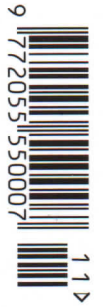


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Luxury hotel the Boulevard opens at Blackpool Pleasure Beach

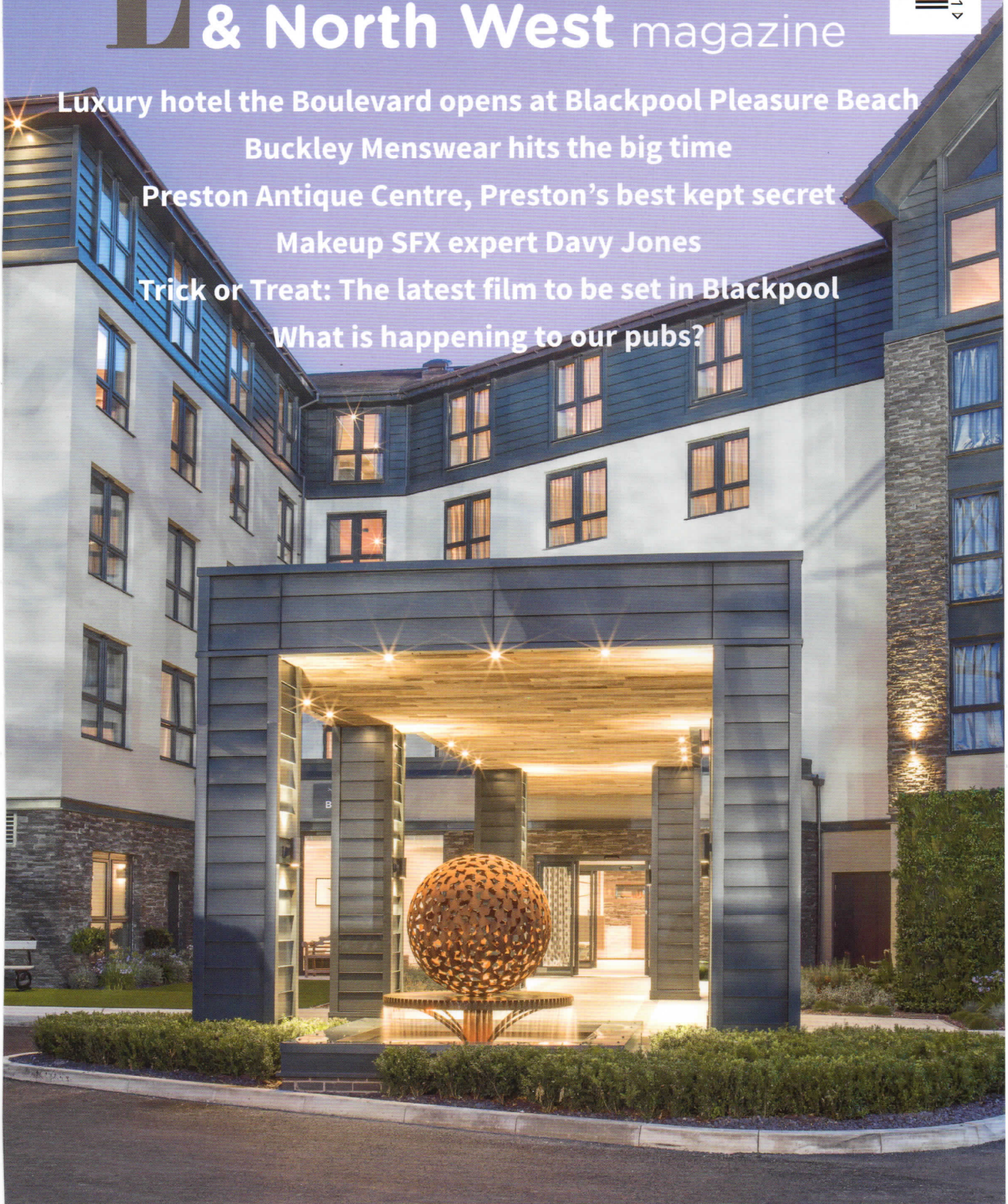
Buckley Menswear hits the big time

Preston Antique Centre, Preston's best kept secret

Makeup SFX expert Davy Jones

Trick or Treat: The latest film to be set in Blackpool

What is happening to our pubs?



WHAT IS HAPPENING TO OUR PUBS?

By Andrew Harris



The Withy Trees pub in Preston has closed after 160 years. The owner Greene King is selling the property.

The loss of pubs in the UK is a national crisis. There were about 75,000 pubs in the 1970s but they began closing and we only had about 50,000 by 2008. Since then we have lost a further 22% - 11,000 pubs – so fewer than 39,000 remained by 2018. Pubs continue to close – often permanently – at an average rate of 18 a week although some have been converted to meet other community needs such as child care or religious centres. In theory we could have no pubs left by about the year 2040 but the trend is complicated as many pubs are doing well as others close. So why do some succeed when others fail and does it matter?

Pubs fulfil many purposes. They can be community hubs, the preferred

meeting place for many, a refuge for the lonely, a source of affordable meals and employment for about 450,000 people. But this last figure is confusing as small pubs - employing 5 people on average - are closing and larger pubs – employing an average of 8 people - are thriving. In the 10 years to 2018 employment in rural pubs increased by 17% but urban pubs increased by only 4%.

So how are we doing in our region? In round figures we have about 5,000 pubs and an astonishing 238 breweries which together employ about 100,000 people. According to the British Beer and Pub Association (BBPA) the food offering in pubs – which accounts for the majority of their earnings – has been transformed and continues to

grow. Many pubs now offer a ‘wonderful range of cuisine from across the globe to help push footfall’. In response to high street coffee stores many pubs also boast state-of-the-art coffee machines and open earlier to serve breakfast – tapping into the rise in café culture. These trends are complemented by pubs moving on from drinking and eating to appealing to those attracted by major sporting events like the FIFA and Rugby World Cups, music nights - with live bands – pub quizzes and theme nights. Many pubs are adapting to the changing wishes of a changing clientele. Perhaps that is what distinguishes the winners from the losers?

The pub industry has faced a



The Royal Garrison pub couldn't attract other customers when few soldiers remained.

nearly 600,000 premises but few broke the rules. It was a mixed blessing: bad for traditional pubs but good for others which became much more family friendly. Everybody became more healthy!

- The National Minimum Wage was introduced in 1998 but rebranded as the National Living Wage in 2016. On the one hand it is a safeguard against exploitative employers on the other is a further burden for hard-pressed publicans to cope with. From April 2019 it is £8.21 an hour for employees 25 and over, £7.70 for those aged 21-24, £6.15 for 18-20 year-olds and £4.35 for under-18s. The rate for apprentices is £3.90. It is undoubtedly fair and necessary but an added expense for pubs.

- In recent years pubs have struggled to survive a triple whammy of high beer duty, rapidly rising Business Rates and VAT. As a result, a third of the cost of a pint is now made up of various taxes. The Campaign for Real Ale – CAMRA – has appealed to government to stop increasing the impact of taxes on pubs which contribute more than £23 billion to the UK economy each year. CAMRA's National Chairman Jackie Parker says *"As taxes (on pubs) continue to rise more people are choosing to drink at home and, as a consequence, pubs are closing down. It's a vicious cycle."* CAMRA also argues that 'Pubs provide a wealth of social benefits to individuals and communities – bringing people together and making them happier, better connected and more trusting.' As the BBPA chief executive points out later *"In the UK beer duty is 11 times higher than it is in Germany and we pay the third highest beer duty in Europe. It means 46 pence is paid in beer duty on a typical pint."*

- Since 2000 the amount of beer



The Bridge Inn by the Ribble became a nursery after it closed.

fearsome range of threats and changes over the last 50 years. From 1967 there have been eight –

- The 1966 Road Traffic Bill introduced the limit of 80mg per 100 millilitres of blood which was enforced by the new breathalysers the following year. The priority has to be road safety but this change had a negative impact on rural and remote pubs.

- Smoking was banned in all enclosed public spaces – like pubs – from the 1st July 2007. The move was controversial at the time but the country soon fell into line. In the first 18 months local government officers inspected



Former pubs provide excellent accommodation for uses like the Tinkerbells Day Nursery.



The little-used John O'Gaunt pub better serves the community as another nursery.

purchased in supermarkets has increased by 27%! The affordability of beer in supermarkets and off-licences has risen by 188% since 1987, according to a study by the Institute of Alcohol Studies or IAS. Measuring affordability using an index which adjusts prices for inflation and income growth, the IAS reports that the affordability of wine and spirits has gone up by 131%. Prices in pubs have also had to rise – an average pub price for a pint of draught lager has risen 36% since 2007 to £3.58 in 2017. But our price compare well with the rest of the UK. See later.

- Pubs have faced increasing competition from restaurants. From 63,368 in 2008 they increased to 86,630 in 2017 with many competing directly with the increasing number of 'Dining Pubs' – the only way many pubs can remain viable.

- In recent years there has been a huge increase in the number of home delivery offers such as Home Chef, Plated, Sun Basket, HelloFresh, Martha and Marley Spoon, Deliveroo, Blue



The non-food Duke of Wellington pub thrives despite all the trends.

Apron, Terra's Kitchen, Green Chef, Purple Carrot, Amazon Fresh and Peach Dish –plus many local pizza and fish and chip outlets. They are the preferred alternative for many.

- All human activities are affected by social trends which are often hard to explain. According to the Office for National statistics (ONS) the number of adults who say they drink alcohol is

FACTORS WHICH AFFECT PUBS



drink' on their heaviest drinking day. The number of adult men drinking between 3 and 6 pints of alcohol on their heaviest drinking day fell from 40% to 33% since 2006. Change indeed – but pubs are about more than alcohol. There is evidence that many young people prefer other ways of meeting than going to a pub.

If all the pubs in the UK were spread evenly – each serving catchment areas of the same population size – there would be 4,200 in our region. As it is there are more than 5,000 pubs in the north west which suggest that either we use pubs more than other regions or we are in for many more closures. One factor is that the price of a pint of beer varies – the most expensive is more than double the price of the cheapest. The average price in London is £5.19 whilst Oxford, Edinburgh, Winchester and Brighton are in the range £4.57 to £4.24 per pint. In our region average prices per pint are just £3.93 in Manchester, £3.45 in Liverpool, £3.02 in Preston, £3.00 in Chester, £2.90 in Salford and £2.80 in Lancaster with Carlisle enjoying the cheapest pint in the UK at £2.35. All figures are averages for the local area. What is good for the customer, however, is less good for the viability of our pubs.

The trend is for larger pubs to be run very professionally. The best are often privately owned and operated or run by experienced companies like Ember Inns, Vintage Inns or Wetherspoons. There are fewer brewery operators like Greene King but many of the worst pubs are owned by pub-owning companies – known as pubcos – who are property companies with little or no experience of how to provide and market their food and drink. Most successful pubs are now called Dining Pubs which are half way to being restaurants.

Traditional pubs - serving beer, wine and spirits only - survive in larger city and town centres but there are exceptions. The Duke of Wellington pub in the Ashton-on-Ribble suburb of Preston is not on a main road but is almost hidden in the midst of the community it serves. Landlady Pauline serves no food but runs a thriving pub where customers can meet each other, sit outside on sunny days or watch football, play snooker, enjoy live performances and join quizzes inside. The pub is also the base for local organisations like the Fishing Club.



The Inn at Whitewell in Lancashire is the national Pub of the Year 2020.

at its lowest level since surveys began in 2005. In 2016, 57% of British adults said they drank alcohol in the preceding week but since 2005 there has been a 2% increase in the number

of adults who don't drink alcohol at all. Surprisingly, young people are least likely to have drunk alcohol with 27% describing themselves as teetotal. But this age group are most likely to 'binge



The wonderful Assheton Arms in Lancashire is the national Dining Pub of the Year 2020.



Some pubs are legendary. The Fishermen's Rest recalls 1886.

Unfortunately traditional pubs with such pro-active management are now rare. Your columnist enjoyed his visit - so congratulations, Pauline!

The 2020 edition of the Good Pub

Guide has just been published and it pays handsome compliments to our region. There are 366 entries for the north west. 74 are main entries with a further 292 given the less exciting introduction of 'Also Worth a Visit'.

The town of Clitheroe is surrounded by no fewer than 5 pubs which are distinguished by being main entries – definitely the place for pub-lovers to live! The national PUB OF THE YEAR 2020 is the Inn at Whitewell which is near Clitheroe and described as 'Rather a grand old house with smartly pubby atmosphere, top quality food, exceptional wine list, real ales and professional, friendly service and luxury bedrooms'.

Another winner – in Downham near Clitheroe – is the Assheton Arms which is named as the national DINING PUB OF THE YEAR 2020. It is described as a traditional country inn with plenty of dining and drinking space, a friendly welcome, several real ales and creative food plus bedrooms. This pub is busy and popular and is the best of the best – but approach it via Clitheroe/Chatburn rather than Worston as the latter road is single track and difficult.

The Good Pub Guide is a splendid publication but there are strange omissions –

- The Fishermen's Rest in Birkdale is hugely successful and merits a main



The Fishermen's Rest in Birkdale is a busy and successful pub with history.

entry. The name recalls the loss of the ship Mexico in the Ribble Estuary on the 9th December 1886 when the crew were saved but the RNLI lost 27 lifeboatmen – its worst ever disaster. Nowadays its food and drinks offer is outstanding and evidenced by being consistently busy. Reserving a table is recommended.

- The Wheatsheaf in Woodplumpton north of Preston shows another way to serve the community. It is an unpretentious village pub but following the closure of a local post office it offers this service on Tuesdays and Thursdays each week which is a lifeline for many local people. More pubs could do this.

The challenges faced by British pubs are best described by Brigid Simmonds who is chief executive of the British Beer and Pub Association –

“The number of pubs in the UK is still falling, with pubs facing increasing and considerable tax pressures from a range of sources: particularly high beer duty, unfair business rates and VAT. This is deeply concerning because pubs are a great British institution and are often the social hub of their community.



What pubs should be providing in the future.

In the UK beer duty is 11 times higher than it is in Germany and we pay the third highest beer duty in Europe overall. It means that on a typical pint we pay 46 pence in beer duty. Cutting beer duty is therefore one of the best ways of helping pubs and in turn

pubgoers because when tax goes up footfall falls. It is why we are supporting the www.longivethelocal.pub campaign which is calling on the Chancellor to cut beer tax.

Furthermore, the current business rates



The Wheatsheaf at Woodplumpton which is also a part-time Post Office.



More pubs could do this. Only 3 hours a week meets the needs of many.

system is obsolete and needs a complete overhaul. Pubs are paying 2.8% of the entire business rates bill, despite accounting for just 0.5% of business turnover. That is grossly unfair."

Our pubs are reducing in number but improving and the distinction between pubs and restaurants is becoming blurred. The best of them are outstanding but they need urgent government help to lighten the tax burden and reform unfair Business Rates as we proposed in the City Centres article in our September edition. Pubs are a very British concept worth keeping but we must remember the adage - use it or lose it!



Andrew E. Harris gratefully acknowledges the help provided by the British

Beer and Pub Association, the Campaign for Real Ale and the Office for National Statistics in the preparation of this article. The 'Factors Which Affect Pubs' artwork was provided by David Bridge of Southport. For past topics visit www.andrewharris.co.uk