



The History of
THE IMPERIAL HOTEL
BLACKPOOL



History

The practice of sea bathing for medical reasons reached Blackpool at the end of the eighteenth century. A private road to bring in stage coaches from Manchester and Halifax was established in 1781, resulting in the building of a few small hotels, a bowling green and even an archery stall along this stretch of rural coastline. By 1837 an assembly room had been built and in 1846 the railway line from Preston and Fleetwood extended to incorporate Blackpool, indirectly causing Fleetwood's demise as a resort and the bankruptcy of its founder Peter Hesketh-Fleetwood. By contrast Blackpool, nearer to the industrial heartland of Lancashire, boomed.

The rapid development of this new resort was intensified by the practice among the local mill owners of closing their factories for a week every year to service and repair machinery. These enforced absences became known as Wakes weeks. Each town's mills would close for a different week, enabling Blackpool to rely on a steady stream of visitors over a prolonged period in the summer months.

In 1863 the North Pier was completed, rapidly becoming a central attraction for elite visitors who were drawn to Clarendon Park Estate on the northern outskirts of Blackpool. Accessed by a toll road and in stark contrast to the rest of the resort, Clarendon Park was aimed at "the aristocracy, gentry and clergy". Its focal point was to be a new temperance hotel called The Imperial.

The style of this new hotel was grand but restrained. The architects, Clegg & Knowles of Manchester, came up with a French Renaissance design to be built in brick. It opened in 1867 at a cost of £22,170 and eight years later a second wing (off the South Concourse) was added.

In its early days this exclusive teetotal hotel did not make as much money as had been hoped. This was ironic because Blackpool, south of The Imperial, continued to extend rapidly along its Golden Mile. Fortunately a relaxation of the prohibition on alcohol led to The Imperial taking off as the venue of choice for important municipal events. In 1878 the opening of Blackpool's splendid Winter Gardens was

celebrated at The Imperial with the Lord Mayor of London booking out the hotel for his entourage of 63 mayors and lady mayoresses from across Britain. In 1891 the laying of the foundations of Blackpool Tower were again celebrated with a gala dinner at The Imperial.

To further the hotel's appeal The Imperial embraced Hydropony, a fashionable term for a combination of treatments that involved occupational therapy, physiotherapy and water for the alleviation of pain, stiffness in the joints and gout.

As the hotel found its feet as Blackpool's most illustrious address it embarked on an ambitious scheme of further development that included a ballroom with glass ceiling so that couples could waltz under the stars and a Turkish, Russian and seawater bath complex in the basement of the southern wing. In 1904 an extension of the north wing in a more florid neo-baroque style added a large dining room, enabling the old dining room to become an exclusive grill room, plus a palm court and palm garden.

By 1905 The Imperial had reached its current size and layout although the usage of rooms would change over the years.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

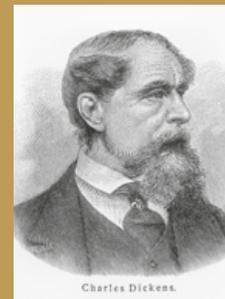
The first royal visit to Blackpool came in 1912 when Princess Louise (sister of King George V) opened "Princess Parade", a new section of the Promenade and 10,000 light bulbs were switched on in celebration. Subsequently Princess

Charles Dickens

In 1869, two years after the opening of The Imperial Hotel Charles Dickens came to stay. Britain's most famous novelist was suffering exhaustion. His public reading farewell tour kept to a punishing schedule and at Preston he collapsed with partial paralysis. Ordered to cancel his tour and rest, Dickens booked into The Imperial where he wrote enthusiastically of "this charming sea beach hotel". "I am much better than I was on Sunday", he recorded "my weakness and deadness are all on the left side".

Dickens went on to describe that he had had a "delicious walk by the sea". He was observed by hotel staff kicking his hat along the beach like a football. "I sleep soundly and have picked up amazingly in appetite".

After leaving Blackpool Dickens resumed his busy schedule. He died the next year following a stroke.



Charles Dickens.

Louise's niece Mary, the Princess Royal, became the first member of the Royal Family to stay at The Imperial when she came to switch on those famous illuminations.

She stayed in Room 311. This royal connection has continued with both Princess Margaret and Princess Anne also staying in what is now known as The Balmoral Suite.

During World War I The Imperial was commandeered as the Atlantic Military Hospital for shell-shocked officers. At this time a mortuary slab was installed in the wine cellar, which is still there today. Between the two World Wars Blackpool flourished, recognised as the world's first and most successful working-class seaside resort.

The Imperial however continued to offer a more exclusive experience than the legendarily fierce Blackpool landlady.

During World War II the hotel was once again commandeered, this time as the new home of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. It was only returned to its owners in 1951.

BLACKPOOL'S SHOWBIZ HEYDAY

In the 1950's Blackpool's pre-eminence among British seaside resorts was undisputed. The need to entertain such a huge summer population led to the building of nine theatres – only London operated more – and these offered two shows a day, which made Blackpool the West End's most important venue for out of town try-outs. Stars who stayed at The Imperial at this

time included Arthur Askey, Petula Clark, Charlie Drake, Bruce Forsyth, George Melly, Eric Sykes, Tommy Steele, Thora Hird and Gracie Fields, a particular favourite with locals. Hollywood was not immune to the lure of Blackpool either. Errol Flynn, Fred Astaire and Jayne Mansfield also came to stay at The Imperial.

In 1964 The Beatles stayed at the hotel immediately after the Royal World Première of their film *A Hard Days Night* in London. On the advice of their manager Brian Epstein they went live on stage at Blackpool's Winter Gardens to introduce the new film and a photo taken in the Derby Room (still displayed in the hotel) shows John, Paul and Ringo sprawled on one of the sofas before going on stage.

BLACKPOOL'S POLITICAL HEYDAY

At the same time as Blackpool came to dominate UK show business it took off as a political conference venue. Winston Churchill was the first serving UK Prime Minister to make The Imperial his "conference hotel" during the party conference season. All three political parties followed suit right up until 2007 when the last Blackpool political party conference was held in the Winter Gardens. During this time many political deals were done – and many plots hatched – in what is now known as the No. 10 bar. In 1983 the Cecil Parkinson scandal broke during the Conservative's Blackpool conference and in 1985 Mrs. Thatcher celebrated her 60th birthday at The Imperial, vehemently informing reporters that she had no intention of retiring.

Winston Churchill

The Churchill Room and the Churchill Suite (Room 218) commemorate the many visits Sir Winston Churchill made to The Imperial when he was prime minister and leader of the Conservative party. Churchill, a man who described himself as "easily satisfied with the best" made the decision to base himself at The Imperial in 1954. That year his party conference speech made headlines by attacking the UK's former ally Joseph Stalin. This set the precedent for Conservative, Labour and Liberal parties to base themselves at The Imperial during the party conference season.

Because Churchill liked to take over the Smoking Room as his private office, it has been renamed in his honour and is now decorated with the story of his life as well as some bills from The Imperial made out to Sir Winston or Lady Churchill.



Into the Twenty First Century

Sadly in the 60s and 70s the hotel management tried to keep up with modern trends and destroyed or hid much of the original decoration. Ceilings were lowered, stained glass windows and roofs were removed. Fortunately most of the damage could subsequently be restored. The Imperial has begun a process of restoration. In recent years the alcove where Winston Churchill used to sit in the Smoking Room has been opened up again, while down in the basement the Burmantofts tiles in the former Turkish baths have been uncovered and cleaned up.

Blackpool Civic Trust undertook a three-year project to remove the thick plaster and paint covering the Burmantofts tiles, which were installed in 1898 and covered up in the 1950s. The name "Burmantofts" comes from the area of Leeds where the tiles were made. All the restoration work was carried out by volunteers who removed most of the plaster from

the three baths. Their efforts were mainly concentrated on the "hot" room and one wall of the large "cooling room" so that visitors and guests would get some idea of how opulent and magnificent the Turkish baths must have looked when they were first opened. The superb friezes in all three rooms with their motif of scallop shells and twisting, diving pikes shows Victorian workmanship at its best. The Victorian attention to detail can also be seen in the exposed ceiling beam in the cooling room.

In 2015 Blackpool Civic Trust and The Imperial Hotel received Blackpool Town Council's Conservation Award for this restoration work.

But times have changed in Blackpool. Wakes weeks ceased long ago, party conferences now take place in modern media venues like the National Exhibition Centre in Birmingham and the development of the M55 has made the resort accessible for a day out, rendering many of the town's hotels surplus to requirement. The Imperial, however, remains pre-eminent in Blackpool, proudly preserving its history, a microcosm of the story of this remarkable resort. As the architectural historian Sir Nicholas Pevsner wrote in 1969 "it is the climax of Blackpool hôtellerie".

The No.10 Bar

The original glass-roofed billiard room retains its stained glass canopy but has been turned into a bar and named No.10 after all the UK prime ministers who have stayed at The Imperial while in office. There are eight pub-style mirrors around the walls of the L-shaped bar, eight of which have prime ministerial surnames cut into

the glass – Churchill, Macmillan, Wilson, Callaghan, Thatcher, Major, Blair and Cameron.

The ninth mirror awaits the next sitting prime minister to stay at the hotel.



Turkish Baths Restoration



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