

SEAHORSE



Number 19

July 2008

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

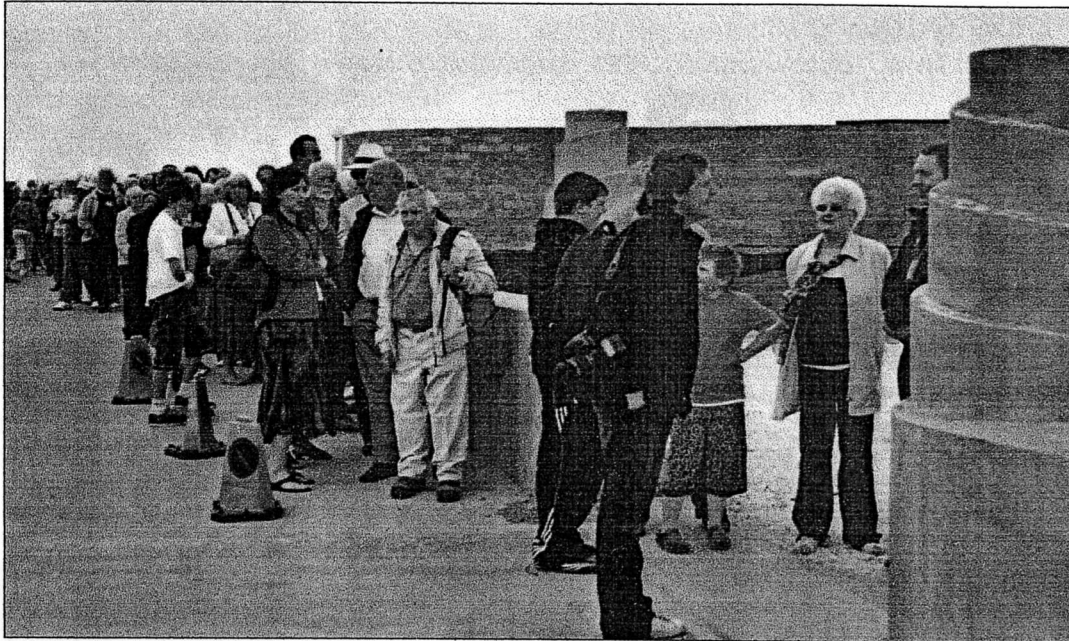
## MIDLAND HOTEL OPENS !

After three years of restoration work and over nine years of campaigning by the Friends, the Midland Hotel has re-opened its doors to the public. Thanks to all members, old and new, for your support. Well done to everyone!

As promised by Urban Splash, the Midland opened at 11am on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2008. Like hundreds of other people I went along to see for myself. By 9.15am there was a small queue headed by a lady determined to get in and revive old memories. Photographs were being taken and yes, there were still quite a few workmen buzzing around! Over the next hour the queue gradually grew and by 10.30am stretched back some hundred yards southwards along the pavement. Was crowd control required yet?

People had travelled from afar to be part of the first swell of folk inside the building. The lady was still in pole position on the starting grid. Everyone was in good cheer, even though they realised that shortly they would be in for a soaking as the weather began to deteriorate and the first spots of rain started to fall. The entrance to the car park was being manned by a member of staff who was chatting and laughing with the people waiting. Cars were slowing down in the road to look at the hotel and people were walking past gazing up at the building. There was a sense of expectancy in the air.

The queue must have been several hundred strong as 11am approached. Following my plea, the security man allowed me up to the entrance to take photographs as the doors were opened. Urban Splash staff held the queue back for a while and then it was like the January sales used to be when they were in January! Radio Lancashire was there getting people's views about the hotel and we (myself, Barry and Peter) were interviewed on behalf of the Friends. By now the heavens, as well as the Midland, had opened and everybody was becoming rather soggy. The queue was a sea of colourful umbrellas and waterproofs and seemed never ending as people continued to join it despite the weather. This hotel inspires such devotion.



An orderly queue forms along Marine Road waiting for the Midland to open.

After our interview with Radio Lancashire we repaired to Brucciani's for a coffee and to dry off. We later learnt that some 3000 visitors went inside the hotel during the day. Amazing!

Since its opening the Midland has experienced some teething troubles, which was to be expected. In hindsight it probably needed another couple of weeks to be ready but Urban Splash were committed to open on June 1<sup>st</sup> and kept to that date as promised. The main thing is that **THE MIDLAND IS OPEN** and that is what we have fought for. While there have been complaints, I have also met lots of people who have had a great time. The problem areas are being addressed and changes have already been made. Things are improving and the future looks bright, both for the Midland and Morecambe. We will continue to stand by this hotel now, just as we have done for the last nine years.

**Sue Thompson**

### **URBAN SPLASH PRESS RELEASE (extract)**

'The stunning *Art Deco* Midland Hotel in Morecambe Bay opened its doors to guests today (Sunday June 1<sup>st</sup>) following its complete refurbishment by award winning property developer Urban Splash.

Working with architects, Union North, restorative consultants Avanti Architects and drawing from its own experience of transforming other Listed and historically important buildings across the UK, Urban Splash has faithfully restored many of the original *Art Deco* features and added contemporary interventions and design solutions to bring the building back to life.

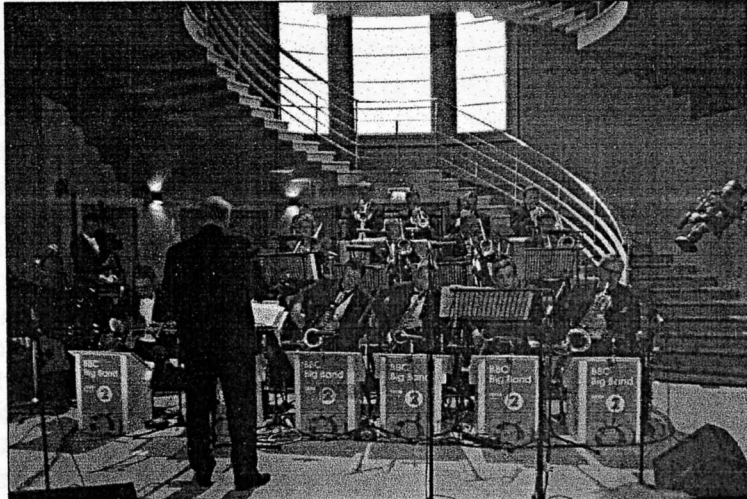
The redevelopment has been made possible thanks to the support of the Northwest Regional Development Agency, Lancaster City Council, Heritage Lottery Fund and English Heritage who, in addition to Urban Splash, have invested greatly in the Midland Hotel.

The result is a beautiful 44 bedroom hotel which overlooks the uninterrupted coastline of Morecambe Bay, offering fantastic views of the Lake District.'

## CULTURE AT THE MIDLAND

On Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> May, five days before its official opening, the Midland Hotel played host to the BBC and an invited audience of former employees, celebrities and special guests for a recording of BBC2's *Culture Show*. The programme was broadcast three weeks later and painted a very positive portrait of Morecambe - unlike a recent piece on Channel 4 News.

Opening with shots of Morecambe's traditional attractions - the promenade, beach and amusement arcades - the *Culture Show*'s architectural presenter Tom Dyckhoff said that the great British seaside resort was 'in a right old state' but that Morecambe was 'bravely defying the odds'. He said 'You can either do it the Blackpool way or (pointing at the Midland) this way.' Tracing the fortunes of the hotel from its heyday, through the years of decline and up to the present, he added: 'This is not just restoration, this is reinvention'.



*The BBC Big Band 'swings' in the hotel foyer.*

Inside the Midland the refurbished foyer looked like a stylish film set as the musicians of the BBC Big Band and vocalist Clare Teal entertained an enthusiastic audience with classics from the age of Swingtime. The session was recorded for two programmes of Radio Two's *Big Band Special* which were broadcast on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> June - providing more invaluable publicity for Morecambe. Highlight of the evening was the appearance of rising star Beth Rowley - a tiny lady who amazed everyone with the power of her voice.



*Beth Rowley stars at the Midland. Her CD 'Little Dreamer' is well worth a listen.*

For once it was nice to see a programme that didn't pander to the usual stereotypical (and frequently inaccurate) image of Morecambe as a down-at-heel resort but showed a town that was optimistic about its future and well worth a visit.

**Adapted from a Visitor article by Ingrid Kent. Photos by Barrie Marshall.**

## THEY MADE THE MIDLAND

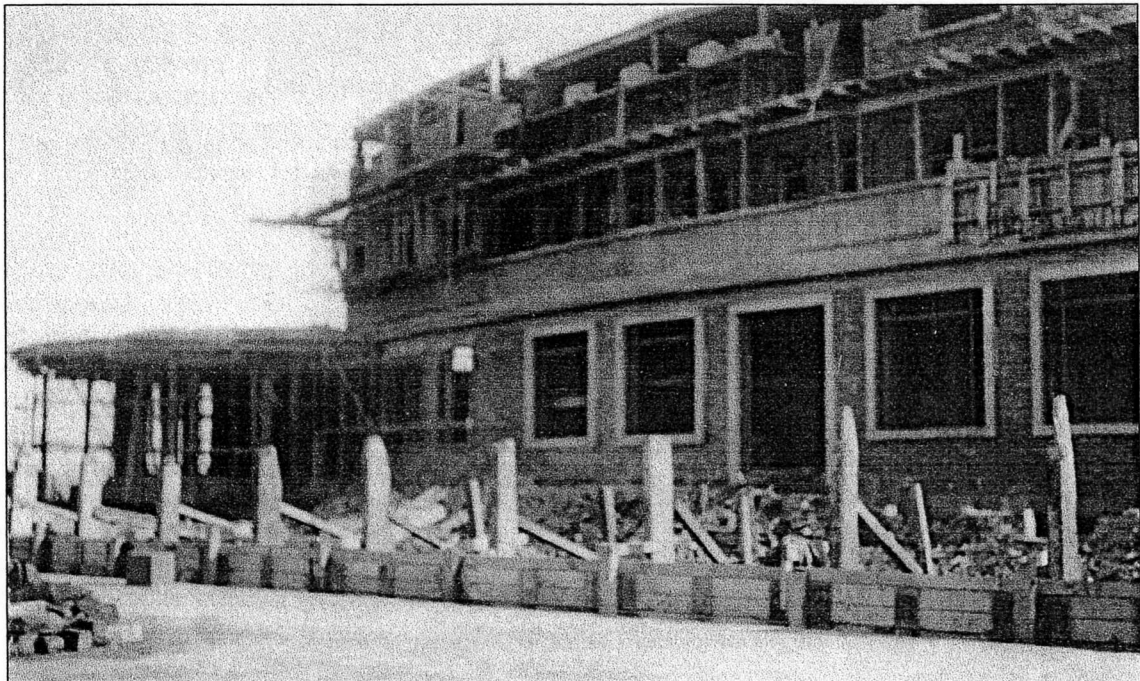
*Early issues of the newsletter included a series of articles about the people who helped create the Midland Hotel. One other person deserving of mention is...*

### **George Hicks : Building Manager**

My father, George Albert William Hicks, was born in Chesterfield in 1896 the son of a locomotive driver. On leaving school at the age of twelve he worked as a fireman on a steam crane and two years later became its driver. In 1918 he joined the Royal Artillery and spent most of the war as a wheelwright in France. On one occasion he was sent forward into 'no-man's land' to repair a wheel on a gun so that it could be retrieved. Whilst there a barrage opened up and he took cover in a pothole and was there for three days! When he got back to the line most of his company were dead.

After the war he joined the firm of Humphreys of Knightsbridge as a foreman and rose to become a Superintendent of Works (Building Manager). He worked on Whyteleys Department Store in Kensington first, while living in Woolwich, and each day took the tram for half the journey and walked the other half. In 1929 he was appointed Building Manager for the construction of a ten-storey office block at Grosvenor Gardens, Victoria which had been designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens. This was followed by the Midland Hotel in Morecambe for which Humphreys were the main contractors.

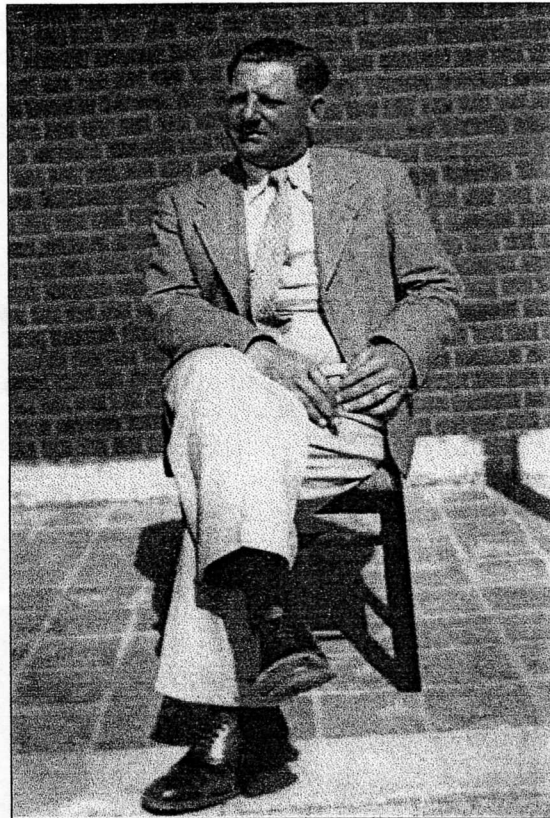
By that time he had bought a house in Beckenham, Kent but during the building of the Midland he lived in a flat near the sea front in Morecambe with his wife and young son. As Humphreys 'man on site' he was responsible for overseeing construction work and liaising with all the sub-contractors. Two of his brothers – a carpenter and a bricklayer – were also employed on the building. One eventually married a local girl while the other was, for a time, a boyfriend of Thora Hird. As a senior member of the firm, my father was allowed to bid for sections of the work for which, in effect, he appointed the sub-contractor. He bid for the demolition of the old Victorian hotel (which was pulled down a couple of months before the completion of its replacement) and also bid for the asphalt work.



*Photograph by George Hicks taken in early 1933 showing building work in progress on the seaward side of the Midland Hotel.*

After the Midland Hotel contract Humphreys was short of work due to the Depression and put all staff on half salary. However, the firm managed to acquire a commission in Iraq and my father agreed to go there for three years, my mother and two brothers remaining in the UK. On his return in 1937 he continued to work for Humphreys, notably on the construction of Burtonwood aerodrome near Warrington. During World War Two he joined the firm of Costains and returned to the Middle East, to Iran in the Persian Gulf, to work on an RAF aerodrome which was used to protect the oil installations. Back in this country 18 months later he helped supervise the construction of Mulberry Harbours which were deployed in the D-Day landings.

In 1949, still employed by Costain, he began work on the Festival of Britain site. Designed to be opened two years later to mark the centenary of the Great Exhibition of 1851, the Festival was to be a celebration of Britain and British achievement. There were two building contracts for the site, split by the railway. My father ran the contract for Costain which included construction of the Dome of Discovery (1951's equivalent of the Millennium Dome) and the iconic Skylon. He worked long hours on the project – in fact we hardly saw him for those two years – a commitment which was recognised by the award of the British Empire Medal. His later contracts were in and around London, the last two in Bromley and Beckenham where he lived. He finally retired in September 1964 but sadly did not enjoy a long retirement, dying the following April.



*George Hicks (1896 – 1965)*

My father was a good organiser who could handle men. Those who worked for him said he was fair but he insisted on everything being done correctly. Some of his men worked for him for over 20 years and would follow him from contract to contract. He was technically very able and could generally bring a job to conclusion on time and showing a profit which, not surprisingly, made him popular with his employers.

**Beverley Hicks**

## COOKHAM'S OTHER ARTIST

Most people associate Cookham with the artist Stanley Spencer but the Buckinghamshire village was also home to Frank Sherwin, one of the country's most distinguished designers of railway posters and carriage prints. He came to live in Cookham in 1940 and stayed there for the rest of his life, apart from a period in World War Two when he worked for the Air Ministry on the camouflage of RAF bases in East Anglia.

Frank Sherwin was born in Derby in 1896 and attended the Art School there before service in the First World War. On demobilisation he studied at Heatherleys Art School in London and gradually became established as a freelance artist, working particularly for the main railway companies. In 1936 he married fellow artist Marjorie Fry and the couple lived in Hampstead until the outbreak of the war. Although he was not as well known as Stanley Spencer, Frank Sherwin's work was probably seen by more people, his scenic travel posters being displayed in trains and on railway stations throughout the country. As well as designing posters, he was also a gifted watercolour artist, notably of marine subjects, and gained a reputation for his skill in capturing the appearance of water. He exhibited at the Royal Academy and in 1951 was elected member of the Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolour. Membership of the Royal Society of Marine Artists followed in 1967.

During his long life (he died in 1986 aged 90) Frank Sherwin produced designs which were reproduced as calendars, cards and book jackets, while his watercolours (and oils) included subjects from all over Britain as well as parts of Europe, especially France and Belgium. However, it is probably for his railway posters that he will be best remembered. In 1949 he wrote a series of articles for *The Artist* magazine, in one of which he attempted 'to give as much practical advice as possible on producing a poster to order.' In it he explained the process of creating a poster from commission to finished product. An abridged account is given below.

'It usually starts in the office of the company which is commissioning the advertisement where the requirements are specified and the artist is asked for a rough sketch to show his interpretation of the idea. In the case of a poster advertising a holiday resort or district, the artist will visit the place to make his preliminary sketches and to get a general idea of the atmosphere and surroundings. I often make two or three sketches in pencil on the spot of different aspects, showing the place to its best advantage, and then go back to my hotel bedroom and try composing each one to suit the correct poster size. This often necessitates taking many liberties with the place, eliminating undesirable features and emphasising others, with an eye to making an attractive poster.

I often deliberately sketch from as high an eye level as possible in order to give prominence to, say, a promenade or beach, and so to reduce the sky to a narrow strip [as in the Morecambe and Heysham poster]. This gives more scope in making interesting groups of small figures or boats. I usually execute my colour sketch on a water colour board about 10" x 6" for the double-royal size, roughing in the composition, indicating the placing of figures and allowing a panel at the bottom of about a fifth of the length [for lettering]. I mix in saucers a quantity of each of the eight colours I have decided to use, bearing in mind that at least two of these should be strong and dark in order to give a good contrast.

After the rough has been approved, I proceed with the full size finished design. Over a backing of plyboard I strain a thickish cartridge paper. In pencil I divide my rough sketch into eight squares, then do the same on a sheet of rough paper the full size of the poster, and sketch in the design with a 3B pencil, taking one square at a time. With the aid of my pencil sketches, photographs and any studies which I think will be useful, I make a fairly complete drawing in pencil of the poster to its correct size. I then pin over this a piece of stout tracing paper and make a tracing with a soft pencil. I now turn this over and draw over all the lines in reverse with a 3B pencil. This tracing I pin down firmly on to my prepared board, and with the handle of a palette knife I rub the tracing down. When finished I have a perfectly clean and well defined outline of my poster which is ready for painting.

