

The SHUTTLE

The magazine for everyone in Blackburn with Darwen

ISSUE 7 | 2026

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SPILLS THE BEANS!**



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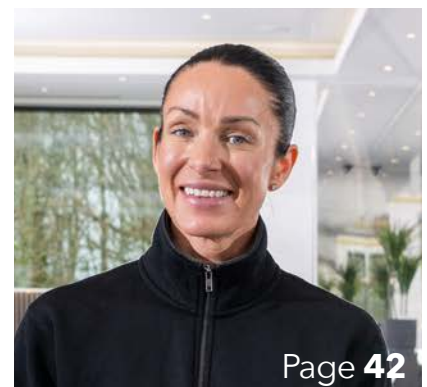
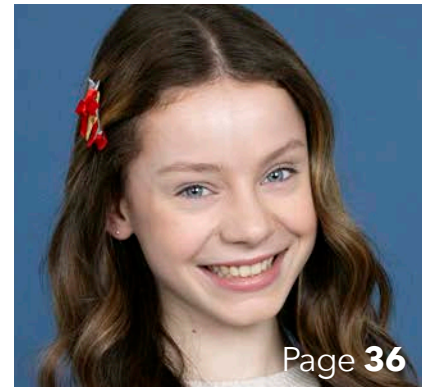
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LETTER FROM THE LEADER:

Celebrating our people, place and progress

Welcome to this year's edition of **The Shuttle**, celebrating the people, places, and progress that make Blackburn with Darwen such a special place to call home.

Over the past year, there has been plenty to be proud of. From exciting investment plans in Darwen and improvements across our town centres, to the continued success of our leisure, culture, and community services, this magazine highlights the stories that show our borough at its best.

You'll find features on inspiring local people - from BAFTA-nominated filmmaker Sufiyaan Salam, Blackburn-born viral influencer and community ambassador Alistair Almond, to Darwen's own Coronation Street star Grace Gardner.

We're also shining a light on projects that matter locally, including the Darwen Youth Zone, extensive renovations at our historic King George's Hall, Blackburn Library and Museum, and the growing music scene here. There's so much happening across our communities.

You may also have seen information recently about Council Tax for the year ahead. Like many councils across the country, we've had to increase Council Tax by 4.99% to keep essential services running as demand and costs continue to

rise - particularly for adult social care and support for vulnerable residents.

For most households, this is around £1.25 - £1.50 per week, and Blackburn with Darwen still remains below the average council tax rate across Lancashire. This helps us protect the services people rely on every day, from care for older residents and support for families, to keeping our neighbourhoods clean, safe, and well maintained.

Reflecting the strong community spirit we're known for, also featured in this edition is a rundown on the Mayor's charity work, unmissable events, the Cathedral's centenary celebrations, the majestic opening of the new Masjid-e-Vali, and the incredible work of our Darwen Moors ranger.

We're also proud to support local businesses and entrepreneurs, from independent favourites to new ventures helping our high streets thrive.

Meanwhile, the 2026 Leader's Award winner highlights the pioneering multi-agency work that happens in Blackburn with Darwen to support babies during their vital first 1,001 days of life.

Looking ahead, you'll find a round-up of

Local Government Reorganisation and what the next steps could mean for the borough. We're also making progress with the Lancashire Combined County Authority (LCCA), developing a new Local Transport Plan aimed at improving public transport, creating better connections, and delivering infrastructure that helps businesses grow. Through the Combined Authority, we are now in a stronger position to make the case for major investments that improve transport for everyone. We remain focused on making sure Blackburn with Darwen's voice is heard as national decisions are made.

As always, this magazine is part of our commitment to keep you informed, celebrate local success, and share how the council is working with partners and residents to improve opportunities, support communities, and build a stronger future.

Blackburn and Darwen is, and always will be, **part of your story**. Watch out for our new campaign - sharing your services in action.



Cllr Phil Riley
Leader, Blackburn with Darwen Council



RUNNING BEAN

Exclusive interview: Blackburn with Darwen's social media sensation Alistair Almond on staying grounded - and building a dream powered by running, coffee and community



If you've scrolled TikTok, Instagram or Facebook recently, chances are you've come across Blackburn's very own social media success story, Alistair Almond - better known online as Run Weasley.

Usually mid-run, often smiling into the camera, sometimes struggling but always honest, the 23-year-old has built a loyal audience of more than one million followers across his platforms. Known affectionately as "the ginger guy who runs," his content resonates for one simple reason: it's real.

There are no filters, no gimmicks and no polished perfection - just one foot in front of the other and a running commentary on life, motivation and self-belief.

Originally from Shadsworth and a former pupil at Our Lady and St John Catholic College, Alistair's journey hasn't followed a conventional path. Before his rise online, he spent a short time working as a police officer. Today his career looks very different, but the discipline, resilience and mindset he developed during that period continue to shape his approach to life.

His viral success has since earned him ambassador status with global fitness brand Gymshark, cementing his place as one of the UK's most relatable fitness creators.

But it isn't just the running that draws people in - it's his personality. Alistair's humour, warmth and authenticity shine through every post. He's honest,



down-to-earth and refreshingly unfiltered. Yes, he admits he can have a bit of a potty mouth, but his infectious energy and genuine nature mean followers feel like they're running alongside a mate rather than watching an influencer.

Despite his growing profile, his roots remain firmly local. Family plays a huge role in keeping him grounded, particularly his mum, who has been a constant source of support and guidance. Together, they regularly shop for and donate supplies to the local foodbank - a simple but meaningful act that reflects the values behind his growing platform.

He is also an ambassador for Nightsafe, supporting vulnerable young people, and remains close to his friend Liss, who has been by his side through life's ups and downs.

Speaking to **The Shuttle** in an exclusive interview - naturally over a flat white in a cosy café - Alistair explains that running was never about medals or personal bests.

"For me, running was about confidence," he says. "It helped me work through body image issues, self-doubt and how I felt about myself."

Progress, he adds, didn't happen overnight.

"You don't fix everything in one go. You build it gradually."

That philosophy of consistency runs through every part of his life. His routines are simple, realistic and repeatable - whether it's training, food or mindset. His love of eggs, sourdough and cottage cheese is well documented online.

"It's not about being perfect," he says. "It's about giving yourself a chance. If you're putting the work in, you've got to back yourself."

Before social media became his full-time focus, Alistair worked at Costa Coffee, where his appreciation for a properly made brew began. But for him, coffee has always been about more than caffeine - it's about connection.

He's unapologetically passionate about flat whites in particular.

"It's basically fuel," he laughs. "The human version of petrol."

That love of coffee is now shaping his next big ambition.

Alistair hopes to open his own café in Blackburn, appropriately named The Running Bean - a welcoming space designed to bring people together and create a sense of community.

Inspired by a relaxed jazz soundtrack and a New York-style atmosphere, the idea is already gathering support. Through a GoFundMe campaign, he has raised more than £13,000 towards making the dream a reality.

Importantly, he talks about the project not as a business venture, but as a community hub.

"It wouldn't just be a café," he says. "I want it to feel like somewhere people can come and just be."

The vision is calm, inclusive and unpretentious. Good coffee, done properly. Music playing in the background. No pressure to rush. A space where runners and non-runners alike can sit, chat, work or simply take a moment.

"You don't have to love running," he adds. "You just have to want somewhere that feels welcoming."

He's keen for the space to reflect the community around it, marking celebrations, hosting events and giving people reasons to come together.

"It's about doing things properly," he says. "Making people feel included."

For Alistair, success has never been about leaving Blackburn behind. Instead, it's about investing in the place that shaped him.

"I'll keep doing what I do," he says. "Getting people moving, helping them feel better, and hopefully creating something that adds a bit of good to the area."

There's also another side to him that many followers may not expect - he's a talented singer.

"Not too bad, am I?" he jokes.

If his future café features his own soulful soundtracks, regulars certainly won't be complaining.

Despite growing national attention, Alistair still runs the same local routes, chats with neighbours and stays connected to the community he calls home.

The Shuttle also put him through a quick-fire round of questions - and his characteristically side-splitting honest answers can be found on our website and social channels.

Whether he's clocking up miles, supporting local causes or working towards opening The Running Bean, Alistair's story is one of consistency, community and connection.

You may even spot him on bus shelters across Blackburn and Darwen, as part of a campaign celebrating his success - and setting him the challenge of running to each one.

Because if there's one thing that defines Blackburn's running star, it's something simple: showing up, staying real and bringing people along for the journey.

And if his story so far is anything to go by, this is only the beginning for our man Al.



Read more about Alistair's fascinating journey and watch the hilarious 'This or That' videos at:

www.theshuttle.org.uk



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Gearing up for the Tour de France!



Blackburn with Darwen will feature as part of the 2027 Tour de France Grand Départ – set to be the largest free sporting spectacle in British history.

The global cycling event will see both the men's and women's Tour de France races start in the UK, marking the first time in history that both have begun in the same country outside of France.

Here, the Tour will arrive on Saturday 3 July, 2027, taking in Blackburn, Tockholes and Belmont, showcasing the borough's landscape, heritage and communities to a worldwide audience.

For residents, it means the chance to watch world-class cyclists race through familiar streets, villages and countryside, right here on their doorstep.

Welcoming the announcement, Councillor Phil Riley, Leader of Blackburn with Darwen Council and Transport Lead for the Lancashire Combined County Authority, says: "What a proud moment for our borough and Lancashire to be included in one of the largest sporting events in the world.

"This is a unique chance to spotlight our towns and villages, welcome visitors, and inspire a whole new

generation of cyclists.

"We're looking forward to making the very most of this incredible opportunity - the Tour de France can expect a very warm Northern welcome in 2027."

The men's Tour de France will begin in Edinburgh on Friday 2 July, with the opening stage finishing in Carlisle.

Blackburn with Darwen will feature on day two, as the race travels from Keswick through the Lake District and across Lancashire, before finishing on The Strand in Liverpool.

Riders will enter the borough at Brownhill, travel along Whalley New Road, and pass through Blackburn town centre, taking in landmarks such as Blackburn Cathedral, Cathedral Square and views of the Wainwright Bridge. The route will then continue along Alan Shearer Way, Livesey Branch Road and Heys Lane.

Elsewhere, cyclists will tackle Tockholes Road, Belmont Road and Rivington Road, where a King of the Mountains (KOM) climb is planned, promising an exciting moment for spectators.

The North West will play a central role

across both races, with Manchester and Liverpool confirmed as key start and finish locations.

Councillor Riley adds: "This is a chance to show off our borough to the world.

"Importantly, all of our residents will be able to enjoy this iconic event for free, watching world-class cycling right here in our borough.

"July 3 2027, is a date for all our diaries: it promises to be a real moment in history."

Alongside the route announcement, organisers revealed JOY, a national programme aimed at tackling inactivity and improving mental wellbeing, while British Cycling also confirmed plans to recruit 7,000 volunteers, offering people of all ages the chance to play a hands-on role in delivering the event.

More details are expected to be announced this spring.

To find out more, please visit: **letourgb.com**

And follow Blackburn with Darwen Council on Facebook and Instagram for the latest local updates.



Sisters at the heart of Sudell's food hotspots

Here at **The Shuttle**, we love shining a light on the people and places that make Blackburn special, and right now, there's one corner of town that's stealing the spotlight.

Sudell Cross and King William Street have become the borough's most talked about food spots, drawing visitors from across the North West for their brunches, bakes and beautifully curated interiors.

TikTok and Instagram can't get enough of the new venues popping up here!

And if you've passed by at lunchtime or early evening, you'll have seen the queues, the kind that spill onto the pavement - especially around Kohi and Crumbssss, whose food is just as photogenic as their aesthetic.

It's a scene that would've been hard to imagine a few years ago, but Sudell Cross has become the place to be.

Right next door to Kohi is Grumpy Baker, opening from 5pm with a late-night dessert vibe and

cheesecakes that could rival the viral Turkish ones.

Sweet-toothed visitors are spoiled for choice, with Heavenly Desserts and Crumbssss just steps away. And for those looking for something savoury, Café Espresso and the long-standing Sudell Sandwiches continue to hold their own as well as the hugely popular Ginger Muffin.

What makes this little corner even more special is the women behind two of its most beloved businesses. Standing proudly opposite each other are Crumbssss and Sudell Sandwiches - one modern, one traditional, both powered by sisterhood.

Crumbssss is run by sisters Mehzabin and Tasneem Patel, whose shared love of baking began at home. What started as a passion project became a full bakery in 2025, when they opened their Blackburn town centre shop.

"We balance each other perfectly," Mehzabin tells **The Shuttle**. "Everything at Crumbssss is baked

in-house with simple, honest ingredients. For us, it's more than a business: it's a reflection of our bond and our values."

Tasneem agrees: "We've had an amazing response from the community. Blackburn is our hometown, and we wanted to create something people could feel proud of. Crumbssss is built on quality, consistency and genuine love for what we do."

Both sisters feel that being a female business owner is incredibly empowering and rewarding. "It comes with its challenges, but it's also given us confidence, independence and a strong sense of pride in what we've built."

Over the road, Sudell Sandwiches has been a Blackburn favourite for almost four decades. Despite technically retiring, owner Maria Wrathall still works most days - and her passion hasn't faded one bit.

In 2025, Lancashire Telegraph readers voted Sudell Sandwiches the best sandwich shop in East Lancashire, and



Maria puts that success down to staying true to what they do best.

"We make bespoke sandwiches with good quality local produce, which all comes from Blackburn. We've always supported local suppliers," she says.

Maria first opened the shop 38 years ago, taking a chance on a street with offices, but no sandwich options. It paid off.

Now working with her sister and a small all-female team, Maria says, "I really think the reason I'm still in business is because of the relationship I have with my sister. We work so well together."

As for the new wave of cafés and bakeries around her? Maria welcomes them.

"Competition is good - it keeps you on your toes. There's room for all of us. We're your breakfast and lunch go-to, and the new places bring something different."

Find more places to eat and drink in Blackburn town centre at www.discoverblackburn.co.uk





Alive with culture: What's on in Blackburn with Darwen in 2026

There's always something to do in Blackburn with Darwen - whether it be a visit to our fabulous museum, the packed programme of events at our many libraries, the hugely popular Making Rooms or our busy leisure centres, including a super fun brand-new inflatable in Darwen!

We also have free family fun in our markets during half-term holidays, bowling, cinemas, ice skating and fabulous places to eat out - we are a borough brimming with creativity, community spirit and culture.

And if you think that's plenty, just wait - this year's events calendar is bursting at the seams, ready to surprise, delight and get the whole borough buzzing.

A Cathedral Centenary to remember

Blackburn Cathedral is celebrating 100 years, and it's doing it in style.

Think exhibitions, talks, recitals and concerts that turn the whole year into one big cultural celebration - including Taylor Swift and Oasis by Candlelight.

It's history, music and atmosphere all rolled into one unforgettable programme - turn to page 49 for more details.

Silent Disco Walk: Dance through the town

Fancy dancing your way through Blackburn?

The Silent Disco Walk on Saturday 18

April is your chance to turn the town centre into your own personal stage.

With a soundtrack designed to get even the shyest feet tapping, this guided walk is part adventure, part party, and entirely brilliant for families.

Darwen Live takes over

The May bank holiday means one thing: Darwen Live is back.

On Saturday 23 May, Dayz Gone By will blast through pop-punk favourites, joined by X Factor's Janet Devlin.

Sunday brings Amnesia, a high-energy 90s club-classics revival, plus the legendary Lancashire Hotpots.

So many more brilliant acts are being announced, so keep your eyes on the Darwen Live Facebook page.



Picture by Robin Zahler

Five years of Blackburn Pride

Blackburn Pride celebrates its 5th anniversary on Saturday 20 June, and the town centre will be bursting with colour, joy and community spirit.

Expect arts, crafts, live entertainment and the much-loved parade - a celebration of love and inclusion that grows bigger and brighter every year.

The National Festival of Making

On 4 and 5 July, the Festival of Making returns - one of the North West's most distinctive cultural events.

Workshops, installations, performances and demonstrations will spill into streets, venues and public spaces, celebrating Blackburn's

heritage of craftsmanship and its bold creative future.

It's hands-on, imaginative and perfect for all ages.

Christmas lights that spark magic

Blackburn and Darwen's Christmas lights switch-on events mark the start of the festive season with sparkle, excitement and plenty of cheer - and they never disappoint.

Darwen's event draws in thousands of people for more than nine hours of festive fun, while Blackburn's switch-on dazzles with an equally packed line-up of live music, performances and community spirit right in the heart of town.

For even more events, check out the what's on guides at:

www.discoverblackburn.co.uk
www.darwentowncentre.co.uk



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2026 Leader's Award winner: Donna Butler

Driven by a passion for supporting families in the vital first 1,001 days of a child's life

When it comes to giving babies the very best start in life, the work of East Lancashire Hospitals NHS Trust's Baby Friendly Lead Midwife, Donna Butler, has had a huge impact.

This summer, her leadership will be recognised as she receives the Leader's Award at the 2026 1V Awards, presented by Council Leader Phil Riley. But Donna is quick to share the credit.

"This award belongs to my team," she says. "And to the wider network we work with across Blackburn with Darwen."

That network includes a team of two specialist staff and three support workers working alongside midwives, health visitors, early years teams in Family Hubs, Public Health colleagues and parent volunteers. Together, they are reshaping support for families in those crucial early days of parenthood.

"Throughout their contact with the Baby Friendly Team, mums receive non-judgemental support to achieve

their goals - whether that's breastfeeding for the first few days, or longer term," Donna explains.

While breastmilk is proven to give babies the best nutritional start - boosting immunity and protecting against illnesses like diabetes - Donna and her team support mothers to do what is best for them and their babies.

"Here in BwD, we're changing the conversation around infant feeding," she says. "If we support parents during pregnancy and those early weeks - regardless of how they feed their baby - the relational aspect of parenting can be transformational."

A key focus is encouraging closeness. Keeping babies close while feeding strengthens bonding, supports brain development and helps babies feel safe and loved, laying strong foundations for their future wellbeing.

Donna trained in nursing, midwifery and health visiting in Tower Hamlets at the Royal London Hospital before moving to Blackburn 25 years ago. Working locally while raising her four

children gave her a deep understanding of the borough and its families.

"I've always been interested in health inequalities, and wanted to work somewhere I can make a difference," she says.

That difference is clear. In 2018, Blackburn with Darwen became a Baby Friendly Gold Standard borough, a prestigious UNICEF accreditation. Today, the borough has the second highest rates in the North West for babies whose first feed is breastmilk.

But for Donna, it's the families who matter most.

"I've met mums who've faced real challenges and come through them stronger," she smiles. "That's what makes me proud."

Parents to be and new parents can find a whole range of support in our network of Family Hubs and children's centres. Visit: www.familyhubsbwd.org



A seat at the top table:

Mo Isap OBE tells The Shuttle why Lancashire needs a stronger voice and greater control over its future and why devolution matters to you

Devolution. It's a word you may have heard, but what does it actually mean for you?

Put simply, it means more investment where you live - funding for vital infrastructure, new opportunities for businesses, and jobs for local people like you, or people you know.

Devolution is already underway here with the Lancashire Combined County Authority (LCCA) officially being formed in 2025.

But for Mo Isap OBE, truly unlocking the full benefits of devolution depends on Lancashire going one step further and securing a Mayoral Combined Authority - something you're likely to have your say on in the coming months.

It's a model that's already working well elsewhere - think Andy Burnham in Greater Manchester - giving regions a stronger voice, greater powers, and direct control over funding and decision making.

Indeed, Mayors receive almost 10 times more investment compared to regions without one and they're also more successful at attracting direct inward investment from national and global investors creating new high skilled jobs.

With this in mind, Mo - a proud Blackburnian, hugely successful entrepreneur, and Chair of the Lancashire Business Board - explains why a mayor-led authority could be a real game-changer for Blackburn with Darwen and for Lancashire, and why it's something we should all be backing.

"Devolution is about having a seat at the top table," Mo tells **The Shuttle**.

"It's about us getting our fair share and not waiting for the crumbs."

Drawing on his own experience, he adds: "When my dad came to Blackburn in the 1960s, he came

because it was a flashing beacon of prosperity.

"He arrived with just £20 and all his worldly belongings in a single suitcase.

"He gave up his role as an educator in India to work in the mills here - swapping his shirt and tie for blue overalls, working 12-hour shifts, seven days a week. He worked harder than anyone I have ever known.

"He did that because he wanted better. Better for himself and better for his family.

"And that is exactly what we should be asking for - what we should be demanding - today."

From Saturday afternoons spent in the library while his friends were out playing, to securing a place at university and scaling his first start-up into one of the UK's largest digital print companies and employing thousands of people, Mo knows first-hand the impact that opportunity and investment can have - and what a Mayoral Combined Authority could unlock.

"We have the talent here," he says.

"The talent and the values needed to succeed - working hard, caring for others, being incredibly resilient.

"These are exactly the traits that big investors are looking for, and they run through our very DNA here in Blackburn with Darwen. It's Arte et Labore - by skill and hard work."

Giving back to the place he is proud to call home is important to Mo and his efforts were recently celebrated with an OBE awarded by the King for services to education and skills.

This includes Mo being a founding director of Star Academies, one of the UK's highest-performing multi-academy trusts, which includes Blackburn with Darwen's two Tauheedul high schools.

His company, IN4 Group, has also

helped more than 3,000 people secure jobs in the technology sector through the training it provides.

Here in Blackburn with Darwen, IN4 has partnered with the council to roll out MEGA Hubs in every high school across the borough, equipping students with the skills needed for careers in digital technology.

The partnership has also delivered the first-ever MEGA Scholarships - giving young people from the borough the skills, experience, and competitive edge needed to secure top university places and degree apprenticeships.

And there's the Power of Mind (Mums In Data) programme too - helping mums and carers in to flexible working - and support for our businesses to embrace AI and the latest technologies.

Alongside this, Mo volunteers his time to lead the LCCA's Lancashire Business Board, working with senior figures from some of the county's foremost regional, national, and international firms to help the county attract new investment.

"We must be ambitious," he adds. "We must look up and demand the investment that we deserve.

"We're very good in Lancashire at making a little go a long way - just look at what my dad has achieved with a suitcase and £20.

"If we get a fair crack of the whip when it comes to Government funding, we can be that flashing beacon of prosperity once again.

"I truly believe that Lancashire has the potential to be the most investable place in the whole of the UK."

You can read more about the role of the LCCA at:

www.lancashire-cca.gov.uk

And there's more on IN4 at:

www.in4group.co.uk

Curtain up!

King George's Hall is ready to take centre stage once again this autumn, returning with an unmissable line-up of events

The doors to King George's Hall will officially reopen this autumn – and it'll be back with a bang!

The unmissable line-up already includes everything from an 'out of this world' evening with British astronaut Tim Peake, to The Proclaimers, the renowned Hallé Orchestra, a brand-new panto for 2026 – oh yes, there is – and so much more!

Backed by over £13 million of investment, the Grade II-listed venue has been transformed inside and out.

From a new roof and windows to upgraded bars, improved seating, lifts, lighting, bathrooms, and more – every detail designed to create an even better experience for audiences.

For over a century, King George's Hall has been at the heart of the region's cultural scene, welcoming global icons from Queen to The Beatles and David Bowie, and more recently Liam Gallagher and Florence + The Machine.

Now, the spotlight will be on the incredibly popular venue itself as it prepares to welcome audiences for an unforgettable programme of live entertainment.

Councillor Quesir Mahmood, Deputy Leader of Blackburn with Darwen Council and Executive Member for Growth and Development, tells **The Shuttle**: "King George's Hall is the jewel in the crown of our Cultural Quarter – an iconic venue for the whole of the North West, and we're incredibly proud to have it right here in our borough.

"Generations of visitors have amazing memories of seeing their favourite artists, bands, shows and comedians on stage, and we can't wait to welcome audiences back this autumn for a packed, unmissable line-up.

"Thanks to more than £13 million of new investment – the majority being Government funding secured by the



Leading councillors and senior officers visited King George's Hall to see the transformation taking shape

Council – the venue is undergoing extensive works.

"Opportunities like this happen only once in a generation, and we've worked hard to make the very most of it to help safeguard this historic building so acts can continue to delight audiences for another 100 years and more."

King George's Hall first opened in 1921, after serving as a Red Cross Hospital during the First World War.

Many of the original features remain today, including exquisite plasterwork and the magnificent Art Deco house lights, which have been carefully restored as part of this project.

'King of Curry,' Akbar's – the Cultural Quarter's flagship restaurant, set within the King George's Hall building – has also been upgraded and remains open as usual, serving up its award-winning cuisine. You can read more about that on page 67.

And opposite, the Blakey Moor building has been completely transformed in anticipation of the reopening, with work also underway on the neighbouring former Subway building too. Both perfect for new eateries – adding to the whole King George's Hall experience.

Councillor Mahmood adds: "That whole area – Blackburn's Cultural Quarter – has benefited from more than £50 million of new investment in recent years – a staggering amount.

"With a cultural resurgence in the town, the likes of The Exchange and The Making Rooms are also benefitting too.

"And elsewhere, both Darwen Library and Darwen Library Theatre are set to undergo multi-million-pound improvements as well as Darwen Market Hall.

"Investing in these places – places that really matter to our residents, our communities and our businesses – is important to us all and to our town's futures."

Indeed, while work continues at King George's Hall, Darwen Library Theatre continues to host a packed programme of live music, comedy, and more.

For full listings for both venues, visit:

www.bwdvenues.com

And for all the latest updates, follow King George's Hall on Facebook and Instagram.





Our young people deserve this!

The finishing touches are being made to Darwen's brand-new youth centre and it's super impressive

For the past year, right in the heart of Darwen, the town's brand-new Youth Zone has been taking shape.

And while the term 'state-of-the-art' may be readily banded about with new developments like this, this project truly lives up to that description.

Doubling the size of the facility that once stood there, the new centre will be open to youngsters seven days a week - every weeknight, weekends and school holidays too.

And how lucky they'll be to visit.

Step inside and there's everything from a games cave to a recording studio, a salon, a gym, its own version of the hugely popular Making Rooms, and more.

And it's completely free to enjoy, including the tasty, warm food served up too.

"This project really is impressive," says Councillor Julie Gunn, Deputy Leader of Blackburn with Darwen Council and the executive lead for Children's Services and Education - which was recently rated Good by Ofsted.

"I walk around this facility - this state-of-the-art facility - and I know it is what our young people deserve. It's absolutely brilliant."

The scheme is being delivered as part of more than £8 million of new Government funding, successfully secured by the Council and its partners, for improved youth facilities across the borough. And it forms part of tens of millions of pounds of new investment for the town - you can read more about that on page 53.

Darwen Youth Zone itself has benefitted from funding through the



Youth Investment Fund, Council investment and Youth Zone contributions - including invaluable support from local businesses through the hugely successful patron scheme.

The same developers, Seddon Construction, also recently finalised impressive improvements at Audley & Queen's Park Children's Centre too - both schemes a shining example of the partnership working that Blackburn with Darwen is renowned for nationally.

Wayne Wild, Chair of Blackburn and Darwen Youth Zone, adds: "What a remarkable journey Darwen Youth Zone has been on. From launching during Covid in The Meeting Place, to the space we currently have on Railway Road, and now this impressive new purpose-built Youth Zone - it really is incredible.

"We already have more than 350 young people as members of Darwen

Youth Zone and now, with this new facility, we can double that, which is fantastic.

"To think we now have two Youth Zones right here in Blackburn with Darwen really is a proud moment for everyone involved."

The whole Youth Zone ethos is about inspiring young people - offering them a safe place to have fun, learn new skills and be inspired. And inspired they will be at Darwen Youth Zone.

A community day, celebrating the official opening of the building, is set to be held in April. For details on that and all the latest on Darwen Youth Zone, please visit:

www.blackburnyz.org

On the website, you can also find out more about the patron scheme and the benefits for businesses.

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All fields marked with a * must be completed for the entry to be valid.

GDPR* Your data will only be used to contact you should you be the winner of this competition.

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Take a bao – Blackburn’s first sushi spot is a huge hit with foodies

In our last edition of **The Shuttle**, we told you how Blackburn is quickly earning a reputation as one of the North West’s most exciting foodie destinations, with a growing number of restaurants, cafés, and street food pioneers putting the town centre firmly on the culinary map.

And now something new has been added to the impressive mix too – the town’s centre’s very first East Asian restaurant, Shinsen Sushi.

Shinsen is bringing fresh sushi, ramen, bao buns, bento boxes, donburi, poke bowls, and more to Cathedral Square, a new neighbour for the already hugely popular Checks & Greys.

For chef Dimitris Kalliontzis it’s a dream come true.

Shinsen first impressed diners on Blackburn Market, attracting food lovers from across the North West who described the sushi as ‘the best they’ve ever had.’

Its popularity was such that Shinsen quickly expanded from its first stall – and after outgrowing an even larger

one, Cathedral Square became the natural next step.

Dimitris says: “I studied at Culinary Arts School in Greece and I’ve worked at award-winning restaurants across Europe.

“Making sushi actually started as a hobby though – cooking for family, friends, and colleagues.

“The response was incredible, so I began taking orders from home.

“After the pandemic, we launched Shinsen at Blackburn Market, and two years later, opening our own dine in spot is truly a dream come true.”

Shinsen offers a broad menu to satisfy every craving and everything is prepared in an open kitchen, allowing diners to watch their meals being made, all using the freshest ingredients.

The restaurant also offers click-and-collect, deliveries, and outside sushi catering too.

“Blackburn has amazing culinary talent and passionate food lovers,” Dimitris adds.

“We want people to enjoy the whole experience, try something new, and see what we offer.

“We’re incredibly grateful to our loyal customers – who travel from across the North West – and can’t wait to welcome new faces soon.”

Shinsen is open Tuesday to Sunday, with free evening parking at the Jubilee Car Park.

Councillor **Quesir Mahmood**, Deputy Leader of Blackburn with Darwen Council, praised the opening: “From award-winning South Indian cuisine to reinvented street food, Shinsen Sushi adds a delicious Japanese offering to Blackburn’s vibrant culinary offering.

“It’s fantastic to see a market start-up grow into its own restaurant, and I wish Dimitris every success.”

For more on places to eat and things to do in Blackburn town centre, visit:

www.discoverblackburn.co.uk

And for all the latest updates, follow Shinsen on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok.



From Darwen to the world: centuries old craftsmanship on a global stage

Traditional fireclay sinks are a hallmark of luxury interiors – timeless, elegant and built to last for generations.

And **The Shuttle** is proud to report that the very first traditional fireclay sink was produced right here in our borough.

When the architectural division of a respected terracotta manufacturer closed its doors in 2015, it could have marked the end of a centuries-old craft in Darwen. Instead, it became the beginning of something remarkable as two former employees made a bold decision: to protect the rare, highly specialised ceramic craftsmanship that had shaped Darwen's identity for generations.

Jon Wilson and Steve Allen chose to

rebuild the business, creating Darwen Terracotta and, two years later, the Whitebirk Sink Company – two businesses rooted firmly in our borough but working on a global stage.

By combining traditional craftsmanship dating back to the late 1800s with modern digital technology and precision engineering, they transformed challenge into opportunity, safeguarding skills, protecting jobs and ensuring a historic Lancashire craft could continue to evolve and succeed.

Co-founder Jon Wilson tells **The Shuttle**: “From the very beginning, this business has been about people. We founded Darwen Terracotta to protect skills, livelihoods and a craft that matters.



Jon Wilson



"Being able to grow from our Blackburn base while staying true to traditional skills and seeing our work exported around the world is something we're incredibly proud of."

Today, the Whitebirk Sink Company stands as the last British-owned maker



Steve Allen

still carrying forward the handcrafted fireclay sink tradition. Equally as impressive, Darwen Terracotta is now the UK's largest specialist producer of architectural terracotta.

Their craftsmanship can be seen in some of the country's most recognisable buildings, including Harrods, the Natural History Museum and the Royal Albert Hall.

Internationally, their work features in landmarks such as the Wrigley Building in Chicago and New York's Martinique Hotel - proof that Darwen craftsmanship is admired across the globe.

A decade into trading, the company has taken its next significant step: moving towards employee ownership.

Co-founder Steve Allen adds: "Transitioning the business to employee ownership was a decision driven by people and legacy. We wanted to ensure the business remained independent, that our employees were recognised for the

role they have played in building it, and that the company was set up for long-term continuity."

For Jon and Steve, keeping their business in the borough was a deliberate choice. Blackburn and Darwen have a rare concentration of specialist ceramic and terracotta expertise, with skills passed down locally for well over a century.

"Relocating elsewhere would have meant losing the knowledge, experience and craftsmanship embedded within this community," Jon adds. "Staying here means those skills continue to thrive."

Firmly rooted here in our borough yet shaping buildings across the world, Darwen Terracotta and the Whitebirk Sink Company stand as powerful examples of what can be achieved when heritage, innovation and local pride come together.

This is a centuries-old craft - yet proudly preserved and very much part of our borough's future.

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Bringing The Exchange back to life

Blackburn with Darwen has long been shaped by people who quietly give their lives to the community, and few embody that more fully than Alastair Murdoch.

He's a GP by training, a church leader by calling, and now a trustee championing one of the town's most ambitious regeneration projects: The Exchange.

Alastair first arrived in Blackburn as a young doctor, and what he saw made a lasting impression, eventually leading him to helping establish the Cornerstone Practice, where he served for more than 30 years.

Alongside medicine, community work grew naturally from his own personal journey of faith and that sense of purpose broadened again in 2012 when Re:Ignite Church was founded.

Soon after, concern grew for a well-known Blackburn town centre building in serious decline: The Exchange - the former Apollo Cinema which was later home to Tiggis restaurant too.

For Alastair, it was more than just bricks and mortar. "It was where we came as a family. It held so many memories."

When a major early donation arrived, the church stepped forward and purchased the building in 2015.

Since then, The Exchange has become a restoration project of remarkable scale, requiring over £10million in

total. Funding has come from the church, funding secured by the Council through the Government's Levelling Up Partnership, supportive funders, and a major pending bid to the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

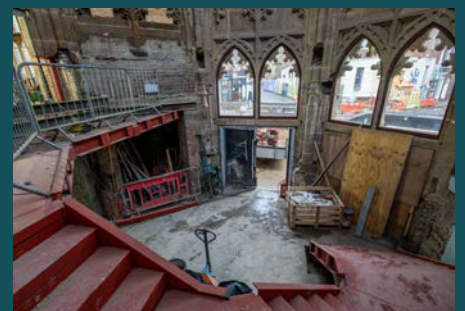
"We had no idea what a roller coaster this would be," Alastair says, "But seeing the tower completed is a significant milestone."

Behind the project is a diverse and deeply committed team: founding members, trustees with expertise ranging from business to arts, volunteers with backgrounds in law, heritage, journalism and community engagement, and partners such as the council, One Voice Blackburn, Super Slow Way, the British Textile Biennial and the National Festival of Making.

"People have prayed, believed, donated, painted, cleaned, volunteered and generally supported the vision. We simply wouldn't be here without them," says Alastair.

The building itself continues to surprise. Alastair lights up when describing his favourite discovery, the original entrance to the stalls. "Some of the older residents had told us stories about sneaking in through Town Hall Street," he adds. "Uncovering the pressed steel tiles, the staircase and the original ticket office felt like bringing lost history back into the light."

While a partial reopening is planned for May, full refurbishment isn't expected to



be complete until 2031. But for Alastair, the heart of the project is already clear. "The building is for everyone and that's written into the charity's governing document," he says.

"We want The Exchange to bring people together, strengthen cohesion and restore hope. This town has so much potential, and I'm grateful to have spent my life here."

**Follow the progress of
The Exchange restoration:**
www.exchangeblackburn.org.uk



Writer Sufiyaan Salam with his father, Shakil Salam at the BAFTAs

From Blackburn to BAFTAs: writer Sufiyaan Salam earns award nod

Here at **The Shuttle**, we love writing about the incredible things our residents achieve. And someone who knows a thing or two about writing incredible stories is Sufiyaan Salam, whose latest short film recently earned him a BAFTA nomination.

From childhood daydreams in Blackburn Library to theatres, film sets and a debut novel on the horizon, Sufiyaan's journey is one powered by imagination, grit and a deep sense of home.

Growing up in Blackburn, storytelling came naturally through opportunities around him. "I was always telling stories as a kid," Sufiyaan says. "Though when you're a kid, telling stories sometimes means 'lying', and would often get me in trouble."

Early memories of his mum reading to him and weekend trips to Blackburn Library helped spark his love of words, and a school exercise describing a beach at age six sealed the deal. But it wasn't until watching a Spider Man 2 behind the scenes documentary that he realised writing was something people actually did for a living.

From then on, he never stopped: doodling in notebooks, making films with cousins and even teaching himself animation. As a teenager, he uploaded short films to YouTube "long before it was cool", where he met longtime collaborator Luis Hindman, who went on to cocreate the BAFTA-nominated short film with him.

When the nomination came, his first reaction was relief. He'd once casually told a crew member his ambition was "to get a BAFTA" and, despite missing out, Sufiyaan was thrilled to take his dad to the 2026 ceremony. "It was great to get to take my dad to the BAFTAs, and an honour to celebrate MAGID / ZAFAR with our talented cast and crew."

Among his achievements, one milestone stands out: seeing his first



play performed at London's Bunker Theatre in early 2020. Sufiyaan reflects, "It was the first time my work had been performed by real actors, in front of a real audience. I was 22. It made me realise: ahh, okay... I want to do this for the rest of my life."

He's also had several surreal encounters along the way including meeting Stormzy - multiple times! "It's funny going from being a fan to suddenly finding yourself in a competitive card game or a discussion about the origins of Tetris," says Sufiyaan.

Family remains one of his strongest sources of inspiration. His parents and grandparents, who uprooted their lives to move to the UK, demonstrated resilience and sacrifice. His dad arrived in the 1980s with no English and now works for an NHS charity, driven by a desire to help his community.

Reflecting on their journey, Sufiyaan feels he's "trying to bring that immigrant work ethic" into his own career.

Now living in London, his routines have shifted, but Blackburn remains deeply rooted in him. Indeed, every trip home includes a visit to Kebabish, as well as an appreciation for Blackburn's better tasting water and the famous northern hospitality. He misses his mum's cooking too and even the Blackburn accent.

These days, Sufiyaan's schedule centres on the gym, writing sessions and watching at least one film each night.

His advice to young creatives is simple and sincere: "Don't be afraid to dream big. Be resilient. And have something you want to say."

He also believes in the importance of reading, being a little bit deluded and in focusing on making your work "so good, it's undeniable."

With his debut novel WIMMY ROAD BOYZ due for release on 28 May, alongside multiple film and TV projects in development, Sufiyaan Salam's star continues to rise.



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Meet Shirley - the sparkle behind the sweat!



If you've been lucky enough to come across Shirley Kelly, you'll know that she is a true ray of sunshine.

A fitness instructor at all three of BwD Leisure's sites - Blackburn, Darwen and Witton Park - in one week she can teach no less than 16 classes, with up to five in one day. And they're almost always full to the brim!

From yoga, to dance, aqua aerobics and even martial arts - this lady can do it all.

"I do anything that makes you feel great" she beams.

Shirley began teaching at BwD Leisure in 2021 after lockdown left her looking for a new challenge and the chance to reconnect with people.

"Lockdown was really tough," she explains. "I need to be around people - I thrive on that interaction."

Her interest in fitness goes back many years with a family background in health and sport - including her brother running a gym.

In fact, to help promote it, Shirley competed in bodybuilding competitions and was crowned UK Bodybuilding Champion in the figure category in 1989, wearing a sparkly bikini no less. She also holds a black belt in karate.

"Everyone gets in the zone as soon as I put my mic on," she says with a smile.

Shirley's favourite class to teach is yoga, which she believes benefits both strength and flexibility, as well as wellbeing. A typical class can attract up to 40 participants of all ages and backgrounds.

"BwD members embrace everything - they've got so much grit. They never miss a class either, they'll come whatever the weather - even in rain or snow."

She is also well known for her lively dance sessions, which often see participants wearing bright, sparkly outfits.

Shirley encourages anyone who hasn't tried a class before to just turn up as sessions can be adapted for different fitness levels.

"I teach people how to tap into their own internal pharmacy," she says. "When someone leaves saying 'that was fantastic', I know I've done my job."

"In fact, all the staff at BwD Leisure are awesome at what they do. All trainers share the same goal to get people fit and living their best lives."

To support her active lifestyle, Shirley makes sure that she fuels her body correctly with plenty of protein and



five different colours of fruit and vegetables every day.

"If I'm feeling tired, I just look around at everyone working hard and it recharges me. I've found my people," she adds.

BwD Leisure memberships start from as little as £18.50 a month.

As well as classes at all three sites, you can get a free PT session every single month and access to the swimming pools.

Find out more at:

bwdleisure.com

Picture by Shafiq Khan

Everyone's welcome at Blackburn's newest mosque

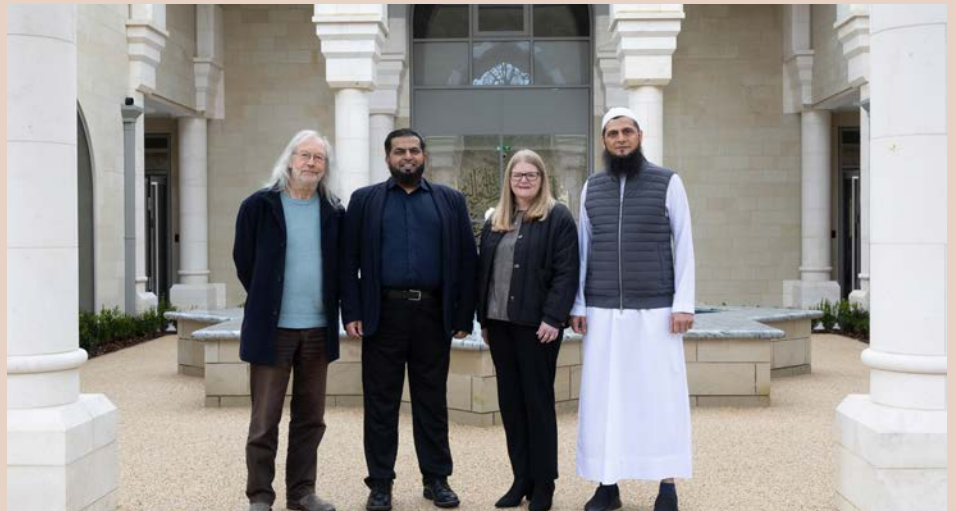
If you've travelled along Preston New Road over the past couple of years, you won't have missed the remarkable transformation taking place on the former site of Westholme Junior School.

What was once a vacant plot is now home to one of the most striking mosque developments in the North West. Masjid E Vali officially opened its doors in January 2026, marking the completion of a project more than five years in the making – and one of the region's most ambitious new places of worship in recent years.

The mosque has been funded by the Issa Foundation, a charity established by Blackburn with Darwen-born brothers and entrepreneurs Zuber Issa CBE and Mohsin Issa CBE – founders of EG Group. The development is named in memory of their late father, Vali Issa.

Speaking to The Shuttle, Zuber Issa said the mosque represents far more than bricks and mortar.

"Masjid E Vali stands as a tribute to my



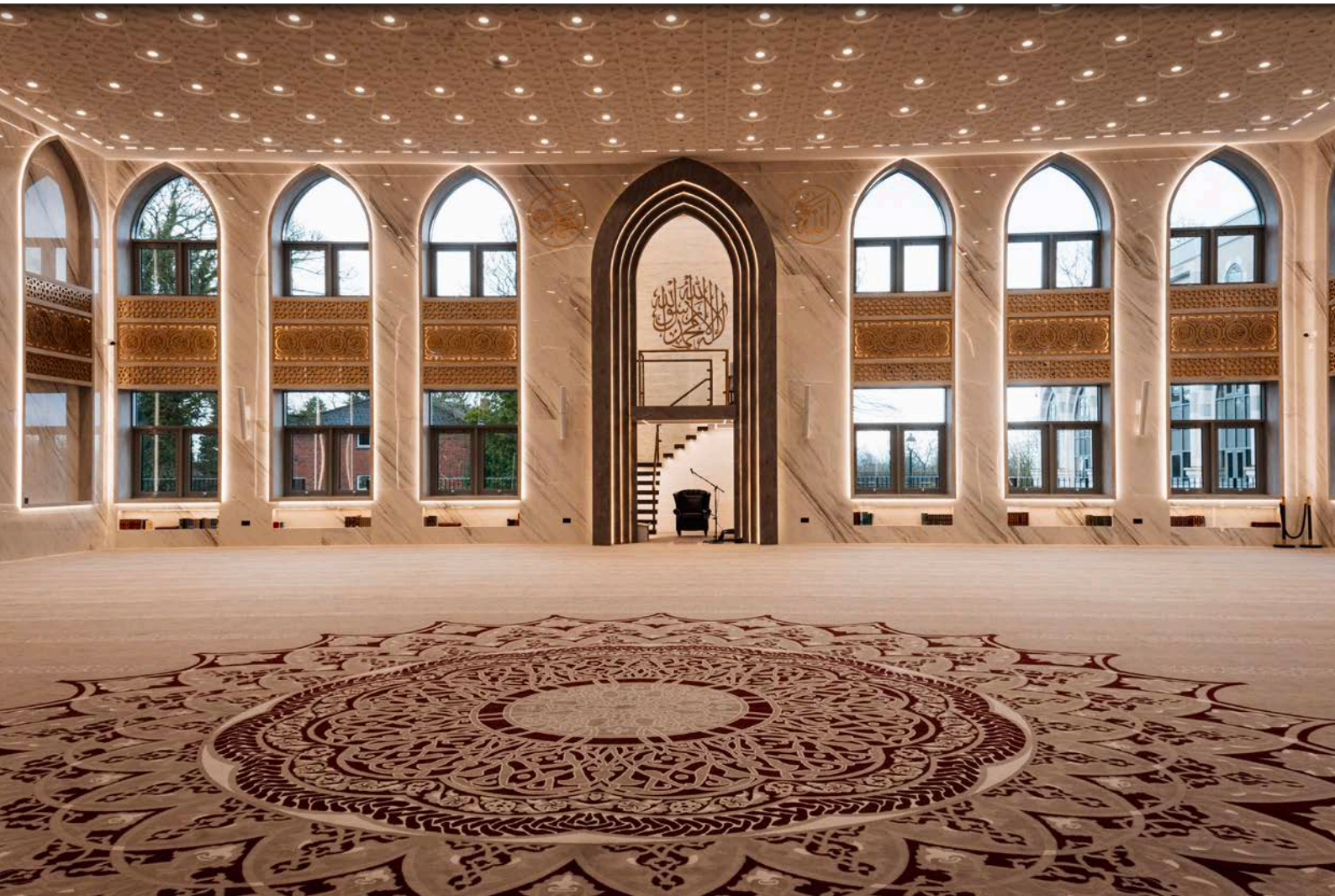
Councillor Phil Riley, EG Group's Ilyas Munshi, Council Chief Executive Denise Park and Javed Patel of the mosque's management team

father's values of compassion, humility and service to others," he says. "He believed in the power of community, in opening doors rather than closing them, and in bringing people together regardless of faith, ethnicity or background.

"I hope that Masjid E Vali becomes not only a place of prayer, but also a place

of unity, learning, understanding and lasting friendships for generations to come."

Inspired by beautiful architecture from across the Middle East, the mosque blends classic and contemporary Islamic design with high-quality local materials, creating a welcoming and uplifting space for the whole community to benefit from.



Visitors enter through elegant marble pillars and pass a tranquil fountain before arriving at a welcoming reception area, which leads into the main prayer hall. The hall can accommodate more than 1,000 worshippers, making it one of the largest mosques in the region.

Masjid E Vali also includes dedicated prayer spaces for women, alongside a crèche and children's play area - the first mosque in Lancashire to offer such facilities.

A neighbouring community building provides flexible space for events, educational programmes, wellbeing activities and wider community use.

Since opening, the mosque has attracted visitors from across the UK and beyond, with many praising not only its architectural beauty, but its strong focus on community engagement.

Councillor Quesir Mahmood, Deputy Leader of Blackburn with Darwen Council, says, "While the mosque will serve worshippers locally and from



further afield, the message from the Issa family and the management team is clear that everyone is welcome at Masjid E Vali. It has been designed not only as a place of worship, but as a true community hub for people of all faiths and none.

"It has already hosted events such as women's health days and community safety initiatives, and it has huge potential to play an important role in bringing people together across Blackburn with Darwen."

Masjid E Vali is hosting a community open day on Sunday 19 April, 9am to 12.30pm. Everyone is welcome to take a tour of the mosque and learn more about the community spaces.

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Guardian of the moors

James Readfern is a familiar face on the moors above Darwen. For the past eight years, he's been a custodian of the land, working as a ranger on the Lord's Hall Estate, a sprawling 1,500 acre area, equivalent to around 800 football pitches.

"I fell into being a ranger as my family work in the area. I didn't take the conventional route via agricultural college, although that's what I'd recommend to anyone wanting to follow this path," James explains.

Living and working at the top of the moor is a demanding role, but one that comes with a fantastic lifestyle. James can often be seen patrolling the moors every day, sometimes accompanied by his assistant Nathan. Their work ranges from path and vegetation maintenance to litter picking, footbridge restoration and more - all to ensure the moors remain a safe and welcoming place for both people and wildlife.

"One of the important jobs we do is cutting the heather," says James. "Many species, like the curlew, are ground-nesting birds and rely on short vegetation to feed."

Another key responsibility is tackling issues such as wildfires and antisocial behaviour. James frequently liaises

with emergency services to keep the moors safe.

"We often have problems with off-road bikers. Riding motorbikes on the moor is illegal because it causes severe long-term environmental damage. The moor is mainly peat, which is incredibly delicate and only builds up by about 1mm per year."

Rain, snow or shine, the weather doesn't deter James from his patrols, though it can be challenging.

"The weather is very changeable in winter, and snow often causes problems. But on a summer's day, being up there is something quite special."

It's not a role for everyone, James admits.

"I've got a personality suited to the job because I enjoy my own company. Many people would find it very lonely."

Over the years, James has been involved in a variety of projects: slowing water flow to reduce flooding



in Darwen, planting native species, creating firebreaks - and his favourite, the restoration of Darwen Tower.

"It's part of my job to ensure the tower is still standing in 100 or 200 years, and I like that idea," he says.

James' advice for anyone visiting the moors? "Know the Countryside Code and leave it as you find it. And most importantly, be kind."

For those interested in getting involved in the work happening on the moors, there are plenty of volunteering opportunities hosted by the Lancashire Wildlife Trust. More information can be found at lancashire-wildlife-trust.goassemble.com

Grace Ashcroft-Gardner
as Corrie's Lily Platt



Amazing Grace!

From Darwen to the cobbles: 13-year-old lands dream role on Coronation Street

Imagine being just 13 years old and stepping into a role on one of the biggest and most recognisable programmes on British television.

For most young people, it's the stuff of dreams.

But for Darwen teenager Grace Ashcroft-Gardner, it has become an exciting reality.

The talented youngster plays Lily Platt in Coronation Street, joining the iconic cast on the world-famous cobbles of Weatherfield.

Watched by millions of viewers across the UK and beyond, the long-running ITV drama has launched countless careers over its 60-plus-year history - and Grace is now proudly becoming part of that legacy.

Grace's passion for performing began at a very young age. Whether it was dancing around the living room, taking part in local performances, or confidently stepping onto the stage, family and friends quickly noticed her natural ability and love for entertaining.

What started as a childhood hobby soon developed into a serious ambition, fuelled by dedication, hard work, and a fearless approach to new challenges.

That early love for the stage has now taken Grace, who attends school in Blackburn, from local beginnings to one of the most famous streets in British television.

Despite her rising profile, she remains firmly grounded, continuing to attend school locally while carefully balancing her education with the demanding filming schedule that comes with appearing in a major TV production - no small feat for someone so young.

Proud mum Kathryn shared the family's excitement with **The Shuttle**, describing the experience as a dream come true.



"Seeing her work alongside Coronation Street legends like Barbara Knox, (who plays Rita), really is a dream come true!"

She says: "We are unbelievably proud of Grace. She has always loved performing, but to see her take such a huge step at such a young age is incredible.

"Working alongside Coronation Street legends like Barbara Knox, who plays Rita, is something we never could have imagined.

"She's worked so hard for this opportunity, and to watch her film on such an iconic set, surrounded by people she has admired for years, really is special for our whole family."

For Grace, joining Coronation Street is about far more than just securing a role. It represents a chance to learn from some of the most respected performers in the industry, gain invaluable on-set experience, and grow as an actress within one of Britain's most-loved television programmes.

Her journey to Weatherfield has been supported by Stagebox, a world-class performance training programme and industry accelerator that helps young talent develop the skills needed to succeed at the highest level.

Indeed, Grace secured her audition for Lily Platt through Stagebox Management, the organisation's in-house agency, which has helped more than 600 students and alumni land major screen roles.

She's also had dance and performing arts training from the age of three with Charlotte Read Dance Company, based in Darwen - which she still attends today - and Darwen School of Music, where she had singing lessons for six years.

Grace's story is proof that big dreams really can start close to home!

For more information, please visit:
www.stagebox.uk



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Darwen Saddlers: 180 years of skill and tradition

Every Darrener will have passed J Houghton & Son, better known as Darwen Saddlers. Sitting proudly on Bolton Road, it's in a prime spot – but don't be fooled by the modest exterior. While the sign reads saddlers and harness makers, the skills inside stretch far beyond that description.

"People come in with all sorts of things they want fixing," says John Thomas, a descendant of founder Harry Baldock, who started the business back in 1845. "I like anything that's unusual. I don't like to be beaten."

John first started working in the shop at just 13 years old and now runs the business alongside his relative, Bryan Galloway.

In its early days, the workshop specialised in saddlery and harnesses before expanding into leather goods for Darwen's thriving cotton industry – including mill belting and even footballs. Later, Harry's nephew William Houghton took the reins, branching out into car trimming, motor hoods and horse-drawn carriages.

Today, John and Bryan still do all of that – and more – using many of the same traditional tools and machines.

They've been making harnesses for the shire horses at Thwaites Brewery since the 1960s, and their work has even found its way into aristocratic homes. One of their pieces is said to hang on a wall in Chatsworth House.

"We deal with people from all over the country – Somerset to Durham," John explains, while working on a bespoke knife case.

Everything is made to order, exactly to the customer's requirements, and as much as possible is done by hand, using time-honoured techniques. From handbags and belts to walking sticks, cases and even a corset (!) – be sure to ask John about that story if you visit.

Darwen Saddlers doesn't list its work online. Instead, it relies on reputation, craftsmanship and word of mouth – a go-to place for anyone looking for something truly special.

Looking ahead, it's unlikely that anyone will take over the business once John and Bryan step away.

"After we finish, that's it," says John.

"Until then, I'll keep going until my mind and fingers give up."





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**BLACKBURN
with
DARWEN**
BOROUGH COUNCIL

The Council changes coming to Blackburn with Darwen

What Local Government Reorganisation means for residents by 2028

You may have seen the term LGR mentioned in the news or council updates recently.

It stands for Local Government Reorganisation – and it's set to reshape how local services are run across Lancashire. It's the biggest change to local government in more than 50 years.

The Government has been consulting and a final decision on the future structure will be made this summer.

Here's a clear guide to what's being proposed and what it could mean for people in Blackburn with Darwen.

What is Local Government Reorganisation?

Across Lancashire, services are currently split between:

- Lancashire County Council – e.g. education, social care, highways
- District councils – e.g. bins, housing, planning, leisure
- Two unitary authorities – Blackburn with Darwen and Blackpool Councils – single organisations responsible for all local services in their areas

The Government wants fewer, larger unitary councils – which would be responsible for all these local services.

The aim is to:

- Simplify services
- Reduce duplication
- Save money
- Make it clearer who is responsible for what

Blackburn with Darwen is already a unitary authority, but the wider reorganisation could change the area we work in and the council structures around us.

What options are being considered?

Blackburn with Darwen, working with several neighbouring authorities, has supported a proposal for three unitary councils across Lancashire.

Different councils across the county have proposed alternative models, including:

- A two-council structure, creating much larger North and South Lancashire authorities
- Other variations involving four or five councils

The Government will choose the option it believes delivers the best balance of:

- Strong local identity
- Efficient services
- Financial stability
- Effective leadership

You can read all five proposals on the Council's website:

www.blackburn.gov.uk

What will change for residents?

The new structure will come into effect in April 2028.

What will continue:

- Town and place names stay the same
- Bin collections and other local services will continue
- Council tax will still be paid
- Schools, care services and leisure will remain locally delivered

What may change:

- New council boundaries and names
- New councillors representing revised ward areas after elections
- Some services reorganised or combined
- One organisation delivering everything instead of multiple councils

The intention is simpler, more joined-up services with less confusion about who does what in some areas.

The Government's decision this summer will determine which future the borough moves towards.

What happens next?

- Decision due: Summer 2026
- Elections to new 'shadow' authorities: May 2027
- New councils start: April 2028

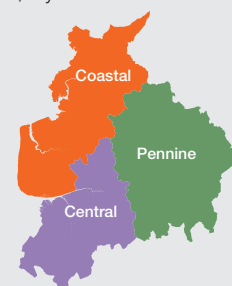
2 Unitary Authorities:

Supported by Lancashire County Council



3 Unitary Authorities:

Supported by Blackburn with Darwen, Hyndburn, Fylde, Wyre and Rossendale Councils



4 Unitary Authorities:

Supported by Chorley, South Ribble, Ribble Valley, Preston, West Lancashire and Lancaster City Councils



4 Unitary Authorities:

Alternative option: Supported by Blackpool Council



5 Unitary Authorities:

Supported by Burnley and Pendle Councils





Helping women build strength, confidence and connection

The owner of Lancashire's first women's only reformer Pilates studio is proud of the diverse community she has grown, inspired by local members

Michelle Payne owns Pulse Pilates and opened her first studio at Stanley House Hotel in March 2024.

At that time, Pulse Pilates was the only reformer Pilates studio in Lancashire, equipped with 10 reformer machines that have sliding platforms, springs, pulleys and straps to add resistance for a full body workout.

Blackburn born Michelle tells **The Shuttle**: "Blackburn was the perfect place for me to open my first studio.

"Blackburn is so special in that the town's diversity has given us an amazing platform to grow. It's important to me that we serve our members' needs - we put them at the heart of everything we do."

Originally open to everyone, Michelle's decision to become a women-only studio was inspired by Pulse Blackburn members.

"I've been a member of gyms all over the world, and I never really found a studio that met my needs," she says. "It was a brave decision to restrict our Blackburn membership, but I knew it was the right thing to do for this community.

"Becoming a women-only space gives our members extra confidence and security when they step into the studio to take time for themselves and their fitness."

Once a competitive rower, Michelle has long had a passion for fitness. And she feels Pilates supported her during a difficult time going through a series of unsuccessful IVF treatments. "When I felt like my body was letting me down, Pilates reminded me that my body is strong," she shares.

This led to the former marketing professional retraining as a Pilates instructor in her early 40s. "I knew I could use Pilates to help other people, and I've put all my love into Pulse."



Originally developed by Joseph Pilates over 100 years ago, the practice was developed further in World War One to help rehabilitate injured servicemen.

Michelle explains: "Pilates can support people through every stage of their lives. At Pulse, we have members from age 18 right up to their eighties.

"Pilates complements other fitness training, by improving the body's flexibility and building strength using low impact exercises. For me, it offers a holistic approach to fitness."

Michelle is keen to share the benefits of Pilates with everyone.

"So often, women don't make time for themselves, particularly as they age and find themselves juggling work and family responsibilities. Building strength is important for all women as we age, to future-proof our bodies so we can enjoy life to the fullest."

Michelle has carefully built her teaching team at her studios in Lancashire.

"Our team also reflects the area's diversity. It's really important to me that

members coming into our studio feel seen, and recognise themselves in our teaching team."

Michelle's 12-strong team have all completed a five-month training programme and can deliver classes in both mat and reformer Pilates.

After the success of Pulse Blackburn, Michelle opened a Ribble Valley studio in autumn 2025. She's currently working towards opening a Preston studio this spring.

Beyond Lancashire, Michelle plans to take Pulse Pilates nationwide, and is getting ready to launch an activewear line soon.

"Pulse Blackburn will always be special to me. I'm proud that we have grown such a supportive community here. Over the last two years, I've learnt so much as a business owner, and grown as a person too."

Find out more about Pulse Pilates at:
www.wearepulse.co

Spotted a lump?

Get it checked **right away.**

Your doctor will want to see you.
Book an appointment.



CHECK IT 

Don't chance it.

Listen to your body. **Act on cancer.**

Find out more at: ActOnCancer.co.uk/CheckIt

Photo: Derren Lee Poole



Darreners Begin2Sing

When Paul Stuart Davies set up the Begin2Sing project for Darwen, it was never just about hitting the right notes.

For this experienced music teacher, it's always been about encouraging Darreners to boost their wellbeing through singing, while building their confidence and celebrating their town.

"I've seen the confidence and joy that singing can bring to people of all ages," Paul explains. "Begin2Sing is about giving that to local people who have never had any singing tuition before, and building them up to perform in front of an audience."

And for many taking part, the impact has been life-changing.

Mother and daughter Charlotte and Hailey are regulars at the Begin2Sing workshops. Charlotte joined last August, having seen the project advertised on Facebook.

"I love singing karaoke at home but felt really nervous about singing in public. Even after signing up, I questioned whether I could actually do it.

"Coming along to the first workshop

was quite daunting – I have anxiety and struggle with meeting new people. But everyone was so welcoming, and Paul was brilliant at making us feel comfortable."

16 year old Hailey, who has struggled with mental health during her teenage years, joined her mum at the workshops in early 2026. Pushing herself out of her comfort zone, she quickly surprised herself.

"I felt nervous, but I wanted to challenge myself," she says. "I don't normally speak to anyone, but I felt confident enough to talk to other people at the workshops. I even sang a short solo in my very first session!"

Paul feels really proud of the Begin2Sing community that he has built, with friendships forming and confidence growing. "It's been wonderful to hear about the positive impact on people's wellbeing."

People taking part in the Begin2Sing project have even taken to the stage over the last few months – including performing live at the Christmas lights switch-on events in both Blackburn and Darwen. Charlotte was among



Mum and daughter Charlotte and Hailey attend Begin2Sing together

those performing the Begin2Sing single, written by Paul and inspired by Darwen, at these festive events.

Charlotte, who also suffers with Crohn's disease and fibromyalgia and is unable to work, adds: "I never would have dreamed I could do that! Begin2Sing has really helped me with my wellbeing. When I'm singing, I feel like I'm in a different place."

Find out more about Begin2Sing workshops:

Facebook Begin2Sing Darwen
Instagram begin2sing

Discover everything your local library has to offer

Books

eBooks

eAudiobooks
& ePress

Free Wi-Fi
& computers

Printing,
photocopying
& scanning

Online resources

Study spaces

Activities
& events
for everyone

Community history

cottontown.org

Digital support
& IT courses

Space to meet

Information

Home Delivery
Service

Find opening times, join the library, search the catalogue or
manage your account online, all in one convenient place.

Visit bwdlibraries.com

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Go on, read into it!

It's the National Year of Reading – and the very fact that you're reading this **Shuttle** article means you're already taking part, perhaps without even realising it!

But could you be tempted to read more, or even encourage others to give it a go?

That's exactly what the friendly team at Blackburn with Darwen Library Service are on hand to help with no matter your age or interests

And with more than 100,000 books on the shelves across the borough's five busy libraries, alongside over 104,000 free e-books, audiobooks, newspapers and magazines available online, getting started has never been easier.

Adele Karwat, library service manager, says: "We know that reading helps expand worlds, sharpens minds and fuels creativity. It lets us escape and is great for our wellbeing.

"For some people, it can be hard to find the time to read, but with so many benefits, we want to be part of helping change that.

"The motto for the National Year of Reading is: 'If you're into it, read into it' – and that can mean a book, a newspaper article, a magazine feature, song lyrics – whatever takes your fancy."

A brand-new Blackburn with Darwen Libraries website is now live, putting a

huge amount of reading material right at your fingertips.

BorrowBox is a great example. Accessible via the website, the app lets you read the latest books, daily newspapers and magazines – all for free.

You can also learn a new language using the e-language tools, check opening times for your local library, and explore a full rundown of what's on.

There's a link through to the Cotton Town website too – a fascinating archive celebrating Blackburn with Darwen's rich history, perfect for anyone keen to learn more about where they live.

And if you think libraries are quiet places, think again. There are more than 40 activities every week – from reading groups and digital workshops to LEGO Club, live performances, knit and natter, IT courses and even a community apiary.

Adele adds: "The website is a great place to start. We know people are incredibly busy, but online you can browse the latest releases, access free online resources, manage your library account and plan a visit to your nearest library – and it's all really quick and easy to do.

"Libraries are fantastic community hubs, welcoming spaces with so much to see and do, as well as free Wifi and computer access. And if you're lucky, you might even bump into our lovable mascot Wordsworth!"

Blackburn Library also recently

celebrated an important milestone: 50 years at its current home on Town Hall Street.

Fascinatingly, when the doors first opened there in 1975, an incredible 400 people a day signed up to become members.

If you're not already a library member, you can join today for free – in-person or online.

You'll find libraries in Blackburn, Darwen, Mill Hill, Cherry Tree and Roman Road.



Go all in with the National Year of Reading!

Check out the brand-new library website at:

www.bwdlibraries.com



Crompton Fields, Darwen



Welcome home!

Make the move in 2026.

Brand new, family friendly homes in the Holden Fold area of Darwen.

Crompton Fields offers a range of home sizes and styles to suit your needs. Whether you are a first-time buyer, need somewhere bigger as your family grows, or looking to downsize, you'll find a modern, energy-efficient home that is perfect for you.

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Blackburn Cathedral: A century of faith, community and culture

A year-long programme of events and activities is marking a major milestone for one of Blackburn's most recognisable landmarks.

The Cathedral will host an ambitious programme of celebratory events, exhibitions and special projects, all designed to reflect the many different strands of the Cathedral's place across the North West to mark its 100th anniversary.

Organisers hope the centenary will serve not only as a moment of reflection, but also a launchpad for the Cathedral's next century.

The Revd Canon Andrew Horsfall, Interim Dean of Blackburn, tells **The Shuttle**: "Since becoming a cathedral in 1926, this building has stood as a beacon of faith and fellowship at the heart of our community in Blackburn. This centenary year offers a unique opportunity to honour our heritage while looking forward with renewed purpose to what lies ahead."

The Cathedral's centenary will include more than 1,000 acts of worship, over 30 live music performances and a variety of civic occasions.

Visitors can enjoy a series of major exhibitions and installations throughout the year, including:

- A life-size replica of the Turin Shroud - until 12 April
- Fabric of Faith, celebrating cathedral vestments and featuring a special art installation by renowned textile artist Margo Selby - 27 March to 26 April
- A Table for the Nation, a striking 43ft table crafted from ancient fossilised oak - from May 2026 to May 2027
- The Parishes in Bloom flower exhibition - 21 to 24 August 2026
- Tyndale 500, marking the 500th anniversary of the Tyndale Bible - from September to November.



Textile artist Margo Selby

Music will play a central role in the centenary, with classical concerts, choral performances and lunchtime recitals bringing people together at the Cathedral.

Blackburn Cathedral continues to thrive as both a spiritual home and a vibrant cultural venue. This centenary year promises to be a landmark moment in an already remarkable story - and the beginning of an exciting new chapter.



Pure gold

Celebrating 155 years on Blackburn's high street, Ainsworth Jewellers continues to shine as a family business built on craftsmanship, care and community

For an incredible 155 years, Ainsworth Jewellers has been a proud and constant presence on Blackburn's high street.

The longest-established business in the town centre, five generations of the Ainsworth family have dedicated their lives to serving the people of Blackburn and beyond.

Engagements, weddings, birthdays - Ainsworth's has played a part in an untold number of special occasions over the years.

Their jewellery has stood the test of time, too, carefully passed down through family trees, just as the business itself has.

What began as a small workshop in 1870 - when Queen Victoria was on the throne - has since evolved into a true destination.

And today, under the careful watch of Phil Ainsworth and his wife Helen Dimmick, the business continues to grow. In fact, it has trebled in size - no small feat in an era of changing consumer habits.

Not ones to rest on their laurels, and in this milestone year, the team has launched a new champagne bar as part of a prestigious collaboration with Joseph Perrier.

They've also unveiled a dedicated Wedding Ring World - the 'perfect match' for their Inspired bridal boutique.

They've introduced a PureJewels Lotus Collection too, a striking range featuring a rare gold especially suited to all skin tones.

And if all this wasn't enough, there are even bigger plans on the horizon.

Going right back to their roots, a new workshop is set to launch at the Darwen Street emporium, with a



renewed focus on bespoke commissions and one-of-a-kind designs.

So, what's the key to their ever-growing success?

"I genuinely think it's down to the love we have," Helen tells **The Shuttle**.

"The genuine love and passion we have for jewellery and the industry, the love for our town and the people here, our loyal customers, and the love we have for each other."

It's a statement Ainsworth's customers are quick to agree with.

"We offer the Bond Street experience here in Blackburn," Helen adds - and having previously managed Tiffany's there, she has the experience to back up the claim.

"We love being part of people's stories, and it's the personal touch that keeps generations of the same families coming back to us, along with loyal customers from right across the North West.

"Loyal customers who turned out in droves to celebrate our special anniversaries recently."

Alongside 155 years of Ainsworth

Jewellers, the business also celebrated 60 years in Darwen Street and 35 years of Phil being part of the family business.

"We have the history and the wealth of experience," Phil says.

"Step into the shop and you can enjoy a fascinating trip down memory lane in our museum, celebrating everything from our links to making the FA Cup medals to the clock on the conservatory in Corporation Park.

"Ainsworth's is a proud part of Blackburn's history and a proud part of the community here. We very much want to be a proud part of its future too.

"We serve our customers in the very best way possible, so we can continue our legacy of craftsmanship, customer care and community connections for many more generations to come."

For years, the motto for Ainsworth Jewellers was 'Making Blackburn sparkle' - and what a true gem this business is!

Find out more and plan your visit: www.ainsworthjewellers.com

And follow Ainsworth Jewellers on Facebook and Instagram.

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The projects shaping Darwen's future

Darwen is a town proudly built on hard work. In fact, its coat of arms carries the Latin motto "Absque Labore Nihil" - nothing without labour - a sentiment that still rings true today.

And with tens of millions of pounds of new investment set to transform the town, there's a huge amount of hard work underway. Here's a quick update on the projects helping shape Darwen's future:

Darwen Town Deal

Town Deal funding has already helped complete the renovation of Darwen's beloved Jubilee Tower, the impressive transformation of Junction4 Skatepark and the new clubhouse at Darwen Cricket Club. Now, after careful planning, some of the larger schemes are now moving forward too.

In the last 12 months, planning permission has been secured to refurbish the town's Victorian Market Hall, including a new arcade to replace the existing annexe and improvements to the town centre car park. Permission has also been granted for works to Darwen's Carnegie library and the library theatre - with all three set to benefit from millions of pounds of new

investment. And, in the latest step forwards, Barnfield Construction has been appointed to lead the works.

Elsewhere - and Linked to Darwen's proud manufacturing heritage - work is already underway on Revolution Park at Chapels - set to be Darwen's new home for advanced manufacturing. And, next door, Town Deal funding has also supported the expansion of the Perspex International site - safeguarding local jobs while significantly reducing water and energy consumption too.

And with Darwen being so blessed with beautiful, Victorian parks that connect the town centre to the Pennine moorland and on to the Tower, in 2025, work began to improve pathways as part of the Destination Darwen scheme.

Pride in Place

Alongside the £25 million secured through the Town Deal Fund, Darwen was also one of 75 towns awarded £20 million in the first round of the Government's Pride in Place programme. To bring these opportunities together, a new Darwen Town Board has been formed.

Over the past year, work has been underway to develop a long-term investment plan for Government, setting out how the funding could be spent over the next decade.

Residents, businesses, young people, community groups and partners from right across Darwen were all invited to share their views. The key priorities identified include improving the town centre and supporting local businesses, enhancing parks and green spaces, positive activities for young people, supporting charities and community groups and more.

While the plan is being reviewed by Government, the board has launched a new Darwen Community Fund, with £250,000 available as part of a pilot programme to support local projects. Look out for more updates on that coming soon.

To be the first to hear about investment in Darwen, follow the Council on Facebook and Instagram.

To find out more about the town centre, visit:
www.darwentowncentre.co.uk

Food waste recycling is coming...



From Monday 1 June 2026, Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council will be collecting food waste from **every household** in the borough.

When your kitchen caddy is full of food waste, empty it into your new 23 litre food waste recycling bin.

Your 23 litre bin will be collected weekly.

What you'll receive to help you recycle.

1



Kitchen caddy

2



Caddy liners

3



Outside 23 litre food waste recycling bin

Thank you to those of you who are already recycling your food waste!



IT'S GOOD TO RECYCLE YOUR FOOD WASTE



What can you put in your caddy?

 Dairy	 Meat & bones	 Bread, cakes & pastries	 Tea & coffee grounds
 Fish	 Fruit & veg	 Rice, pasta & beans	 All uneaten food & plate scrapings



Please don't put these items in your caddy.

 Packaging	 Liquids like milk	 Oil or liquid fat	 Non-food items
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For more info, visit: www.recyclebwd.org



Feeding people not bins: Blackburn Foodbank's vital work

An external review of waste in the borough's bins last December found that 43 per cent of what's in the burgundy bin is food waste. Of that, around two-thirds is 'edible' food – meaning perfectly good food that could have been eaten is being thrown away.

At the same time, many people in the borough don't always have enough food – something Blackburn Foodbank sees first-hand. Supporting around 300 people every week, the foodbank's mission is to offer practical, all-round support to those who need it most.

"I think people don't always believe food poverty exists," says Gill Fourie, Operations Manager at Blackburn Foodbank. "But we know it does – and for a whole variety of reasons that are not usually the fault of that person."

Food isn't handed out without careful thought. Staff and volunteers take time to talk with people, finding out what will help them through the next few days. Each person receives a tailored package containing a range of items that can be turned into nutritious, familiar meals – and, crucially, food they know they will eat.

"People can tell us what they need," Gill explains. "That way, we don't risk any food waste."

While Blackburn Foodbank purchases most of its food to make sure people receive the right items, donations still play a vital role. Charities and supermarkets help keep food in circulation and out of bins, while schools also get in touch when they have surplus fruit from projects they're involved in – another way food waste is reduced further along the chain.

"There's enough food for everybody," Gill adds, "but it's just not in the right place at the right time."

Across the UK, the most commonly binned food items by weight and volume include potatoes and bread, followed closely by fresh fruit and vegetables such as carrots, apples and salad leaves.

"One thing we do is buy fresh food at the very last minute, once we know exactly how much we need," says Gill. "That way it reaches people the same day – and doesn't go to waste."

If you'd like to support Blackburn Foodbank, monetary donations are preferred, allowing funds to be directed where they're needed most.

To find out more, visit:
blackburn.foodbank.org.uk



For households currently receiving food waste collections, and for all homes from June 2026, excess rubbish left beside or on top of burgundy bins will no longer be collected. All non-recyclable waste must fit inside your bin, or you may receive a fine. Please recycle as much as possible using blue, grey and food waste bins. Clean recycling left beside the correct bin, loose or in clear bags, will still be collected.



A life in boxing:

Yaqoob's 52-year commitment to the ring

For Yaqoob Hussain, boxing isn't something he does – it's who he is. Now 71, Yaqoob has spent more than half a century immersed in the sport, giving his time as a boxer, coach, referee and judge. From local gyms to national competitions, boxing has shaped his life, his values and his sense of purpose.

"Boxing has been part of my life for the last 52 years," he tells **The Shuttle**. "And I've enjoyed every minute of it."

Yaqoob's love of the sport began in his youth, inspired by the golden era of boxing and one name that still stands above the rest.

"When Muhammad Ali was boxing, that's when I started," he recalls. "He showed that boxing wasn't just about fighting. It was about movement, discipline and confidence – something you could carry with you for life."

At the time, there were very few Asian boxers involved in the sport, but that didn't deter Yaqoob. He trained, travelled and committed himself fully, boxing for several years before realising his future lay not only in competing, but in helping others.

"I thought, I'm not going to stop – I'm going to carry on," he says. "Coaching young people gave me a really good feeling. Helping them believe in themselves and move forward with their lives."

For the past 46 years, Yaqoob has coached boxers of all ages and abilities. Alongside this, he has spent 25 years as an England Boxing referee, a role he says is often misunderstood.

"When you're in the ring, you are in charge," he explains. "You're responsible for the bout and the boxers' safety. You have to be 110% focused."



Discipline, he says, is the foundation of everything boxing teaches, both inside and outside the ring.

"Boxing isn't a game," Yaqoob says. "It's very rewarding, but you have to be committed, turning up whatever the weather. That discipline stays with you for life."

That commitment came with sacrifices. Yaqoob speaks openly about the impact his dedication had on his family.

"My family suffered at times," he admits. "I missed moments with my children because so much of my life was spent volunteering and helping others. But I wouldn't change it for anything."

In 2011, Yaqoob's service was recognised with an MBE, an honour that came as a complete surprise.

"I don't even know who nominated me," he says. "As volunteers, we don't do this for rewards. That honour was really for all the volunteers who give their time."

At the 2025 Community Volunteer Awards, Yaqoob received a Lifetime Achievement Award after being nominated by someone local – another moment that left him "over the moon."

Yaqoob is also proud of how the sport has evolved, particularly the growth of women's boxing.

"We now have female boxers, coaches and referees," he says. "There's no difference – if someone wants to do it, they should be encouraged. Boxing is for everyone."

Ask him what advice he'd give to someone stepping into a boxing gym for the first time, and his answer is simple: commit, respect the sport, and stick with it.

After more than five decades, Yaqoob shows no sign of slowing down.

"My life is boxing," he says with a smile. "And if I can do it, anyone can."

Live in Darwen!

Briana Corrigan
The Beautiful South
Saturday 9 May

John Robb
In Conversation
Thursday 21 May

Rich Hall
Chin Music
Sun 7 June

Mark Watson
Before It
Overtakes Us
Saturday 20 June

Peter Cox
Go West-We
Close Our Eyes
Friday 27 November

Trevor Horn
Adventures in
Modern Recording
Saturday 7 November

Plus much, much more...



To find out about all our events

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Darwen Library Theatre



Young darts prodigy pins Darwen on the map

With darts enjoying a huge surge in popularity, a new generation of young players is stepping up to the oche – and Darwen's Archie Chippendale is firmly among them.

Aged just 13, Archie is already showing that darts is far more than a pub pastime, as interest in the sport soars following the rise of teenage stars on the world stage.

The young Darwen darter has been quietly building an impressive darts CV since first picking up the arrows at the age of six – well before packed arenas, walk-on music and prime-time television helped bring youth darts into the mainstream.

Archie has been part of Blackburn Youth Darts Academy for more than seven years.

"My friend Charlie went to the academy and told me about it," Archie tells **The Shuttle**.

"My parents got in touch with Keith and I joined – I've been there ever since."

Run by Academy Director Keith, Blackburn Youth Darts Academy was created to give young people the opportunity to learn and develop the sport in a safe, supportive and pressure-free environment.

"The aim of the academy is to provide young people with opportunities to learn, play, develop and progress in darts," Keith says. "With darts growing faster than ever, it's vital that young players have the right mentoring behind them."

"Consistent mentoring is extremely important. We want players to enjoy darts first and foremost, while encouraging them to practise and progress if that's what they want."

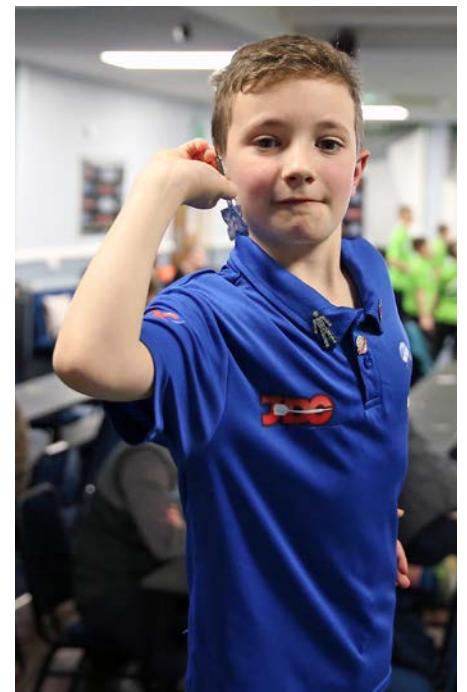
That approach has already paid off for Archie.

One of his proudest moments came in February 2025, when he reached the JDC Foundation Tour Final – an achievement he never expected so early in his career.

"I never thought I'd get to a final just yet," he says. "I was disappointed with how I played – I think the nerves got to me – but I was still really proud."

Among his other achievements, Archie competed in the JDC Foundation Tour Order of Merit and England Youth Grand Prix. At the JDC World Championships in Gibraltar, he faced young players from 21 different countries.

Despite his growing success, Archie remains grounded.



"I've learned that I can't win all the time," he says. "But practising and having fun with friends at the academy really helps."

And his advice to young people inspired by darts' current boom?

"Don't expect to be good straight away," he adds. "Hard work beats talent."



Pictures by Robin Zahler for the National Festival of Making

Crown-ing glory!

The fascinating story behind Blackburn's bold and botanical mural

When the incredible National Festival of Making comes to town, you can guarantee a riot of colour, creativity and the most impressive of cultural collaborations.

And in 2025, the festival certainly didn't disappoint. One of the standout artworks was Floral Timekeepers, a vibrant new mural that completely transformed a small car park close to Prism Contemporary, bringing sunshine to even the greyest of days.

The striking piece is by Morag Myerscough, the globally renowned artist celebrated for her immersive structural installations, bold patterns and unapologetically vibrant use of colour - all designed to inject positivity into public spaces.

Morag (*pictured left*) has created work for the likes of Coachella and the Paris Olympics, and in a huge coup for the town, she was brought to Blackburn as part of Art in Manufacturing, the festival's hugely successful headline commissioning programme.

The initiative pairs artists with some of the UK's leading manufacturers, many of which are proudly based here in Blackburn with Darwen. And this partnership proved to be a 'perfect match', with Morag working alongside Crown Paints, a company with a long and proud history of making colour for interiors and exteriors alike.

Founded nearly 250 years ago as Dob Meadows Printing Shop in Darwen - where its head office remains today - Crown's team helped select the colours for the mural and even contributed their favourite flowers, which were woven into the final design.

And the story behind the artwork is just as fascinating as the mural itself.

Morag drew inspiration from a visit to Corporation Park, particularly its Victorian conservatory. At the heart of Floral Timekeepers is a palette of 49 Crown Paints colours and a spinning colour clock, representing the clock once housed in the park's glasshouse.



During a tour, Morag explained that the clock was originally added so industrial workers wouldn't lose track of time while enjoying the flowers - a brief but welcome escape from the arduous work in the town's many mills.

A newspaper cutting from April 21 1900 records that the clock was donated by Mr Ainsworth of Northgate - part of the Ainsworth Jewellers dynasty, a proud Blackburn business that has traded in the town for more than 155 years. You can read more about them on pages 50 and 51.

Over the festival weekend, which once again attracted tens of thousands of visitors, the area around the mural, at the corner of Barton Street car park, was transformed into an urban parklet, filled with large planters and seasonal blooms. The space buzzed with festivalgoers, bees and butterflies alike.

The project was supported by the Government's High Street Accelerator Fund, and the planters remained in the town throughout the summer, adding a welcome splash of colour to King William Street.

Lauren Zawadzki, Co-Director of the National Festival of Making, says: "We're always thinking about how the National Festival of Making can have a meaningful impact beyond our festival weekend, and Morag Myerscough's permanent mural is such a good example of that."

"It was amazing to work with Morag and bring her vision to life with the support of the incredible Colour Studio at Crown Paints."

"Along with welcoming our festival audiences, a real highlight was seeing the bees and butterflies arrive at the planters almost as soon as the seasonal planting went in."

To date, Art in Manufacturing has commissioned more than 30 artists to create exceptional new works, all showcased at the ever-popular festival, now a firm favourite on the national cultural calendar.

The National Festival of Making will return to Blackburn town centre on 4 and 5 July.

For more information, visit:

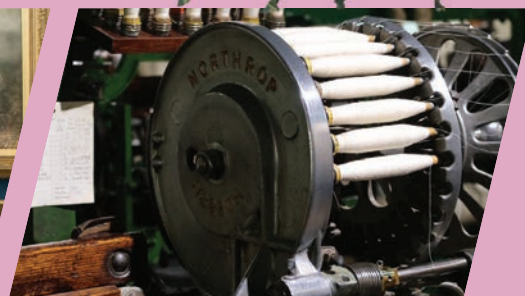
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Hidden treasure

Rare union banner rediscovered at Blackburn Museum



There's nothing quite like the thrill and excitement of stumbling across an old gem in your attic.

Now imagine working in a museum and something like that happening!

Staff at Blackburn Museum & Art Gallery couldn't believe their luck when they rediscovered a rare and remarkable early 19th century union banner while working in the museum store.

The banner is unique in that it depicts solely female textile workers - something highly unusual for the time, despite the cotton industry being predominantly made up of women.

Images of women and the machines they operated have been carefully hand-painted on both sides of the banner, and it would once have been paraded through the streets of Blackburn, proudly representing the Blackburn District Weavers, Winders & Warpers Association alongside the bold motto: 'Unity Is Strength.'

Caroline Wilkinson, Curator of History, tells **The Shuttle**: "We had seen a photograph of the banner when it was displayed in the Lewis Textile Museum many years ago, and we were

absolutely fascinated by it, especially as we're only aware of one other union banner choosing to depict only working women, despite having both male and female members.

"We couldn't quite believe it when we actually found it - we were all blown away."

The banner had been carefully stored in two pieces. After 125 years of being hung with pride by the union, and later Lewis Textile Museum, the weight of the painted central image had caused it to become detached from the surrounding silk and it was put into storage.

It's now undergone an 18-month conservation project with the People's History Museum's Conservation Team in Manchester.

And the banner - with its striking female figure - is now back on display, taking centre stage in the museum's ever-popular Cotton Town Gallery.

The gallery features a fascinating collection celebrating the borough's deep-rooted links to the cotton industry. It even includes the loom depicted on the banner itself.

"We were so struck by how imposing

the banner was and how powerful the "Unity Is Strength" motto would have been," Caroline adds.

"It was really important to us that it was one of the first things you see as you walk towards the Cotton Town Gallery.

"Fittingly, we're also working on redefining our Cotton Town collections, expanding on traditional industrial narratives to incorporate the impact of the cotton industry on the rest of the world and the relationship between the mills and social and cultural change.

"We can't wait to share more with our visitors, who come from all over the world to enjoy our collections."

This year has been a record one for visitor numbers at both Blackburn Museum & Art Gallery and Turton Tower.

Be sure to pop in and see the banner and the Cotton Town collection for yourself.

The museum is open Tuesday to Saturday, 11am to 4.45pm, and is always free to visit.

Find out more at:
www.blackburnmuseum.org.uk



Dancing to our own beat

As small music venues across the UK are closing due to financial pressures, our borough's grassroots music scene beats on!

Blackburn has a rich history of music culture, from bands and record shops to venues that once formed the backbone of the local scene. The town is even immortalised in The Beatles' 1967 single *A Day In The Life*.

Despite the modern-day challenges for smaller music venues, Blackburn and Darwen continue to provide stages for fresh acts to hone their talents.

In Darwen, Sunbird Records has a strong reputation for vibrant nights of live music, built on a simple but determined idea: remove barriers and give artists a place to play.

"We do things differently," says Nathan Howard, one half of the duo that runs the venue in the heart of the town.

Sunbird set out to create a local music scene, supporting grassroots acts and working with Blackburn College and local music schools to nurture new talent.

Sunbird's approach is deliberately genreless. "Different genres, but always quality!" Nathan shares proudly.

That openness has helped attract a steady flow of artists. Jamie Carter, who books acts for Sunbird, says: "Plenty of bands approach us to play here, but we also look ourselves to bring some of the freshest most groundbreaking bands and artists to Darwen from across the UK, Europe and America."

Sunbird's impact has been significant. Artists who once played their early gigs there have gone on to support major acts on tour, while audiences travel in from big cities like Manchester, bringing money into Darwen's town centre economy.

Sunbird also runs its own Neotribe Festival every October, creating what Nathan describes as "our own eco-system" for music and creativity. The headliners for this year's festival include Adult DVD and Formal Speedwear.



Photo: Derren Lee Poole

That success feels particularly hard-won given the wider picture of grassroots music venues closing at an alarming rate. "I feel proud that we're still open in the current climate," Jamie tells **The Shuttle**.

Sunbird will mark its 10th anniversary in May 2026 with a special bank holiday weekend event, a rare milestone for an independent grassroots venue.

"Grassroots music will always exist," Jamie Carter adds. "It's about the people and the music they're making, and you don't necessarily need a grassroots music venue to have a grassroots music scene. People are playing all sorts of music in pop-up spaces like museums and old churches."

And that's exactly what Pete Eastwood and his team achieve every September, with Blackburn's Confessional Festival.

Pete has supported local bands for over 40 years and remains a familiar figure at gigs across the UK, searching for new talent.

In his hometown, Pete has adapted to an absence of grassroots music venues by bringing bands to unexpected spaces.

The annual Confessional Festival, held in the atmospheric setting of the disused Holy Trinity Church, is a not-for-profit grassroots music and arts festival that supports local creatives while also bringing emerging national acts into the town.

"Today's support act is tomorrow's headliner," says Pete. "If you don't give young acts a chance, no one will ever see them."

Pete and his team also run Night At The Museum Live at Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery, with the next event planned for 2026. Supported by Arts Council England funding, these shows highlight both the creativity that still exists locally and the effort required to keep it visible.

Pete Eastwood remains upbeat about the future of Blackburn's scene. "As long as local people are still being creative and making things happen in the town, there is hope for our grassroots music scene."



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The King of Curry lives on

For avid readers of **The Shuttle**, you'll likely remember Shabir Hussain from the front page of our 2024 edition. Proudly known as the 'King of Curry', Shabir was our cover star when he opened one of his hugely popular Akbar's restaurants in Blackburn – a huge coup for the borough.

Sadly, just a few short months later, the much-loved husband and father died of cancer aged 56.

The impact he had was clear. Messages of condolence poured in from around the world and more than 5,000 people attended his funeral. And today, his daughters are absolutely determined to continue the legacy he built from scratch, growing the Akbar's empire in his honour.

"The love and support shown to our family has been tremendous," Shabir's son-in-law, Nazakat says. "It's a real testament to the warmth, generosity and happiness that Shabir embodied throughout his life.

"Since his death, we have worked closely together to take the brand forward. His daughters are determined to carry on their father's vision and honour the legacy he always envisaged."

And staff at the busy Blackburn restaurant – managed by Nazakat (pictured right) – continue to impress diners with their extensive menu and the full Akbar's experience.

"The success of Akbar's has always been rooted in the authenticity of our food. Every recipe was perfected by Shabir, and his commitment to consistency and quality remains at the heart of everything we do.

"Beyond the food, we focus on creating an atmosphere that welcomes guests back time and again, often across generations."

As part of £13 million of new investment in King George's Hall, the restaurant has undergone kitchen upgrades and subtle décor changes planned by Shabir before his death.

Akbar's remains open as usual throughout the works and is always looking forward to welcoming customers, old and new.

Be sure to book your table now at: www.opentable.co.uk

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A year of pride and people:

Mayor reflects on her year in office

Looking back on her year as Mayor, Councillor Jacquie Slater sums it up as "interesting, rewarding and a learning curve."

Since May 2025, the Mayor has represented the borough at a wide range of events and visits, meeting residents, community groups and organisations across Blackburn with Darwen. This has also included attending civic visits and mayoral charity balls alongside other Mayors, reflecting her wider role within the civic life of the region.

"It has been an honour to serve the people of Blackburn with Darwen," she says.

After 23 years representing Blackburn South and Lower Darwen, the Mayor says meeting residents and hearing their stories has been the most rewarding part of the role.

"People have been very supportive. Being able to meet them, stop and talk, and represent them has meant a great deal to me."

One of the highlights of her mayoral year so far has been welcoming visitors into the Mayor's Parlour, from school children and scouts to dignitaries, including the High Sheriff of Lancashire James Carter DL, and his wife Annabel.

"When people visit, you can see how proud they feel, and I feel very proud too. It's the nicest Mayor's Parlour in the North West," she adds.

The Mayor particularly enjoyed visits to local schools, alongside her Mayoress, Lillian Salton, a former Head of Infants. Highlights included children designing the Mayor's Christmas card, as well as visits to winter camps, Christmas fairs and scout activities.

Throughout the year, the Mayor has seen strong community spirit across the borough and support for her chosen charities - Darwen Rotary Club, East Lancs NHS Trust, and Alzheimer's UK, which is especially close to her heart.

Local businesses also showed their support by donating cakes and



refreshments for cake sales and other events. The Mayor's Charity Ball in February was a key moment during the year, made possible through the generous support of Watson Ramsbottom Solicitors, who acted as the main sponsor of the event. Their sponsorship played a significant role in contributing to the current fundraising total, with a final figure for the year set to be announced soon.

If you would like to support the Mayor's charity fundraising contact: mayorsparlour@blackburn.gov.uk



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Our web assistant can help you find information and access online services. If needed, it can also escalate your query to a member of staff. You can use live chat for queries about the likes of benefits, Blue Badges, Council Tax, highways, household waste and recycling, and parking services. Simply click on the chat icon at the bottom right of the page when you visit: **www.blackburn.gov.uk**

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Visit us in person

Drop in at either Blackburn Town Hall or Darwen Town Hall, where our helpful Customer Services Advisors can provide general advice and direct you to other services. Please check opening times before you visit.

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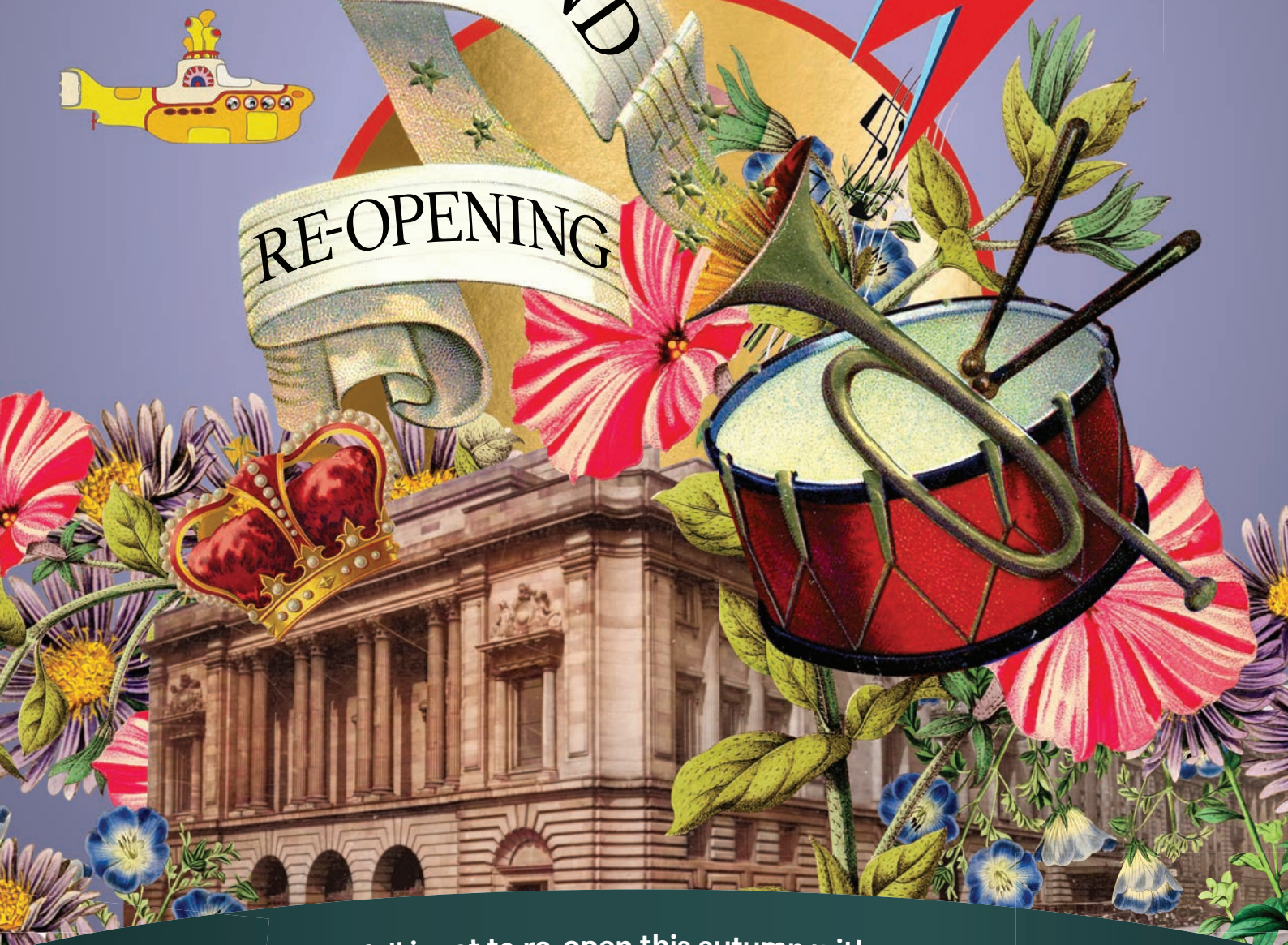
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