**21C Margate**

Once a popular [seaside resort](/dickens/19c-margate) where Victorians came to take the air, where day-trippers streamed off the London train and crossed the barely 200 yards to deposit themselves and their paraphernalia on the famous beach; where poets including [Keats](/19c/19c-keats-margate/), the [Rossettis](/19c/19c-rossetti-biography) and [T. S. Eliot](/20c/20c-eliot-biography) came to recuperate, and artists to paint the sunsets, where Dreamland hummed with jingled music and punters screamed braving the 1920 Scenic Railway, Margate was to suffer the fate of many other seaside towns: limping through the end of the last century with rising unemployment, dilapidated structures, organ music, and absent holiday makers abandoning the British seaside for the Costas.

But a very different Margate has arisen over the last twenty years due to considerable investment in the cultural sector, the [Turner Centre](https://turnercontemporary.org/) being its flagship. Attractions like the Margate Caves and Dreamland have gone through a reincarnation, most of these made possible by dedicated pressure groups. Artists have always lived and worked in the area and renewed artistic innovation and enabled renovation, created workspaces and studios, bringing the Old Town back to life. While there remains a gap between poor communities and the blossoming of the arts, there are many projects and workshops to enable engagement and development.

It remains to be seen what impact Covid will make on the new creative industries, and small businesses on the whole. But the town’s success at evolving proves that adaptability, above all, is the key to meeting future challenges.

My book \_***In Margate by Lunchtime\_*** offers a bird’s eye view of Thanet from pre-Roman times to the 20th c. Just as our early ancestors would have found miraculous The Thanet Windfarm which stands now off the coast like sentinels an act of magic, so might of a mermaid tour guide on a Vespa, except of course she’s real.

Article by Maggie Harris. February 2021.

For more on the history of Dreamland see [‘Canterbury Tales: from the City to the Sea’](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=461nK7mazNo)

**The Mermaid Tour**

Excerpt, from[*-In Margate by Lunchtime\_*](https://maggieharris.co.uk/books/in-margate-by-lunchtime/)***,*** Maggie Harris

There was a mermaid on a scooter outside the station. Gary rubbed his eyes twice, hard, with the back of his fist.

‘Oi Gary!’ she shouted again. ‘Do you wanna ride or not?’

Gary did a quick shufti round to see if it was him she was hailing.

The car park was full. Summertime. Bare-feet, bare-headed, bare-assed. It wasn’t only the picnic baskets spilling over.

But no-one called Gary stepped up.

‘Oi Gary!’ She shouted again. ‘Do you want a ride or not?’

Gary clocked her, carefully this time. Long hair. Adidas top, sunglasses, earpiece and a speaker phone. Oh, and tail, tucked in neatly on the scooter plate. The engine was running. Without a word he climbed on. She twiddled the handles with her fingers. For some reason Gary was glad about that; he had no idea how she’d kick-start the engine. He’d had a long journey and couldn’t be arsed to work out the machinations of a mermaid on a scooter. He glanced at her hands, though; happy to see they looked normal. Her fingernails were chipped, lime-green nail varnish flaking, and her knuckles were muddy. Bloody hell, he thought, don’t tek care of herself, does she? She’s either a mechanic or climbed her way out the grotto.

As soon as he settled himself they were off. He got a mouthful of hair as she spun the bike round in the car park. Fine, flyaway, fishy hair it was, blonde. Or it could have been the smell coming off the beach. It was low-tide and he could see the bunched-up seaweed left high and dry on the sand.

‘Bit of a pong, that!’ Do you get a lot of that down here?’ he shouted. But the engine was spluttering and she didn’t hear him. He tried again, reckoning he should attempt some effort at conversation, but the wind swallowed his words.

She slowed up by the roundabout and turned right along the promenade, then passed him something over her shoulder. It was an earpiece. He grasped it with a wavering hand, the other gripping the underside of his seat. He placed it behind his ear and almost jumped when he heard her voice, catching sight of her at the same time in the wing mirror.

‘Do you want the whole works or the quickie?’

He nearly did fall of the bike then. She’d sped up past the Clock Tower and was belting it hell for leather up the hill. He clocked the new gallery as she sped past.

‘The whole works of course!’

He caught her eyes again in the mirror. She was smiling. Pulling his leg. Got a sense of humour. Especially seeing she herself didn’t have a leg to stand on.

‘Right. Well that piece of architecture we just passed sits on the site of a real ship, The Ship Inn. Site of many a Friday rockabilly night, just the place to catch your breath when you stagger out pissed. Wind’s famous for that here. Tucked away on your right is the Northern Belle, the oldest pub in Margate named after a Yankee ship that went down, used to be The Watermen’ s Arms. Whole lifeboat crew went down trying to save ’em. Coming up around this corner now, now a very attractive block of flats, lies the ghosts of the Hippocampo, a nightclub that banged out everything from rock to reggae to soul. Some had a right laugh there. Bet you didn’t know the singer from Madness married a girl from Ramsgate didja? On your right, another ghost, the famous Butlins. Site of mass entertainment, and dolphinarium. Animals didn’t have many rights then.’ ©Maggie Harris.