Lancashire, Where Women Die of Love

Charles Nevin

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LANCASHIRE, WHERE WOMEN DIE OF LOVE

Charles Nevin

EDINBURGH AND LONDON

For Jack and Jean Nevin, and all Lancastrians everywhere, whether native, adopted or just by inclination.

Contents

INTRODUCTION

The County of Romance

Lancashire. Beyond the Trent, up a bit, left-hand side. Cotton and coal and clogs and caps and chimneys and chippies and all the rest of it: people who speak as they find, but friendly with it, come in, sit down and have a cup of tea, love, life's as hard as my vowels. Rains a lot, too.

I was born in Lancashire. I can do a bit of that: dark winter afternoons, the coughing on the top deck, the smell of damp gaberdine mixing with the tobacco and whatever particular piece of pungency was coming out of the chimneys that day, the yellow in the lamplight; or, if you prefer, I can give you the dust hanging in a summer's day, the smuts on the privets.

Smuts on the privets! There's hard. No, we weren't poor; in fact, we were rather well off. My father had a string of grocery shops, mostly passed down from his father, son of a man from Louth who left 'because my father wouldn't let me keep racehorses'. An Irish joke. St Helens, where he settled, was a good walk from Liverpool, where the boat came in. My mother, daughter of another self-made man, came, by way of the War, from London, a sparrow's hop from the East End; but she somehow found an altogether worse grime and uncouthness in south-west Lancashire, and worked very hard on our vowels.

I left, as you do, although I really hadn’t joined very much, and went to London, change at Oxbridge, holding on to a bit of stage Northernness for distinction and identification purposes among the metropolitan middle classes.

We who play this game keep a close eye on our references. We know what is expected of us. Northerners should display two principal characteristics: no-nonsense, down-to-earth, spade-a-spadery, resolutely unimpressed by any fancy modishness; and that famously droll sense of humour, deemed essential to survive the accident, and accent, of birth.

The humour bit is interesting and crucial to the really important Northern distinction, easily grasped but so often ignored by outsiders: that between Lancashire and Yorkshire. (The North-east? Sui generis. North-easterners, not Northerners, fetching folk, with an affecting faith in the ability of their quaint accent to lend an intrinsic wit, wisdom and interest to anything they might care to say. And have you ever seen one in an overcoat? Exactly. Cumbria? Much of it used to be in Lancashire; most of it should have been. I should also add that anywhere south of Lancashire and Yorkshire is in the Midlands.)

I tell you, Lancashire and Yorkshire is the thing. The Pennines: a boundary far more significant than the Trent. On the one side lives a warm and whimsical race, ever ready to chuckle, even laugh, in the face of the sheer ridiculousness of life; on the other, a sad and surly people, unable to understand why they haven’t been let in on the joke.

Unable to understand, too, why their importance, so clear, obvious and evident to them, remains so stubbornly unrecognised by everyone else. Little wonder that they feel so impelled to insist upon it, very loudly and very regularly. And to trumpet their virtues, which have so similarly failed to travel. Cast your eye over this summary, contained in the old Yorkshire rhyme:

You must hear all; you must say nothing.
You must sup all; you must pay nothing.
And if ever you do anything for nothing
Do it for yourself.

Hmm. My purpose, though, is not to judge, but to distinguish: to beg you not to confuse them with us; to rescue Lancashire lightness and wit from the smothering gloom that has fallen upon it from over there. And they will thank me for it: they've never liked us, you know. J.B. Priestley, from Bradford, of course, thought us noisy, frivolous spendthrifts, and joined in the general headshaking at our 'annual goings on' in Blackpool. They didn't call him Jolly Jack for nothing. He was a professional Yorkshireman, but, as Paul Routledge, the estimable political commentator and biographer, also from over there, has put it: 'Have you ever heard of an amateur Yorkshireman?' Consider this list: Arthur Scargill, Roy Hattersley, Michael Parkinson, Fred Trueman, Geoffrey Boycott, Alan Titchmarsh, David Blunkett. And now this one: George Formby, Gracie Fields, Stan Laurel, Frank Randle, Robb Wilton, Tommy Handley, Ken Dodd, Les Dawson, Eric Morecambe, Victoria Wood, Steve Coogan, Johnny Vegas, Caroline Aherne, Peter Kay. It is an essential truth that comics come from Lancashire and don't come from Yorkshire. Forget the ten famous Belgians, ask a Yorkshireman to name a famous Yorkshire comic. Actually, as it happens, Frankie Howerd was born in York, but I think we'll let that pass. And Ernie Wise.

Why is this? Well, I have tended to toy with the Scandinavian influence on the east and the Celtic influence on the west, but it is careful toying, as my wife is half-Norwegian. And then, not long ago, I came upon a guidebook to Lancashire written by Walter Greenwood, author of the classic Lancs romance *Love on the Dole*. It was Walter who provided that old Yorkshire rhyme. Here he is on the difference:

> These two great counties, as every schoolboy knows, are divided by the Pennines, the backbone of old England. Yorkshire faces the full blast of the easterly wind which may account for the Yorkshire character … [whereas] The boisterous wind that buffets the land of the Red Rose is born in the tumbling wastes of the Atlantic. A wild, warm, amorous wind wenching with fat clouds and leaving them big with rain of which they deliver themselves on the Pennines' westerly slopes.

Terrific, Walter, thank you. On the one side, a land exposed, under attack from the elements and whatever else Europe can hurl at it; on the other, even the wind is more fun. No wonder we're different. Very different. I also recommend A.J.P. Taylor's *Essays in English History*, and in particular the one on Manchester, which has a fascinating excursion into Lancashire and Lancashireness. He agreed about the Pennines, and the wind:

> Cultivated Englishmen who never go further than Stratford-on-Avon or perhaps Lichfield regard all 'the North' as one in character and scenery – hard, bleak, rugged. Yorkshiremen are hard all right – living in stone houses and sharpened by the east wind. But … Lancashire people are the very opposite from those in Yorkshire. This is the land of the south-west wind, bringing an atmosphere that is always blurred and usually gentle.

The finest, though, is yet to come. Taylor had read *Le Lys dans la vallée* by Honoré de Balzac, in which the hero, Félix de Vandenesse, is seduced by the beautiful Lady Arabella Dudley, a Lancastrian, who tells him that Lancashire is 'the county where women die of love'. Well. The county where women die of love! That is something, is it not? Can Surrey, Sussex, Gloucestershire, Shropshire or even Essex make such a boast?

It is true that Balzac's authority on England, Sarah Lovell, his lover, came from Bath; and that, in the book, Lady Arabella does not die of love, despite being spurned by Félix: these, though, are minor quibbles. Taylor himself thought Lancashire women more likely to say, 'Come on, lad, let's get it over,' but then he was a bit dry, even though he came from Birkdale. He is better on the whimsicality of

the Lancastrian male, that talent for not taking things too terribly seriously evidenced by all those comics cited above, which he blames on the benign and blurring breeze. His father, he wrote, was incapable of going out of the house without coming back with some fantastic tale of what had happened to him. This chimed with my own father, who, while not a ‘romancer’, as he called people like Alan’s dad, certainly had his whimsical side.

His account of service life between 1939 and 1945, for example, was not a routine one, despite an unswerving admiration for Churchill and ‘Monty’, and distinguished service in Egypt and Europe. The only shot of any significance he claimed to have fired, for example, seemed to have gone through a wall at the Rose and Crown, Colchester, nearly killing an American officer in the next bedroom. Otherwise, by his account, he managed to rise quite peaceably from private to major in the Royal Army Service Corps (Run Away Someone’s Coming, as he loved to put it) because his superiors decided, rightly as it turned out, that a Lancashire grocer would be rather better at supplying the Eighth Army than any of their regular chaps. The high-ups, he said, seemed to think a Lancashire accent the outward sign of an inward trustworthiness. This belief proved particularly useful during their visits to his depots, which tended to involve groups of men moving the same stock to different points on the inspection route to disguise irregularities (not of his making, I stress). And he never did get to go back to the Western Desert to find all that sugar they had stored there, under the sand, away from Rommel, and which, he claimed, seeing as it was uncontaminated by Hiroshima, would now be worth a bloody fortune, if he could remember where he put it.

His memories of all this, including the Indian Army CO sitting down to lunch in a tent in the middle of the desert and sending the plates back because they hadn’t been warmed, would more often than not lead to the set piece of

his war time: the embarkation from North Africa of 500 Italian prisoners of war followed by their immediate disembarkation and re-embarkation when he mistakenly counted only 499. I can see him now, hugging his small but generously sized self over this, feet up, whisky in hand, and hear his giggling exclamation at the daftness of it all: ‘Oooh, bloody hell!’, or, as he elided it, ‘Oooh, bloody’ell!’

Whimsical, you see. Very whimsical, Lancashire. Where else, for example, would a bull actually find its way into a china shop? Lancaster. Where else, for another, would a man end a 12-hour siege after police gave in to his one demand, an egg and mayonnaise sandwich? Blackpool. The 68-year-old pensioner caught breaking the speed limit four times in three days? Accrington. Three times World Salsa Champion? Southport. Australian rugby Test centre collapses with sunstroke? Wigan. Lord Lucan traced to Goa? No, it was a banjo-player from St Helens called Barry. Exactly. And always so. Something in the water as well as the wind, perhaps. And wherever you go. I was in Bury not long ago, admiring the town’s striking Whitehead Clock Tower, which bears the legend about time and tide waiting for no man, and features, high up, a life-size bronze figure of fleeting Time. And as I looked, I noticed that someone had climbed up and neatly hung a pair of trainers on the figure’s arm.

What I’d like to do is explore the source, the spring of this whimsy, and sift the stories that flow from it: stories of lost lands and dreams and laughter and kings and weavers, including the top hand, the Bard himself.

Indeed. Shakespeare spent much time in Lancs, at Hoghton Tower, in the service of the Hoghtons, ready to write, drawing his inspiration. It must have been at Hoghton that Will found his Lancashire-like passion for abroad, that sympathy for sunshine and warm earth and exotic passions that touches the people of this land as surely as its rain (which is probably why).

Go on, sneer: that will account for Benidorm and Tenerife. But, consider: there is a Lancashire toreador, Frank Evans, a kitchen-fitter from Salford. It was also long the habit around Barrow to name children Ferdinando in tribute to the doomed, romantic fifth Earl of Derby. Plato was a popular choice, too. And, as it happens, in a whimsical gesture of fellow feeling, the Greeks offered their throne to a later Earl of Derby, the nineteenth-century prime minister and translator of the *Iliad*. He turned it down, of course, preferring, as Disraeli put it, 'Lancashire to the Attic Plains'. And who should blame him? Another version has the Greeks bearing their gift to his son, Lord Stanley, provoking the response, 'Don't they know I'm going to be the Earl of Derby?'

Balzac obviously sensed these affinities and fancies. Stand at Hoghton Tower, looking west, and you will see that other great erection: Blackpool! Has there ever been a more breathtaking monument to whimsy and romance, this homage by the Irish Sea to Monsieur Eiffel and La Belle France? And the compliment is returned: further south, down the coast, is Southport, where the youthful, pre-imperial Napoleon III found inspiration for his new Paris.

So why should this not be the county where women die of love? After all, did Jung not have a famous dream that Liverpool was the pool of life? He did. And while we're dealing in deep thought and this great county's international influence, can it really be mere coincidence that Frank Zappa and Captain Beefheart grew up in the small town of Lancaster in the Californian desert?

You should know, too, that, according to the Ordnance Survey, the exact centre of Great Britain, taking into account the mainland and the 401 islands, lies in Lancashire, just near Dunsop Bridge, a charming place, cupped by the gently grand green hills of Bowland, watered by the sweet Hodder and the stream that lends it its name.

Ignore rival claimants and desperate tourist boards: Lancashire is The True Heart of Britain.

I do not say that there can be no seriousness here. There weren't that many laughs, on the whole, during the Industrial Revolution. And whimsy does have its sober moments. How else would you describe the decision to turn Manchester into a seaport by building a canal 35 miles long, 120 feet wide and 28 feet deep? Or, indeed, the decision of the Lancashire cotton workers to support Abraham Lincoln's fight against slavery despite his blockade of the South's cotton, the blockade which had thrown them out of work? Lincoln called this 'an instance of sublime Christian heroism which has not been surpassed in any age or in any country'. Well, he would, wouldn't he? But I'm pushed to find any matching acts of such, well, high-minded gormlessness. It strikes me as a bit like having George Formby in charge of foreign policy, and rather splendid.

Anyway, having thought about all this, it seemed to me that, even though the mines and the mills had gone, there was still some digging and spinning left to do: I wanted to see if the County of Romance was still there, whether the Spring of Whimsy had survived, and if women could still die of love; to find out if Paris really was based on Southport and whether Lancastrians were still named after Ferdinando. I wanted to look for the Grail near Ince, to dance in the Tower Ballroom, experience longing in Liverpool and wistfulness in Oldham, and convince you of the truth and beauty of rugby league; go bullfighting from Salford; briefly encounter Carnforth; and play Earsy, Kneesy, Nosey in Wigan. And, perhaps, too, Walter Greenwood's dream had come true, and boys were fishing again in the Irwell, a river which, someone once told me, 'You don't fall in twice'. Coming?

Chapter One

Vive La Blackpool!

Chips, Casinos, and Cross-dressing

> Of course, Lancashire is quite a place – with the best country in the world to my mind, and the nicest people … The men are independent without being aggressive: tolerant, affectionate, sentimental – almost mawkish. Balzac describes Lancashire as 'the county where women die of love'. I think this very unlikely. I have always assumed, though with little first-hand experience, that Lancashire women are as brisk and businesslike in lovemaking as in everything else. The men provide the romantic atmosphere. It delights them to imagine that the women die of love. In reality a Lancashire woman would reply: 'Come on, lad. Let's get it over!'
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> *A.J.P. Taylor, Essays in English History*

On the platform at Blackpool North, Claire was wearing a plastic tiara. Claire was a management consultant in London, but she was also from Blackburn and had brought her London friends to Blackpool for her hen party, to show them how these things were done properly, in Lancs. Her fiancé was from Yorkshire and, with a typically eastern lack of imagination, was having his stag party in Paris. Still, at least it has a tower. I asked Claire if she knew that Lancashire was the county where women died of love. 'I thought it was from the cold, or too many chips,' she said.

It was raining hard, so I took shelter under a pawnbroker's canopy, not far from the Winter Gardens, Blackpool's first

indoor entertainment centre, opened in 1878 but continuing to fulfil a clear and pressing need. Whimsically entitled, too. Waiting, in early September, for a change in intensity from the vertical to the merely angled slashing, I had a look in the pawnbroker's window at the rows and rows of gold rings, on sale at 'giveaway prices', ranging from the delicately diamonded to those clunky ones with the gold coins. They were all 'unredeemed pledges'. In more ways than one: quite a lot of dead love for sale there, I thought. All right, all right, but that's the way it is when you have a theme and it's raining.

There is this plan for Blackpool: to turn it into Las Vegas. Resort casino hotels, four, five, maybe six; hundreds of tables, thousands of slot machines, themed restaurants, conference and exhibition space, open 24 hours a day, first hotel expected as soon as the endlessly protracted and contested legislation to liberalise the gaming laws gets through. The Lancashire Las Vegas.

A lot of people laugh at this, of course. But people laughed at the Winter Gardens and, 10 years later, at the idea for a tower just like Eiffel had put up in Paris. Even Eiffel laughed when they asked him for help. But it got built, which is more than can be said for the one they tried in London, at Wembley. And, I'll have you know, Atlantic City used to advertise itself as the Blackpool of America. It did.

The most testing time for the visionary, though, must be a wet Saturday in the Winter Gardens, just after they've gone into the theatre for Danny La Rue, with a few elderly couples in the amusement arcade on the Twopenny Nudgers and more in the Victoria Bar, which is resting between the live entertainment efforts of Wayne and Jackie, a vocal duo in their eighth consecutive season, and Hats Off, a band featuring two members 'direct from Freddie and the Dreamers'. Except perhaps for a Monday night, when Jackie is having a break at the bar and you watch Wayne working the audience with a beaming determination that is almost

undone by his eyes and you wonder if the previous seven seasons have been like this, too; or down at the Tower Lounge, right underneath it, where a beautiful, groomed black girl, who looks as if she thought she was going to Las Vegas, is smiling too bright a smile and singing ‘A hot time baby tonight’ and on the dance floor below a Glaswegian with a moustache and a football shirt dances with a bald elderly uncle, also in a football shirt, while everybody else watches, sort of. I wondered if I should tell her that Sarah Bernhardt walked out of the Winter Gardens in disgust even before the end of her first act, but decided against it. I remembered that my father had always been very keen on Blackpool, and that my mother couldn’t stand it, and I agreed with both of them.

Anyway, whatever, and at any rate, it was, without a doubt, the maternal instinct which kicked in on the Saturday afternoon as I walked south along the Golden Mile in the rain and the wind and the cold, and the delightfully whimsical notion of staying with a real old-fashioned Blackpool landlady began to beckon ever less brightly in the face of thoughts of an en-suited establishment with stars and a trouser press and ungrudged amounts of hot water.

Even the most deterred researcher, though, perks up at the prospect of a bit of expert input. Gypsy Petulengro seemed fairly convinced that Las Vegas would be a goer, and that it would sit comfortably alongside Blackpool’s traditional attractions. She had been in her booth on the Golden Mile for 40 years, she said. Recently, though, it had not been so good: the families were staying away, put off by all these stag parties. ‘There were some lads outside here earlier with not a stitch on them,’ she said. Well. I don’t know what struck me more about this: such astounding hardiness, or the discovery that there were things that could be a bit much even for a gypsy. I asked her about Lancashire and women dying of love. She didn’t know anything about that, she said; she was from Skegness.

A bit further along, Gypsy Levengro was non-committal on the Vegas question, even though she did agree that Blackpool had ‘been going down for years’. And, on the general topic of gypsy consultation over seaside developments, I should tell you that, carrying out a similar mission some years ago, I got a very firm and favourable prediction about the possibilities of a new pier in Bognor, and nothing has happened yet.

The sun shone for a bit, then it started raining again. I turned off the prom before the South Pier and began to look for a boarding house. Blackpool has more beds for hire than the whole of Portugal; I know this because it’s one of those facts that you see reported time and again, in the same way that Birmingham has more canals than Venice and, size-wise, countries are always a multiple of Wales. Finding the right bed, though, was not easy. What I wanted was not just a suitably fearsome landlady but a suitably fearsome landlady who was running an enterprise with a title affording a touch of irony, or at least a cheap joke opportunity. And I have to say that the spirit of innovation and fun that has always run through Blackpool like … no, I promised myself, no rock similes … let us just say that Blackpool’s spirit of innovation and fun doesn’t extend to the names of its boarding houses. Cliftons, Ocean Views, Sunny This, Sunny That, all manner of Banks and Braes and Denes and Sides, but nothing that really grabbed and shouted, ‘Come in here, we’re good for at least two paragraphs of wry and whimsical humour.’

I stopped a taxi and asked the driver if he knew where I’d find an old-fashioned, no-nonsense landlady; he wasn’t really interested. I got to the door of The Haven, but the sound of a stag party in full voice with the ‘Why, Why, WHY’ chorus of ‘Delilah’ at half past four in the afternoon put me off. It shouldn’t have done, I know: a real reporter would have gone right in there and spent the weekend with them, and that, I suppose, is why I’m not a Fleet Street legend.

More of a footnote, really, or one of those small entries at the bottom of the obituary pages known in the trade as ‘nuggets’, the ones that journalists tend to get in their own or former newspapers when they meet the last deadline, and then only if it’s been a slow day for death.

Sorry, I’ll be strong and get on with it now. The Haven passed up, I followed a woman into one called after its proprietors, Tomarosa, Jeffasharon, something like that. The woman asked if there was a room available for the night. ‘I’ve only got a family room and you wouldn’t be able to afford it,’ said Rosasharon, clearly believing the woman and me to be a couple. Insulted? This was the landlady I was after, except that she was Irish and wasn’t about to part with a room. The landlady at the San Remo told me The Calypso might have a room, but the Irish landlady there didn’t think I was worth it for one night, either.

So: rejected in Blackpool, no room for the night, and this my heritage, too. But then, just like in *A Taste of Honey* or *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* or another of those gritty, black-and-white 1960s britfilms, the landlady from the San Remo came out onto the pavement and shouted down the street that she had a room after all. She was from Eastbourne, but it was still raining.

The room was small, clean, nylon, floral, briskly clashing, bathroom ex-suite, down the corridor. I went out. It was dusk, turning dark. There are, you should know, two great Blackpool sights. One is the Golden Mile: the Tower, the prom and the piers and the people, deckchairs and donkeys and sands stretching out along to the wheels and dippers of the Pleasure Beach. The other sight is the one I was now experiencing: Blackpool by night, the Illuminations, ‘The Greatest Free Show on Earth’, six miles of winking, flashing tableaux and giant faces and figures, and trams lit up as gondolas, lifeboats and battleships, with the Tower traced in light above it all.

The Lights were another great Blackpool wheeze, taken up enthusiastically in the 1920s to extend the season right through September into October. They're now Blackpool's biggest draw, attracting more than three million visitors, most of them driving in their cars, very slowly, bumper to bumper, along the route. Watching them on that Saturday night, on the South Shore, going into town, with the hens and the stags weaving their way along, I began to see that this Las Vegas thing might not be so daft after all. If Tom Wolfe could bang on about Vegas being the shining light of American popular working-class culture, a flash-brash confection of fun and games and ready cash out there in the middle of the desert away from the prissy elegance of European ideas about architecture and the right way to enjoy yourself, what price Blackpool, a roar of drink and chips and tits and lights and silly outfits and songs and shouts up here out of the way on a rainy night in September while the rest of the country was watching *Casualty*?

I was on my way to Funny Girls, the throbbing, quivering heart of the stag and hen industry. It's called Funny Girls because the floor show, the bar staff and the waiters are all transvestites. It was packed with various parties, from Birmingham, Chesterfield, Cardiff, Wrexham and Glasgow, all drinking at a ferocious pace. There were girls dressed as policewomen and nurses, and lads in cowboy outfits. For the girls, minimalism and plenty of protrusion seemed to be the dress code; the blokes weren't wearing much, either. T-shirts featuring the name of the hen or the stag or the birthday person – Martina, Neil, Lisa, Rachel – were big, too. You get used to the groups after a bit; later, though, out on the street, when some of them have got separated, it does still give you a bit of a pause to see a lone priest, in soutane, with crucifix and wide-brimmed hat, staggering past, followed minutes later by a man in full combat gear moving deliberately.

The floor show in Funny Girls was slick, mimed, beautifully costumed and with the odd bit of rudery, which seemed mostly to go ignored in the partying. The MC was Zoe, who won't forgive me if I describe her as a kind of Lily Savage. 'You can tell I used to work at Manchester Airport,' (s)he rasped. 'I wasn't on the check-in staff, I used to sniff the luggage.'

Watching all this, I began to work on another great Lancashire theory, to do with big dominant women, whimsical men and the emergence of Manchester and Blackpool as major gay venues. Zoe, on a break, wasn't impressed, and she didn't think much of women dying of love, either. Mind you, (s)he said, on Wednesday and Thursday nights, they got loads of pensioners in, from places like Bolton and Southport, and they absolutely loved it, roared away. So, Lancashire, the county where old people go to watch men dressed up as women.

Zoe was from Bradford and his real name was Adrian. 'How old are you?' I asked. He replied, 'Zoe's 28, Adrian's marginally older.' Just then, a big bloke, stubbly and T-shirted, approached. 'Can I just ask you one question?' he said, loudly, looking at Zoe's lower parts. Oh dear, I thought, here we go. And then he asked his question: 'How the fuck do you walk in those shoes?' Marvellous.

I went back to my banquette and my theory, but it was difficult to concentrate, what with Sharon from Birmingham walking past in her bridal veil carrying a large inflatable penis. Louise from Bolton was in the men's loo because of the queue for the women's. A man coming in did a double-take. 'All right, petal?' said Louise. At the end of the bar, what I took to be a big, blonde woman in her early forties, with short hair, tattoo, denim and cleavage, was laughing and being generally uproarious. Now that, I thought, is the type of woman who should be very good for a quote on the dying of love question. And the woman over there with the short grey hair who was still wearing her anorak. I went up

to the blonde. Her name was Helen and she was from Worksop, in Nottinghamshire, she told me. I asked her if she was aware that Lancashire was the county where women died of love. She laughed a bit more. ‘I can’t really comment on that, love,’ she said, ‘because I haven’t had a shag yet.’ I couldn’t find the woman in the anorak.

After Funny Girls closes, a lot of people go up to the Pink Flamingo, the big gay club, behind the Flying Handbag pub. All three, and more, are owned by Basil Newby, the Queen of Blackpool, as he likes to style himself. On a good night, more than 7,000 people pass through Basil’s establishments. Basil calls his company In The Pink and is one of those gays who would giggle at the mention of ‘Basil’s establishments’. Basil describes himself as ‘a child entrepreneur’, never reveals his age and hasn’t been to bed before three in the morning in the 20-odd years since he opened the Pink Flamingo: he has that 24-hour casino complexion, an interesting hair arrangement and one of the biggest rings I’ve ever seen. And he won’t let you down. When you ask him about his ring, he lifts a buttock and looks at his bottom. The diamonds, though, are very big, and real. Basil is worth quite a few million.

Basil is the son of a Blackpool hotelier who used to put up the likes of Shirley Bassey and the Kaye Sisters, he will tell you. He did his time as a Bluecoat at Pontin’s and nowadays addresses dinners hosted by the Chief Constable of Lancashire and tells stories involving him being in Amman (you have to pronounce that last ‘a’ shortly). When he took over the Pink Flamingo, it was the kind of establishment, with girls, that had its busiest period over Blackpool’s renowned Pigeon Fanciers’ Weekend in February. (Pigeon Fanciers’ Weekend!) When he started Funny Girls, the licensing magistrate, a female Justice of the Peace, asked him, ‘Are you sure this will be all right, Basil?’ People predicted all sorts of trouble, but now nobody bats an eye when one of Basil’s ‘girls’ passes by in the street, and there

are advertisements at the local job centre: ‘Have you got the balls to work at Funny Girls?’

So there I was, eager with my theory about Lancashire’s whimsicality and other native features making it the natural premier location for the gay community, but Basil wasn’t particularly convinced. He could see that Blackpool’s postcard and panto qualities provided a rich and sustaining setting for cross-dressing, but he felt Gay Blackpool was more to do with himself than anything in the air or the water. I was tempted to say, ‘Cometh the hour, cometh the man’, but decided not to give Basil the opportunity. We parted, after I’d satisfied myself on one thing that had been bothering me: the safety of all these approximately clad girls staggering around Blackpool all night. ‘Don’t worry about that,’ said Basil. ‘They’re much rougher than the men.’

The next morning, a bell rang at the San Remo for breakfast. Mrs Harris was doing the cooking and Mr Harris was doing the serving. Mr Harris was from Ashton-under-Lyne, even if Mrs Harris was from Eastbourne. The front room was pretty full, with several families, a couple of young lads, another on his own, and me. Mr and Mrs Harris kept up a flow of chat in the manner which has been adopted, rather more self-consciously, by the proprietors of those middle-class boarding houses, small country house hotels. They’d had the San Remo for 24 years, they said, came to it through a family connection. It was hard work and getting harder: weekly stays were in steep decline and a lot of places had gone bust, the ones that had borrowed. A lot of people saw 24 sitting down for evening dinner at a tenner a head, but mostly it wasn’t that easy.

Mr Harris asked the young lad on his own where his dad was; the lad explained that he had met someone last night and gone off with her. ‘So he just left you in the lurch, like?’ said Mr Harris. The lad said it had been late on, so it wasn’t too bad. There was a bit more joshing. I asked Mrs Harris

what had happened to the battleaxe Blackpool landlady of legend. ‘A myth!’ said Mrs Harris. Just then, the lad’s father drew up outside in his car. ‘I hope he’s not come for his breakfast, because it’s cold!’ said Mrs Harris.

They were finding themselves getting more and more irritated with people, said Mrs Harris. The English were always whingeing and whining about this and that – ‘Somebody told me that their 12 year old should be half-price the other night. I said “Are you telling me what I should charge?”.’ But the Scots and the Irish were all right. ‘Some places complain the Scots don’t eat the food,’ said Mrs Harris, ‘but so what if they pay for it?’ Next weekend was Glasgow weekend, for the Lights, one of the few remnants of the old en masse descents from the same place – the Wakes Weeks. ‘Girls and lads from the same town used to start their courting in the Tower Ballroom,’ said Mr Harris. They had some old friends in Blackpool, they said, Eileen and Denis, from Leigh, that’s how they’d met.

The front room was empty now. Mr and Mrs Harris confided that, as it happened, this was their last weekend. Some people from down south had bought the San Remo for less than they had got for their house. They’d be there next weekend to help them get started. The new people hadn’t any experience, but neither had they when they started. They were off to Canada to join their daughter, who was living in Calgary. Mrs Harris had been to a spiritualist years ago who had told her she would cross the water and wear a uniform, and this seemed pretty close, as her daughter had worn a kind of uniform when she had worked for a spell as a hotel receptionist in Lytham.

They’d just got tired, really. They should have been converting the rooms into en suites, that’s what everybody wanted now. And televisions. Although nobody watched the television in the lounge. Hadn’t been on at all this last week, except for the old lady who wanted to watch her soap at teatime. I went to get my bag. I didn’t mention that I was in

desperate need of an en suite and a telly myself. When I came back down, Mrs Harris gave me a little gift, a tape with a song on it about the *Blackpool Belle*, the train that used to run into the old Central Station, and a cover version of George Formby's 'With My Little Stick of Blackpool Rock'. They told me they would miss Blackpool and I could see that they would. I told Mrs Harris about Lancashire, women and love, and she said that in Eastbourne they died of boredom.

I went off to the Tower. I'd somehow got this idea that the Ballroom was up at the top of it somewhere. It isn't, but don't let that put you off. 'See Naples and Die, but See Torquay First', went the old slogan, and I'd put the Tower Ballroom right up there with the Palmed Paradise of the West Country. What a place! Rococo? I should cocoa! Louis Quinze, Borromini, Bernini? Frank Matcham did more than that: columns, arches, twiddly bits, friezes and frescos, garlands, gold, scalloped and embossed tiers, painted ceiling, cherubs, gods, goddesses, lovers, clowns, clouds, chandeliers, the names of the great composers emblazoned along its length. Louis and the Italians would have been begging for mercy, but Frank, who'd done a few theatres in his time, including the London Coliseum and the Hackney Empire, pressed on. A palace, a temple for the people, and impossible to look at without thinking of all those people, like Eileen and Denis from Leigh, whose lives were set by a meeting on that mighty sprung floor, to the music of Bertini, or Jack Hylton or Ivy Benson. Duke Ellington played there, too, which doesn't seem quite right. In 1956, the Ballroom was badly damaged in a fire. The Wurlitzer had to be rebuilt and Matcham's work restored. When the Ballroom was reopened, the guests of honour were the people who had danced at its opening, nearly 60 years before. I rather liked the idea of that.

There weren't that many there the day I went. But it was sunny outside. The rain brings them in. Ballroom dancing during the day, big bands at night. Ballroom dancing to, of

course, the Mighty Wurlitzer, the organ that comes up out of the stage, beneath the proscenium arch and its legend ‘Bid Me Discourse and I Will Enchant Thine Ear’. Once, of course, it came up along with Reginald Dixon, Mr Blackpool, organist at the Tower for 40 years, whose signature tune was ‘Oh, I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside’. Today it was Phil Kelsall, who has quite a following, including Willie and Julia.

Willie and Julia were retired, from Manchester, and tiny. Willie was dressed in black shirt and trousers. Julia was in a long black skirt and a black-and-white patterned blouse. They hadn’t met there, but they’d been coming for years, usually at the weekend, sometimes for a week, in at ten, out at five. Why? ‘Everything,’ said Julia. ‘There’s a nice atmosphere, and it’s the music, it’s music you want to dance to, and after 30 or 40 years, it’s still the same.’ Willie said you could catch them in the background, ‘just a flash’, on a film made to celebrate the Ballroom’s centenary in 1994.

I asked Julia if I could have a dance. I don’t remember much about it, probably because of the embarrassment; I remember that Phil was playing ‘Are You Lonesome Tonight?’ and that it was a waltz and we seemed to be going round in circles and that Julia was very good about it. ‘You did very well,’ she said. ‘I’ve seen some terrible rows between couples out there,’ said Willie. ‘You didn’t look down, which is good. Look down and you’re lost.’ Phil moved on to the Harry Lime Sequence Foxtrot. Behind the bar, a young waitress, dressed in the old Nippie fashion, black dress, white apron, began to dance on the spot. The next time I looked, she was out there on the floor, in uniform, dancing with a distinguished-looking silver-haired chap to ‘Young At Heart’. Blimey, I thought, we’re all in a Gracie Fields film!

Her name was Michelle and she was 24. She’d been working in the Ballroom for 18 months and she loved it. ‘I like it here. It’s nice, isn’t it? Everyone’s dead nice. They

teach me to dance. There's Fred and Sandra, and a lovely old bloke called Joe, he's 85, he comes on his own since his wife died. It's great when they have the big events, too, like the world championships. They come from all over the world for that, the Far East, the lot. What do you want, love? Salmon and soft cheese? Just the one?' The last bit was to a customer. I went to have a chat with Michelle's recent partner, Roy. He was with his wife, Sophie. Roy had been born in Blackpool but had been away for 40 years, design engineering. But they'd come to the Ballroom and were hooked. 'You only have to walk in here and look at it,' said Sophie. 'It's a magical place, like something out of a fairy tale.' Now they were regulars, and Roy had learnt to dance. They had a son, they said, who was a record label manager, who looked after Dido, Faithless, people like that. What did he make of the parental passion? 'He thinks we're crackers,' said Roy.

There were a few people sitting on their own, widows and widowers, mostly widows, made even more lonely by all the empty seats around them and the sun outside. Like Joe, they used to come with their partners, and now they just sit. Sophie said it was a shame no one ever asked them to dance, very sad. I suppose I should have taken the hint, but I'm not sure that moving round in a shuffling circle with me would have added much to their memories, particularly if I stumbled all over them with my typically adroit questions as well. I told you I had my limitations as a journalist. My moment of truth came in the Azores, rushing to cover the honeymoon of the Duke and Duchess of York, when I had to stop to think about knocking a nun out of the way.

Michelle was doing the food and soft beverages. Ian was doing the bar. At night, he was a trumpeter in the big band. I asked him about Lancashire and women and love. 'That's a difficult one, that is,' he said. 'I've killed a few,' said a man at the side of the bar in a black leather jacket. Michelle said she wasn't sure that people believed in romance like that

any more. Then the man in the leather jacket went up on stage, sat down and took over at the organ from Phil.

I swapped the San Remo for the Imperial, Blackpool's premier hotel, host to many a prime minister at party conference time, and more besides. Ah, the Imperial. Charles Dickens stayed there, you know. And Bill Clinton: 'I like Blackpool. The weather's great. And the town's … kinda sleazy, isn't it?' The Imperial has a bar dedicated to the prime ministers, with big pictures, framed newspapers, the lot. More to the point for me, it also has lots of en suite rooms with tellies and trouser presses, with taps and buttons just waiting.

First, though, I wanted to see a proper comic. Roy Chubby Brown was on at one of the piers, but I wasn't feeling quite strong enough for his Rabelaisian tendencies; and besides, he's from Yorkshire, and rather spoils my theory about there never having been any successful Yorkshire funny men. (All right, then, Keith Waterhouse, Barry Cryer and the *Bo Selecta* bloke as well. But the League of Gentlemen are a quarter Lancastrian, you know.) So, as recommended by Mr and Mrs Harris, I went off to the Number One Club in Bloomfield Road, near the football ground, where Brian Sharpe, from Rochdale, was doing his turn. The Number One was a working men's club and I had a slight difficulty with the man on reception about getting in without proof of affiliate membership. I wasn't too surprised when he told me he was a big fan of national identity cards.

Frank Matcham, I felt sure, would have liked the Number One, with its flecked, red, fitted carpet with 'Number One' woven into it, mirrored columns at the bar, ruched curtains, wallpaper and panels in varying shades and patterns of orange, red, green, blue, gold and beige ensuring that no space was left undecorated. There was a red dot-matrix announcement apparatus of a type I had also observed at Bernard Manning's Embassy Club in Manchester, with

arrows pointing to a side room accompanied by the simple legend ‘Pies’.

Ah, yes, pies. A word, here, perhaps, about Lancashire and food. There is certainly some excellent cuisine available, and you will travel far before you find a finer cheese than that on offer from Eric, very chatty, nice chap, at Ormskirk market every Thursday.

But there is also a generally robust attitude, a liking for the fast and unfussy fostered by generations of working women with limited cooking time; the first mass convenience food, fish and chips, appeared in Oldham before anywhere else; its first mate, the pie, particularly the meat and potato variety, remains revered, even though Europe now insists on it being called potato and meat to reflect more accurately the portion proportion. Wiganers are often referred to, slightlingly, as ‘pie-eaters’, but nobody seems quite sure why, as the rest of the county is equally keen on the individual piece of pastried paradise. There is some talk that the nickname’s origin lies in the fact that Wiganers were the first back to work from the General Strike, and so had to eat humble pie, but that is confected. I do like, though, the way that the JJB stadium, the posh new ground for the rugby and soccer clubs, is known to everybody else as the Pie Dome.

And that’s the thing about Lancs and food: they do like to laugh about it, probably because it helped a little when there wasn’t much. You know about tripe; you might also know that the famous Liverpool stew is known as Blind Scouse when there isn’t any meat in it. And black pudding, of course. ‘I think it is a sacrilegious waste of good blood puddings,’ said a horrified Frenchman witnessing the 141st World Black Pudding-Throwing Championships in Ramsbottom. They’re making black-pudding ice cream now, too. But my favourite is still George Formby being asked at the Ritz in one of his films if he would like some salmon: ‘All right, then, if you’re opening a tin.’

Brian Sharpe came on stage. Brian, it was fair to say, belonged to the more aggressive Lancashire comic school typified by Bernard Manning rather than the whimsy of Formby or Laurel or Dodd. Hecklers, for example, were told, ‘Hey, this isn’t a double act. Shut it.’ There were plenty of my-wife gags, mostly to do with her size: ‘She wears a g-rope’; her domestic shortcomings: ‘We haven’t had a clean plate in the house since the dog died. I saw a cockroach in the kitchen the other day sucking a Rennie’; and her looks: ‘She’s a treasure. Someone asked me the other day where I’d dug her up from.’

There were some very old racist jokes, but nothing to match the Manning bravura in the offence department. When I saw him, a few years ago now, a well-known light entertainer was spending his last days bravely raising money for cancer research. Manning leant on the microphone stand, took a deep draw from his cigarette, paused for a beat, and then said, ‘Fuck Roy Castle.’ Michael Barrymore told me once that to be a really big success, the audience had to like you, a theory his subsequent career was to prove fairly spectacularly. I don’t know where that leaves Manning. The comic who managed to combine his, how shall we say, blunt and direct approach with whimsy and loveability was Les Dawson, though, in the way of them all, not much of his act stands up to time. But Les would have understood about Balzac; Les had his time in a garret, in Paris, trying to become a great writer as well. No, it’s true. I wasn’t so sure about Brian. I asked him for a quick chat, but he was rushing off to his next spot, so I bought one of his tapes and said I would phone him. Then I went back to the Imperial. I wouldn’t have said it was quiet, but, in the bar, one of the other three patrons was making a close study of the newspaper on the wall reporting the death of Churchill.

The Tower, the Winter Gardens, all the piers, and much else in the British leisure industry are owned by an ex-

bricklayer and diesel grease-wiper of pensionable age from Chorley called Trevor Hemmings, who is worth around £700 million, keeps a collection of vintage Rolls-Royces in a barn and loves racehorses almost as much as his privacy. Mr Hemmings, the rarely seen figure behind Blackpool, the new Las Vegas, follows in a line of slightly unorthodox Blackpool entrepreneurs with the requisite touch of whimsy. William Cocker, the first Mayor, who introduced the Illuminations and built the Winter Gardens, was a retired doctor; Sir John Bickerstaffe, who built the Tower, affected a white sailor's cap on most occasions, social and business.

But for poignancy, apt and as broad as the place itself, the palm must go to the Rev. William Thornber, the town's first vicar and enthusiastic populariser, who ended up in an asylum, unhinged by 'intemperance and the breaking of his marriage vows'. (Blackpool's most famous clergyman was, of course, Harold Davidson, the defrocked Rector of Stiffkey, who, wearing only a barrel, protested the innocence and evangelical intent of his association with London's ladies of the night right up until the day he was eaten by a lion. But that was in Skegness; he should have stayed in Lancs, much gentler.)

Nothing like that for Mr Hemmings, or his Leisure Parcs team, who operate from a warren up in the Winter Gardens and have a room with a mock-up of the plans for the front, complete with the Pharoah's Palace resort hotel, the first casino, 70 tables, 2,500 slot machines, 4,000-capacity conference facilities, a 3,000-seat theatre, 500 rooms, 2,000 new jobs, £100-million cost. I thought it looked terrific, lots of big Blackpooly sphinxes and that sort of thing.

There is also lots of talk of creating environments and holistic master plans, of alleviating unemployment and of spin-off benefits in tackling crime and deprivation. It is, Mr Hemmings and his people believe, time for a big gesture. Blackpool should lead British tourism into the future, showing once again the spirit of risk and adventure and

innovation that had created and evolved Blackpool. There is all this affection for Blackpool, they believe, and it is time to cash in on it.

They point to Baltimore, Atlantic City and Biloxi, all places that have regenerated themselves through casinos; why, in Biloxi, so much money was coming into the place that they were now pressed to find new civic amenities to spend it on. And then there was the East, the Japanese: they will come. They already come for the ballroom-dancing championships, very big, and they love the golf at Lytham nearby; they have the right game for a laugh, karaoke, kiss me quick attitude.

It would have taken someone far more cynical than me to resist this rich concoction of statistics, jargon, vision and optimism. But I did manage to ask about the climatic differences between Blackpool and the North American role models. This, too, was not a problem: ‘In Las Vegas, they go inside to escape the heat. Here, they will go inside to escape …’ Of course!

I left the future and went off for a wander, still a little worried and sentimental for the old and present Blackpool, the one that is slowly dying. Blackpool Borough Council has its own regeneration plans, more concerned with family entertainment than casinos, with a giant aquarium and such, but I wasn’t sure this would be any more welcoming for Petulengro and Levengro and the Pigeon Fanciers’ Weekend; or the Ford Day, organised by a delivery driver from Preston, when all these owners of old Cortinas and Escorts and other such unregarded old numbers park their cars down on the lower prom; or the Deaf and Dumb Weekend, come to that, which is always good for a bit of trouble when they get in drink.

By now I was up among the slightly posher guest houses, with their illuminated fronts, and licensed lounges, and huge gilt-framed prints with fancy downlighters, and plaster columns and porticos, and busts, and lamps involving all manner of undraped females holding up all manner of