

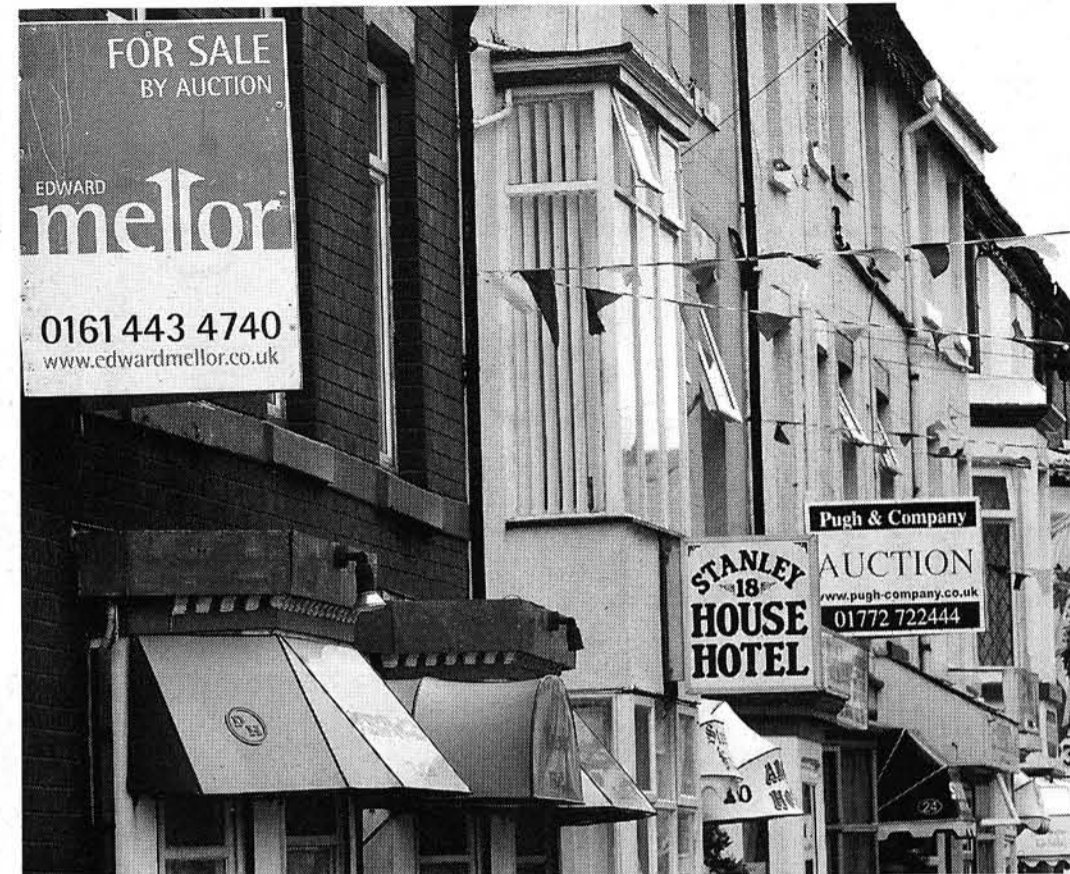
A huge chunk of Blackpool has this month been put up for sale - the equivalent of 5,000 bedrooms - by desperate hoteliers ruined by one of their worst ever summers. But can the tired resort stage a revival?

 by **Rachel Porter**

THE late summer sun fades over Blackpool and its (not quite) Golden Mile. Streets that would once have been bustling are quiet, vacancy signs hang in every hotel window and cafes with no prospect of a dinnertime rush lock-up for the night. Wish you were here? The people of Blackpool desperately do. But, tired of waiting for tourism to return, tired of struggling to pay the bills, tired of watching their once gaudy but glorious town degenerate, Blackpool's hoteliers are getting out. At what should be the peak of the season, days after Dr Who star David Tennant flicked the switch on the 128th year of illuminations, it was revealed that more than 260 of the town's debt-laden hotel owners have put their properties on the market. More than £60million worth of accommodation is up for grabs in what used to be the busiest of Britain's beloved seaside resorts. But after a terrible summer's trading, thanks to appalling weather, on top of the devastating news earlier in the year that Blackpool will not become home to the first super-casino, they are eager to cut their losses. It's so bad that many are accepting bids as much as £30,000 under the asking price, a small sacrifice when faced with the prospect of ever-diminishing returns. One guesthouse owner whose

12-bedroom property is on the market said: "Some owners are offering bed and breakfast for £7.50 a night just to keep their heads above water. I'm 69 and it's time to call it a day. Whether I get a buyer is another matter." At the peak of its popularity, the town's 3,500 hotels would have been packed during the summer months and throughout the 66-night run of the illuminations. Today only 1,700 establishments remain. The idea of whiling away a jolly fortnight's holiday on its beaches - taking a break from donkey rides, sandcastles and ice-creams to pop a few pennies in the slot machines - is one that wouldn't occur to most families and, truth be told, hasn't done so for some time. According to the latest figures, Blackpool still attracts 10 million visitors a year but that is down from 17 million a little over a decade ago. When its popularity first began to slide in the mass tourism boom of the Seventies, as Britons plumped for packages abroad, it made sense for Blackpool to reinvent itself as the country's premier destination for raucous weekend breaks. These days almost no one stays in Blackpool for longer than a night or two, and most of its visitors are the sort that put others off. Visiting hen and stag crowds are so badly behaved that Blackpool Council has announced a crackdown, with council leader Peter Callow wanting parties to sign a "good behaviour contract" on

DESPAIR: Business has been so bad this summer that many of Blackpool's hoteliers are selling their places at knockdown prices



arrival in the town in a bid to restore its family-friendly image. "People are fed up of seeing half naked men and women displaying themselves at midday - and that's just the start of their drinking time," he says. Gareth Eagle, commercial agent at Broomhead's Estate Agency, says: "A lot of hoteliers don't want the stag and hen parties. We have the spending power to raise Blackpool from its mire. Many proprietors have given up on making a living from holiday trade and have taken in permanent guests, many of them Eastern European immigrants, and people living on government benefits. This is a serious concern according to Geraldine Smith, the MP for nearby Morecambe and Lunesdale, who was among the 18 rebel Labour MPs to vote against the government's casino plans in March. She says: "This happened in Morecambe and now it's happening in Blackpool. The trouble with Blackpool is that its problems are on a much bigger scale. "Hotels are being turned into accommodation for people on benefits. Hoteliers need to make ends meet so they effectively import social problems into the area. It doesn't make it attractive to tourists." Ms Smith, who remembers the Blackpool of her youth as "full of life, a fun place to spend the weekend", revisited it earlier this week. "It was quite a shock. There really does appear to be an air of decline. But this is happening to seaside resorts all over the country. They have lost their main source of

'Most visitors are the sort to put others off' more than 100 hotels on our books and the figure is growing. It is alarming that so many people are selling up during the high season. "It is a tough time and some clients are happy to knock £25,000 off an asking price to get a sale." Others are resorting to equally desperate measures. Drastic cuts in nightly rates are filling rooms but they are unsustainable. And those bargain prices are doing little to attract the kind of clientele with

the spending power to raise Blackpool from its mire. Many proprietors have given up on making a living from holiday trade and have taken in permanent guests, many of them Eastern European immigrants, and people living on government benefits. This is a serious concern according to Geraldine Smith, the MP for nearby Morecambe and Lunesdale, who was among the 18 rebel Labour MPs to vote against the government's casino plans in March. She says: "This happened in Morecambe and now it's happening in Blackpool. The trouble with Blackpool is that its problems are on a much bigger scale. "Hotels are being turned into accommodation for people on benefits. Hoteliers need to make ends meet so they effectively import social problems into the area. It doesn't make it attractive to tourists." Ms Smith, who remembers the Blackpool of her youth as "full of life, a fun place to spend the weekend", revisited it earlier this week. "It was quite a shock. There really does appear to be an air of decline. But this is happening to seaside resorts all over the country. They have lost their main source of

The £60million seaside sell off



Pictures: RICHARD BLAKE; DAVE NELSON; AP



HANG ABOUT: Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen believes the town's fortunes could be revived if people were to have a little faith and keep smiling

doubted the wisdom of using a casino to cure Blackpool of its deep-seated ills. "Most people in Blackpool had their doubts, too. They thought it was their last chance to revive the town and sadly, the Government led them to believe the casino would be coming to Blackpool." Paul Crossley, of local estate agents Kenrick & Co, says: "It has been a tough year. A lot of our clients bought hotels believing that Blackpool would get the casino. The gamble didn't pay off and now they want rid of their investment." But, a Blackpool man himself, Mr Crossley adds: "Blackpool has a tremendous future, there is a lot happening here. These things happen in cycles. It has been a bad year but we'll get over it."

AND it's a little more of that spirit that designer Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen would like to see as Blackpool embarks on its illuminations season. "There's no doubt that the casino bid dealt a body blow to Blackpool - a town that was already suffering from serious self-esteem issues," says Laurence, who was in Blackpool last week to light up the "dancing ladies" he designed as a centrepiece to this year's display. "If I were a hotelier in Blackpool looking at my figures after the worst summer on record, I would probably be having a rethink, too. Putting their properties on the market is a knee-jerk reaction. "We're expecting an Indian summer and the illuminations season has only just begun. I think they might feel very differently in a few weeks time. "And I wonder how many of them would be happy away from Blackpool. There's something about it that gets under your skin. It has a personality like nowhere else. Deep down, I'm sure they love it much too much to leave." He, like politicians at local and national level, believes that Blackpool has plenty to offer. "A day out in Blackpool is a cultural heritage experience like no other in the country. While the rest of us live in rather beige towns, Blackpool was designed to make us smile. "The casino would have galvanised local spirit and brand Blackpool, so to speak. But with its century-old pleasure beach, its architecture, its unique sense of style, Blackpool has all it needs to be a success again. "I would encourage hoteliers to refrain from putting their properties up for sale and for God's sake start smiling."

HANGING TIMES: Once popular as a family seaside resort, inset, Blackpool is now more likely to attract the hen and stag hordes

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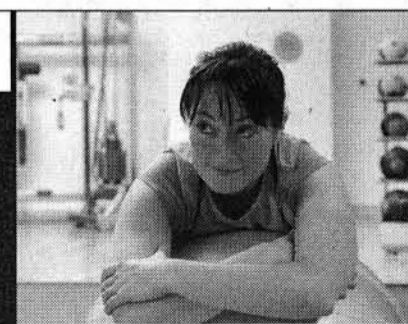
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