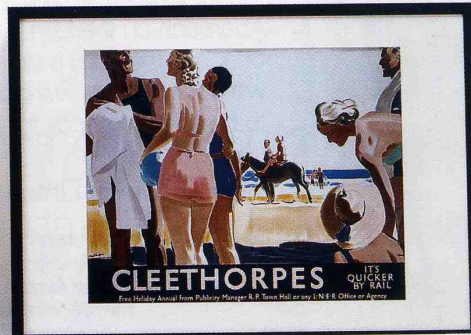
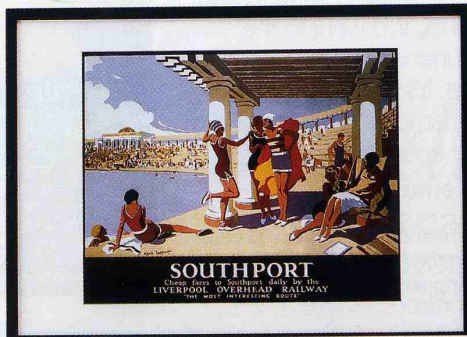


# OFF THE WALL



The British coast never looked so good as it did on the old railway advertising posters. With the help of expert Paul Rennie, we celebrate the golden age of seaside graphic art **WORDS Eddi Fiegel**



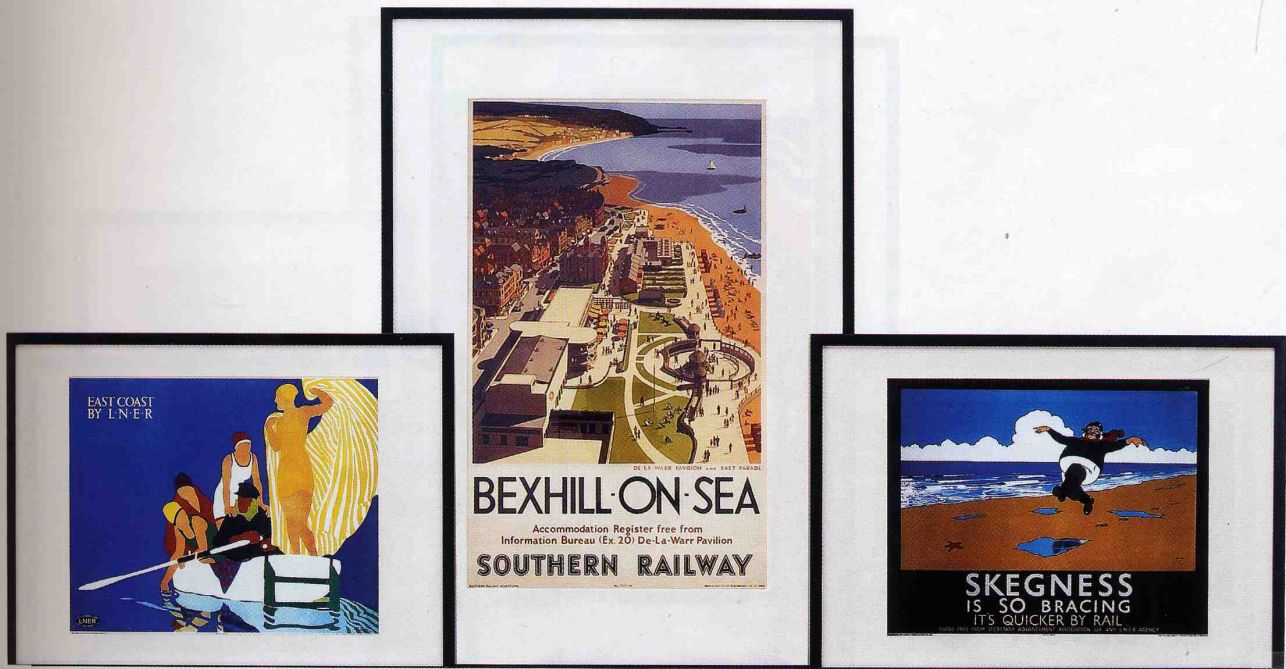
Ask most people to visualise a seaside poster and it's generally images from the 1920s and 30s of bright young things sitting languidly in front of a lido or a coastal panorama that spring to mind. The years between World War I and II are acknowledged as the golden age of railway poster advertising – the result of a happy combination of competition between the then flourishing major railway lines, resorts eager to attract visitors, and printers keen to demonstrate their technical capabilities. These posters and others from ensuing decades, all of which present an idealised version of British seaside life, have become more desirable and collectable.

One person with a passion for the striking graphics of vintage seaside posters is Paul Rennie (above left, with his

wife Karen), a Modernist design expert, who, with Karen, runs Rennies Seaside Modern, a shop full of vintage treasures in Folkestone. When the couple relocated from West London to the town in 1986, they moved into a flat full of white walls. This proved the perfect backdrop to display posters, and they soon found an original 1927 Southern Railway poster for Folkestone for £120 at an auction. The vast fantasy scene shows the white, neo-classical Leas Cliff Hall gleaming in the bright sunshine, its flat roof bustling with colourful parasols and lithe-limbed bathing belles. As Paul has amassed so much knowledge about the seaside poster, we asked him to guide us through its history and to advise on how to find one of our own.

## SYBARITIC SOPHISTICATES

During the golden age of the poster, railway lines contracted the best designers of the day, including



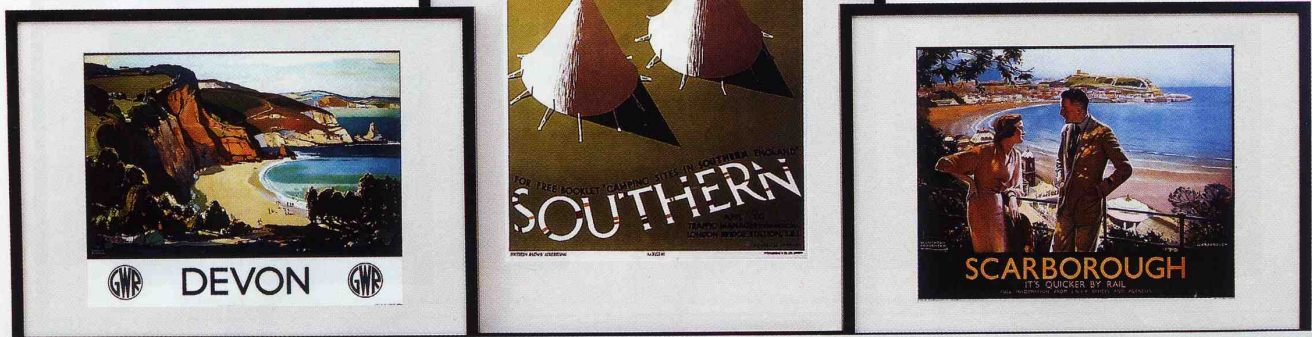
FROM FAR LEFT **Bathing beauties in Southport** – designed by Alfred Lambert in 1923; this poster, by Andrew Johnson for London & North Eastern Railway (LNER), enticed visitors to Cleethorpes in 1930; an Art Nouveau-inspired Tom Purvis poster for LNER, 1935; the De La Warr Pavilion and East Parade, Bexhill, in all their Modernist glory, 1947; the jolly John Hassall image for Skegness, which was first produced in 1908

Tom Purvis, whose 1935 *East Coast by LNER* (London & North Eastern Railway, above) epitomises the look. Stylised, sophisticated holidaymakers bask in the sun on a carefree rowing expedition and look unflinchingly modern, like flattened Art-Deco figurines. Purvis favoured intense, flat blocks of colour – Mediterranean blues, yellows and reds – and eschewed detail, almost bordering on abstraction. This was not just his natural preference, but a fortunate by-product of budget restrictions, as printing each individual colour required a separate – and therefore costly – print run. These already antiquated printing processes gave the posters much of their visual punch, as, unlike contemporary digital systems, the colours didn't break up and pixelate when the images were reproduced on a grand scale.

'If you look at Ryanair and EasyJet advertising now,' Paul Rennie says, 'it's bloody awful – just about a price point, they've got nothing else going for them. There's

no glamour, no story. Just the fact that you can get somewhere you didn't want to go for £30. What these vintage posters were trying to do was to sell you an idea. The pictures are constructed so as to create a fantasy of Margate or wherever – a fantastic combination of people, infrastructure and pleasure.'

Highly simplified and conceptualised advertising images were not new, even in the 1920s. One of the earliest and probably most famous seaside posters of all, *Skegness Is So Bracing*, was first created for the GNR (Great Northern Railway, above right) in 1908 by the French-trained Victorian poster designer John Hassall, drawing on the Art-Nouveau traditions of Toulouse-Lautrec. With his ruddy cheeks and jovial bonhomie, Hassall's fisherman – which he unconvincingly denied had been based on a former railway manager at the GNR – still looks as jolly and Skegness equally fun by association more than a century later.



FROM ABOVE LEFT This landscape poster, encouraging rail travel to Devon, was the work of Leonard Richmond in 1937 for GWR; a 1935 design of teepees by the sea was produced by Nowell Edwards for Southern Railway to promote its free booklet of campsites in the south of England; in the 1930s, W Smithson Broadhead took a more romantic approach for LNER with this 'Brief Encounter' couple by the Scarborough coast

## ROMANTIC WALKERS

But while GNR and other railway lines used these styles to convey ideas of modernity associated with many of the newly developed coastal resorts of the Twenties and Thirties, other stretches of the British coast still drew on a more romantic, painterly Victorian ideal. Leonard Richmond's 1937 *Devon* poster for the GWR (Great Western Railway, above) presents a long stretch of unspoilt golden sand with only a few lone walkers.

'This wasn't about fun,' Paul Rennie says, 'it was about a much more literary, Virginia Woolf-type idea of escape. This was for people who wanted to get away from city life and have a Greta Garbo moment.' It also featured a much more detailed style than Purvis and his contemporaries' radically simplified images, mainly because the GWR, which had a virtual monopoly on lines to the South West and Wales, could still afford to print these more costly images.

## GLAMOROUS TRAVELLERS

By the 1950s, printing techniques had evolved and the posters of the time are a last burst of creativity before the package holiday boom of the Sixties. The 1953 British Railways *Margate* poster, which the Rennies have for sale in their shop (for £1,250), is a classic example.

'This is a swing back from that very dramatic, extreme 1930s simplification,' Paul explains, 'to something that is not as realistic as the Edwardian posters, but a kind of hybrid of the two – there's a bit of simplification for impact but there's realism as well.'

Posters like this from the 1950s are generally less expensive than earlier images but eventually they will almost inevitably appreciate in value. The Folkestone poster the Rennies bought in 1986 is now worth about £5,000 – more than a hundred times what they paid for it, but they have no intention of selling. These posters were not only brilliant pieces of design,



FROM ABOVE LEFT Stylised gulls and clever typography brought Art-Deco style to Blackpool in this poster by Ralph Mott, 1935; Morecambe got a sexier image from Lance Cattermole for British Railways in 1960; the 1933 opening of the soon-to-be-iconic Midland Hotel in Morecambe inspired this simple, sharp image (artist unknown) – the building became a draw for visitors to the resort

they also offered a fantasy vision of glamour and pleasure that is just as potent more than 70 years after they were created.

### A POSTER OF YOUR OWN

Original seaside posters can still be found, although they are becoming more and more elusive. Fans of these examples of graphic design can, however, buy reproductions, which are readily available. All the images on these pages can be bought from SSPL Prints, the official print sales site of the Science Museum, National Media Museum and National Railway Museum. **coast** readers can get ten per cent off all purchases (A4 prints usually cost £15) until 31 December 2009 by going to [ssplprints.com](http://ssplprints.com) and entering the code CSTW2009 at the checkout. *Rennies Seaside Modern, 47 The Old High Street, Folkestone, Kent (01303 242427, [rennart.co.uk](http://rennart.co.uk)).*

 For more places to visit by train around the UK coast, see [allaboutyou.com/country](http://allaboutyou.com/country)

### \*THE REAL DEAL

*Paul Rennie's guide to buying original posters*

- **Prepare to pay** £500 to £600 at entry level. Posters from the 1950s and 60s are generally cheaper than 1930s ones.
- **Look out for posters with steam engines:** they may be worth at least £1,000. The same applies to bathing beauties. Double that price if a poster has both. Tom Purvis posters from the Thirties are also always expensive.
- **Choose locations carefully.** The value of posters is related to property values of the places being advertised – posters for Cornwall and Devon, Norfolk and Suffolk will be more expensive than, say, the North East or East Kent.
- **Don't hesitate.** Even if a poster is in ropery condition, buy it – an original is so rare, you're unlikely to see it again.
- **Be suspicious.** If it's in a frame, it's hard to tell if it's genuine.
- **Look online** at [christies.com](http://christies.com) and [ebay.co.uk](http://ebay.co.uk) to get an idea of prices and dealers.