

Fun, Fantastic Fairgrounds

Y5 Y6

Reading comprehension

A day out to visit a fairground is a wonderful experience that has been enjoyed by families for many generations. Some may argue, it is a rite of passage for children. So many aspects make it a unique and unforgettable experience: the music, the games, the fluffiness and sweet taste of the candyfloss and the thrill of the exciting rides can make for an unforgettable day. There are two types of fairgrounds – travelling fairs and fairs which take up a permanent space. Let's look at the history of these marvellous places.

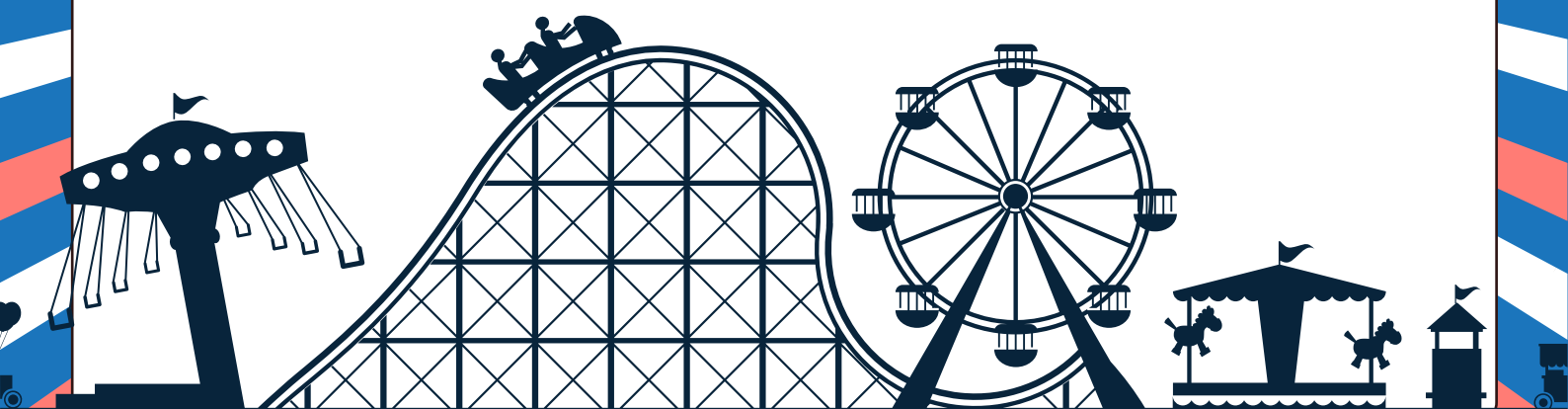
The history of fairgrounds

Fairs date all the way back to medieval times. Over time, they have evolved and have always been at the forefront of showcasing items from the popular culture of the time, for example exhibiting cars long before they became a common sight in society.

The golden age of travelling entertainment did not occur until the latter half of the eighteenth century. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, attractions such as theatrical booths, waxworks, and freak shows began to rise in popularity in the fairground industry. Some of the showmen who exhibited in this period became very rich and left the fairground industry altogether. In 1868, Frederick Savage, who was an English agricultural engineer, devised a method of driving rides by steam. His invention, which was a steam engine mounted in the centre of a ride, transformed fairgrounds in England and around the world. In 1891, he produced the classic style for the English "Gallopers", or as it is now more commonly known, the Carousel.

Towards the end of the Victorian era, there were many different types of mechanised rides, such as ghost shows, which delighted fairs' visitors. During this time, 200 fairground events were taking place in the United Kingdom every weekend, from Easter through to November. Fairs were an important feature of the holiday calendar in both urban and rural places all over the UK.

In the twentieth century, the clamour for more exciting modern sensations saw the invention of more sophisticated rides and many of the old attractions were superseded by the Whip, the Caterpillar and the famous modern classics, the waltzers and the dodgems. These new rides transformed the scenery of the fairground, and many have survived and are still a part of the travelling fairs in the twenty-first century.



Travelling fairs

The tradition of travelling fairs is still living today. Travelling fairs reflect the influence of the popular culture in which it operates. When a fair rolls into town, its heritage often predates the history of the town. Showmen, or fairground people, see themselves as a cultural group, whose industry keeps them moving around the country permanently. One of the most famous fairground families are the Silcocks, who started a travelling fair in 1918 in order to avoid having to work in the mines. The business has been passed on generation to generation - the Silcock brothers (Lawrence, Edward, Herbert and Arthur) started travelling just before the First World War with a set of swings, a children's ride and a barrel organ and equipping themselves with a large three-abreast set of Gallopers (Carousel). The family business is still in operation today and has had to evolve as society has changed to include things like fast food kiosks and video game arcades.

What's at the fairground?

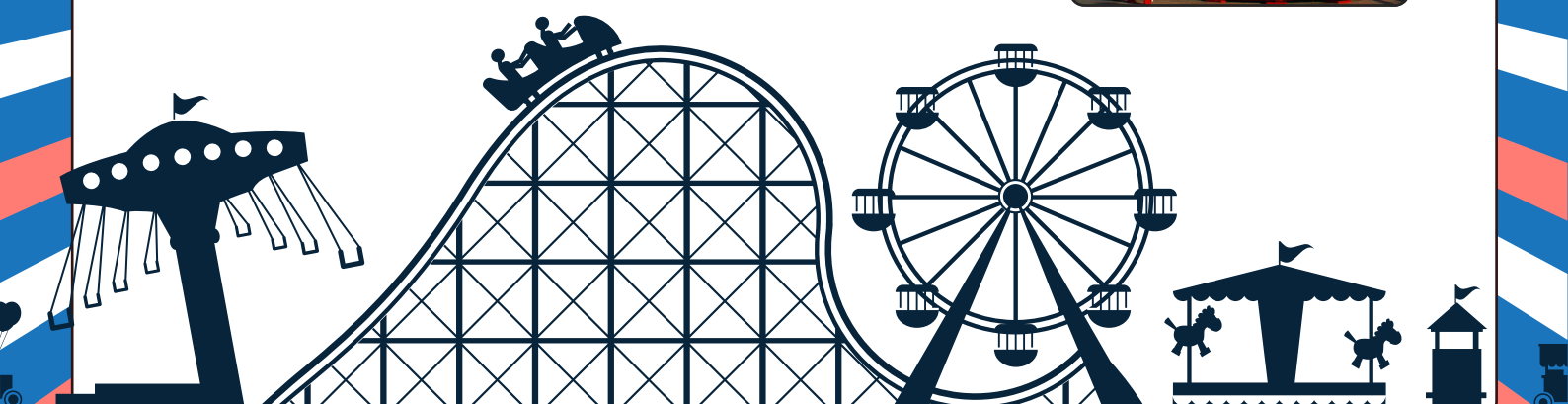
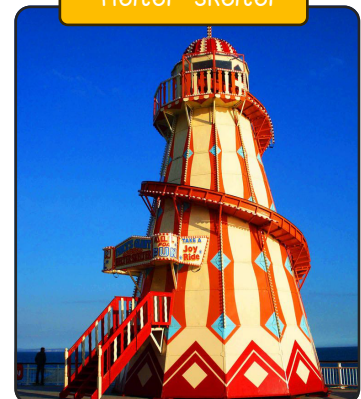
Carousel



The inspiration for modern carousels comes from cavalry games and jousting of 12th century Europe and Asia. Horsemen of that time, played games in which a group of horsemen would ride in a circle and throw breakable balls full of perfume to each other. The first platform carousel was made in 19th century and they were called dobbies. It had a platform that rotated with fixed animals and chariots.

A helter-skelter is typically a wooden high tower with a slide built around it. Users climb up inside the tower and slide down the outside, on a mat or a sack. Its name was first recorded at Hull Fair in October 1905. The term 'helter-skelter' pre-dates the fairground ride and has been used to mean disorderly haste or confusion since at least the 16th century.

Helter-skelter



Ferris Wheel



A Ferris wheel (sometimes called a big wheel) is a structure consisting of a rotating upright wheel with multiple passenger-carrying components (commonly referred to as passenger cars, capsules or gondolas) attached to the rim in such a way that as the wheel turns gravity keeps them upright. The original Ferris Wheel was designed and constructed by George Washington Gale Ferris Jr. as a landmark for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

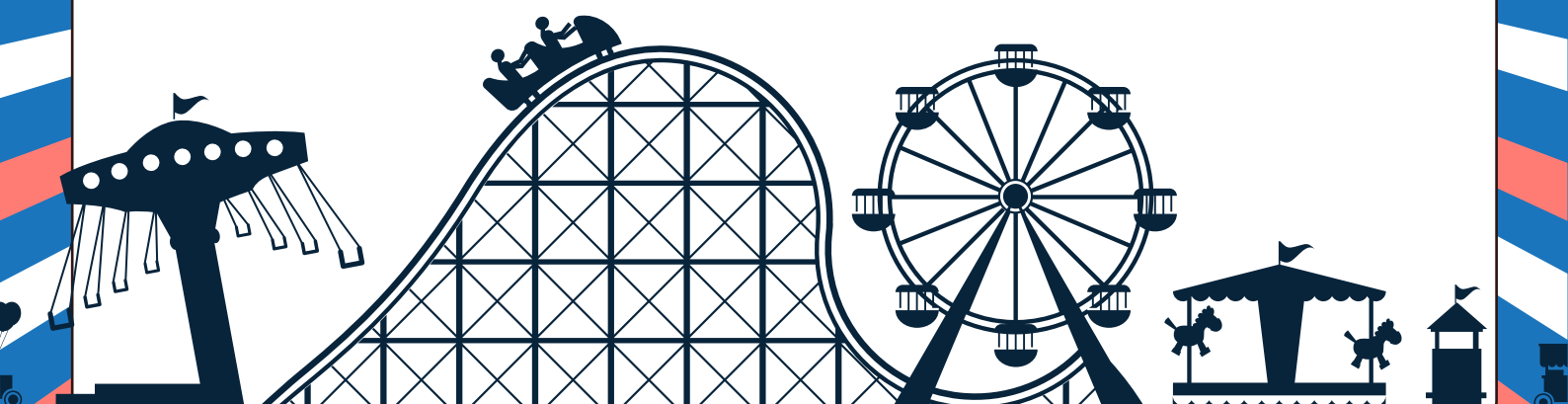
The Coconut shy has been a well-known attraction at fairgrounds for centuries. The word "shy" in this context means to toss or throw. To play this game, participants throw wooden balls at a row of coconuts balanced on posts. Traditionally, a player has three chances and wins each coconut successfully dislodged. In some cases, other prizes may be won instead of the coconuts.



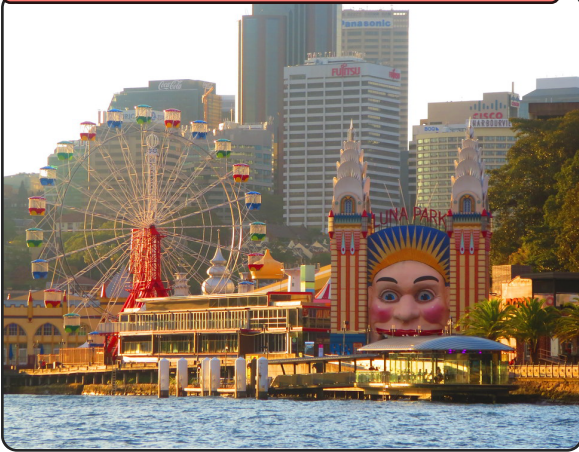
Game: Coconut Shy

Fairgrounds today

In the UK, there are several surviving permanent seaside amusement parks in Blackpool, Margate, Great Yarmouth and Southport. They were founded in the late 19th and early 20th century, but their origins can be traced back in Britain to the annual fairs that took place throughout the country. In the USA, Coney Island in Brooklyn (New York) still exists and is still popular – this is one of the earliest global self-contained amusement parks. It was established in the mid-1890s and provided a direct model for Blackpool Pleasure Beach and other amusement parks. The city of Sydney in Australia has a large fairground site right in the centre of the city in their world-famous Darling harbour, which proves a very popular hit with tourists and locals alike.



Luna Park: right in the centre of Sydney



Fairgrounds today, both the travelling and permanent types, stay successful by using both history and modernity to market the fair. Fairs still reflect popular culture and are a key part in many national events annually. The showmen have skilfully adapted to stay relevant to culture and to provide a fair for varied audiences. The fair was, and continues to be, an intriguing and magical place, where all types of people can come along and enjoy all forms of live and mechanical entertainment. Long may fairs continue to be part of our society!

