It's Perfectly Good!

Ride restoration benefits vs. costs

by Sophie Brookover



MICHAEL COSTELLO

Six Flags Great Adventure in Jackson, New Jersey, operates a historic English-style carousel that reportedly dates to 1881.

WHETHER THEY'RE LABELED CLASSIC, VINTAGE, LEGACY, OR HERITAGE, older rides remain mainstays at many amusement parks worldwide. While each holds meaning for visitors decade after decade, their longevity is tied to unique maintenance and refurbishment schedules needed to keep these treasured rides running safely and smoothly.

Operators at four parks across Europe and the United States—Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen, Pleasure Beach Resort in Blackpool, England, De Waarbeek in the Netherlands, and Six Flags Great Adventure in Jackson, New Jersey—speak with Funworld about the enduring popularity of their heritage rides.

The Power of Nostalgia

In a world where novelty is both highly prized and ubiquitous, the simpler pleasures of introducing one's children and grandchildren to the wholesome experiences of one's own childhood feel almost luxurious. Parks like Tivoli Gardens and Pleasure Beach Resort, founded in 1843 and 1896, respectively, are proud of their deep roots and their careful stewardship of their most historic rides. Tivoli's most popular ride is its wood-construction roller coaster (conveniently named The Roller Coaster), which dates back to 1914.

"Legacy rides are the reason people are coming back again and again for generations," says Kasper Schumacher, co-head of operations. The park's deep commitment to ride longevity is the source of its motto, "Tivoli is always, like never before."

Andy Hygate, Pleasure Beach Resort's operations director, describes his seaside park's slate of rides as a healthy combination of nostalgia and up-to-date thrills, honoring the past in the park's 130th season of operation with a 1:3 ratio of heritage to new rides.

The park's oldest ride, Sir Hiram Maxim's Flying Machines, opened in 1904 and remains a popular ride—and is also the first one visitors see upon entering the resort.

"Our internal research tells us that classic rides are a niche driver of visitors," explains Hygate. "[While] the main driver is new and exciting rides, so we try to offer a wide variety." This balance is exemplified by a carousel built in the 1920s to the brand-new Aviktas gyro swing ride from Intamin.

Maintenance Behind the Magic

Magic doesn't come for free, of course, and all attractions require routine inspections and maintenance to run safely. Vintage doesn't mean cost savings. Keeping aging rides running smoothly and safely often requires an extra investment of time, expert labor, and money.

"[Our goal is] to preserve these attractions for future generations, while ensuring they fully meet today's safety standards," explains Mikael Rutger, creative director at De Waarbeek.

GREG NUSE



Sir Hiram Maxim's Captive Flying Machines opened at Blackpool Pleasure Beach in England on Aug. 1, 1904. Designed by inventor Sir Hiram Stevens Maxim, the ride features rotating arms with suspended cars that swing outward as they spin, simulating the sensation of flight.

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"Lead times can be longer, and in some cases, the original manufacturers or companies [that built the rides] are no longer in business," Rutger says. In cases such as the Rodelbaan roller coaster, whose steel construction dates back to 1930, "every single bolt and nut required has to be custom-made because there is simply no off-the-shelf solution available."

To address the similar creative and practical challenges presented by Tivoli's Roller Coaster, Schumacher says the park works with a machinist to produce new spare parts based on original and updated technical drawings. Tivoli's maintenance department also replaces one-eighth of the Roller Coaster's wooden track each winter, with supplemental work provided by up to 10 skilled carpenters from around the Copenhagen area who take on a three-month job to devote their time and expertise. Schumacher is grateful "to have very skilled and experienced woodworkers working on this track," many of whom have been returning annually for over a decade.

Both De Waarbeek's Rutger and Tony Rossi, director of construction and maintenance at Six Flags Great Adventure, credit the sophistication of technological advances with extending ride lifespans. Rutger reports that "today's lubricant technologies are far more effective and longer-lasting than what was available when many of these attractions were originally built." His park's maintenance team also uses a dedicated app to track all required servicing.

"[It's] invaluable—particularly for older attractions—where staying ahead of potential issues is so important." For his part, Rossi appreciates the potential of ultrasonic testing and the clarity and sharpness of images captured by maintenance drones.

Refurbishment to Replacement

Tivoli takes refurbishment seriously as demonstrated by the complete rebuilds of its 1960s-era Trolley Car several times and its multiple conversions of the vehicle's engine from diesel, to gas, to electric—until the vehicle outlived its service life. The park then worked with Severn Lamb

to make a complete replica of the original. Even though "it was very expensive, it is really beautiful, more sustainable, and a lot more comfortable for both guests and ride operators," shares Schumacher. This approach provides a brand-new ride that meets visitors' enthusiasm for vintage experiences.

Across the Atlantic, Six Flags Great Adventure inked headlines when making tough decisions. While the park imploded its 456-foot-tall Kingda Ka roller coaster in 2025 and retired its SkyRide in 2023 (originally installed at the 1964 World's Fair in New York), the facility recently rebuilt and refabricated its Saw Mill Log Flume, made by Arrow Development in 1974.

Rossi recounts the complexity of the flume project, which included obtaining permits to place new, code-compliant footers footers in the park-owned lake. The process was a long and expensive one, but "the company decided we were going to invest the time, the money, and the resources to make it better than it was." Six Flags worked with Holland Fiberglass to produce the new flume sections as exact replicas of the classic ones. The update is so seamless that "if you did not know it was redone, you'd never know," Rossi says with pride.

Riding into Retirement

How do attraction operators know when it's time to usher a beloved ride into retirement? All four operators agree the decision is driven by safety, cost, ride popularity, and return on investment. De Waarbeek's Rutger draws a succinct line in the sand: "If we cannot guarantee the safety of a ride to the standards we and our guests expect, it cannot remain in operation."

The decision-making teams at Pleasure Beach Resort rely on data. Hygate explains the park tracks "our throughputs on down to each individual ride to look at patterns of guest visits" to watch which rides are losing popularity. Rossi says costs are calculated that incorporate parts, time spent on inspection, and maintenance.

When rides do need to be retired, operators can look for ways to make it a milestone event. Pleasure Beach Resort "threw a party for the final evening" of its 1960s-era Grand Prix car ride, Hygate says. "Guests came to ride it one last time. It gave us a way to handle the closure of a ride in a way people appreciated." Six Flags Great Adventure donated vehicles and a piece of track to the National Coaster Museum in Plainview, Texas, upon the retirement of Kingda Ka, which stood as the tallest operating roller coaster in the world for nearly two decades. FW



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