

National

Exhibition

Dreaming of the seaside: Freud's travel letters tell of happy days in Blackpool

Psychoanalyst's messages from Rome, New York and Lancashire go on display

Maev Kennedy

He loved the sand, he loved the sea, he even loved the weather and the food: a quarter of a century later Sigmund Freud's memories of the bliss of paddling in Blackpool were so vivid that he included them in his landmark 1900 work *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

His first visit to England in 1875, aged 19, when he stayed with relations in Manchester and then went beachcombing and rock pool hunting at Blackpool, was also his first sight of the sea.

"One feels oneself like a hero who has performed deeds of improbable greatness," he wrote.

A selection of his travel letters will go on display from tomorrow in the museum at his last London home, along with an exhibition of contemporary art inspired by one word in his 1908 letter from Blackpool – "*Reisemalheurs*", the woes of travel. The shock in the Blackpool letter was that apart from damp cravats and straw hats, there were no woes. "He was an unambivalent Anglophile," said museum curator Michael Molnar. "He really loved England and English culture."

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud wrote of one based on strong memories of his earliest visit to Blackpool, "a whole day on the shore of the Irish sea", when "a charming little girl" asked him if he had found a starfish and inquired whether it was still alive.

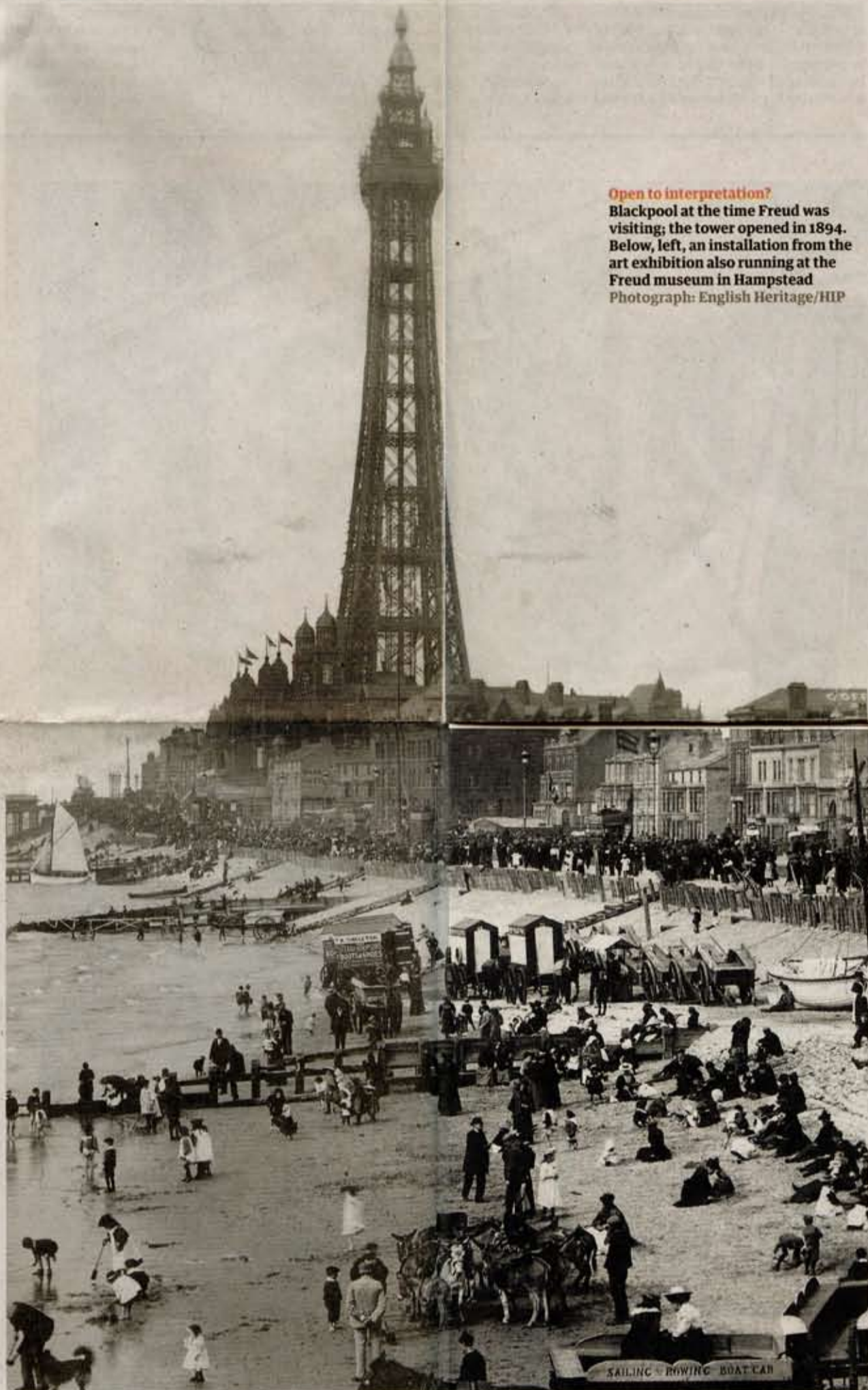
"Yes", I replied, "he is alive", and at once, embarrassed at my mistake, repeated the sentence correctly."

Freud was an ardent but notoriously anxious traveller, with a particular neurosis about visiting Rome, where he felt he might be overwhelmed by the weight of history and culture. When he finally got there he wrote, headed "midday, opposite the Pantheon", to his wife; "This is what I have been afraid of for years." He first went to America in 1909, as part of a sort of psychoanalysts' roadshow with fellow pioneers Sandor Ferenczi and Carl Jung. Freud joked that it was just a holiday, that he was going to see a porcupine; the American analyst JJ Putnam gave him a present of a little metal porcupine, which sat on his desk for the rest of his life, and is included



in the exhibition. On their first night in New York he sent his wife a postcard of the new Park Row skyscraper, the tallest in the world when built, with the message: "I do not let myself be impressed, bearing in mind that I have already seen so much that is more beautiful, though of course nothing bigger or wider."

The travel letters have never before been exhibited, or translated into English, though Mr Molnar has co-edited a volume in German, and has translated some for the exhibition: "They are a wonderful resource. Some are just notes but many are real travel reporting. It is surprising that they have not received more attention." Some original letters and many postcards are in the museum collection at the Hampstead house where Freud and his family lived after escaping the Nazis in 1938. He died a year later, but the house remained a home for his youngest daughter, Anna, until her death in 1982. Hundreds more letters to his family and friends, showing the father of psychoanalysis in



Open to interpretation? Blackpool at the time Freud was visiting; the tower opened in 1894. Below, left, an installation from the art exhibition also running at the Freud museum in Hampstead
Photograph: English Heritage/HIP

Expert view Cravats, hats and taboos

Oliver James

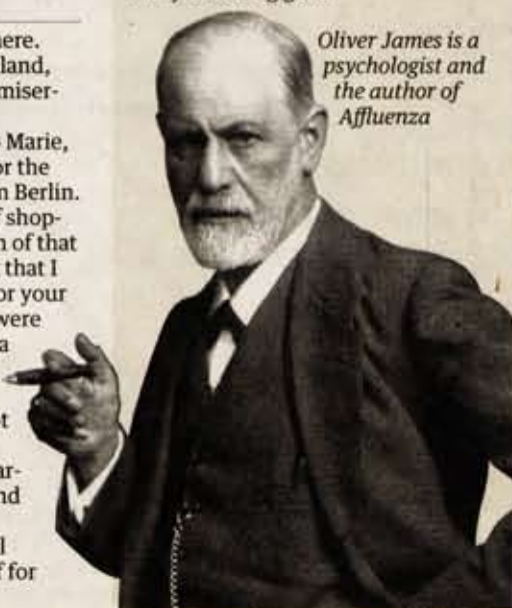
What might Freud himself have made of this letter? How might that differ from more modern, empirically based interpretations? As "any fule kno", Freud was liable to find sex in almost everything and to trace it back to desires of small children towards their opposite-sexed parent. In his hands, the lack of cravats could have become a fear of seeming sexually inadequate or inappropriate, likewise the misfortune befalling his panama hat – the sea water leaking into a trunk, a smelly, corrosive, taboo sexual liquid creating self-consciousness or inhibition, ruining his outward appearance (cravat, hat)?!

Then there's the gratification provided by English (and Dutch) cigars, such a compensation for his "miserable Bavarian weeds". If cigar = penis (durr), Freud finds them more satisfying because they are at one remove from his familiar (incest-associated) homeland – a nicotine holiday romance, when, playing away, we feel so liberated. Then again, there is a joke which has Freud sitting in his club enjoying a cigar when a hostile psychiatrist sneers: "That's a long, fat, juicy cigar you're sucking", to which he replies: "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar."

The reading of sexual agendas into everything has very much gone out of fashion in the world of therapy. Many of Freud's fundamental assertions have been demonstrated to have been correct by scientific studies – dreams do have meanings, we do have an unconscious, repression of uncomfortable realities is commonplace. But while Brett Kahr's monumental recent survey of the sexual fantasies of 19,000 Britons, *Sex and the Psyche*, provides hard evidence for Freud's contention that we are still tremendously sexually repressed, the oedipal theory remains unproven, perhaps because untested, empirically.

Modern analysts would concentrate far less on sexual innuendo and more on what the letter says about his pattern of emotional attachment to his loved ones. They might find fodder here indicating an insecure pattern, like his anxieties about pleasing (eg the slightly obsessive presents detail) and withholding of information about his feelings until he sees the reader face to face.

But most different of all, modern psychologists would be extremely reluctant to hazard any guesses about the letter's unconscious meanings without much more background information – the age of speculative analysis is long gone.



Oliver James is a psychologist and the author of *Affluenza*

Extract

An edited version of Freud's letter to his family from [Lytham] St Anne's on September 5 1908

My Dears,
I do not get round to writing much here and can only communicate the most essential information, all the rest I am saving up for telling you.
... It was fine yesterday, not raining today either, but is cooler and windy, so that I am happy that a planned voyage to the Isle of Man was thwarted thanks to my objections. For I enjoy it much better here than anywhere else; it is delightfully quiet and elegant; yesterday we spent almost the whole day apart from meals at Lytham and Blackpool. You will readily believe that one feels very well so near to the sea which one sees all the time. England in general is for holidays and eating; there is more pleasure in

human contact here than elsewhere. The cigars here, like those in Holland, are real compensation for those miserable Bavarian weeds ...

I have transmitted your gift to Marie, the fact that I brought nothing for the little girl can be made up for from Berlin. There is of course no question of shopping here, there will not be much of that in London either. The only thing that I still need for myself is cravats. For your lovely white and coloured ones were ruined by sea water leaking into a corner of the trunk. This is the only travel mishap [*Reisemalheur*] so far. The bother could not do the panama any good either and since then it has been unwearable ... I should be leaving England around the 15-17.

Hearty greetings to you and all the little ones and hoping myself for good news. Your Sigm.

startlingly jaunty mood – he admired Hyde Park, but contrasted the nice babies with their "fantastically ugly nurses" – are in the Library of Congress in Washington.

The exhibition of paintings by the South African-born, New York-based artist Vivienne Koorland takes its title and its inspiration from the word *Reisemalheurs*. Her mother, a Polish Jew, was sent as a frightened teenager to South Africa, and her grandparents died in concentration camps.

The family history, and her own life, with work and relatives scattered across the globe, make her very sympathetic to Freud's anxious ambivalence about travel. One canvas is filled by one phrase of Freud's: "Gestern traumte ich wieder vom reisen" – yesterday I dreamed again of travel.

"It is the condition of my own life," she said, "all the comings and goings."

Reisemalheurs, Freud Museum, Hampstead, north-west London, until April 22