

BLACKPOOL

◀ lives in a big baronial pile in Poulton-le-Fylde, over in Blackpool's scenic rural hinterland, from which he can "just see the top of the Tower; otherwise, I could be anywhere". He's also just spent £6 million lovingly converting an old Odeon into a complex housing the Handbag, the Flamingo nightclub and Funny Girls, his famous drag revue bar. My parents' friends go to Funny Girls and love it; mainstream entertainment (it's even done the Royal Variety Show). But Flamingo is a gay club, albeit one built on a scale and lavishness that puts pretty well every other gay club I've seen to shame (and reader, I've been to quite a few). The Art Deco lamps have been lovingly restored "at several grand a pop" and fitted with new LED lighting. The lamps change colour constantly – as does the magnificent, *Saturday Night Fever*-style dancefloor, which is now rapidly filling with gay men and some sassy-looking young lesbians. They're having a ball, and it would take a hard heart not to be bowled over by the shameless pizzazz of the place.

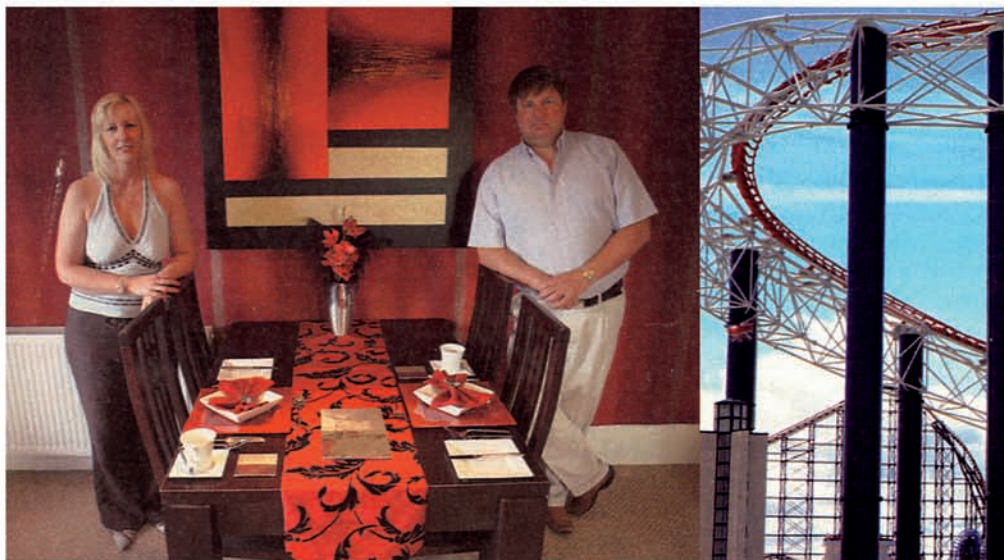
On a more domestic scale, but no less ambitious, I head back from Flamingo to the Number One guest house – a far cry from the kind of Blackpool boarding house my grandmother used to run, doubtless with a rod of iron, over on Osborne Road. Blackpool landladies were tough. (Perhaps they had to be, but a neighbour of my grandma's was known to tip guests' clothes out of their bedroom window into the garden below if she took against them.) My mum recalls walking down Osborne Road in the Fifties and seeing an identical scene in every bay window, with a table set for "high tea". "Salad, which meant a tomato, a piece of lettuce and a few slices of cucumber on each plate. Wafer-thin ham, bread and butter, and cakes on the top of a cake stand. One per person." Run by Claire and Mark Smith, the Number One is an altogether different experience – an award-winning B&B (best in Blighty), more boutique than boarding, with Egyptian-cotton sheets, flat-screen TVs, Jacuzzi baths and what-have-you.

Other new hoteliers are also raising their game. But one of the challenges facing the town – reputed to have as many hotel rooms as Portugal – is that some landlords jumped the other way, turning old boarding houses into bedsits for people living on benefits. They advertise for tenants in newspapers throughout the north. Thus, Blackpool imports social problems and the kind of unsightliness that comes with poverty – for poverty is seldom easy on the eye. So Basil opens swanky new venues, Amanda works her theatrical magic on the Pleasure Beach, the council landscapes the main road entry into the town... but all that good stuff gets dragged down by glimpses of another Blackpool, such as rundown Central Drive or a none-too-golden stretch of the Golden Mile.

Over a magnificent breakfast at Number One, Doug Garrett, head of the ReBlackpool regeneration agency, talks about plans to tip that balance back in Blackpool's favour. (Like other people I talk to in Blackpool, he seems torn between appealing for lottery money and similar funding to turn the town around, and the need to communicate the message that Blackpool is a fun place to visit now.) A smart new railway station. An upscale shopping centre. Doing up the seafront, where the monolithic Victorian sea wall is to be turned into a series of headlands dubbed the People's

Playground, while banks of steps will reconnect the town with the sea and those amazing (and now squeaky clean) beaches. There's talk of a giant indoor entertainment complex. There's already a giant glitterball ("The world's largest!" the PR lady enthuses) on the front and – now this is thrilling! – plans to recreate the aurora borealis in the skies above the Prom.

Northern lights? That would get me to Blackpool – and recreate the sense of wonder visitors must have felt in its heyday, walking into the belle époque Tower Ballroom (still holy ground for ballroom-dance fans) or the gilded Alhambra that is Tower Circus. The wild animals have gone now; they used to live in the vast cellars below. My mum remembers the elephants taking their morning constitutional on the beach. But the Circus can still be flooded with 40,000 gallons of water for marine spectacles, while the day I went, a full house watched jaw-droppingly good Russian acrobats. Blackpool still has five theatres, one of which, the Grand, was built by the celebrated theatrical architect Frank Matcham, and it has high hopes of luring the currently homeless Theatre Museum there



– as well as securing Unesco world heritage status for these enduring monuments to popular pleasure.

But can they hold their own against more modern attractions? The Winter Gardens is a case in point. Every British Prime Minister since the Second World War has spoken here, but now that the big party conferences are heading to – where else? – Manchester, that record might not hold. My parents went courting here. "Two and thrupence got you into the first showing in the cinema," my mum recalls, "and then you could go dancing". Later, Dad would take my older brothers there to see the Beatles. The Gardens wouldn't get those kinds of bands appearing there now, but it's still a great venue, popular with performers, promoters and punters alike. It's not hard to see the appeal: a gig, then making a weekend of it staying in a B&B, hitting the clubs and, if the sun comes out, fish and chips washed down with a bottle of plonk on the beach. What's not to love, if that's your taste and budget?

But this kind of tourism, along with Blackpool's other existing attractions, plus some new ones, looks unlikely to turn the tide in Blackpool's favour. What might have done that, the locals almost uniformly

From left: the Flamingo dancefloor pulls in the pink pound; the Big Dipper on the Pleasure Beach; Claire and Mark Smith of the Number One B&B; a packed Blackpool in 1949