

A Palace invite for the owners of the UK's top guest house. **Elizabeth Gomm** reports

WHEN the Queen asked "What is the Number One?" she was delighted to discover that it's Blackpool's smallest B&B.

And its proud owners, Claire and Mark Smith, were happy to explain that their three-bedroomed luxury guest house has also been awarded the title of Britain's best.

The Queen, Prince Philip and other members of the royal family, were hosting a reception at Buckingham Palace to celebrate the British hospitality industry.

And that saw Claire and Mark rubbing shoulders with the great and the grand - including hotel magnate Sir Rocco Forte; celebrity chefs Gordon Ramsay, Angela Harnett, Hugh Fernley-Whittingstall and the Roux Brothers to name a few.

Claire and Mark's invitation came out of the blue: "We had just come home from our holidays at 1am and I was going through a pile of mail to see if there was anything interesting when I saw an envelope with the royal crest on the front.

"Inside was an invitation to a celebration of the hospitality industry at Buckingham Palace. It came out of the blue and we have no idea who put our names forward," said Claire. The couple, who are Blackpool's staunchest allies, didn't expect to meet the Queen.

"We just thought we would see her milling about somewhere in the distance," said Claire.

She was almost speechless when they were put in line to be introduced to the monarch and Prince Philip. "We were told. The Queen would like a word with you, which was just incredible."

When we said we were from Blackpool, Prince Philip joked "Oh, up north eh?" in a Lancashire accent which immediately put us at ease." Mark mentioned to the Queen that they'd met before, when he was a teenager representing England's scouts at a World Jamboree in Windsor Great Park.

"She just remarked that was a long time ago, and asked him if he'd changed much. She was really amused when I told her he'd just got taller and wider!" said Claire.

"It was the most amazing day.

"The Queen is such a beautiful lady, I had never realised before just how beautiful she is."

The couple, who have built on the



TOP BOSSES: Mark and Claire Smith, who were invited to meet the Queen (inset) after their B&B Number One was named Britain's best. By ROB LOCK

A B&B fit for ROYALTY



success of their boutique B&B to become partners in a second, and bigger, Number One at South Beach, were among 370 key personalities from the industry at the event.

They were invited by the Queen into her London home to celebrate and recognise the major contribution they make to the British economy.

The guests came from all levels - as well as all sectors - of the industry. So, while there were many famous faces arriving at the Grand Entrance, there were also a whole host of lesser-known personalities.

After being formally introduced to the Queen and other members of the Royal Family, including the Duke of

Edinburgh, the Earl of Wessex and the Duke of Kent, in the White Drawing Room, the guests were free to wander through five other rooms within the state apartments and enjoy drinks and canapés.

A display of items - old menus, watercolours of state banquets, porcelain and china - from the Royal Collection

depicting royal hospitality through the ages highlighted the connection between the Royal Household and the industry. Claire added: "It was just a wonderful day. Just driving through the gates of Buckingham Palace was amazing."

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