



## Sir Billy and the company he built

On 10<sup>th</sup> March 2021, members, wives, widows, and Friends of Haywards Heath & District Probus Club were treated to an excellent Zoom talk about the late Sir Billy Butlin and the company he founded. The speaker was the historian Dr Kathryn Ferry, who has a passionate interest in architecture, design and seaside culture.

### About Sir Billy Butlin...

Sources: • [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billy\\_Butlin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billy_Butlin) • <https://www.butlins.com/about-us> • <https://bognorregistrails.co.uk/history-pages/sir-w-e-billy-butlin/> • <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butlins> • [https://www.bigredbook.info/billy\\_butlin.html](https://www.bigredbook.info/billy_butlin.html) • [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand\\_Ocean,\\_Saltdean](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Ocean,_Saltdean) • <http://traquo.com/the-grand-ocean-hotel-saltdean-near-brighton/> • [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butlins\\_Bognor\\_Regis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butlins_Bognor_Regis)

Billy Butlin (in full, Sir William Heygate Edmund Colborne Butlin MBE) was a South African-born British entrepreneur whose name is synonymous with the British holiday camp. But he was not the first: Amongst the first public campsites, *The Cunningham Camp* (see [here](#)), later *Cunningham Young Men's Holiday Camp*, opened on the Isle of Man in 1894. Billy Butlin was still in short trousers when Fletcher Dodd launched his 'Socialist Camp' in 1906 in Great Yarmouth with three bell tents pitched in his garden. Inspired by utopian ideas, Fletcher Dodd, a member of the Independent Labour Party, saw in his model camp a means of offering the poor of Britain a chance to sample the delights of a seaside holiday. And Warner's already existed in one form or another before Billy Butlin opened his first camp in 1936. It was Butlin who turned holiday camps into a multimillion-pound industry and an important aspect of British culture.

Butlin was born in Cape Town and had a turbulent childhood. His parents separated before he was seven, and he returned to England with his mother. He spent the next five years following his grandmother's family fair around the country where his mother sold gingerbread; exposing young Billy to the skills of commerce and entertainment. When he was twelve his mother emigrated to Canada, leaving him in the care of his aunt for two years. Once settled in Toronto, his mother invited him to join her there. After the First World War (he was a bugler in the Canadian Army), Billy returned to England (aboard a cattle ship, no less), with only £5 in his pocket. Investing £4 of that money to hire a stall travelling with his uncle's fair, he discovered that giving his customers a better chance to win brought more custom in. He quickly became successful and started his own travelling fair.

**"Leave your Summer Holidays to me" INVITES BILLY BUTLIN**

To most people the essentials of a good holiday are "a change and a rest"—and quite right they are, too. But it is not enough simply to go away and do nothing. "Change" means change of activity as well as of scenery, and there is much truth in the old saying that "a change is as good as a rest".

That is why my Holiday Camps, situated in hundreds of acres of their own grounds at the edge of the sea, provide not only opportunity for rest and quiet, but also every popular holiday entertainment and sport. Add to these amenities the lasting pleasure of making new friends, and what more could a holiday offer?

At first glance a Butlin holiday may seem rather expensive, but remember, nowhere else could you dance each day to such famous bands, see greater entertainment stars or enjoy better facilities for every kind of sport and amusement without paying one penny extra. Pound for pound, the Butlin All-in Tariff is Britain's best holiday value.

I hope you'll leave your summer holiday to me this year—you'll be glad you did.

*W. E. Butlin*

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BLOCK LETTERS please

*You can even get away from yourself at*

**Butlin's**

Lock up the ledgers, forget all about figures—at any rate the kind that go in columns—and become the man who has only himself to account for—the man who passes the glorious hours of freedom idling or playing as the fancy takes him—the man on holiday at Butlin's. And all this goes for the woman on holiday too—even more so. Nobody deserves a break more than you do!

**Butlin's - WHERE YOU MAKE NEW FRIENDS**

Picture Credit: "'Leave your summer holidays to me' - Butlins Holiday Camp leaflet" by Rescued by Rover is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0

An advertisement costing £500 (today c £35,000) was placed in the *Daily Express*, announced the opening of his first holiday camp (Skegness), inviting the public to book for a week's holiday. The advertisement offered holidays with three meals a day and free entertainment with a week's full board cost anything from 35 shillings (old money) to £3 (today c £213). When the camp opened, Butlin realised that his guests were not engaging with activities in the way he had planned. Most kept to themselves, and others looked bored. An engineer engaged on constructing the camp (Norman Bradford) was asked to entertain the guests, which he did with a series of ice breakers and jokes. By the end of the night, the camp came alive, and the Butlin's atmosphere was born. Bradford became the first of the long line of Redcoats.

Butlin actively engaged in charity work through the *Grand Order of Water Rats* and through the *Variety Club of Great Britain*. He was *Chief Barker of the Variety Club* in 1959, 1966 and 1975.

## Timeline for Butlins

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Between 1936 and 1966, ten camps were built, including one in Ireland and one in the Bahamas. In the 1970s and 1980s, Butlin's also operated numerous large hotels, including one in Spain, several smaller holiday parks in England and France, and a revolving restaurant in the Post Office Tower in London. But tough competition from overseas package holiday operators, rising operational costs, and rapidly changing demand, forced many of the Butlin's operations to close in the 1980s and 1990s.

Three of the original camps remain today under the Butlins brand in Bognor Regis, Minehead, and Skegness. They are now owned and run by Butlins Skyline Ltd, a subsidiary company of Bourne Leisure Ltd, which also operates other leisure brands such as Warner Leisure and Haven Holidays.

Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butlins>

## Decade-by-Decade

- 1930s: Skegness opened in April 1936 and doubled in size in just 12 months. It was officially opened by Amy Johnson, the first woman to fly solo from England to Australia. Clacton-on-Sea became the second camp in 1938.
- 1940s: To help with the war efforts, Billy's existing camps were given over to the government.
- 1950s: Indoor heated pools designed to be used 'whatever the weather' opened at Ayr, Clacton, Pwllheli and Skegness. After holidaying in the Caribbean, Billy opened Butlin's Bahamas.
- 1960s: A further three resorts opened: Bognor Regis (1960), Minehead (1962) and Barry Island (1966).
- 1970s: with air travel to foreign destinations becoming accessible to everyone and as people fell in love with holidaying abroad, the concept of 'holiday camps' faded. The business was sold to the Rank Organisation.
- 1980s and 1990s: Billy Butlin passed away on 12<sup>th</sup> June 1980. His funeral procession was lined with Redcoats. Many sites were closed or sold off.

Source: <https://www.butlins.com/about-us/our-timeline>

## Connections with Sussex

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Butlin's presence in the seaside resort of *Bognor Regis*, began in 1932 with the opening of an amusement park and soon expanded to take in a zoo as well. In 1960, Billy Butlin opened his first post-war mainland holiday camp, moving both the amusement park and zoo into the new camp. The camp survived a series of cuts in the early 1980s, attracting further investment and again in the late 1990s when it was retained as one of only three camps still bearing the Butlin name.

The Ocean Hotel at *Saltdean* occupied a site of around 4 acres with 344 bedrooms and a dining hall that could seat 300 people. The iconic hotel was designed by architect RWH Jones in the classic moderne styling of the age (he also designed the Lido at Saltdean). The Ocean Hotel opened as a luxury hotel in 1938. During World War II, the building was taken over by the fire service and used as a fire service college. It was then bought by Billy Butlin in 1953 and became a Butlin's Holiday camp. In 2005/6, the main hotel building was redeveloped into luxury apartments.

# Zoom Talk: Sir Billy Butlin

Delivered on: 10<sup>th</sup> March 2021

Haywards Heath & District Probus Club

Given By: Kathryn Ferry

The Ocean Hotel became the *Grand Metropolitan* for a TV film as the famous (fictional) Belgian detective Hercules Poirot staying there on vacation to boost his health, had to use all his skills when the pearl necklace of an actress who was staying at the hotel, was mysteriously stolen, see [here](#).



Picture Credit: "File:Grand Ocean Hotel, Saltdean-8279764869.jpg" by Chris Sampson is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#)

## About the Speaker



Dr. Kathryn Ferry grew up near the sea in North Devon and remembers childhood holidays around the UK, many by the sea. Victorian architecture and design were her first academic interests, but she is now better known as an architectural historian, and a writer and broadcaster on many 'seaside' related subjects including holidays, beach huts and bungalows. She is the author of several books and articles and regularly contributes to television and radio. She also lectures to a wide range of audiences. Her website is at:

<https://www.kathrynferry.co.uk/>.