

A Guide to Clifftown

[including a Glossary of Terms and Asides]

By M G Boulter

Front Cover:

The front cover of the album shows the Olympia, which is one of the arcades on the seafront in Southend-on-Sea. It is a typical British seaside strip of neon lights and competing buzzes and theme tunes from hundreds of games machines. Most local people won't recognise the building because who really looks up when they're having fun in the summer?

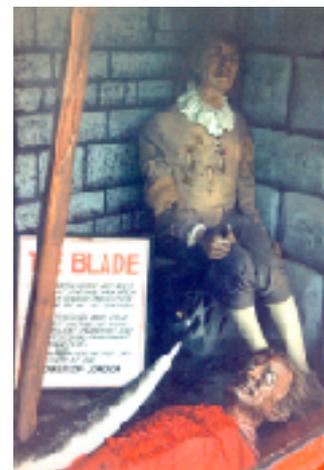
Seafront icons you need to know:

"Peter Pan's" - by far the biggest feature of the seafront is the permanent fairground sprawling across the beach with such delights as 'The Pharaoh's Revenge', 'Rage', 'Mighty Mini Mega' and my childhood favourite 'The American Whip'. Officially branded as *Adventure Island Southend* these days all locals over the age of 25 will refer to it as 'Peter Pan's' after it's old name Peter Pan's Playground.

"The Pier" - Any Southender will tell you we have the longest pleasure pier in the world. People seem proud of it. It's long because the tide goes out a long way. The pier has burnt down numerous times and in 2005 I watched it burn from Belton Hills like a torch in the night.

"Never Never Land" - refers to the now obliterated theme park attraction on the cliffs where as a kid you could follow a path around dioramas depicting magical worlds. They had the entire collection of He-Man toys displayed in one case which seriously impressed me in the late 1980s. The only remnants of it now is a large fairy castle complex which rises out of the shrub.

"Fantasy Land/ Waxworks" - Another abandoned theme park that was locally famous for having a waxwork of a man being carved in two by a swinging blade. It was the wonder of Southend when I was young.



Midnight Movies:

I walk around the streets of Southend and its suburbs at night. It's a sprawling network of suburbia with each part having its own unique character. In the summer the seafront is alive with people and in the 1990s boys used to descend with their souped up cars and bumper kiss each other as they slowly went around the loop of the esplanade. It used to feel so dangerous driving down there with my dad when we were kids to drop relatives off on the other side of town.

"Bumper Kissing" - trying to touch your car's bumper with another while slowly making your way down the seafront in a queue of other highly altered cars.

"The Braken" - In Leigh-on-Sea, leading from the train station across the hill towards Hadleigh Castle are thick bramble and blackberry hedges, sprawling wild. As kids we called this 'The Braken' and was where we built our secret dens and the like. In this song I enjoyed name dropping it.

Soft White Belly

This song references a number of personal local experiences. The old lady referred to at the beginning was someone I had observed back in 2014. She had stood in an empty arcade in the off season and with a small plastic tub of pennies she was methodically feeding the 'tuppenny shoves'. It looked like an Edward Hopper painting, something comforting and tragic in the same moment.

On the opposite shore to Southend is the Hoo Peninsula and the Isle of Grain in Kent. It is dotted with vast silos and chimneys which have been a constant backdrop to my living here. In 2016 they demolished the power station chimney on the Isle of Grain using explosives. Everyone came out to watch and people sat on the hills with champagne and gramophones like the Queen was about to visit. I watched it with my friend Lucy Farrell and we subsequently wrote a song about it called 'Explosion Day'.

"Tuppenny Shoves" - The glorious term coined (excuse the pun) by the legendary local comedic poet Simon Blackman to describe those games machines where you launch pennies onto moving trays in the hope that once accumulated they will push the cuddly toy or poor quality watch into the receiving hatch.

"The Casino" - The Westcliff Casino sits on the foreshore and is a vast lit up plexiglass and steel cube. Open until the early hours it is the go to place for the 1am nightcap. London biographer Iain Sinclair referred to Southend as 'Casino City'.

"Ship Full of Bombs" - Refers to the SS Richard Montgomery which grounded off Southend in 1944. It is packed full of explosives and is cordoned off by the MOD in the middle of the Thames. A local radio station is named after it - they have some great specialist shows, check them out. www.sfob.co.uk

Clifftown

Southend is a place where kids grow up and then 90% of them flee for London after working the menial jobs at the co-ops and curry houses. They then return to raise their own kids here. It's the natural cycle like salmon swimming upstream. Southend is also a commuter town where the commuters have their own code and community. You become friends with people without saying a word to them simply because you both get on the same carriage at 7.38am from Leigh Station every day for the last eight years.

Southend links direct into Fenchurch Street, which is overlooked by the Tower of London, and when you leave the City at night the Tower is lit up (ominously I think) just to remind you that there were once kings who would kill and maim all sorts of men, women and children within those walls. Anne Boleyn grew up near Southend in Rochford. The Boylen residence is still there and is now converted flats (expensive ones) and a golf club.

"Southend Airport" - This is where all the planes are flying from and to in the song. Neil Young shipped his 1930s Rolls Royce from the airport in 1974 and then stayed in Westcliff for a day or two (see my song 'Westcliff'). They also shot the airport scenes in Goldfinger here.

Nights at the Aquarium

All seaside towns have an aquarium. Southend's aquarium sits at the east end of the seafront. It emits salty mudflat smells and is usually full of excited and noisy kids. The cafe has porthole windows and it's nice to sit there at weekends and pretend you're out at sea.

"The Three Shells Restaurant" - is a cafe on the seafront where you can go for all your candy floss, donuts (as spelt), hot drinks, buckets, spades and ice cream. It has an iconic roof shaped like three clam shells. For great coffee try Roberto's a little further near the casino. A favourite haunt of mine and Paul Ambrose who plays bass on the record.

Icy Paw

Kids jump off the quays and jetties in Old Leigh during the summer. It's a dangerous pastime as many harbour stumps and fishing detritus lie just beneath the water. I was thinking of the jetty on Canvey island when writing this song. It's a huge finger pointing out to sea and was used for pumping oil into the nearby Shellhaven. Local heroes Dr Feelgood named their debut album after it and sang about the oil refinery, its flames burning in the night: *'I'm going down by the jetty/ Tonight the tide is high/ It's tankers in the channel laying/Flames up in the sky'*

The heron who flies from the gables is a nod to the local heron who I watch from my living room window. He comes when the Prittle Brook is high.

"Prittle Brook" - The Prittlewell Brook is a stream that winds all the way through the suburbs and courses about seventy metres from my house. It's named after the medieval village of Prittlewell, which was the big smoke here until Southend developed in the 1900s. Two blocks away from my house, in 1926, they found bronze aged offerings buried in its banks.

The Slow Decline

This song starts in Peter Pan's Playground where there is a small stage under the rollercoaster. Presenters take to this stage in the summer and over blaring music they pump the children up into fairground ecstasy.

The man dying on the headlines was a catch all phrase I read when I was in my early twenties, scribbled on an A board outside the newsagents. The seafront used to have lots of first floor nightclubs - Mr B's, Bar Bluu and the legendary TOTS (Talk of the South) where I heard once, during dropped conversation, the owner had boasted in the 1970s he had secured an appearance by Elvis (it never materialised of course). The man in the song had fallen (or was thrown) from one of the nightclub windows. There's an undercurrent of East End gangster here and they made a film called 'Essex Boys' about the Rettendon Turnpike Murders. Less said about that.....

Southend has a superb homeless charity and sadly in the summer months, some years back, homeless people were making makeshift camps on 'the cliffs'. I reference them here standing under the Arches, which is a nod to the row of beachside cafes which are housed in the arches under the road that leads up the cliff. It's referred to locally as the Essex Riviera in July and August.

"The Cliffs" - can refer to the grassy upland between the Cliff Lift and the Pier/ Never Never Land. It can also mean the Cliffs Pavilion which is a concert hall where I once saw Willie Nelson play.

Simon Of Sudbury

Simon of Sudbury was the Archbishop of Canterbury during what was commonly known as the Peasant's Revolt in 1381. The revolt was largely led and instigated by the men of Essex and Kent and was ignited when people in nearby Corringham, Stanford Le Hope and Brentwood (now famous for TOWIE) refused to pay a poll tax. Wat Tyler was potentially from Basildon and after Simon of Sudbury was beheaded by the rebels the revolt was suppressed with Tyler's murder at Smithfield and the subsequent Battle of Billericay. Simon's head was saved from the spike and kept in a church in Sudbury where it still sits. This song is about my quest to find it.

Fan of the Band

Southend was once packed full of venues where music was played most evenings. The current go to music pub is The Railway Hotel but here are some others (RIP) that were special for me and many others:

The Ship, Leigh-on-Sea: I've played here more than most other places I reckon. The Pink Flamingo Club used to be held here every month and it used to attract musicians from all over the world. It's currently boarded up.

Bar Lambs, Westcliff-on-Sea: Famous for having giant piano keys painted on the floor this basement bar was odd but special. Not currently open to the public.

The Grand, Leigh-on-Sea: Packed full of musical and entertainment heritage. Four bars with an upstairs room where all the Southend pub rock bands played in the 1970s, Dr Feelgood, Eddie and the Hot Rods etc. Lee Brilleaux's local boozer and also where Frankie Howard performed stand up when stationed in the nearby barracks in Shoebury during or just after the war. Currently closed being turned into flats.

"The London Road" - The one road in and out of Southend. Officially the A13 and memorialised by Billy Bragg in his song 'A13 Trunk Road to the Sea'.

Night Worker

I could write a whole album worth of songs about the things I've seen on commuter trains; it's human life in microcosm and there's distinct comradeship among those who find themselves on those busy trains that mark the very beginning and end of the day.

When I first began gigging in London I often found myself running down Fenchurch Street for the last train home. The cabbies would always be there having a smoke and waiting for those who missed it so they could get a fare for the way home. The City is gloriously empty at night and in the foyers of the huge glass towers of insurance companies and banks you will often see lonesome security guards whiling away the night.

"Neptune, high on your wall": - The Neptune refers to the vast building that is known as 10 Trinity Square just off Fenchurch Street. Once the home of the Port of London Authority. A figure stands proud on the ramparts surrounded by clam shells and pointing out towards the River Thames and the world.

"Drunk girl, Leaving too soon"/"The Vomit Comet"- The term affectionately used for the last train home to Southend from London Fenchurch Street at weekends, which is often full of drunken revellers, tired shift workers and party girls. Imagine a house party on a train carriage with people rolling down the aisles, lovers' tiffs, boys shouting tall stories and generally missing their stops. Those who don't want to participate can be found staring intently out of the train window with earphones on. Multiply atmosphere and intensity by 100% at Christmas and bank holidays.

Pilate

“The Mermaid under Carnival Lights” - In Victorian times some travelling carnivals would display wonders of the sea including real life bodies of mermaids which were often remnants of fish and monkeys stitched together to make a grotesque mannequin of a dead mermaid. The lyric refers to these seaside carnival grotesqueries.

And Finally, a Guide to Pronunciations...

The old Essex accent is fast disappearing. It has a twang to it that rounds the ‘a’ into an ‘o’, similar to ‘aw’. My late grandad and uncle on my mother’s side were from Rochford and spoke in this accent. One of my cousin’s still has remnants of it. The more common accent now is ‘Estuary English’, so don’t pronounce your t’s and if ‘well’ appears in any place name, say ‘wall’ instead, e.g., Chalkwell is pronounced ‘Chalk-Wall’.