1920).

[56] The Ratepayers' Protection Society, formed in 1870, declined somewhat during the 1890s but re-emerged at times of high municipal expenditure during the 1920s.

powers and a stronger financial base to encourage the resort's growth, and enabled the buying of the harbour. In 1895, the green open spaces of Hillsborough were purchased for £7,500 to prevent further development of the site, and the Cairn was laid out as a pleasure garden. The IUDC strove to attract visitors by upgrading theatre facilities with a 1,400 seat capacity Alexandra Hall in 1901,[57] and the purchase of the pier in 1908 for £14,750. Notable additions in 1910 were the Gaiety Theatre and Concert Hall in Wilder Road, for concerts and high-class entertainments; and a year later the first cinema, the Picture Hall in Northfield Road.

Thus, by the 1920s, with the exception of a few areas, the council controlled all of Ilfracombe's main open spaces, and although at first a pragmatic response – reactive rather than proactive – to speculation, it became an explicit commitment to protect the resort's natural resources and amenities. From then on during the decade the resort's development was a noticeable partnership between the public and private sectors. The former invested in the creation and enhancement of the public tourist infrastructure, building promenades, peers, gardens and concert halls; while the private sector developed areas such as accommodation and entertainment, which augmented the income of the resort, and increased property tax receipts for the local authority. Although the high cost of providing an extensive range of facilities and entertainment was a strain on municipal resources, plainly there was generally agreement among councillors to this expenditure.[58]

Figure 16: The Victoria Theatre completed in May 1925, behind the bowling green in the Victoria Pleasure Gardens.[59]

[57] By August 1910 the Alexandra Hall was being used as a cinema, and in 1921 screened films for the Palace Theatre during renovation. It was owned by the IUDC until July 1923, after which became a cinema, but was then transferred back in 1930.

[58] It was possible to identify occupations of councillors in the press reports for local elections, from which it could be established that approximately 33% of those with identifiable businesses were connected to the holiday trade over the period 1910–30. During the years of intensive investment during 1919 to 1925 this increased to 48%.

[59] From the Ilfracombe Museum photographic collection.

In May 1925 a new 750-seat concert hall, the Victoria Theatre (see Figure 16), was completed at a cost of £11,385,[60] and sat ornamented by two meaningless turrets which were allowed to survive a few years. It was built to replace the Victoria Pavilion, and to harmonise with the recently completed Victoria Pleasure Grounds (see Figure 17).

Figure 17: The Victoria Pleasure Grounds with a bowling and putting green, dominated by the Victoria Theatre.[61]

However, concerts on the bandstand or played on the pier on Sundays had to be arranged to commence in the evening before 8:15pm and in the afternoon before 3:15pm. Together these projects were the inter-war peak of municipal enterprise in Ilfracombe, but compared to Torquay, for example, the number of private and public sector entertainment facilities stagnated.

The 1920s began as an age of popular screen stars, but the history of the cinemas in the town was a fragmented one: the first cinema, the Picture Hall, was renamed the Electric Picture Theatre and closed in 1915. Reopening again as the Empire Theatre after renovation in 1916, the projection box was destroyed by fire while showing the film *Lorna Doone* in July 1925, and had to be closed again for a week in October when the projectors broke down. More successful was the Scala Cinema, which opened in December 1920 with a ballroom in the basement, and continued after it was taken over by the Gaumont British Theatres chain in February 1929.

As well as the fine beaches situated along the North Devon coast, Ilfracombe was able to offer five of its own; two of which were owned by the IUDC: the Wildermouth Beach, formerly owned by the Ilfracombe Hotel, and the well-known Tunnels Beach (see Figures 18 and 19). Also, a small boat could be hired from the pier to reach the beach at Raparee Cove. Excursions were made around the encircling countryside by char-a-bancs, in particular north to Exmoor and places along the coast south to Clovelly, and even inland as far as Dartmoor. Nearby, Watermouth Castle (see Figure 20) was open to the public on certain days, a small

[60] Those councillors claiming to represent ratepayers strongly opposed the planned expenditure involved in the building of the theatre, even after a successful public enquiry in October 1923, and a loan sanctioned by the Ministry of Health in 1924.

[61] From the Ilfracombe Museum photographic collection.

entry charge being made that went to charity, and there was a choice of other activities available including boating, fishing, tennis and golf (on the Coombe side of Hillsborough).

Figure 18: Tunnels Beach was reached by…

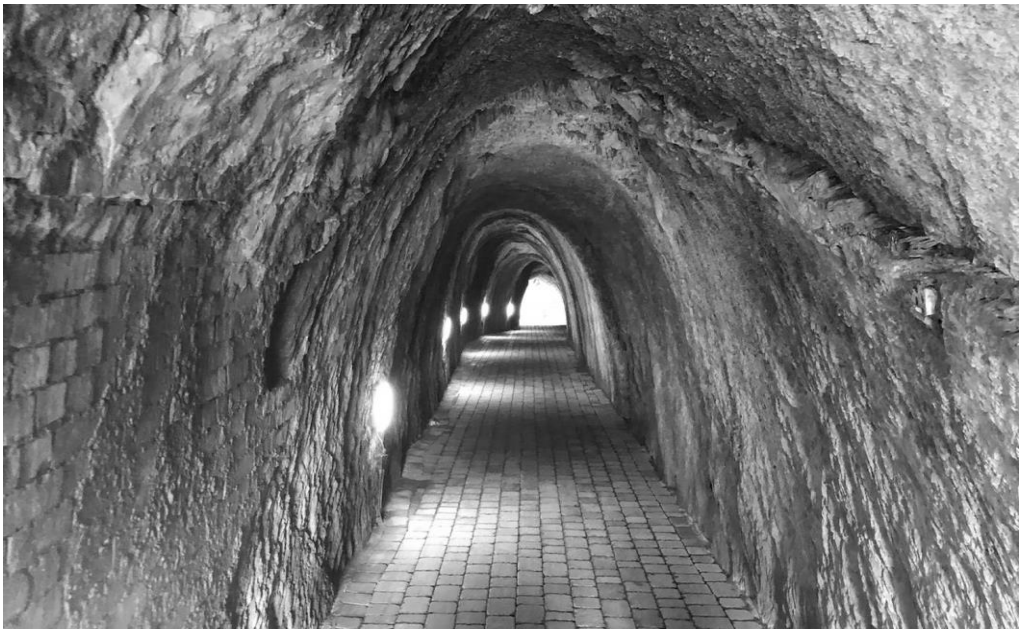

Figure 19: … a tunnel through the rocks.[62]

[62] The Tunnels Beach was given the name after having been made accessible by Welsh miners who dug a tunnel through the hillside in 1823. The site was thought to have been originally a natural cave, known as 'Crekerne Cave' used by smugglers.

Figure 20: Watermouth Castle, known as 'sham antique', having been built in the 1820s.[63]

Marketing

It was not until the late nineteenth century when many among the middle classes began to frequent the seaside resorts that they were forced to compete for the holiday trade on a national basis through private and public sector promotional activities. Until then, publicity had not been their major concern since almost of the seaside resorts had become fashionable, and advertising just emphasised their salubrious qualities. They were also little equipped for the new challenges as they lacked the necessary administrative staff, organisational structures and financial resources.

Some resorts established private publicity associations and advertising committees, such as Ilfracombe's Town Improvement Association established in 1862, and the Ilfracombe Advertising Association in 1896, which was funded by public subscriptions and money-raising events. They published official resort guides and placed press advertisements, but it was not until the period 1919–29 that Ilfracombe witnessed the consolidation of these efforts by the IUDC in collaboration, for the most part, with the railway companies. In this respect, the GWR was a vital partner in publicity, and gave crucial help through the setting up of campaigns using guides, posters, illustrative folders and an annual *Holiday Haunts* magazine.

The vital move came in 1910 when the IUDC established a committee to confer with the Advertising Association, which was invited to nominate three representatives to join three councillors to form a Joint Advertising Committee (JAC) to improve the town guide. Both the JAC and the Entertainments Committee, who appointed a director of entertainment in 1920, enjoyed high profiles and normally thereafter were chaired by prominent councillors. In 1913, the JAC was placed on a firmer footing with an annual grant from harbour revenues, which enabled the booking of advertisements in the leading papers, including 20 weeks in the *Daily Mail* costing £5. That year, the JAC was enlarged to include the whole of the council

[63] Lois Lamplugh, *Britain in Old Photographs: Ilfracombe* (Alan Sutton Publishing, 1996), p. 116.

together with Advertising Association representatives, and one ratepayers' nominee, and thereby established consultations that remained unchanged during the 1920s.

The issue that brought inherent divisions of the town's politics to the surface was the Health and Pleasure Resorts Act (1921) – delayed but revived seven years after the war – which allowed local authorities from September 1923 to fund advertising from the revenue obtained for the letting of deckchairs, beach tents, tent sites and bathing machines; or from admission charges to any gardens or municipal attractions. Spending was limited to the equivalent of 1d on the rates, and was confined to advertising in the press, leaflets, posters at railway stations and guides.

The *Ilfracombe Chronicle* spearheaded the calls for increased advertising expenditure, and urged the IUDC to promote the resort's winter season and publicise its attractive climate.[64] An editorial of 21 January 1922 was typical of this campaign proclaiming: 'Wake up Ilfracombe! What are we going to do about lengthening the summer season both at its beginning and it's end, to say nothing at all as to any movements towards booming the town as a winter resort.'

The years 1922 to 1929 saw consolidation in Ilfracombe's advertising activities, although there was often a poor response to the JAC's appeal for finance. Of the population in Ilfracombe of about 9,000, only 250 regularly subscribed to funds in the early 1920s, and in 1922 the contributions totalled less than £100. The bulk of the funds came from two or three annual fetes and dances held at the pavilion and pier, which in 1922 raised only £189.

In 1923 the JAC recognised that advertising in the provincial press was not as effective as advertising in national papers such as the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph*, and advocated an annual press programme for 1924 costing £10,000 (today equivalent to £488,000), plus £200 from municipal entertainments' profits.[65] But their appeal was unsuccessful, and the increase in the advertising budget for that year barely exceeded £200. A request to spend a sum equal to a 1d rate was refused, but a grant of £100 pounds raised from deckchair and beach tent profits was made following the implementation of the Health and Pleasure Resorts Act (1921). Believing that the Act would secure a more reliable financial base, the JAC embarked on an ambitious £500 joint publishing scheme with the Southern Railway, concentrating on press advertising. Unfortunately, the JAC overreached itself in this activity, and by October 1923 it was in debt by nearly £100. This forced a request to be made to the IUDC for £200, and in response £150 was granted solely for use in advertising the advantages and amenities of the district.

Between 1925 and 1928, the JAC continuously made strenuous efforts to promote the town as a winter resort, including an initiative centred on joint press advertising with the railways. Both the Southern Railway and the GWR[66] each contributed £150 out of a total of £600 for the 1925–26 season, but although it was a substantial sum, it was small in scale compared to the publicity fund for Torquay of £3,000. In the following winter season of 1926–27, 70% of the joint contribution of £670 was spent on advertising in the London papers, with the remainder being located in four provincial papers, believing that advertisements in London

[64] *Ilfracombe Chronicle*, 24 September 1921.

[65] Nigel J. Morgan and Annette Pritchard, *Power and Politics at the Seaside* (University of Exeter Press, 1999), p. 113.

[66] In 1924, the replacement of the former GWR advertising department with a new one brought forward a fresh approach to publicity with the 'Go Western Years', in which small non-display advertisements appeared in the same position each week in hundreds of local papers. Sales of 100,000 copies in 1924 of *Holiday Haunts*, with 712 pages doubled to 200,000 with 964 pages in 1929.

publications were more effective. As in the words of one counsellor: 'It was wise to advertise in better class papers to attract better class people',[67] but unlike the Torquay advertisements they rarely appeared in *The Times*. The IUDC gradually increased its grant until 1928 when it at last reached the equivalent of a 1d rate, as had been requested in 1924.

The social changes of the 1920s – particularly in the position of women – brought shifts in fashion, which resort advertising was quick to seize upon. There was an attitudinal shift and trend towards suntanned complexions (then increasingly popular among women) and the re-emergence of the craze for bathing and sun lounging. Former pride in rosy complexions and creams to prevent the sun from harming the skin gave way to the now socially agreeable and much advertised sun tan and protective lotions.

At this time, dressing and undressing in public at the seaside came to be a valid ritual, without the experience and necessity of using changing huts, booths or machines. Also, the wearing of briefer swimming costumes was reflected in marketing ideas, with sunshine and sex becoming common themes as brochures and posters made liberal use of photographs of bathing belles. The comic postcard continued to capture much of the already established folklore of seaside holidays, then reaching its heyday when the short-skirted flapper and the one piece bathing costume gave Donald McGill and his imitators the chance to develop the contemporary inuendo of large matrons and battered, skinny or beery husbands.

CONCLUSION

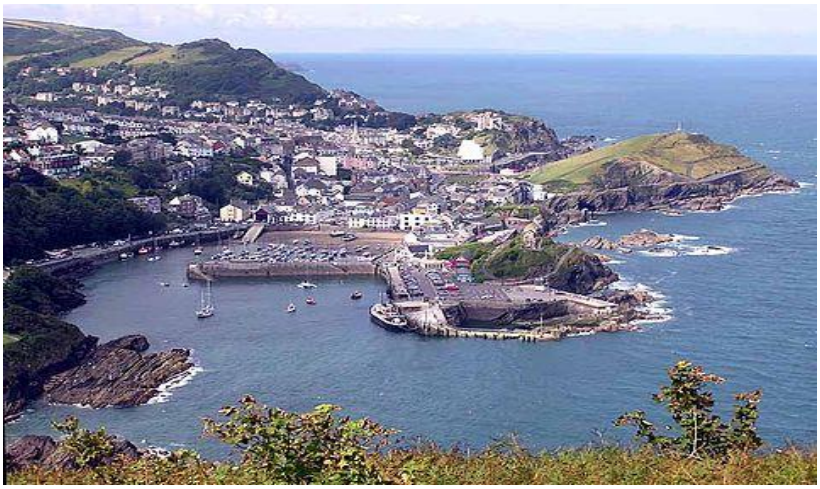

Figure 21: Today's view of Ilfracombe and the harbour.[68]

A modern view of Ilfracombe (see Figure 21) would appear to show that little change had occurred during the past 100 years. But closer inspection would reveal a town with the fading image of a previously fashionable and successful Devon seaside resort.

Ilfracombe had been fortunate during the war in being less prone to the damage and privations experienced in other parts of Britain, due to its isolated position in south-west Britain. But its location remained difficult to envisage in the minds of prospective visitors.

[67] *Ilfracombe Chronicle*, 27 February 1926.
[68] 'Ilfracombe', *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ilfracombe> [accessed 17 July 2023].

They had to be assured that although the word 'north' had something cold about it, this was a false impression because the resort was south of South Wales, south of London and south of Southend, which should have made it sound almost tropical. In fact, Ilfracombe possessed a winter climate as mild and equitable as Falmouth, with an annual average temperature of 10.9°C

With two-thirds of the south-west peninsula lying south of Exeter's latitude, routes from London and the east had been maintained as far south or towards central Devon as possible, but communication between the north and south coasts remained difficult. Not only the principal railway routes, but the roads also converged on Exeter and favoured southern coastal settlements at the expense of those in the north. The inferior roads leading to the north of the county were by comparison less well-maintained, giving rise to complaints from both the Automobile Association and the Cycle Touring Club. In addition, although the recreational use of the North Devon coast always necessitated beach access, the rise of the motor car in the 1920s meant that much additional expenditure had now to be spent by the IUDC towards vehicular access, adequate provision for parking; and on the administrative burden for regulating increased commercial development in the shape of kiosks, shops, cafes, ice cream parlours and amusement arcades in the town.

However, the IUDC strove continually to maintain and boost the tourist trade, in contrast to little input from the County Council whose affairs were dominated by an importunate agriculture industry.[69] Indeed, it was probably Devon's most active local authority during the decade, which did everything in its power towards the organisation of a number of entertainments, and to encourage others to arrange for them privately. Ilfracombe also had succeeded in having a plentiful and varied stock of accommodation: for example, a temperance hotel (Granville Hotel), one which offered hydropathic treatments (Cliffe Hydro Hotel) and one of the most luxurious in the country (Ilfracombe Hotel). But any enthusiasm for major tourism projects was undermined by the IUDC's lack of financial resources, particularly in view of its declining population.

Ilfracombe's remoteness from the urban populated areas, and late arrival of the railway, also ensured that its full-scale entry into the holiday market had been much behind other resorts. It had been fortunate to be able to take advantage of the steamer arrivals across the Bristol Channel, and during late July 1920 over 20,000 people thronged the streets of Ilfracombe, and promoted much optimism. But this number was never to be repeated, and the continuing depression in South Wales, and the lack of a diverse economy, were major causes of a slump in Ilfracombe's fortunes during the decade. In 1924, a decline in cross-Channel traffic, and the need to increase pier charges, did much to sour the previous excellent relationship between P & A Campbell and the IUDC at a time when its competitor, Weston-Super-Mare, was allowing boats to dock free of charge.

But whatever the ambition for further development, and the positioning of itself as a 'popular' resort, the inherent division and internal politics within the town's community illustrated a rift between this desire and the holiday interests of the town's Hoteliers'

[69] Jeffrey Stanyer, *A History of Devon County Council* (Devon Books, 1989), p. 69. (From 1925 in order of magnitude the Devon County Council had thirteen committees: Agriculture; Bridges, Main Roads and County Buildings; County Rate; Finance; General Purposes (including Weights and Measures); Local Taxation Licences; Mental Hospital Visiting; Care of the Mentally Defective; Public Health and Housing; Dartmoor Forest Preservation; Education; Maternity and Chid Welfare; Welfare of the Blind. In addition, there were two sub-committees: Smallholdings; and Diseases of Animals. Most of these had no significant influence on tourism.)

Association, Chamber of Commerce and residential groupings, which were dominated by those advocating a high social tone supported by those retired inhabitants who demanded a lower rates burden. Moreover, there was often a sharp difference of interests between the wealthier inhabitants and those with lower incomes. The rich desired exclusiveness, and sought to keep away the more predominant holidaymakers – the day trippers, motor coach travellers and campers – and to revoke the attempt to provide for all-year-round visitors; while the poorer residents sought more widespread publicity, communal services, day excursionists, and bed and breakfast establishments, with the maintenance of low costs – or at least little or no price rises during the high season.

Amidst these diverse views over the future development of tourism, the early optimism of the years 1918 to 1921 were misplaced, and Ilfracombe's Indian summer and hopes for better prosperity became a winter of depression, for not only the remainder of the decade but also the rest of the inter-war years.