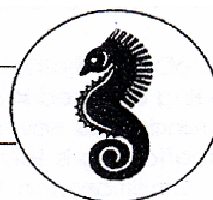


# SEAHORSE



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## Newsletter of the Friends of the Midland Hotel, Morecambe

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Welcome to the latest issue of the newsletter which, as usual, is packed with interesting articles supplied by yourselves and others. Well, this time I think I can say for certain that we are now into the home stretch regarding the re-opening of the Midland. Urban Splash's website mentions May 2008 but their directors remain somewhat coy when you ask them for an actual date. However, as you will see from page two, the work is progressing well and everyone seems confident that the hotel will be ready by early summer. Keep an eye on the Friends' website – [www.midlandhotel.org](http://www.midlandhotel.org) – for all the latest news.

I'm sure you'll agree about the high quality of our new website – even Urban Splash were impressed! It must be good because I can manage to navigate round it. The Friends have been extremely lucky having Ruth Coleman, who produced our first website which put us on the (virtual) map, and Kate Drummond who created the new site with its sunny, seaside look. Many thanks to both. The website has been particularly effective in recruiting new Friends from far and wide (including France) and we now have approaching four hundred current members which is a remarkable achievement when you think we started out eight and a half years ago with around a dozen people.

At our last committee meeting we discussed possible events for the Friends when the Midland re-opens. It would be lovely to take over the hotel completely for a weekend with music, dancing, film shows and other entertainment. Perhaps we can convince Urban Splash to use the Friends as guinea pigs on which to try out the services before opening to the general public. If you have any imaginative ideas please let me know.

To commemorate the re-opening of the Midland next year we have commissioned a limited edition plate, the details of which can be found on an insert with this newsletter. Please let us know if you are interested in purchasing one or more so we can get an idea of how many to order. The company is highly regarded and has made similar plates (and mugs) for the De la Warr Pavilion in Bexhill, a series of plates depicting 1930's houses in London and various items for the Twentieth Century Society.

Finally, news of a book soon to be published. Committee members Barry Guise and Pam Brook have written a history of the Midland, from its first incarnation as a Victorian railway hotel in 1848 to its rescue from near dereliction by Urban Splash. Copiously illustrated in colour and black and white, the book should be available in late November. However, for the Friends of the Midland the publisher is offering the book at a special discount if an order is placed before the official publication date. See the order form inside for details.

I look forward to seeing you in 2008.

**Sue Thompson**

## RESTORATION UPDATE

Those of you who have passed the Midland recently will have noticed that the hotel, despite still being encased in scaffolding, is gleaming white in the early autumn sunshine. Most of the new render has now been applied apart from on the ground floor which will be done when the scaffolding is taken down. On the rotunda the original render was found to be in very poor condition and had to be removed down to the brickwork. It is currently being re-rendered and its flat roof, which has long suffered from rainwater ingress, has been made watertight.

The basement has been totally transformed by the installation of a central corridor and a range of service rooms of various sizes – the main kitchen, manager's office, boiler room, crockery and linen stores, cold rooms, dry food store, maintenance store, staff room, toilets, health spa, etc.

On the ground floor the long dining room wall has been re-instated and will be faced with the original wooden panelling which is being renovated off-site. A smaller dining room/conference room has been created from part of the old kitchen and both will be serviced by an adjacent prep kitchen linked to the main kitchen in the basement by a dumb waiter. New internal doorways have been cut into the rotunda which will link the café/bar with a seating area and provide access to basement toilets. On the other side of the entrance foyer the wall with Eric Gill's map of North West England has been moved to a new location (see page 5) which has greatly enlarged the usable space in this part of the building – one which will now be suitable to host conferences, wedding receptions, etc. Gill's stone bas-relief is about to be dismantled and reassembled in its original position in the foyer. The work is being overseen by stonemason Tony Gregory who has already cleaned and repaired the two stone seahorses at the top of the staircase tower.

Working at weekends, specialists have recently finished the removal of all the plaster from the walls of the stairwell which contained traces of asbestos. The walls are now ready for re-plastering. On the first and second floors the plastering of the rooms and corridors is nearing completion and work is about to start on fitting out the bedrooms.

The shell of the new roof structure is all in place except for the large picture windows which will offer guests in the six suites panoramic views across Morecambe bay to the hills of the Lake District. On the landward side the walls will be faced with obscure glass. For safety reasons the top of the parapet wall has been heightened by the addition of thin stainless steel bars.

A swimming pool is back on the agenda although the details have not yet been finalised. It will be a stand-alone building sited to the south of the hotel. The original idea of a heated bath-house/sauna/pool seems to have been quietly shelved, perhaps on grounds of expense.

One rather unsung aspect of the restoration of the Midland which merits more publicity is the environmentally responsible waste management policy of Urban Splash. Site manager Kieran Gardiner has justifiably pointed out that over 90% of the waste material produced on site by the building work is recyclable. All the waste – wood, metal, plastic, rubble, cabling, cardboard, etc – is separated out and put into designated skips for removal and recycling with very little ending up as landfill.

**Barry Guise**

## FILMING THE MIDLAND

Earlier this year I was contacted by a researcher from the BBC TV regional series *Inside Out* in connection with a programme they were planning about the Midland Hotel. The researcher's name was Emma and we were able to supply her with some background history, photographs and where archive film footage could be sourced. We also put her in touch with Harry Adams who worked at the hotel as a page boy and has a fund of stories about life in the Midland in the 1930s. Harry appeared on the last series of *Coast* and says he is now waiting for Steven Spielberg to call!

Emma had never been to Morecambe and was fascinated by the hotel and its history and the ups and downs of the resort – its lost piers, open air swimming pool, illuminations and much, much more. We talked at length about the formation of the Friends and how and why we started. She said that Robin, the programme's director, would like to meet us when he came to Morecambe on a preliminary visit and we agreed to meet him in Brucciani's café. I am sure those of you who have visited Morecambe will have frequented Brucciani's ice-cream parlour and perhaps even had one of its renowned knickerbockers glories. We suggested that Bruno Brucciani might also be a useful person to interview as he had known the Midland since its 1950's heyday.

Now you must remember that I do not get out much and I was looking forward greatly to meeting a director who worked for the BBC. I met Barry and Lesley at Brucciani's at the arranged time. There were quite a few customers sitting at various tables but nobody wearing a badge 'I work for the BBC'. Barry asked me what he looked like and I realised 'Oops!' – how were we going to know him and how was he going to recognise us? Oh well, we're here now, let's order coffee. My mobile rang. It was Robin asking if we were on our way. I answered that we were already in the café. He said so was he and I turned round to see a man in the far corner talking on his phone! I had wanted to make a good impression for the Friends but had got off to an embarrassing start. Introductions completed, he asked us a lot of questions and outlined what the programme hoped to achieve. We must have impressed him because he wanted to include a piece about the Friends. Well, when it comes to filming I'm the one who gets pushed forward – everyone else likes to stay the other side of the camera. I went home hoping he would forget all about us and just use the information we had supplied. Then a call came from Emma. 'Can you be ready for filming on the 17<sup>th</sup> July? Robin really liked you and was impressed with your passion for the hotel.' I was pleased in a way because it meant that we had got the message across about the importance of the Midland and the part it could play in the recovery of Morecambe.

I quite enjoy filming, it's something very different. However, you all know that the camera never lies – and it puts at least 12 pounds or kilos or whatever on you. The ladies will understand. The diet was found but no time for plastic surgery and where the heck is that wrinkle cream? You are probably thinking 'vain woman' but the last time I was filmed I felt like one of the thorns to a Granada TV rose. On that occasion Peter Wade and I were being interviewed by a tall, blonde, willowy presenter called Jo Blythe. Me, with no make-up and wearing a Harold Wilson knee-length mac (it was pouring down!) which the wind blew to full capacity. My friends, who watched the programme, cruelly recording it for posterity, said I resembled the Michelin man/woman. Jo, of course, was immaculate, looking super in full make-up, elegant black coat, etc. But I never learn.

The presenter of the *Inside Out* series was to be Paul Hayes whom many of you will know from antiques programmes such as *Bargain Hunt* and *Cash in the Attic*. He actually lives in Morecambe and is possibly the male version of Jo Blythe – tall, blond, with a cheeky face and always smart. On the day of filming I arrived at the Midland to discover things were running a bit late. It had been arranged to film me talking to Paul under the canopy of the Platform Arts Centre (the old railway station) opposite the hotel at 2pm but this would not be possible for another hour at least. To pass the time I decided to go and watch the filming inside the hotel. This entailed getting kitted up in hard hat, luminous waistcoat and boots.





*Sue Thompson of the Friends of the Midland being interviewed by Paul Hayes for the BBC TV programme 'Inside Out'.*



*Filming inside the Midland Hotel with Site Manager Kieran Gardiner talking to Paul Hayes.*

I had not been in the building since the Friends' AGM and it was nice to see the progress that had been made. I chatted to Kieran and Olivier (the new hotel manager) between filming and was glad I had agreed to take part in the programme.

Eventually it was my turn to be filmed and we walked over the road to the Platform. I asked if I could keep the gear on because I felt it was similar to a disguise but they said no. When the hat came off my hair was flat, my make-up had gone and I was very hot. Paul, of course, the complete professional, was smudge-free with hair just right. How do they do that? I checked with my husband Ian who, bless him, said I looked great – the fibber! Anyway, like a true pro I bounced into action. Lines sorted, camera rolling and I was off. By now the sun was totally in my eyes and they wouldn't let me wear sun-glasses. I couldn't even see the camera or the crew so focused on Paul. He was really helpful and gave me some tips – I shall leave it up to those of you who see this X-rated bit of the programme to judge whether or not they worked! We needed a few takes, not all my fault I hasten to add, Paul sometimes standing in the wrong position and blocking out the hotel. Incidentally, if you ever see any of the still photos there are several of the director with his head bowed and propped up by his hand - I can assure you he is thinking and listening intently and is not distraught at my inability to function coherently in front of a camera!

Despite my apprehensions, it was all very enjoyable and I hope I did the Midland justice. The programme will be screened by BBC North West sometime in October-November and when we receive the actual transmission date we will post it on the website. The BBC has promised me a copy of the programme which will be instantly destroyed when I get it although I am sure most of my interview will end up on the cutting room floor where it belongs. However, if my humiliation in front of thousands helps keep the Midland in the news then it will have been worth it.

**Sue Thompson**

## **A MOVING EXPERIENCE**

Have you ever tried to move a wall? Not by dismantling it brick by brick and then rebuilding it somewhere else but physically moving it in its entirety to a new location?

This was the daunting task that faced conservation artist Brian Cardy and engineer Mike Hawkins at the Midland Hotel in July, a task made more complicated by the fact that the wall in question was also a valuable – and delicate – piece of artwork in its own right.

As work on the restoration of the Midland progressed, Urban Splash came to realise that the future financial success of the hotel could be compromised by the number of relatively small rooms on the ground floor. With the existing configuration it would be difficult to cater for large parties or hold conferences of any size, a drawback which would effectively restrict the potential client base of the hotel. Enlarging the space to the south of the entrance foyer seemed the answer as one or two walls would be easy to remove. However, the stumbling block to the creation of a space was the wall containing the picture map of North West England carved by Eric Gill and painted by his son-in-law Denis Tegetmeier. The question was could the whole wall be moved without damaging the map?

Brian Cardy, an expert in picture conservation and restoration based in Chorley, believed it was possible. After expressing some concern, English Heritage were convinced and gave their permission. The first step was to protect the map and ensure the plaster would not crack during the move. Brian Cardy explained what was done. 'Immediately over the picture we pasted two layers of Japanese mulberry tissue paper and then a layer of very strong brown Kraft paper to give it strength and prevent any cracking. On top of this went a cotton scrim and then another layer of brown paper. I then put a self-adhesive scrim and covered it with foam held on by squares of cardboard which gave it tremendous rigidity.'





*Picture conservationist Brian Cardy (right) and engineer Mike Hawkins (centre) explain to Barry Guise the way in which they have protected Eric Gill's map of North West England and how they intend to move the wall to its new location.*

Mike Hawkins and his engineers from MP Marine of Maryport then took over. The bottom eighteen inches or so of the wall were cut away and replaced by a series of blocks. A steel support was fitted all along the underneath of the wall to give it strength. Two lengths of steel were then welded at right angles to the support beam and fitted with wheels. More reinforcing steel was attached to the back of the wall to prevent it from collapsing during transit. When this was completed the top and sides of the wall were cut round using a diamond-tipped saw.

Now standing free the wall was ready to be moved. Its supporting blocks were replaced by four hydraulic jacks which slowly lowered it and the wheelbars onto the floor. Fingers were crossed and gradually, following the slight curve of the building, the wall was wheeled the fifteen metres or so to its new location. It was then jacked up so the wheels could be removed before being lowered into its final resting place. Remarkably, the actual moving of the wall had taken less than three-quarters of an hour and gone without a hitch, a tribute to the skill and expertise of the professionals involved.

With the picture wall fixed in place, a second wall has been constructed behind it to provide extra support and to facilitate the return to its original position of the Midland's most famous artwork – Eric Gill's bas-relief of Odysseus being welcomed from the sea by Nausicaa.

The map's protective covering has now been removed and Brian has made a start on restoring the artwork to its former glory. Over the years some areas have suffered from over-zealous cleaning while others have been touched up with household paint in colours unrelated to the original shades.

**Barry Guise**

## ANOTHER FAMOUS BELGIAN ?

Question: how many famous Belgians can you name? \* Not easy, is it? To give you a start there's the painter René Magritte, singer Jacques Brel, Georges Simenon the creator of *Maigret*, five times winner of the Tour de France Eddy Merckx – oh, and Hercule Poirot, but he was fictional! Not a long list but perhaps, given time, there might be another person to add: Olivier Delaunoy.

Appointed in January as the General Manager of the Midland, the Brussels-born Olivier will be responsible not only for the running of the hotel when it re-opens next summer but will also have a major role in recruiting staff, designing the accommodation, planning the kitchens and choosing the restaurant menus – basically a hands-on approach to everything concerned with the operation of the Midland. A short while ago Friends of the Midland managed to prise Olivier away from his busy schedule for an interview.

FOMH: *Could you tell us a little bit about your background and how you came to work for Urban Splash.*

Olivier: I started cooking when I was 14 years old and worked in a restaurant before coming England when I was 22. When I arrived I worked as a bricklayer because it was the only job I could find - my family had a background in masonry and construction - and it took a while before I came back into catering. I learned the language very quickly on the building site because there was nobody else around me who could speak French. Through a friend I got a job running the restaurant in a country house hotel in Sussex and then moved to the George in Stamford and became the food and beverages manager. After that I opened my first restaurant – in Sheffield because it was cheap! I was approached by Rocco Forte to run his restaurants in London and then worked for Raymond Blanc helping him set up his chain of *Le Petit Blanc* restaurants. Eventually I became frustrated and left to do consultancy work.

Normally, the transition from restaurants to run hotels is almost an impossible one but it came about that a person I knew needed someone to run a hotel food and beverages operation. I wanted knowledge so I said “*Let's trade – you teach me everything about running a hotel (and it was a big hotel in the heart of Birmingham) and I'll help you with the restaurant.*” I did that for two years, the two hardest years of my life! Afterwards I felt I understood it inside out. I then went into partnership with a friend and we developed a company called *Night Night* whose concept was to put the most luxurious facilities into the smallest possible hotel bedroom space. The first hotel with these rooms (which were made off-site) was an enormous success but sadly my business partner died of a brain haemorrhage and the shareholders wanted to go in a different direction. Not long afterwards I met Tom Bloxham and following an interview I was chosen to run the Midland. Since then it has become a labour of love.

FOMH: *What do you think is needed to make the Midland a successful hotel?*

Olivier: Making sure the downstairs works. We have to utilise every space to the best of its potential. For example, when I first came on board we only had one kitchen and now we have three – we need that number for everything to function efficiently. All the different areas have to be sustainable in their own right – the conference section, the restaurant, the bar and the rotunda. Normally in a hotel you generate most of your revenue through your bedrooms but because of the configuration of the Midland you have to do 50/50 with the catering which is a difficult strategy – but if we do brilliant food we will be busy. What we will have is a truly functional building which will bring a lot of pleasure to a lot of people. It will be a building that people will enjoy for what it was and what it is.



*Olivier Delaunoy, the Midland's new General Manager, outlines his ideas for the hotel.*

FOMH: *You will obviously have no problem attracting visitors initially but how will you get people to come back again?*

Olivier: We will have six different types of bedroom and will also have six suites designed individually and unique in their own right. I believe that you go back to a place because you like the room but you also want the quality of the product. People will go back somewhere because they are known and they like the surroundings and are treated well. Warmth makes people return and that is my key word.

FOMH: *Much will therefore rest on the staff in the hotel. What criteria will you use to employ them?*

Olivier: My approach is to employ people who have personality foremost. If they have no skill I will train them from scratch. If they have the most wonderful personality and I believe they will give each customer a great experience then I will employ them. The customer comes first. The customer prevails.

FOMH: *What sort of people are you hoping to attract to stay at the Midland?*

Olivier: Ideally we would like 50% private and 50% business customers but you would obviously get more holidaymakers in the summer and more business people in the winter. We



have to have a strong corporate approach because that generates good revenue throughout the week.

FOMH: *How much will it cost to stay in the Midland when it re-opens?*

Olivier: The room rates will vary but will probably be around £99 per room including VAT. Some of our suites will be more - £215 for a night - but other rooms will be less. If you book early enough you will be able to get them cheaper for around £75-80 which is very decent.

FOMH: *How do you see your role once the hotel is up and running?*

Olivier: My role is to make the Midland work and to do whatever it takes to achieve that. If I have to be here 24/7 for a year, two years, three years, then that's what I'll do. We really want to get this right by developing something that is operationally wonderful and has a backbone and somewhere where guests can feel welcome and cared for. The hotel will have a heart and soul and our guests will instantly feel great when they walk through the door. We are all extremely passionate about the Midland and are sure it will do wonders for the area.

\* As to other famous Belgians, did you get Georges Rémi (Hergé) the creator of Tin-Tin the boy detective, Adolphe Sax inventor of the saxophone, or the film actor Jean-Claude Van Damme - 'The Muscles from Brussels'?

## **A MIDLAND MEMORY**

Our first sight of the Midland Hotel was in 1997 at the completion of the Austin 7 Coast to Coast run. We had the option of staying there and paying extra for an evening meal. Quite a large number of the entrants chose to do this. The Midland had an air of faded opulence that must have made it a great hotel in its time. Our room overlooked the sea and was clean and tidy, our £5 evening meal quite adequate and good value for money.

The waitresses were full of humour - we think that's what kept them going. A carafe couldn't be found for the wine - "Would the bottle do?" Nothing matched, not the wine glasses nor the fruit dishes, and we were told they had to nip to the supermarket and get all the food, paying cash as they weren't allowed credit! Whilst the meal was in progress a gentleman with a music centre proceeded to play tapes by the dance floor. This came to an abrupt end after about four tunes when he announced "If you're not dancing I'm going home" in the best Fawlty Towers tradition.

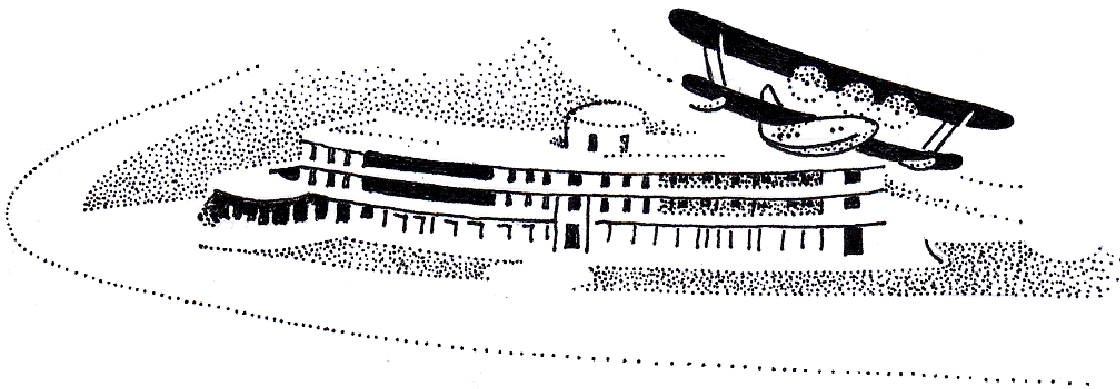
The following year in June we stayed there again after another Coast to Coast run but this time there were four of us. No evening meals were being served but we did have breakfast. A caretaker manager was in and we think we may have been among the last residents. We still think longingly of the afternoon teas in the sun lounge and the sunsets over the bay and are looking forward to seeing the artwork and the graceful lines of the Midland when restoration is complete.

***Josie and Ray Mackinnon***

## MIDLAND MYTH

Among the many stories that surround the Midland is the one that Coco Chanel swapped the Cap d'Antibes for Morecambe Bay, setting down by flying boat to call in at the hotel.

The tale has been aired over the past few years by writer and cultural commentator Michael Bracewell both in his article *La Vie Deluxe* (Tate 4, March/April 2003) and again in the book *I Know Where I'm Going*. The latter incidentally caught the spirit of the moment when it appeared, its cover I recall being the first image in Tom Bloxham's presentation inside the Midland in November 2003 when he set out his vision for the hotel and for Morecambe, re-branding the town as the 'Brighton of the North'. When I met Michael Bracewell a couple of years ago I asked him about the source of the Chanel story and he cited Noel Coward, another figure associated with the Midland's pre-war glory days.



The problem with this period is that, in the absence of hard evidence in the form of the guest books, it is seen increasingly through a golden haze of fading memories and wishful thinking. It has even been suggested that some of the names bandied about from this time (Coward himself, Gertrude Lawrence and even Mrs Wallis Simpson) were the invention of later owners of the Midland intent upon deliberate myth-making for their own benefit.

Coward produced two complete volumes of autobiography, *Present Indicative* and *Future Indefinite* as well as a third incomplete volume, *Past Unconditional*. As for many, Coward's 1930s was a decade to be overshadowed. *Present Indicative* ends in 1931 which is incidentally the year of the closest known connection between Coward and Morecambe – the opening of a provincial tour of *Bitter Sweet* directed by C. B. Cochrane at The Tower. The book closes with *Cavalcade* and Coward's embarkation for South America. In the closing line Coward dissolves away both England and the new decade, 'When we came up on deck there was no England left. Nothing but sea and sky.' When the thread is picked up again in *Future Indefinite*, Coward has leap-frogged over the decade to 1939, telescoping the 1930s into a single paragraph (albeit with an intriguing ending).

*'Not that these pre-war years were lacking in interest and variety. On the contrary they were rich in incident and I enjoyed living them. And I cannot agree with contemporary social commentators that they were so appallingly decadent and degraded. It is true that there was a certain flush discernible on the face of High Society - High Society in the Long Island, Paris, Riviera sense - but on the whole those poor maligned years were not nearly so bad as they are made out to have been. There were worse things going on in the twenties and thirties than casual amorality in the South of France and ostentatious parties at the Ritz. The Lido contributed less to future chaos than Geneva, and the propaganda of the Comintern throughout the modern world swayed our destinies far more than the perfumes of Chanel.'*

The famous guests mentioned previously in *Seahorse* by former hotel staff are almost all from later years and not generally in the same glittering league as the Nancy Cunards, Agatha Christies or Princes of Wales that another *Art Deco* retreat, Burgh Island in Devon, can boast.

The Chanel story has more recently grown to become, if not an urban myth, then at least a seaside one. Writing in *The Independent* newspaper at the end of last year, Charles Nevin commented on '*those delightful nuggets of lore that I have never dared check for fear they might not be so*'. Nevin's top three nuggets were:

1. that Charles Dickens had considered naming Tiny Tim, Puny Pete
2. that a vicar had suggested to Charles Darwin that he publish a book about pigeons rather than *The Origin of Species*
3. that Coco Chanel used to pop over from the Cap d'Antibes in her flying boat to stay at the Midland Hotel, Morecambe.

The Chanel story has even spawned another parallel one of its own, as noted by Kathryn Flett writing in *The Observer* in July 1999. This time the visitor is Gloria Vanderbilt, her starting point Boston and her exotic mode of transport, a yacht. To add to the story's allure, she is summoned to a clandestine meeting at the hotel by Edward VIII. It is perhaps as well to follow Nevin's advice and let such sleeping stories lie, though the Midland's ability to weave myths around itself even in the recent past should never be under-estimated.

**Peter Wade**



*Stonemason Tony Gregory at work renovating the Midland's seahorses.*

## THE EMPIRE'S LAST SHOUT

It began on May 3<sup>rd</sup>. The King and Queen opened it and afterwards dined at the Atlantic Restaurant on caviar, Tay salmon, lamb, peas and potatoes. Paul Robeson, Eddie Cantor, Gracie Fields, Anna Neagle, John Buchan and Charles Laughton came to look at it. Herbert Rowse, Basil Spence and Thomas Tait designed buildings for it, the tallest of which rose 300 feet. Jack Hylton, Lew Stone, Henry Hall, Henry Wood, Adrian Boult and Thomas Beecham with their orchestras all performed in its 1500 seat unheated and temporary concert hall. Vera Lynn sang. Billy Butlin organised the amusement park. In the final of the football competition Celtic beat Everton by one goal in extra time. The vintage car rally attracted Albions, Argylls and Arrol Johnstons. Souvenir plates were by the Carlton and Paragon potteries. The modern statues of nubile young women in a state of nature shocked and offended some. It was seriously suggested in a letter to the *Evening Times* that the '*statues could be provided quite cheaply with little tartan kilts*' serving the purpose of decency and advertising Scotland, the writer concluding '*This is a country where nudity is not practicable.*' Throughout the six months of the event it certainly wasn't – the weather was appalling. Season tickets to see the statues, with or without miniskirts, and everything else cost one pound five shillings. Daily admission was just one shilling while on special days, if you were a school child or unemployed, admission was free. It did not open on Sundays because the Church of Scotland objected. Nevertheless, 12,593,000 people attended. It still made a loss though and the grumbling guarantors had to find three shillings and seven pence in the pound. The location was Bellahouston Park, Glasgow, the year was 1938 and the event – The Empire Exhibition.

Even today, seventy years later, the pavilions and buildings in contemporary photographs look amazingly up to date with their clean functional lines and absence of fussy ornamentation. Predominantly white surfaced, there were, however, a few in pastel colours and several with blue, ochre or pink panels. The building style, and layout of the exhibition site as a whole, owed much to the architect given overall design control. Thomas Tait was a convinced modernist who designed, among many other buildings, St Andrew's House in Edinburgh and the towers of Sydney Harbour Bridge. Many of the exhibition's pavilions were not much more than steel frameworks clad in asbestos panels but several were planned and built as permanent structures, including the Palace of Art, the Palace of Engineering and, in surprisingly traditional form, the South African Pavilion (the latter two were in fact relocated at the close of the exhibition). However, it was not an architectural or design exhibition as such. Its actual objectives were mostly economic – fostering empire trade and stimulating Scottish work and production. The organisers also saw it as a showcase to display the progress of the British Empire at home and overseas and, interestingly, given the political situation at the time, they also aimed to '*emphasise to the world the peaceful aspirations of the peoples of the British Empire.*'

The Tower of Empire (or Tait's Tower as it became known locally) dominated the exhibition site with its sheer verticality when much else emphasised horizontal lines. Essentially the tower was a steel framework containing electric lifts to take visitors up to the viewing platforms which had space for some 600 people, 300 feet above the ground. There were days, however, when there was not much to see because of the weather or when Glasgow was lost in an industrial smog. The structure weighed 3,200 tons, supported on concrete foundations reaching to a depth of 21 feet 6 inches. They are probably still there today but nothing remains of the tower. There were calls at the time for it to be retained but it was considered to be a hazard to aircraft approaching what was then Renfrew airport – and also perceived as a navigation landmark for enemy bombers if there was a war.

The modernist Palace of Art was one of the structures designed to be retained after the exhibition closed. During the exhibition it functioned as an art gallery, specialising in displaying the work of Scottish painters, such as Ramsay, Raeburn, Wilkie, McTaggart, Lavery, Hornel and E.A. Walton. Since then, the building has never been used for its intended purpose of accommodating the surplus of paintings held at Glasgow's premier gallery in the





*The Palace of Art at the 1938 Empire Exhibition*



*The Palace of Engineering at the 1938 Empire Exhibition*

Kelvingrove Museum. Over the ensuing years it has been altered, modernised and extended but is still there in Bellahouston Park and is still recognisably the Palace of Art. In pristine condition following a recent refurbishment the building now functions as a Centre for Excellence in Sport.

Another building designed to be permanent was the Palace of Engineering, the largest of the exhibition's structures and built by Sir William Arrol & Co. using 1,200 tons of steel. After the exhibition it was moved to Prestwick Airport where it became part of Scottish Aviation's factory repairing and servicing aircraft during World War Two and as a production base for the company's Pioneer and Twin Pioneer aircraft in the 1940s and 1950s. Since then it has continued in use as part of the aircraft industry. Public access is limited but the building appears to be in a sound state. Although clearly modified and extended it is still recognisable as 'The Palace' as pictured in old exhibition photographs.

The South African Pavilion was built in the style of a traditional Cape Dutch farmhouse. It was designed by the architect James Miller (78 at the time) and was notable for being out of tune with the rest of the structures in the exhibition which were built in a contemporary, functional style using the latest materials. Maybe Tait relented because Miller, besides being a distinguished architect, had also been in charge of the 1901 Kelvingrove Exhibition. The Pavilion was later dismantled and rebuilt at a former Nobel explosives and chemical works at Ardeer on the Ayrshire coast where it was used as a guesthouse for visitors to the plant and as a staff canteen. Now in a decayed state, it has been B listed by Historic Scotland.

When the exhibition closed most of its objectives had not been fulfilled but that was not the fault of the organisers – they were simply overtaken by worldwide events outside their control. In a final piece of entertainment three Hawker Hinds staged a mock attack and, having been caught in the searchlights, were driven off by artillery fire. The gates finally closed on October 29<sup>th</sup>, less than a year before the start of a war which would result in the beginning of the end of the empire the exhibition had been designed to celebrate.

But what of the buildings? Did they go on to have a lasting influence? Perhaps not in the sense that there was no pioneering, seminal design that opened the way for later architects to develop further – but they did show the direction in which modern architecture was travelling. For architects the war resulted in a design hiatus and many had to reach back to pre-war ideas before they could move forward again. The structures built for the Festival of Britain in 1951 are not markedly different from those of the Empire Exhibition thirteen years earlier.

Prior to the Empire Exhibition Glasgow had a sound track record of organising international exhibitions going back to 1881. All three previous events held in Kelvingrove Park had made a profit. The Empire Exhibition of 1938 was the exception and made a loss. The unrelenting rain and gusty winds played their part in depressing attendances by over a third from the organisers' projected 20 million. On the last Saturday of July the weather was so abominable that only 71,000 people turned up when over 200,000 were expected. On August 11<sup>th</sup> an awesome electrical storm resulted in severe flooding and some structural damage. On October 14<sup>th</sup> a 70 mph gale caused two huge glass windows in the western side of the Treetops Restaurant to cave in. During the six months of the exhibition 23.75 inches of rain fell, exceeding the norm for the period by a full five inches. However, on the final day the crowds came in vast numbers and over 364,000 people swarmed all over the site despite the terrible weather. The last three hours brought a torrential downpour. On the stroke of midnight, to the singing of *Auld Lang Syne* and the National Anthem, the Union flag was struck from Tait's Tower. The floodlights dimmed and died. The Empire Exhibition of 1938 was at an end.

**Mike Stone**

[Other pictures of the 1938 Empire Exhibition can be viewed on the Members' Area of the Friends' website]

## MORECAMBE TOWER (PART 2)

In 1912 one of the most famous names in Morecambe's entertainment history became manager of the Tower. Harold Rupert Vivian Addenbrooke (later Councillor and Alderman) moved to Morecambe from Scarborough where he had managed the Floral Hall in its opening season. At once he set about bringing the best entertainment he could afford to the resort; music hall stars such as Vesta Tilley, Little Tich, George Robey and Harry Tate all graced the stage of the Tower Theatre before the outbreak of World War 1.

The Great War itself in no way dampened enthusiasm for the entertainment on offer as the town became host to various army training camps, especially for the Bantam Corps and several others from Manchester, whose families were encouraged to visit the seaside to see their loved ones parade. There was also an influx of workers for the National Projectile Filling Factory (aka the munitions works) at White Lund, later severely damaged in a spectacular explosion in October 1917. Saturday night was the highlight of the week and at the Tower all could be assured of *'healthy entertainment without vulgarity and conducted in a most orderly manner'*. Sadly the war did see the end of the dream of completing the upper levels of the Tower – in fact, in 1917, the steel structure was dismantled so that the metal could be used for war purposes. T.W. Ward Ltd was responsible for the demolition and Morecambe lost its highest advertisement (the word TOWER had been picked out in lights at the top). The Visitor mourned the *'Passing of a Landmark'*



The close of the war saw the Tower Theatre play host to Dame Nellie Melba in a Sunday concert; a 'small' audience of only two thousand (largely due to the high ticket prices - 2s 4d up to 10s 6d) watched her sing seven songs ending with 'Home Sweet Home'. In December 1918 the Tower held a Victory Ball as part of Morecambe's Peace Celebrations and, after four years of darkness, the illuminations in the gardens resumed. Following the success of a repeat of these events, along with a Japanese fête in late August 1919, the Council decided that Morecambe should have a Carnival and Illuminations every September, based at the Tower. (The Illuminations lasted as a major attraction until the mid 1990s apart from a brief lull 1940-1948 because of World War 2 and later power rationing.)

During the 1920s, many shows premièred at the Tower and/or transferred to/from London theatres. The first touring ice-show opened here for a six-week run. An idea of the types of entertainment at that time can be drawn from this 1923 example. Florrie Forde topped the bill with appearances by Besses O'The Barn, Black Dyke Mills and Foden's Bands, Lilly Morris,

G.H. Elliott (the 'Chocolate Coloured Coon'), Leslie 'Binkie' Stuart ('Lily of Laguna & 'Little Dolly Daydream'), Hayden Coffin (turn of the century musicals' leading man), Harry Day's 'Rockets' and George Formby. Florrie Forde was a regular at the Tower, often accompanied by rising stars, such as Flanagan and Allen, from her London shows. At a presentation in honour of his retirement in December 1948, Mr. Addenbrooke recounted this anecdote....

*'Florrie Forde was a real trouper, one of the finest artistes who ever trod the stage. I remember paying her on the Saturday – we didn't trust them sufficiently to pay them on the Friday then – and I asked her how she would like her £100 fee paying. She replied "In postage stamps" !'*

Despite its continuing success, the Tower was put up for sale by auction in May 1925. The whole complex of indoor theatre, ballroom (reputed to be one of the country's finest), six licensed bars and four large cafés plus gardens with their own alfresco stage, dressing rooms, terrace and bars was bought by New Century Pictures to add to their two hundred other cinemas. A cinema/theatre was part of the modernisation of the premises at this time.

On 1<sup>st</sup> October 1928 (the same day that Morecambe and Heysham celebrated their amalgamation into one borough with a dinner for three hundred civic guests in the Tower Ballroom), the complex became part of Gaumont British although cinema remained only one part of the total entertainment offering. After refurbishment in 1931, the 1800-seater theatre screened the latest talkies at 8 pm every Sunday while putting on London musical comedies at other times. For the next quarter of a century, the ballroom, resplendent with Harold Addenbrooke's Mystic Carnival Lantern (aka Kaleidoscopic Globe), remained one of Morecambe's best-loved attractions, gaining the reputation as a 'respectable' venue, unlike some of the town's other dance-halls. Gradually the live shows in the theatre began to play a secondary role to the cinema operation, prompting major changes in 1934 at the Winter Gardens which then became the resort's leading variety theatre.

Coinciding with Harold Addenbrooke's retirement in 1948, Gaumont British became part of a larger cinema entertainment group known as Circuits Management Association Ltd and at Easter 1949 the 'tattered Tower' closed, to be re-opened at Whit as the 'gay and gorgeous Gaumont'. Following a takeover by the Rank Organisation and further modernisation in 1952, Diana Dors made an appearance at the opening of the Gaumont, 'Morecambe's Entertainment Centre'. Its pre-eminence was short-lived. The rise of television in the 1950s and competition from Morecambe's other cinemas led to falling attendances and eventual closure at the end of 1957.

An independent operator, Ernest Rolls, took over the building for the next two seasons with his famous 'Dancing Waters' but he moved to Llandudno in 1960 and, despite enquiries, no-one actually came forward to use the theatre. In April 1960 the Rank Organisation offered to lease the building to Morecambe Corporation for possible conversion to a bowling alley and conference centre but the costs involved were too high for the Council and it was deemed preferable to leave any development to private enterprise. The Tower was sold to two local business men who auctioned the contents over a two-day period before finally selling the building on to Shops and Store Development Ltd.

In November it was announced that the Tower would be demolished and the site used for a hotel or apartments. In fact no such development took place. After all traces of the Tower had disappeared they were replaced by the 'Morecambe Bowl', a building with a frontage of 140 feet but a mere height of fourteen feet. The craze for ten-pin bowling did not last long, although briefly revived in 1968. Plans were published in 1970 for a multi-storey conference hotel on the site but these came to nothing and the 'Bowl' was replaced by a bingo hall - a great contrast with the glamour that once was the Tower.

**Stephen Jones**