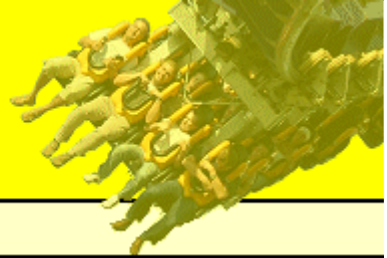


MAGAZINE



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A SEASON IN REVIEW



The amusement industry is all about making people happy. If you run a park, the very cornerstone of your business is to entertain. When people are entertained, they'll spend money, and that'll make *you* happy.

It seems a shame that for an industry moulded around such high-spirits, that 2004 has been one of the most miserable seasons I've ever known. In fact, I strongly considered not writing this article as there was very little positive upon which to dwell, but Coaster Kingdom has never shied away from the bad; in fact, I strongly believe it is one of Coaster Kingdom's strongest assets that we say what we see – if 2004 has been a catastrophe, I don't think we have any right to shy away from it as we have a certain obligation to report on rides, attractions and indeed the industry, whether the findings are good – or sadly bad.



Spring 2004, and Spinball Whizzer and Dragon's Fury had been the subject of scrutiny in old Blighty, whilst abroad on the continent, Denmark were looking forward to the country's largest looping roller coaster, Dæmonen.

As the coasters rose, so too did people's expectations. Denmark would see their first wooden roller coaster, Falken, whilst Europe would see another Gerstauler 95-degree drop Eurofighter (Typhoon, Bobbijaanland), the world's first Vekoma launched 'Motorbike' coaster (Booster Bike, Toverland) and Heiße Fahrt represented a landmark installation for Freizeitpark Klotten as a Gerstauler Bobsled coaster; the first major ride in the park.

But there was a quite outstanding reason to get excited about this season, for 2004 was a special year for Thorpe Park, Pleasure Beach Blackpool, Drayton Manor and Alton Towers.

Celebrating their tenth anniversary, Shockwave (Drayton Manor), Nemesis (Alton Towers) and the Pepsi Max Big One (Blackpool Pleasure Beach), whilst celebrating its silver anniversary after 25 years, Thorpe Park. More incredibly, though, Sir Hirim Maxim's Captive Flying Machines would, by August, have been flying for over a century.

And so, the foundations were laid for an excellent year. So what went wrong? Well, in the UK, almost everything. Birthday celebrations were neigh on non-existent, Tussauds' new coasters were dogged with downtime, and both Blackpool and Oakwood had to learn to cope with almost immeasurable trauma.

And so, the construction fences came down, and the ticket booths reopened. Both Dragon's Fury and Spinball Whizzer opened to modest fanfare from the parks, but were both subject to almost universal acclaim. Fury in particular sparked a new-found passion in a park whose ailing line up relied upon much needed investment.

Despite an interview to the contrary in Attraction Management Magazine suggesting Alton Towers were after more steadfast and high capacity rides



(of which Air really is neither), Spinball was a coaster with an excruciatingly low capacity in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Ironically, as Alton Towers opened Spinball Whizzer, it closed many other rides in a fairly draconian manor. Due to a lack of interest, Dynamo (Huss Breakdance), Vintage Cars, Carousel and Bone Shaker (Mondial Supernova) were all mothballed. Dynamo was packed up and dumped unceremoniously on the hardstanding behind Duel, whilst in supremely ignorant fashion, Boneshaker and most of Cred Street were fenced off effectively mocking everyone by taunting them by rides that were fenced off for their inconvenience.

As if four filler attractions closing weren't enough, the park decided to close the historical Swan Boat ride with the usual adage of poor rider numbers being cited as the reason. In place of the stately swans, Splash Kart Challenge, an ugly up-charge attraction whereby those willing to pay for the privilege navigate an unsightly floating course in 'Splash Karts'



Sadly, Alton Towers' new philosophy has been proven that you either have to queue for a ride, or pay for the right not to queue by either being confined to up-charge attractions or having to stay in on-site hotels.

Tussauds' other parks had issues of their own.

Poor attendance was heard as being the catalyst to a knee-jerk reaction throughout the chain with regards to cut backs. Well-publicised events such as Alton Towers' Halloween Spooktacular were cancelled, as were the fireworks at Thorpe Park and the newly planned and heavily advertised late summer openings that were advertised in park and on leaflets right up until the day the event

was cancelled.

Even more amazingly, the Roper family successfully sued Alton Towers on the basis the park makes too much noise. Consequently, the park's only remaining event, their famous fireworks display was in dire jeopardy to the point that coaster enthusiasts were actually encouraged to write the local press to support the endangered event.

From an unreservedly arrogant park to one where such a criticism couldn't be further from the truth; Oakwood.

The park managed to rack up some column inches nationally with the announcement of their new coaster from company of the moment, Gerstauler. The beyond-vertical drop coaster would accomplish more than Bolliger and Mabillard managed with Oblivion, with a 95-degree drop, inline twist, camelback hill and vertical loop all featuring on the proposed £3 million investment.

As the park looked to the future, it would soon be haunted by the utter tragedy that was the death of 16-year-old Hayley Williams who fell from the Intamin River Plunge, Hydro: Water's Revenge.

There is something profoundly choking about the fact that someone should lose their life at a place that by its very nature instils so many happy memories, and there is in my opinion no park that deserves this any less than Oakwood.

Whilst the accident renewed criticism of Intamin's T-bar restraint, another rider died on Six Flags New England's Superman: Ride of Steel in similar circumstances to that attributed to the death of a rider on Knott's Perilous Plunge (River Plunge) and another accident on another Superman: Ride of Steel which necessitated the fitting of seatbelts to all Intamin rides with similar restraints.



Furthermore, Californian state departments ordered the closure of all rides in the state that featured similar restraints (Superman: The Escape, Magic Mountain, and Xcellerator, Knott's Berry Farm) pending changes to their satisfaction. Meanwhile, Hydro is still closed whilst a joint investigation with Police and the Health and Safety Executive continues.

Other parks weren't immune from incidents. Whilst in actuality all paled compared to Hydro's accident, there were an unusually high amount of lucky escapes.

In Early April, an emergency walkway fell from one of the mid-course brake runs on Chessington's Maurer coaster, Dragon's Fury. The heavy metal gantry fell about thirty feet onto the walkway below, yet remarkably did not injure anyone.

Tussauds were quick to close Dragon's Fury and also its sister ride, Spinball Whizzer at Alton Towers whilst modifications taking about two months were made. In June, both reopened with extra bracing on the walkways.

Elsewhere in Germany, Euro MIR riders had an extremely lucky escape when an operator error on the Mack spinning coaster after a shutdown caused a returning train hit the back of another stationary train. 17 riders were injured, one of which broke their leg. Amazingly, no serious injuries were sustained and the ride quickly reopened.

Whilst we dwell on the death of one rider and the luck of others, it is worth remembering just how safe theme parks actually are. Injury and death is a remarkable occurrence at a theme park. You're more likely to get caught up in an accident at home than you are at a theme park, whilst the likelihood of winning the lottery or getting struck by lightning far outweighs that of dying on a roller coaster.

Whilst Oakwood work to overcome tragedy, Pleasure Beach Blackpool have had almost unthinkable trauma to cope with this year, with two serious fires which frankly pale in comparison to the deaths of their figureheads, Geoffrey Thompson and Lillian Doris Thompson.



20 May saw the first disaster unravel in the form of a ferocious fire that threatened one of the Pleasure Beach's main assets, the Grand National. Whilst the fire was quickly spotted in the dead of night, the Joseph Emberton designed station was severely damaged, whilst neighbouring rides like Trauma Towers and Alice in Wonderland got away with cosmetic damage.

It cannot be stressed how lucky the Pleasure Beach were. The fire threatened the very heart of

the Pleasure Beach – the entire area is packed full of 100 years of history, and for the park to come out with no real casualties in terms of ride loss is a miracle and a credit to Lancashire’s firefighters.

Not even a month later, the park had to deal with a completely different type of heartbreak; the surprise death of Geoffrey Thompson, the park’s Managing Director. Geoffrey Thompson fell ill surrounded by the people he loved, and passed away on 15 June 2004.

His untimely death leaves a gaping hole in the industry. He was without a doubt the most influential and important people in the UK amusement industry, and despite being a forward thinking and shrewd businessman, embraced history with unparalleled vigour.

The sight of hundreds of Pleasure Beach staff lining the Golden Mile in Blackpool is one of the most poignant and heartwarming scenes of appreciation I’ve ever seen in my life. If this doesn’t highlight what Geoffrey Thompson accomplished in his fruitful life, nothing does.

On the evening of Geoffrey Thompson’s wake, Doris Thompson, Geoffrey’s mother, passed away. Mrs. Thompson was an enigmatic and colourful character that had an important role in the Pleasure Beach well beyond her 100th birthday.

Whilst the deaths of Geoffrey and Lillian Doris Thompson are profoundly tragic, their hard work will have an indelible effect on Blackpool. It is hard to imagine anybody else having such an important role in shaping an entire town like the Thompsons have.

As a timely reminder of the global impact the Thompsons had, the National Amusement Park Historical Association (NAPHA) honoured Doris and Geoffrey, both lifetime members, during the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (IAAPA) annual convention in Orlando, Florida. Amanda Thompson reflected on the poignancy of this accolade by citing the incredible amount of historical rides, specifically coasters, still run and maintained to an amazingly high standard at the Pleasure Beach.

Towards the beginning of the season, we launched our series of anniversary features, celebrating the tenth anniversaries of Nemesis (Alton Towers), Shockwave (Drayton Manor) and the Pepsi Max Big One (Pleasure Beach Blackpool), and also the centenary of Pleasure Beach Blackpool’s Captive Flying Machines.

Whilst we researched these features, Drayton Manor and Blackpool embraced in the spirit of celebration helping us do their wonderful rides justice, whilst unsurprisingly Alton Towers politely declined.



To their credit, though, Alton Towers organised Nemesis X that was a private event addressed by John Wardley where enthusiasts could learn more about the history of Nemesis, and indeed what the future might hold.

Nemesis has in terms of presentation fallen into a pitiful state. Effects are not working and the ride is looking worn with parts fenced off to make way for Fastrack and Air’s queue. Fortunately, the ride is running the best it ever has, although the presentation of the ride goes to show where the park’s interests lie.

Other birthday celebrations, meanwhile, were even less inspiring.

Thorpe Park celebrated its silver anniversary with a small flower border by the exit and a world record breaking naked ride on Nemesis Inferno where 28 plucky riders rode the B&M inverter dressed in nothing but their birthday suits and as god intended; nude.

Amazingly, this was as far-reaching as Thorpe's birthday celebrations got. Planned events such as the season closing fireworks and the midnight opening throughout August were cancelled despite being heavily advertised even into the dates that the planned events were supposed to run.

Meanwhile, Drayton Manor's celebration of Shockwave's tenth was even more subdued. About half of the ride was painted with a new sky-blue colour scheme, bizarrely leaving the bottom of the lift blue and red, and the first half of the ride grey and brown. No mention of Shockwave's milestone anniversary was made within park, and for a relatively quiet year for Drayton Manor, surely it would have been a good time to draw people's attention to a wonderfully unique ride.

Also, very little pomp and circumstance was made of the centenary of the wonderful Captive Flying Machines at Pleasure Beach Blackpool. Considering this is the oldest ride in the Pleasure Beach, to see only a small event coinciding with a European Coaster Club event, it was a shame to see so little attention drawn to a ride which a century on still has an enigmatic drawing power.



2004 wasn't only a season of upset and disappointment.

Thanks to Dæmonen, Tivoli Gardens in Denmark were happy to report attendance of over 3m and record profits at almost twice as much as last season. Suburban European parks are inherently popular (this small park's attendance far exceeds Alton's, for example), yet Dæmonen was a gamble as it was a previously much-unexplored genre in Denmark. Nevertheless, the ride, one of B&M's smallest ever roller coasters, has paid the park dividends.

Meanwhile, Europa Park celebrated the opening of Colosseo, their lavish Roman-themed hotel built around a reconstruction of Rome's Coliseum with

1200 beds, making the entire Europa Park resort the largest in Germany with 4500 in total.

Following this success, in a relatively surprise announcement, Europa Park announced the addition of Portugal, a new country with a more elaborate version of Tusenfryd's Supersplash building on the success of their current water coaster, Poseidon.

And in another unexpected announcement, following on from the successful Intamin wooden coaster, Balder, Liseburg in Sweden announced Kanonen (Canon), a twice-looping Intamin hydraulically launched 'Accelerator' coaster, the first in Europe.

The coaster features a high-speed launch into a 75ft outside top hat featuring a 90-degree drop into a circuit featuring a vertical loop and one of Intamin's trademark inline twists.

Less likely though was a coaster that was always considered a dead cert; Blackpool's

launched coaster. First planned for 2006, then called P2K7 (Project 2007 – geddit?), and then reportedly the park’s “contract” with Intamin was written off and new tenders for the coaster sought.

Reassuringly, though, Blackpool Today reported that an “Even Bigger One” was planned, and that the proposed course would take the coaster from the park, across Ocean Boulevard, across the tram lines, across the prom, the beach and – and I kid you not – into the sea on a specially constructed pier. Whatever happens with P2K7, Blackpool is most certainly looking outside the box.



Towards the end of the 2004 season, a welcome distraction from a generally disastrous year was the annual speculation on what Alton Towers would be installing. This year’s supposition was on a scale almost beyond that of Oblivion (SW4) with UK forums being veritably whipped up into a frenzy as a corrugated metal box with a supposed Intamin delivery note were spotted behind Cred Street.

Plans discovered by enthusiasts also formed a pivotal part of speculation with regards to ‘Jazz Land’ a redevelopment of what’s left of Cred Street, and a launched coaster, possibly a Vekoma Motorbike coaster, in the woods in front of Duel.

Unsurprisingly, the Intamin crate was never seen again and the exciting plans never came to fruition.

But, one rumour would just not go away – that Alton Towers were planning a launched coaster. And on queue, a scan of an in-park newsletter revealed construction on a new coaster would start in the middle of September. And what does that mean? Yet *more* ride closures. Incredibly, as construction walls went up, Ug Bugs and Ug Swinger closed for the rest of the season taking the total rides closed this year to eight.

By the end of the year, Ug Land closed as a building site, and Alton Towers proudly invited all who would listen to ‘Ride Rita’ next year – she’s the Queen of Speed, you know. Information was scant – the ride would be roughly the same height as the existing Corkscrew roller coaster, and the ride would be a launched Intamin of some shape or form.



The trend of removing rides to make way for new ones doesn’t end there, either. Drayton Manor announced the impending removal of the much-ridiculed Klondike Mine Train to make way for Barnstormer, an exquisitely twisted Maurer coaster with three inversions, and one glaring omission; over-head restraints. Barnstormer would be the second coaster in Europe (following Skywheel) to use Maurer’s much-lauded X-Car, using a U-shaped lap bar to do the work an overhead restraint would normally do.

The trend continues with the removal of Thorpe Park’s Flying Fish which closes to make way for 2006’s proposed Intamin hydraulically launched

coaster. Thorpe Park also honoured at least the most exciting part of their 2005 chapter of the previously announced Medium Term Development Plan (MTDP) by announcing Slammer (Sky Swat) and Rush (Screamin' Swing), both rides from Utah manufacturer, S&S. Sky Swat is a large 105ft rotary ride, whilst Screaming Swing swings screaming swingers over 90-degrees in just a few swings using suitably minimal seating and S&S's fandangled air technology.

If you thought Alton were fairly audacious with their ride closures, look no further than Flamingoland. In what can best be described as a cull, an August edition of World's Fair advertised not only rides like Tri Star, Top Gun and the 'enclosed' coaster, Thunder Mountain, but also their flagship Schwarzkopf coasters The Bullet and Magnum Force.

The park is gambling on the success of major themed rides to form the fabric of the park's future with rides like Cliffhanger and Lost River being very much the sign of things to come. Indeed, look no further than the Vekoma Booster Bike to see what the park is planning for next year. Is a family launched coaster a worthy replacement for Magnum Force and Bullet? You decide.

Novelty coasters form a strong backbone to the line-up of new rides for 2005. One of the most extreme has to be Garadland's proposed S&S Screamin' Squirrel coaster. The Screamin' Squirrel is one of the more extreme inventions to come from the playground of Stan Checkets of S&S. Cars topple over the edge of a vertical zig-zag to run along the underside of track completely upside-down before curling around 180-degrees onto another straight of track and then repeating the process again and again until you're at the bottom.

And, as the park announces plans to build a resort hotel and a second gate, news that Tussauds are interested in making more European acquisitions centres on their interest in buying Gardaland. Fortunately, it seems the plan has fallen by the wayside, although it does seem inevitable that Tussauds are intent on beefing up their portfolio abroad.

Coincidentally, one of Tussauds' former assets, [Universal's] Port Aventura changed ownership. NBC-owned Universal sold Tussauds' former stake (37%) to Spanish bank, La Caixa, for a reported €40 million. This delays any forthcoming major investments, although a heavily-themed Intamin drop ride, Hurakan Condor, was announced towards the end of the season. Any major coasters will have to wait until a rumoured 2007, though.

And who can forget the biggest take-over of the year? Here's a clue; it's probably the biggest buy-out since Six Flags purchased the Walibi Group. Yes, that's right, friends, Star Parks announced in the first half of this year that beleaguered Six Flags had sold their share in their European theme parks to a small consortium of businessmen who called themselves Star Parks.

Movie World in Germany was the first park to be re-branded and almost instantly became Movie Park Germany. Elsewhere, the cuddly orange Walibi would make a triumphant return as Six Flags Holland and Six Flags Belgium became Walibi World and Walibi Belgium respectively.



And whilst Six Flags were to maintain control of Movie World Madrid, after a particularly slow year at the Spanish park, the park opted out of a 99-year management contract with Six Flags and took control of the park themselves. The disappointing attendance at

the park has been attributed to misplaced marketing, although it is worth remembering that not one of the major Spanish parks has had a particularly successful year in terms of profits.

Whilst British enthusiasts have been distracted by what will probably go down in history as the worst season in recent history, 2004 continentally has been a season of change. While the impact of the accident on Hydro, the deaths of the Thompsons and the fires at Pleasure Beach Blackpool cannot be overstated enough, much has gone on abroad that will have a massive impact in Europe, and 2005 is already showing promise with at least four major coasters already announced in the UK alone, and at least a further three on the continent

2004 serves as a lesson not to take anything for granted. Rides come and go. The people who own rides and parks come and go. And whilst it is easy to remember 2004 as being a disaster, it is also a time to remember how dynamic the amusement park industry actually is, and how no year is the same.

An online version of Magazine is available from coasterkingdom.co.uk and includes features such as a forum unavailable to readers of the PDF version.