



Going to seaside? Don't forget your tie.

Phil Woodford uncovers some unlikely formality amid the faded splendour of Eastbourne.

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No one knows Eastbourne quite like Chris Mannion. Every night, the popular veteran entertainer makes his way between seafront hotels, plugs in his double-deck electric organ and entices the elderly residents to the dancefloor. For an hour or two, the clock is wound back as they tango their way around the room to tunes like O Sole Milo – popularised in the 1980s Cornetto ads. Mannion dresses to impress his clientele in the elaborate garb of an old-style variety performer. But his schedule doesn't allow for a trip to the London Palladium. Just a half-mile drive down the coast and another of his regular evening appointments.

Predictability and tradition are important to most of the holiday-makers who make their annual pilgrimage to the south coast. At one particular three-star hotel, gentlemen are politely requested, out of courtesy to the ladies, to remember their tie for dinner. Most male guests seem happy to comply with this quaint regulation, but there are a few unchallenged renegades who appear determined to show their female companions the ultimate discourtesy. If reports are to be believed, their faux pas has nothing to do with social class, as there is no direct correlation between tie-wearing and the ability to hold a knife and fork correctly.

You don't need a PhD in sociology to realise that this resort is posher than its visitors. The architecture of the buildings says Telegraph, but the average occupant screams Express. Of course, the majority of the fun-seekers are elderly. And while younger people do show their faces in the hotels, it tends to be for events such as wedding receptions. Something old, something new, something borrowed and a tattoo. After Chris Mannion, or one of his fellow entertainers, has tapped out some classic tunes of yesteryear, the old-time dance troupe retire to bed and the youngsters get to strut their stuff.

There's an interesting division between young and old on the front during the day too. The beach is for teenagers, twenty-somethings and families – many of whom may well be local – while the promenade is for those who remember the days when the Warmington-on-Sea Home Guard were on patrol against possible German invasion. (Trivia buffs may be interested to know that the Victorian camera obscura on the pier was actually dismantled during the war to prevent its falling into the hands of the enemy. What exact use the Nazis would have made of it, I really don't know. For that matter, I'm not sure what they would have made of the pier itself.

But back in the 1940s, I doubt that it hosted a nightclub or shops selling oversized floral blouses.)

Today, the young walk, while the old drive. It would be cruel to describe mobility vehicles as the transport mode of choice for visitors. You only use a mobility vehicle when you don't have a choice. Nevertheless, there's an unusually high proportion of pensioners who propel themselves down the front at a speed approaching 10mph. Prom rage seems to be a rare phenomenon, but may be under-reported to the police.

The Wishing Well cafeteria is centrally located at a slight vantage point and has special parking arrangements for the one-seater motors. For this reason, old-timers seem to make a beeline for it. The trappings of the modern world are there in the form of bottles of mineral water, but the seating, signage and ambience would probably be familiar to ageing mods and rockers. T J Hughes – a local department store – is similarly languishing in a bygone era. The furnishings and fashions are desperately out of date and although it boasts a café that seems superficially to have been given a 21st century makeover, the cashier won't countenance a debit card.

Notes and coins are the common currency in this town, although quite what currency we're talking about is hard to make out. Across the road from Hughes is a shop selling all kinds of tasty morsels from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. One senses that roubles and newly-mined euros are more familiar to many of the town's workforce than pounds and pence and that the fragile economy of the seaside resort would collapse were it not for the influx of migrants. The hometown girls dream of being pole dancers, while the Polish girls dream of their home towns.

Does it matter that Eastbourne today survives on elderly visitors being served by Eastern Europeans? Probably not. But the first group is going to die out, perhaps never to be replaced. And the second will be moving on, as better jobs and better prospects lure them elsewhere. This is a town that's clearly surviving in 2007. I suspect that a number of hoteliers still turn in a decent profit. But what of 2017 or 2027? And what of Chris Mannion and his fellow performers? Relegated, I fear, to a battered seaside scrapbook, along with donkey rides, Punch & Judy shows and a walk along the pier.