



Smiles ahead

CLAIRE Smith knows what it is like to be Number One.

After all, her boutique bed and breakfast establishment of that name has just been judged best in the North West Tourism Awards.

The three bedroom property in St Lukes Road, South Shore, already holds similar awards for Blackpool and for Lancashire - both achieved this year.

And now Claire (*above*) has fingers crossed for a countrywide accolade in the Enjoy England Awards for Excellence, to be announced in London next April.

Success is certainly no stranger to Claire, who is repeating the achievements that she and husband Mark, a trained chef, gained at their previous Blackpool property, which collected numerous local, regional and national trophies, well as entries in prestigious guides.

That hotel also had a restaurant open to non-residents, although this time around, at Number One, meals are restricted to guests and to breakfast.

But what a way to start the day - guests can have breakfast hampers in their rooms or tuck into the likes of croissant with ham, cheese, poached egg and hollandaise sauce or scrambled egg and poached salmon on home-made potato cakes.

Mrs Smith said: "We took the last business as far as we felt we could, having extended to 11 rooms, and having achieved many awards, culminating in the Booker Prize



LAP OF LUXURY: Inside Claire Smith's Number One B&B

By CRAIG FLEMING
Tourism Writer

(the organisation better known for its book award).

"We wanted a new challenge, a complete change, but more than that we wanted to go to the next level and if we had stayed at the last property, it would have meant knocking rooms together."

Claire admits: "It's all very well having a bright idea and giving up your livelihood to do something completely different but first you have to know it's a viable proposition and not too off the wall."

That is why she sought help from the Learning Tourism project, funded by Lancaster University and the European Union Regional Development Fund.

She was among 111 applicants to benefit from the project run by Lancaster University's Tourism Centre.

Claire says: "I was absolutely thrilled to bits with the feasibility study which found out about the

niche market for this upmarket hotel.

"The study also impressed the bank and made it easier to raise the money. I couldn't have afforded the time or the money to have it done it myself.

"As a result we decided that we should have a fresh start and create a business where we would be able to offer larger and more luxurious rooms."

Guests certainly get luxury at Number One, with 42 inch plasma TVs in the bedrooms and even 17 inch LCD screens set into the wall at the bottom of the bath.

Compared to Blackpool's rank and file family trade, it is very much a niche market, but one that the Smiths feel is for them.

Claire admits: "The 2006 season was as up and down for us as it was for other tourism businesses, although we are not dependent on holiday visitors.

"Our customer base is different than that at the last property and we aim for the corporate market because that keeps us going

through the winter.

Claire says: "We have now had two full seasons here and it has been a learning curve and, even now, there are things that need tweaking.

"When we opened, we thought we were very cutting edge with an all-in-one remote that controlled the curtains, the lighting, the CD player, DVD recorder and TV in the bedroom.

"But I ended up having to spend up to half an hour explaining it all to guests and when one couple told us at breakfast that they had slept with the lights on because they could not turn them off, then we realised that this season we had to offer separate controls for each function," she smiles.

"We are proud to be best B&B in the North West but we will continue to look at ways to improve.

"Wherever we stay, I take a pad and pencil and note things that would make a stay at Number One even better for our guests."

Other Blackpool tourism and leisure businesses who want to know if they are eligible for support, from marketing to IT skills, should contact Lancaster University's Tourism Centre manager Alan Heywood on (01524) 594947.

Cover picture: Claire Smith serves Mike Wilkinson, chief executive of Lancashire and Blackpool Tourist Board, to celebrate her establishment being declared the best B&B in the North West.