



A dance with light and the weather: *the secrets of the Margate optics*

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Images courtesy of
Greg Bottle | gregbottle.com

Why is Margate's entrancing light so special? We talk to an Academy Award-winner, a landscape photographer, and experts in art history and optical sciences to find out

We will always have the light. Even on Margate's most melancholy days, when the boisterous summer trade has left and the crumbling seafront re-embraces its uncanny, post-apocalyptic loneliness, the grey-green, slate-moss sea can often perform a sublime rescue of the spirit. What is this strange optical anomaly, and why has it provided such creative succour to generations of local artists?

First, the physics: the precious ocular gift that is Margate's natural light is the beguiling lovechild of geography and perception. Charles Falco is a professor at the College of Optical Sciences in Arizona, and co-author of the Hockney-Falco thesis with British artist David Hockney. "Margate is at roughly 50-degrees north latitude, while the sun is never further north than roughly 23 degrees (the Tropic of Cancer)," he says. "This means the sun is always relatively low on the horizon behind anyone in Margate who is gazing out over the sea, and thus they view the sea with 'northern light'. Unlike direct sunlight, northern light has been reflected by the atmosphere, during which it loses most of the warm reds and yellows of the spectrum. The light comes from the entire area of the sky. Because that is such a broad source, it is essentially shadow-free. Combined, these affect both colour and depth perception."

Outside the hours of dawn and dusk, this "flatness" can provide painters and photographers with a kind of uniform optical canvas on which to experiment with visual storytelling. "The major advantage of northern light for the artist

is that it's largely unchanging in quality through much of the day," says Falco. "A location with a light fog can have the same effect, as can falling snow. Anything that diffuses the light and causes it to become a broad source is difficult to shield." This would explain a phenomenon most Margatians can relate to: a blinding sensation akin to staggering out of a nightclub in the early hours, superimposed over a humdrum excursion like an afternoon walk to the supermarket.

Photographer Greg Bottle has lived in Thanet all his life, and takes eerie, evocative shots of Margate that capture its unsettling edginess. "I feel that to truly understand how the 'northern light' can influence a landscape, one has to have experienced polar light in the Arctic areas during winter, like Iceland, Norway or Finland," he says. "Then one really knows what they are looking for. It is the light and colour at sunrise that paints my landscape. I've always loved remote locations that give me a sense of peace, so when I'm home I look for places I can get that same sense. What I call the 'magic light' only ever happens in winter, when you get that deep pink, almost magenta northern light. Margate is an oddity: sunset is the best time to photograph, but sunrise is the best light, so I'm often shooting in the opposite direction to the sun's position."

The American photographer Annie Leibovitz calls landscape photography "a dance with light and the weather", and it is the striking interplay of these natural protagonists that lends Bottle's work such emotional depth. "Flat light, and even dull cloudy days, have their own unique ►

qualities, especially for dramatic or black and white pictures," he says. "Most of my pictures of the Anthony Gormley sculpture near the Tate were taken in flat grey light, with heavy cloud cover at sunrise. Flat light can add an ethereal look when shooting long exposures and make the subject jump off the background."

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No artist has done more to romanticise Margate's light in the collective creative consciousness than JMW Turner; his 1822 watercolour "Sun-Rise: Whiting Fishing at Margate" is one of his most striking utilisations of light as a storytelling device, according to Sam Smiles, professor of art history and visual culture at the University of Exeter. "An

interest in depicting natural light had developed in the late 18th century by artists on the Grand Tour, but exhibited paintings using these qualities had to fight against critics' expectations that preferred the golden 'old master' tones they were used to," he says. "Capturing natural light meant painting in a higher key. Turner and his contemporaries had to demonstrate that natural light wasn't harsh and discordant from an aesthetic point of view. He was unusual in liking Margate as a subject for artistic treatment; in fact, an early oil of the town he painted received a comment from a critic who was obviously surprised to find Margate had any potential!" The critic was John Landseer, father of the Victorian painter. He wrote: "We had not imagined that any view of Margate, under any circumstances, would have made a picture of so much importance as that which Mr Turner has painted of this subject. The detail of the town and cliffs, being lost at the early hour which is represented, in the mistiness of the morning, and only the bolder forms being discernible... Margate acquires a grandeur we should in vain look for at any other time and under any other circumstances."

Turner's namesake would later nurture a fascination with light held by one of Margate's most celebrated sons. Arnold Schwartzman, Academy Award-winning filmmaker, designer, and patron of the Margate School, spent his summers as a boy in his parents' Majestic Hotel on Lewis Crescent in Cliftonville. "A few hundred yards along the promenade was a small, metal-fenced enclosure which contained several meteorological instruments," he remembers. "This was the domain of Captain JE Turner, the town's meteorological observer, who recruited me as his volunteer assistant. There was a glass magnifying sphere - it resembled a fortune teller's globe - which focused sunlight onto a paper card. As the sun crossed the sky, it scorched a track along the card's half hour hash marks. I would then measure the burnt areas to calculate the amount of the day's sunshine. At the end of the day, Captain Turner would report our findings in a telegram, which he would take down to Margate railway station and put on the train to the Met Office in London. Margate often held the record for the country's most hours of sun!"

Whenever he visits from his home in Los Angeles, Schwartzman is still struck by the majesty of the Margate sunset, with its astonishing tapestry of chiaroscuro streaks and smudges. "I had a 'Turner moment' recently, when I photographed the light reflecting from the various pools on Margate Sands," he says. "During my worldwide ventures as a filmmaker and photographer, I have filmed the sun going down in the Sinai Peninsula, in Western Australia, and in Spain's Alhambra. And I have not found Margate's equal."

