

## Brighton Rocked: Mods, Rockers, and Social Change During the Early 1960s

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### “THAT IS BRIGHTON, MY SONS!”

Brighton—Britain’s popular holiday resort, fifty miles south of London—provides a charismatic backdrop to *Quadrophenia*. The Who’s 1973 rock opera and Franc Roddam’s subsequent (1979) film adaptation both feature Brighton as a setting for pivotal narrative sequences. But, in the movie version especially, the seaside town also has symbolic importance. Set in May 1964, the film begins as diehard, West London Mod Jimmy Cooper (Phil Daniels) and his friends are building up to the excitement of a bank holiday in Brighton. Jimmy pays off his new, tailor-made suit (“Three buttons, side vents, 16-inch bottoms”), gets a razor-sharp haircut and, with mates in tow, trawls around London for a weekend’s supply of Purple Hearts. Then, as dawn breaks, a phalanx of scooter-riding Mods heads south, with Jimmy leading the way. As the ranks of Lambrettas and Vespas crest the Downs (the bucolic hills overlooking the sea), Jimmy pulls up to take in the view. “Look at that! That is Brighton, my sons!” Jimmy crows, as he gazes down at the seaside town. Laid out

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like an alluring, Mod-*esque* version of Shangri-La, the town is a vision of enticing possibilities. Offering liberating escape from the workaday world of drudgery and obligation, Brighton seems to symbolise the Mod ideals of high living and non-stop hedonism (Fig. 2.1).

Indeed, following Whitsun 1964, Brighton has had a special place in Mod folklore. The “Battle of Brighton” that took place that weekend—an episode central to *Quadrophenia*’s storyline—has anchored the town in Mod mythology. Tales of the Mod “invasion” of Brighton, and images of beachside battles between Mods and Rockers, have become key motifs in the popular history of Mod subculture and have seen Brighton immortalised as a Mod mecca. And this enshrinement certainly has some justification. The events that unfolded were undoubtedly spectacular and were a major news story. They also played a significant part in the development of Mods and Rockers as discrete, distinctive groups with clear-cut styles and identities.

At the same time, however, sociologists and historians have pointed to the way the “Battle of Brighton” was exaggerated and distorted by the press of the time. Magnified and misrepresented by a fevered media, the “Battle of Brighton” was presented as emblematic of seismic social and cultural changes that were transforming the nation; changes in which young people and youth culture were configured as the strident



Fig. 2.1 “That is Brighton, my sons!”

vanguard. It is, then, important to recognise the “mythological” dimensions to the Mod bank holiday mayhem; and the way *Quadrophenia* both portrays this process of mythologisation and is, itself, constituent in the myth-making.

Unpacking the mythologies that lie behind *Quadrophenia*’s storyline requires attention to their historical context. To understand why the Mod “invasion” of Brighton was such a newsworthy event, the episode must be seen in relation to the wider patterns of social change that characterised Britain during the early 1960s. Particular recognition must be given to the way the mythologies surrounding the “Battle of Brighton” were rooted in the growing social significance of youth culture after the Second World War; together with the profound transformations taking place in working-class life as a consequence of shifting patterns of employment and the growing impact of consumerism. But a longer historical context also deserves recognition. Brighton’s Mod fracas of Whitsun 1964 and the media uproar that followed were, in many respects, just the latest instalment in a long history of controversy that surrounded the town’s “invasion” by raucous groups of working-class youngsters.

### “LONDON BY THE SEA”

Brighton’s status as a haven for leisure and pleasure dates from the 1750s when the town was one of many declining fishing ports revived by the fashionable elite’s enthusiasm for coastal resorts. During the nineteenth century, gradual increases in disposable income and annual holidays brought more working-class visitors, especially with the completion of a railway link with London in 1841. Initially, rail fares to “London by the sea” (as Brighton became known) were prohibitive; but by the 1860s, third-class travel and low-priced excursion trains had made regular sea-side jaunts a possibility for most working people and popular weekends saw nearly 150,000 Londoners descend southwards as “To Brighton and back for three shillings” became a household phrase in the capital.

Renowned as a place where the staid and the serious gave way to the ribald and the risqué, Brighton attracted throngs of working-class visitors out for a taste of fun and excitement. This loosening of restraint, however, was always a site of tension. Fear of the unleashed lower orders plagued respectable Victorians, and high-minded essayists hotly condemned the holidaying crowd’s dress, morality and—especially—their

propensity for debauched excess. In 1860, for example, one anonymous author (identifying himself as simply “A Graduate of the University of London”) bemoaned Brighton’s “scenes of vice and temptation”, the outraged writer reserving particular ire for young visitors from the capital. That year, the critic lamented, reduced fares on Sunday excursion trains had seen the arrival of thousands of young Londoners who were responsible for the “disgraceful scenes which were enacted in many parts of the town”:

Towards the evening, the Queen’s Road swarmed with drunken and disorderly persons, who set aside all decency, and whose conduct was an offence against public morals. Many of them got too drunk to make their way to the station in time, and were left behind. The carriages were filled with young men and women, in too many cases inflamed with strong drink, whose conversation was disgusting enough to shock every sense of propriety.<sup>1</sup>

Brighton’s reputation for licentious leisure endured and, during the inter-war period, was complemented by an aura of small-time villainy. This was largely indebted to the rival turf gangs of the 1920s and 1930s who feuded at the race track and on the promenade, reputedly slashing their enemies with cut-throat razors—events that were the inspiration for Graham Greene’s 1938 novel, *Brighton Rock*.<sup>2</sup> Greene’s teenage anti-hero, “Pinkie” Brown, was a fictional character, but the aspiring gangster and his cronies were closely based on the criminals that frequented Brighton’s inter-war race meetings. The gangs were finally broken up in June 1936 after a fight at the nearby Lewes Races. A thirty-strong East London gang known as the Hoxton Mob descended on the event, planning to attack a local bookmaker; but police had anticipated the raid and a violent mêlée ensued. The Londoners were “tooled-up” with iron bars, billiard cues, and knuckle dusters, but most were eventually arrested and jailed.

After the Second World War, Brighton rode high on a post-war holiday boom, but by the 1960s its prosperity was looking shaky. In 1961 *The Economist* was warning that Brighton was “on the rocks,” the town depending on a short peak of seasonal trade centred on the August bank holiday.<sup>3</sup> The 1963 summer season, however, was Brighton’s most unsuccessful in twelve years and the local Entertainment Managers’ Association lamented “the appalling situation which the whole of Brighton and Hove

is suffering by the lack of visitors and the almost complete emptiness of the town.”<sup>4</sup> But it was not simply the numbers of visitors that prompted concern. The attitude and behaviour of those who *did* visit the resort also provoked unease. Victorian distaste for working-class leisure-seekers found echoes in the angst of Brighton’s post-war grandees who, like local author Hector Bolitho, bemoaned the “fish-and-chip-minded people who hurry down from London,” turning the town into “a shabby trippers’ resort.”<sup>5</sup> And, as in the nineteenth century, it was younger visitors who attracted the fiercest ire. This time, however, the concerns were felt even more keenly as traditional anxieties about youth running wild were given added impetus by patterns of social and economic change that had pushed young people into the national spotlight.

### “THE TEENAGE TOWN”

For some, young people in post-war Britain were a bright prospect. As historians Selina Todd and Hilary Young show, many working-class parents encouraged their children to enjoy more adventurous lives amid the newfound economic security of the 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, many young people faced social and economic opportunities unknown to previous generations. A decline in heavy industry, movement of capital into lighter forms of production (especially consumer goods) and the expansion of production-line technologies created a demand for flexible, though not especially skilled, labour power—and young people (because they were cheaper to employ than adults) were ideally suited to the role. As a consequence, the 1950s and early 1960s saw buoyant levels of youth employment and young people’s spending power steadily grew.

Indeed, the equation of “youth” with “affluence” became a prevalent post-war theme. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, market research conducted for the London Press Exchange by Mark Abrams helped popularise the notion that youth, more than any other social group, had prospered since 1945.<sup>7</sup> Widely cited in an array of official reports (and a welter of books, magazines and newspaper articles), Abrams’ data suggested that since the war young people’s real earnings had risen by 50% (roughly double that of adults), while youth’s “discretionary” spending had risen by as much as 100%—representing an annual expenditure of around £830 million.<sup>8</sup> Abrams maintained, moreover, that this spending was concentrated in particular consumer markets (representing, for example, 44% of total spending on records and 39% of spending on

motorcycles), which, he concluded, represented the rise of “distinctive teenage spending for distinctive teenage ends in a distinctive teenage world.”<sup>9</sup>

Abrams’ research was—and continues to be—frequently cited as an index of young people’s soaring post-war prosperity. Room exists, however, to qualify some of his contentions. For example, Abrams’ definition of teenagers as “those young people who have reached the age of fifteen but are not yet twenty-five years of age and are unmarried” would have undoubtedly disguised differences of earnings and expenditure within this group; while his discussion of *total* expenditure and *average* earnings would, again, have concealed differences and disparities.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, less well-known research contrasted with Abrams’ more spectacular claims. For instance, in 1967, Pearl Jephcott’s study of Scottish youngsters found that 59% of 15–17½-year-olds had less than £1 a week spending money and 81% of 17½–19-year-olds had less than £3; while in 1966, Cyril Smith’s study of youth in the northern town of Bury found that only 5.5% of fifteen- to eighteen-year-olds spent more than £2 per week, with 61.5% spending less than 15s.<sup>11</sup> “The popular picture of affluent teenagers,” Smith concluded, “grossly simplifies the very real differences in income among them.”<sup>12</sup> And in Brighton, too, research painted a more modest picture of teenage spending. In 1959, the town council’s Education Committee tasked themselves with investigating the social and economic needs of local youngsters (a decision that, itself, testifies to the salience of “youth issues” during the period), and the ensuing report recorded that most local boys spent less than £2 a week, while most girls spent between £1 and £1.10s—roughly half the levels calculated by Abrams.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, while Abrams’ claims (and the publicity surrounding them) may have exaggerated the scale of “teenage affluence,” it was not pure illusion. Figures produced by the Department of Employment and Productivity confirm that young people’s weekly earnings rose steadily in the post-war era and show that, whereas male manual workers younger than 21 years-old received only 31% of their older workmates’ earnings in 1935, by 1965 this had risen to 68%. Similarly, whereas female manual workers younger than 18 years-old received only 45% of older women’s earnings in 1935, this had risen to 68% by 1965.<sup>14</sup> Teenage wallets, then, may not have been bulging, but they were certainly increasingly replete, and—as Brighton’s Education Committee concluded in 1959—there was “obviously some justification for the claim that young people today have comparatively much more money to spend.”<sup>15</sup>

It was, moreover, a spending power of increasing importance to Brighton. The local elite may have been aghast, but the town's businesses increasingly orientated to the youth market as older visitors drifted away. As journalist Dan Farson observed in his introduction to "Living For Kicks," an ITV documentary profiling local teenagers in 1960:

Brighton—a favourite place for almost everything, including retirement. But today it's also known as "the teenage town" because of the large number of amusements there.<sup>16</sup>

The same point was made in 1959 by a young Brightonian, who explained to readers of *New Statesman* that:

... if there's one thing better than being a Teenager in Love, it's being a teenager in Brighton. ... There are numerous cinemas with adequate snogging facilities, pubs that are tolerant of under eighteenish types ... and above all there are innumerable coffee bars, each with a character of its own.<sup>17</sup>

Enthusiasm for teenage culture, however, was hardly universal. As Dick Hebdige argues, a recurring duality has characterised popular debate about youth. For Hebdige, contrasting images of "youth-as-fun" and "youth-as-trouble" have regularly served as motifs around which dominant interpretations of social change have been constructed.<sup>18</sup> In these terms, young people have been *both* celebrated as the exciting precursor to a prosperous future *and* vilified as the most deplorable evidence of social decline. Hence, alongside the breathless celebrations of teenage consumption, post-war Britain also saw many more fearful accounts that cast juvenile delinquency and commercial youth culture as depressing indices of social decline. During the 1950s the anxieties coalesced around the spectre of the Teddy Boy.

It was around 1954 that the Teddy Boy was first identified by the media in the working-class neighbourhoods of south London. His style of a long, drape jacket and drainpipe trousers was sometimes interpreted as an adaptation of Edwardian fashion—hence the sobriquet "Teddy Boy"—but it was really a variant of the American—influenced styles that had become popular among many working-class youngsters in Britain during the 1940s. And, as historian Geoffrey Pearson shows, longstanding anxieties that cast working-class youth "as the harbinger of

a dreadful future” were given especially sharp inflection in responses to the Ted, who was cast as the villainous culprit responsible for a surge in crime and violence.<sup>19</sup> The Teddy Boy was presented as a new, uniquely vicious menace stalking streets and dancehalls all over the country. Not least in Brighton, where existing concerns about working-class “trippers” were given additional force by the alarm that increasingly surrounded the styles, tastes and attitudes of “affluent youth.”

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s Brighton saw a spate of anxieties about young visitors and their impact on the town. In 1954, for example, the local press blamed London Teddy Boys for a stabbing at the town’s Regent dancehall; while in 1956 seafront traders, outraged at obscene graffiti, held “Teddy boy trippers” responsible.<sup>20, 21</sup> Critics argued that particular problems were posed by the train from London that arrived in Brighton early on Sunday mornings. The cheap fares available on the service were said to attract “Teddy Boy gangs and skiffle groups travelling to Brighton for a day by the sea”; and the “Trouble Tram” (as it was dubbed) became known for its “skiffing Edwardians and their teen-age ‘molls’ who terrorize the passengers.”<sup>22</sup> One incident saw fourteen youths detained and sent back to London after smashing windows and fighting with fire extinguishers, while on another occasion the local press reported that a “noisy cargo of London skiffers out on a spree” was greeted by a squad of more than thirty police officers who were “standing by to scatter the skiffers if they had decided to play rough.”<sup>23</sup>

Other groups of youngsters also drew hostility from Brighton officialdom. Particular enmity was directed towards neo-bohemian beats or beatniks—or “beachniks” as they were dubbed in the town. During the early 1960s, hundreds of young visitors spent summer nights sleeping on the stretch of beach between Brighton’s two piers and, speaking to “a young man in a thick black jersey and jeans and embryo beard,” a *Times* journalist discovered that most of the group were “youths between 16 and 22 looking for a good time – but a good time which costs as little as possible,” the bemused reporter observing that on Sunday mornings the seafront was:

... more like a dormitory than a beach. Groups of young men trailing their bedrolls over their shoulders, carrying their transistor radios ... and recounting their night’s adventures are a common sight. Wherever shelter from the biting night breezes offers itself one may expect to come on a beachnik.<sup>24</sup>

But seafront traders, town politicians and the local press were appalled. One town councillor, for instance, suggested that sleeping beachniks should be roused with fire hoses, while colleagues speculated that bulldozing sections of the beach might be a better deterrent.<sup>25</sup>

National concerns, then, were given especially sharp inflection in Brighton. Since the Victorian era the town had wrestled with anxieties about the behaviour of working-class visitors and, during the 1950s and early 1960s, the fears became more pronounced as Brighton struggled to adjust to changes in its traditional holiday trade. And, amid the wave of national unease about youth culture, Brighton's young visitors were regularly configured as both a source and a symptom of the resort's problems. Initially, Teddy Boys and "beachniks" were cited as principal threats. But events in 1960 foreshadowed a new phase of dread. That March Brighton's press reported that the town centre had seen a "running battle" between local lads and a gang of London youths, twenty-strong and armed with broken bottles and a hatchet.<sup>26</sup> This time, however, the Londoners had not travelled by train. They had arrived on scooters.

### "YOU'VE GOT TO BE SOMEBODY"

The pack of young scooterists who arrived in Brighton during 1960 were indicative of changes in British youth style. The late 1950s saw the Ted's drape jacket and greasy quiff gradually give way to the chic, Italian-inspired flair associated with the Mods.<sup>27</sup> Italian aesthetics wielded a general influence on British design throughout the period, popularised by films such as *Roman Holiday* (dir. William Wyler, 1953) and *La Dolce Vita* (dir. Federico Fellini, 1960) and, by the late 1950s, the smoothly tailored lines of Italian fashion were increasingly sported by the "Modernists"—the hip cliques of young West Londoners immortalised in Colin MacInnes's 1959 novel, *Absolute Beginners*.<sup>28</sup> The "Modernist" look of short, "bum-freezer" jackets and tapered trousers quickly spread through London's working-class housing estates where youngsters' taste for exquisitely cut suits took them to tailors such as John Stephen in Carnaby Street; which, itself, was transformed into the throbbing heart of the Mod universe. Other Mod haunts included Soho nightclubs such as the Scene and the Flamingo where white, British Mods got down to the sounds of black, American soul music and rhythm and blues (the latter emulated by "Mod" groups like the Who and the Small Faces),

together with early Jamaican ska and bluebeat. The scene was fuelled by amphetamine pills—Purple Hearts, French Blues, Black Bombers—while mobility was provided by gleaming Italian Vespa and Lambretta scooters, sometimes turned into wondrous, two-wheeled sculptures through the addition of a profusion of chrome accessories and superfluous wing mirrors. And long, “fishtail” parkas (courtesy of American army surplus) protected the Mods’ all-important suits from engine oil and the vagaries of the British weather.

Mod, according to social theorists such as Phil Cohen, was spawned from broader changes in the fabric of working-class culture. After 1945, Cohen argues, the institutions that had once formed the bedrock of working-class life—the extended family, traditional employment structures and the ecology of neighbourhood communities—were increasingly undermined by the trajectory of social and economic trends. Specifically, the redevelopment and re-housing schemes of the 1950s and 1960s destabilised traditional communities and kinship networks, while the decline of traditional industries, post-war affluence, and the rise of consumerism steadily recast working-class identities and values. Although the impact of these changes was felt by the working class as a whole, Cohen argues it was the young who experienced their most significant consequences as their life experiences were transformed by the changing world of work, leisure and “the new ideology of consumption.”<sup>29</sup>

It is a thesis to which *Quadrophenia* eloquently subscribes. Mod hero Jimmy Cooper is portrayed as being at the sharp end of the changes reconfiguring British working-class life. He is a child of West London’s housing estates, but he is a world away from his parents. Working as a mail clerk in an advertising agency, Jimmy is part of the new, burgeoning universe of 1960s affluence and consumerism. And he finds his identity not in work, family and the local neighbourhood but in style, image, and hedonism. Jimmy, moreover, personifies the sense of defiance that cultural critic Dick Hebdige sees as characteristic of the Mod’s sense of self. The archetypal Mod, Hebdige explains, “was determined to compensate for his relatively low position in the daytime status-stakes over which he had no control, by exercising complete dominion over his private estate – over his appearance and choice of leisure pursuits.”<sup>30</sup> Again, the thesis is neatly echoed in *Quadrophenia*. Explaining to his childhood pal, Kevin (Ray Winstone), his fanaticism for being a Mod, Jimmy emphasises the powerful sense of individuality and self-worth he derives—“I don’t want to be like everyone else; that’s why I’m a Mod!” “You’ve got to be

somebody,” Jimmy insists, “otherwise you might as well jump in the sea and drown.”

Jimmy’s passion for Mod starkly contrasts to Kevin’s ardour for the trappings of an “older” teen cult. A hard-line Mod, Jimmy favours sharp suits, short hair, an Italian scooter. But his old school mate is rooted in the Rocker styles popularised during the 1950s—leather jacket, dirty jeans, greasy quiff, powerful motorcycle.<sup>31</sup> And, in their singing duel at the public bath-house, Jimmy gives an emphatic (albeit tuneless) rendition of a Kinks number, while Kevin opts for a 1950s Gene Vincent rock ‘n’ roll standard. The contrast neatly embodies Cohen’s view of 1960s youth style as emblematic of the transitions reconfiguring the British working class. Jimmy, the Mod, personifies the new horizons of working-class life—affluence, consumerism, style consciousness. But Kevin, the Rocker, is the incarnation of a style that harks back to working-class values of the past—rugged, tough, and avowedly blue collar. In *Quadrophenia* the differences are intensely felt and present Jimmy with his first moral dilemma of the film, as he chooses to turn his back on his old friend when Kevin is ambushed and beaten to a pulp by a gang of Jimmy’s Mod brethren.

Social differences between Mods and Rockers were also noted at the time. According to sociologists Paul Barker and Alan Little, court data collected after a “Mods and Rockers” fracas in Margate in 1964 showed that most offenders were working class—but the typical rocker was an unskilled manual worker, while the typical Mod was a semi-skilled or clerical worker.<sup>32</sup> As Hebdige notes, however, “whether the Mod/rocker dichotomy was ever really essential to the self-definition of either group remains doubtful.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, while youth styles of the early 1960s may well have been generated by shifts in the landscape of working-class life, the intensity of the Mod/rocker polarity was at least partly indebted to the media coverage of the “riots” that rocked through British seaside resorts during the early 1960s—an episode expertly dissected by Stanley Cohen in his classic sociological study, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, originally published in 1972.

### “BATTLE OF BRIGHTON”

According to Cohen, press reports of the first recorded Mod/rocker clash set the scene for, and gave shape to, the events that followed. The opening skirmish took place at the Essex resort of Clacton in March

1964. Like Brighton, Clacton had long been a destination for leisure-seeking, working-class youngsters. But that weekend was cold and wet, and the town's facilities for young people were limited. With little to do, minor scuffles broke out between local lads and the visiting Londoners, a few beach huts were vandalised and some windows broken. But, in the absence of other newsworthy material, reporters from national newspapers seized upon the relatively innocuous events and conjured up visions of wholesale havoc. As Cohen described:

On the Monday morning following the initial incidents at Clacton, every national newspaper, with the exception of *The Times* (fifth lead on main news page) carried a leading report on the subject. The headlines are self-descriptive: "Day of Terror By Scooter Groups" (*Daily Telegraph*), "Youngsters Beat Up Town – 97 Leather Jacket Arrests" (*Daily Express*), "Wild Ones Invade Seaside – 97 Arrests" (*Daily Mirror*). The next lot of incidents received similar coverage on the Tuesday and editorials began to appear, together with reports that the Home Secretary was being "urged" (it was not usually specified exactly by *whom*) to hold an enquiry or to take firm action.<sup>34</sup>

For Cohen, the media furore was an exercise in hyperbole and angst-ridden distortion, or what he termed a "moral panic." Newspaper text was peppered with overblown phrases such as "riot," "siege," "orgy" and "screaming mob"; and this, combined with wild exaggerations of the numbers involved, resulted in the perception that events were considerably more violent than was the case. As a consequence, Cohen argued, events began to escalate as journalists, police and young people all expected "Mods and Rockers" trouble at Whitsun, the next bank holiday. Anticipated and vigilantly watched for at a number of seaside towns—including Margate, Eastbourne and (of course) Brighton—"Mods and Rockers" violence was duly spotted by the police and vigorously dealt with. As a consequence, arrest rates soared and magistrates (keen to show they were "getting tough" with the tearaways) imposed harsher penalties. Indeed, as historian Richard Grayson shows, even the government were worried by the episode, and nervous ministers pondered possibilities for new, more punitive legislation to deal with the Mods and Rockers "problem."<sup>35</sup>

But, as Stanley Cohen points out, this was a classic case of self-fulfilling prophecy. Media attention and exaggerated press reports fanned

the sparks of an initially trivial incident, creating a self-perpetuating “amplification spiral” that steadily heightened the social significance of the events. It also “breathed life” into the opposing camps of Mods and Rockers. The “Mods and Rockers,” Cohen argued, had initially been fairly ill-defined youth styles, but were given greater form and substance in the sensational news stories. And the two groups steadily polarized as youngsters throughout Britain began to identify themselves as members of either faction—the Mods or the Rockers.

Cohen’s “moral panic” thesis clearly filters into *Quadrophenia*’s representation of events. Elements of media exaggeration, expectation and self-fulfilling prophecy figure clearly in the build-up to the Mods’ Brighton foray. As Jimmy wakes on bank holiday morning, he gazes above his head at his collection of histrionic newspaper clippings reporting the earlier “Mods and Rockers” furore at Clacton. A radio news broadcast, meanwhile, anticipates further trouble that day:

Shopkeepers in the Brighton area, fearing a reoccurrence of disturbances caused by gangs of rival youths in other resorts, were putting up shutters last night. A spokesman said that, while they weren’t expecting any trouble, they were going to be prepared.

As *Quadrophenia*’s narrative unfolds, however, elements of mythology become more central. When Jimmy’s Mods arrive in Brighton, it is as if the town has fallen to a conquering army. A legion of scooters roll down the seafront and parka-clad teenagers swarm through the town as chants of “We are the Mods!” resound through the streets. Tasting Mod’s collective power, Jimmy is exhilarated. Pilled-up and pumping, he hits the dancefloor in a Mod-packed nightclub, and is cheered on as, precariously, he climbs the balcony’s balustrade and heroically struts his stuff to The Kingsmen’s “Louie Louie.” The next morning more thrills flow. Joining the Mod throng, Jimmy helps rout a pack of hapless Rockers, stampeding across the pebbly beach and trading punches with the hard-pressed police. As the riot spreads from the seafront into the town’s backstreets, the Mods are hemmed in by the law. But Jimmy strikes lucky. Together with Steph (Leslie Ash)—a gorgeous Mod belle over whom Jimmy has been hungrily lusting—he escapes down a back alley and, as the tumult continues in the road behind them, Jimmy and Steph have a furtive (but fervid) “quickie.”

Stumbling back into the fracas, Jimmy is collared by the police. But even this cannot dim his spirits. In the back of the Black Maria, Jimmy's devotion to Mod is bolstered by comradeship with stylish *über*-Mod, "Ace Face" (Sting). And, as the beaten and bruised Mods are paraded in court, Jimmy is energised by Ace's brazen defiance. As the magistrate castigates the young prisoners, Ace affects boredom and glances theatrically at his watch. Hit with a hefty fine, Ace is unfazed. Reaching into his pristine leather raincoat he pulls out a chequebook and responds nonchalantly, "I'll pay now, if you don't mind." Then, to laughs and cheers from the Mod ranks, Ace turns to the dour magistrate and cheekily asks, "Haven't got a pen have you, your honour?"

The courtroom exchange was inspired by actual events. In the aftermath of the Mods and Rockers "invasion" of Margate, the press widely reported that a young miscreant had told local magistrates that he would pay his £75 fine (then a sizeable sum) with a cheque. As Cohen observes, however, while the story was true enough, what few newspapers bothered explaining (though they were well aware of it) was that the lad's offer was an act of mischievous bravado. Three days later he admitted that not only did he not have the £75, but he did not even have a bank account and had never signed a cheque in his life. His admission, however, went largely unreported and, Cohen notes, the "£75 cheque story" was still widely cited years later "to illustrate the image of the Mods and Rockers as affluent hordes whom "fines could not touch."<sup>36</sup> And, indeed, it was given a new lease of life in *Quadrophenia*.

The "£75 cheque story," Cohen argues, was indicative of the general dimensions of exaggeration and distortion that characterised press coverage of the 1964 seaside "invasions." In the case of Brighton, national newspapers conjured with images of a resort laid waste by marauding teens. The *Daily Sketch*, for instance, featured a large photo of battling Mods and Rockers and reported that Brighton police had arrested thirty-five "rioting teenagers",<sup>37</sup> while equally lurid images graced the front page of the *Daily Mirror* alongside a melodramatic account of "all the fury and hate of the scrap-happy Whitsun Wild Ones."<sup>38</sup> Local press reports were in a similar vein. The banner headline "Battle of Brighton," for instance, was emblazoned across the *Evening Argus* as the paper breathlessly related how the town had seen "fierce seafront clashes" and a "tidal wave of shouting youths had knocked people from the pavements."<sup>39</sup> For some it seemed the events were another nail in the coffin of Brighton's economic fortunes. "These Vermin Ruined Whit"

and “Town With Teenage Plague” ran further headlines in the *Evening Argus*, the paper relating how local traders laid the blame for a decline in trade squarely on the crowds of riotous youngsters.<sup>40</sup>

Somewhat passed over in the reports, however, was the fact that holiday-makers may well have been deterred by the previous night’s heavy rain and the cold, breezy weather on the day itself. Moreover, for some observers, the “Battle of Brighton” had been rather more prosaic than headlines suggested. Writing for the sociological journal *New Society*, Paul Barker sought to lay out “what really happened at Brighton on Whit Monday.” Witnessing events first-hand, Barker explained how the Mod “invasion” had certainly been an impressive spectacle:

Teenagers were perched everywhere – about a couple of thousand of them. Their get-up was chic as always: the boys in razor-cuts, short jackets and narrow trousers; the girls mostly in nylon anoraks and stretch slacks, their hair varying from long and ragged to closer-cropped than the boys.<sup>41</sup>

The crowd was huge but, Barker reported, for the most part “was totally passive, seeking only to be entertained.”<sup>42</sup> As photographs and archival film footage testify, there *were* sporadic fights that sent deck chairs (and a few teenagers) flying. But Barker’s account suggests the level of violence was small. Relatively few Rockers had actually come to the town and, in their absence, the Mod crowd had turned on a small group of unfortunate beats camped by the beachside paddling pool. Yet, even here, Barker depicts the “Battle of Brighton” as something of a damp squib:

In fact, only seven or eight actually fought. We all scattered when the fight came rolling our way. It didn’t last long (because the Beats won), but it was very un-Queensbury while it lasted. One Beat went to hospital after being hit on the head by an eel-shop sign.<sup>43</sup>

And a glance through the list of cases brought against twenty-seven reprobates in the aftermath of Brighton’s Mod “invasion” suggests something less than a scene of carnage. A few charges, admittedly, seem reasonably serious. Five youths were accused of possessing offensive weapons, four with throwing missiles and one with assault on a policeman. Other cases, however, appear rather less grave. Eleven youths were charged with using threatening or insulting behaviour, two with stealing milk and one with wilful damage to a deck chair.<sup>44</sup>

Nevertheless, after Whitsun 1964, the notion of Mods and Rockers as malicious and menacing “folk devils” became fixed in the public mind. The image had such resonance because it condensed a much wider set of concerns that preoccupied Britain during the early 1960s. Configured by the press as “the neurosis of the affluent society,”<sup>45</sup> Mods and Rockers served as a focus for a broad sense of unease about cultural trends and the general state of the nation. Or, as Cohen eloquently puts it, they “touched the delicate and ambivalent nerves through which post-war social change in Britain was experienced.”<sup>46</sup> And, as Cohen notes, the concerns were especially pronounced in a seaside resort like Brighton, which “had not yet come to terms with the fact that the old type of summer visitors and day-trippers were no longer coming ... but spending their holidays on package trips to the Costa Brava.”<sup>47</sup> The Mods and Rockers, then, were a symbolic vehicle; a powerful metaphor that articulated more general fears about cultural decline, both nationally and at a local level.

At the same time, however, there was—as Hebdige argues—always a Janus-like quality to representations of youth culture. Alongside fearful depictions of “youth-as-trouble” there were also enthused portrayals of “youth-as-fun” and, while Mods were reviled as the *bête noire* of the affluent society, they could also be fêted as pacesetters of 1960s social dynamism. Well dressed and clean-cut, the Mods’ passion for style could be easily incorporated in notions that cast Britain as moving forward into a new era of exciting progress and modernity. Indeed, just three months after the “Battle of Brighton,” the *Sunday Times Magazine* (then an arbiter of fashionable chic) featured a sumptuous, eight-page photo-spread spotlighting the Mods’ sartorial flair.<sup>48</sup>

### “I’VE HAD ENOUGH”

*Quadrophenia* masterfully captures the mood of Britain during the early 1960s. The film is an accomplished depiction of a world undergoing profound transformation; a world whose social, economic and cultural changes are tinged with both optimism and apprehension. Above all, *Quadrophenia* delivers a compelling portrayal of the “mythologies” of Mod—a youth movement pilloried by its detractors as the baleful index of national decline, but championed by its participants as a font of pulsating energy and the zenith of cutting-edge style.

By the mid-1960s, however, the Mod tide was ebbing. Influenced by the peacock panache of “swinging London,” Mod’s more flamboyant

elements steadily morphed into a fashionable offshoot of the late 1960s hippy scene. Mod's "hard" constituency, meanwhile, gradually segued into the robust machismo of skinhead style, which, as cultural theorist John Clarke observes, can be read as an attempt to symbolically re-animate a "lost" working-class identity and "re-create through the 'mob' the traditional working class community, as a substitution for the *real* decline of the latter."<sup>49</sup> The shift was reflected in Brighton. Concerns about bank holiday violence spluttered on through the decade; but, while the local press continued to refer to young troublemakers as "Mods," by the mid-1960s newspaper photographs clearly show the shaved heads, boots and braces of embryonic skinheads.

Nevertheless, the intensity of local concerns about young "invaders" gradually subsided. Nationally, moral panics about youth and crime were sustained as the media projected a demonology of malevolent youth—stretching from the skinheads of late 1960s to the punks of the late 1970s—as a crystallisation of Britain's social ills. But in Brighton, post-war anxieties about "invasions" by out-of-town low-life steadily diminished as the resort adapted to the changing cultural landscape. Evading the clutches of tawdry, "fish-and-chip-minded" day-trippers, Brighton successfully repositioned itself as a centre for arts and culture with (from the mid-1960s) the expansion of its two universities, the opening of major conference and exhibition venues and the launch of one of Britain's largest annual arts festivals.

In contrast, *Quadrophenia*—in its film incarnation, at least—ends in pronounced uncertainty. Jimmy's soaring highs amid the "Battle of Brighton" are short-lived. Returning to London, the young Mod's life fragments. He loses his job and is thrown out of the family home. More crushingly, he is cold-shouldered and ridiculed by his erstwhile friends and is rejected by a spiteful Steph. Desperate to rediscover his earlier confidence and self-esteem, Jimmy returns to Brighton. But his hopes quickly turn to disillusion. The drizzle-soaked town now seems desolate and empty, while Jimmy spots the valiant Ace Face working as a humble bell boy, bowing and scraping to well-heeled hotel guests.

In its rock opera iteration, *Quadrophenia* closes enigmatically, with Jimmy stealing a boat and heading out to sea. The film version, however, sees a more melancholic conclusion. Wracked with disappointment and despair, Jimmy steals Ace's gleaming scooter and heads out of town. Reaching the deserted clifftops of Beachy Head (a renowned suicide spot), he rides perilously close to the sheer drop. The scooter then

catapults over the cliff's edge, smashing dramatically on the rocks below. And, in the background, we hear the Who's "I've Had Enough," with Roger Daltrey singing that he's "had enough of street fights ... I'm finished with the fashions and acting like I'm tough." It is a powerful closing scene. The more so because the audience is left with the nagging feeling that—despite a beguiling "flashback" at the film's opening, which sees the young Mod walking away from the cliff—somewhere, off camera, a desperate Jimmy may have followed the ill-fated scooter. Nevertheless, the symbolism is fairly clear. Hit with the cold light of reality, Jimmy has seen through the myths that he once found so exhilarating and seductive.

And, like the rest of the film, *Quadrophenia*'s conclusion weaves into its narrative "mythologised" elements of actual events. Martin Stellman, the screenwriter (with Dave Humphries) of the film, was a former journalist and, in preparation for the movie, diligently went through library press cuttings in London and Brighton. Of course, we cannot be sure of exactly what Stellman saw in the clippings, but it is more than likely he stumbled across the story of seventeen-year-old Mod, Barry Prior. A trainee accountant from Finchley in north London, Prior had ridden down to Brighton for Whitsun bank holiday in 1964. At the end of the weekend, Prior and his friends had left town and pitched camp for the night on a high clifftop. In the morning, however, Prior was missing and his friends soon spotted his body sprawled on rocks a hundred feet below. In the bleak photo that accompanied the *Evening Argus* coverage, a huddle of Prior's parka-clad friends can be seen standing disconsolately next to the dead boy's scooter—a brand-new, scarlet Vespa.<sup>50</sup> The circumstances of Prior's fall were uncertain, and a verdict of "death by misadventure" was ultimately given at the Coroner's inquest. It was the most tragic of stories. And was, somehow, made all the more so by the fact that—while the overblown saga of the "Battle of Brighton" made national news headlines—the account of Barry Prior's death was relegated to the back pages of Brighton's local paper.

## NOTES

1. A Graduate of the University of London, *Brighton As It Is: Its Pleasures and Pastimes, With a Short Account of the Social and Inner Life of Its Inhabitants, Being a Complete Guide Book for Residents and Visitors* (Brighton: George Smart, 1860), 98.
2. Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1938).

3. *The Economist*, "Brighton on the Rocks," 26 August 1961, 12–13.
4. *Brighton and Hove Herald*, 27 July 1963.
5. *Brighton and Hove Herald*, 6 June 1959.
6. Selina Todd and Hilary Young, "Baby-Boomers to 'Beanstalkers': Making the Modern Teenager in Post-War Britain," *Cultural and Social History* 9, no. 3 (2012): 451–467.
7. Mark Abrams, *The Teenage Consumer* (London: Press Exchange, 1959); Mark Abrams, *Teenage Consumer Spending in 1959* (London: Press Exchange, 1961).
8. Abrams, *Teenage Consumer*, 9.
9. *Ibid.*, 10.
10. Abrams, *Teenage Consumer Spending*, 3.
11. Pearl Jephcott, *Time of One's Own: Leisure and Young People* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1967).
12. Cyril Smith, *Young People at Leisure: A Report on Bury* (Manchester: University of Manchester, 1966), 17.
13. Brighton Education Committee, *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Needs of Youth in Brighton* (Brighton: Brighton and Hove Council, 1959), 8–9.
14. Department of Employment and Productivity, *British Labour Statistics Historical Abstract, 1886–1968* (London: Department of Employment and Productivity, 1971), 96 and Table 191, 392.
15. Brighton Education Committee, *Needs of Youth*, 10.
16. "Living for Kicks" was originally screened on ITV on 2 March 1960.
17. Robert Kerridge, "Making the Best of Brighton," *New Statesman* 58, no. 1497 (1959), 15.
18. Dick Hebdige, "Hiding in the Light: Youth Surveillance and Display," in *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things*, ed. Dick Hebdige (London: Routledge, 1988), 19.
19. Geoffrey Pearson, "Falling Standards: A Short, Sharp History of Moral Decline," in *The Video Nasties: Freedom and Censorship in the Media*, ed. Martin Barker (London: Pluto, 1984), 88–103. See also Geoffrey Pearson, *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears* (London: Macmillan, 1983).
20. *Evening Argus*, 15 November 1954.
21. *Brighton and Hove Herald*, 14 July 1956.
22. *Evening Argus*, 29 August 1958.
23. *Brighton and Hove Herald*, 7 June 1958.
24. *Times*, 29 August 1962.
25. *Brighton and Hove Herald*, 1 September 1962.
26. *Evening Argus*, 21 March 1960.

27. Accounts of the rise of Mod style exist in a wealth of popular books. Evocative illustrated histories can be found in Richard Barnes, *Mods!* (London: Plexus, 1979) and Terry Rawlings, *Mod: A Very British Phenomenon* (London: Omnibus, 2000). Well-researched chronicles also exist in Paulo Hewitt (ed.), *The Sharper World: A Mod Anthology* (London: Helter Skelter, 1999) and Paolo Hewitt, *The Soul Stylists: Six Decades of Modernism—From Mods to Casuals* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2000). An expansive history of Mod style is also provided in Richard Weight, *Mod: A Very British Style* (London: Bodley Head, 2013). Many academic analyses also exist. One of the most astute is Christine Feldman, *We Are the Mods: A Transnational History of a Youth Subculture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).
28. Colin MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1959).
29. Phil Cohen, "Subcultural Conflict and the Working Class Community," *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, no. 2 (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1972), 23.
30. Dick Hebdige, "The Meaning of Mod," in *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, eds Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Hutchinson, 1976), 91.
31. Compared to the wealth of literature chronicling the Mod movement, material dealing with British Rocker style of the 1950s and 1960s is relatively sparse. That said, some excellent collections of photographs exist in Mike Clay, *Café Racers: Rockers, Rock 'n' Roll and the Coffee-Bar Cult* (London: Osprey, 1988), Johnny Stuart, *Rockers!* (London: Plexus, 1987) and Mick Walker, *Café Racers of the 1960s* (London: Windrow and Greene Automotive, 1994). Additionally, an account of the British biker scene in the mid-1960s can be found in the autobiography of Britain's first Hells Angels president, Jamie Mandelkau, *Buttons: The Making of a President* (London: Sphere, 1971). At a more academic level, ethnographic research conducted among Midlands bikers of the late 1960s is included in Paul Willis, *Profane Culture* (London: Routledge, 1978).
32. Paul Barker and Alan Little, "The Margate Offenders: A Survey," *New Society*, 30 July 1964, 6–10.
33. Hebdige, "Meaning of Mod," 88.
34. Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (London: MacGibbon and Kee Ltd, 1972), 18–19.
35. Richard Grayson, "Mods, Rockers and Juvenile Delinquency in 1964: The Government Response," *Contemporary British History* 12, no. 1 (1998): 19–47.
36. Cohen, *Folk Devils*, 33.
37. *Daily Sketch*, 19 May 1964.
38. *Daily Mirror*, 19 May 1964.

39. *Evening Argus*, 18 May 1964.
40. *Evening Argus*, 19 May 1964; *Evening Argus*, 23 May 1964.
41. Paul Barker, "Brighton Battleground," *New Society*, 21 May 1964, 9.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. *Evening Argus*, 18 May 1964.
45. *Evening Argus*, 19 May 1964.
46. Cohen, *Folk Devils*, 192.
47. Cohen, *Folk Devils*, 195.
48. Robert Freeman and Kathleen Halton, "Changing Faces," *Sunday Times Magazine*, 2 August 1964, 12–19.
49. John Clarke, "The Skinheads and the Magical Recovery of Community," in *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, eds. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Hutchinson, 1976), 99.
50. *Evening Argus*, 18 May 1964.

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Quadrophenia and Mod(ern) Culture

Thurschwell, P. (Ed.)

2018, XV, 268 p. 9 illus., 4 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-64752-4