

Blackpool's poet in residence has launched his seaside collection for national poetry day - **Jacqueline Morley** hears what John Siddique has to say about the town

BLACKPOOL. Love it or loathe it you can't ignore it. Right now it's the town on which the world and his wife appears to have an opinion ... from Daniel Day's thumping great endorsement as "fantastic" to magician Paul Daniel's "tacky" condemnation.

The resort's poet in residence John Siddique gets his say. Literally. He's one of the stars of Wordpool, the third annual festival of words, which ends today.

On National Poetry Day, John got the chance to show just what Blackpool's made of at a special reading to launch his collection, Blackpool: A Poet's View, at the Town Hall.

It's an invitation-only affair, but this is one poet who's set out to discover his turf, rather than expound, loftily, from some ivory tower.

John doesn't do arty-farty, any more than Blackpool does. What Daniels condemns as "tacky" this Rochdale poet sees as "real".

His book, available to borrow from local libraries, and in a limited-edition form too, was compiled after a year in the town, meeting the people and soaking up the atmosphere.

Many lines were inspired by the people he met and the places he saw. The rest comes from the sheer buzz of Blackpool.

"You'd have to be blind not to see that this is a town fighting back, with plenty to say for itself, and lots to commend it," he adds.

Workshops and events involving young and older people, and various groups, saw John out and about among the people of Blackpool.

The aim was to produce a collection capturing the essence of the town, and one poem to be displayed in a permanent public location as a legacy of his residency.

He soon found that the town polarised extremes of opinion - just as his appointment did a year ago. It was panned, rather loftily, by an elitist national press commentator. Blackpool? Getting its own poet in residence? Surely not? Weren't we getting a bit above ourselves?

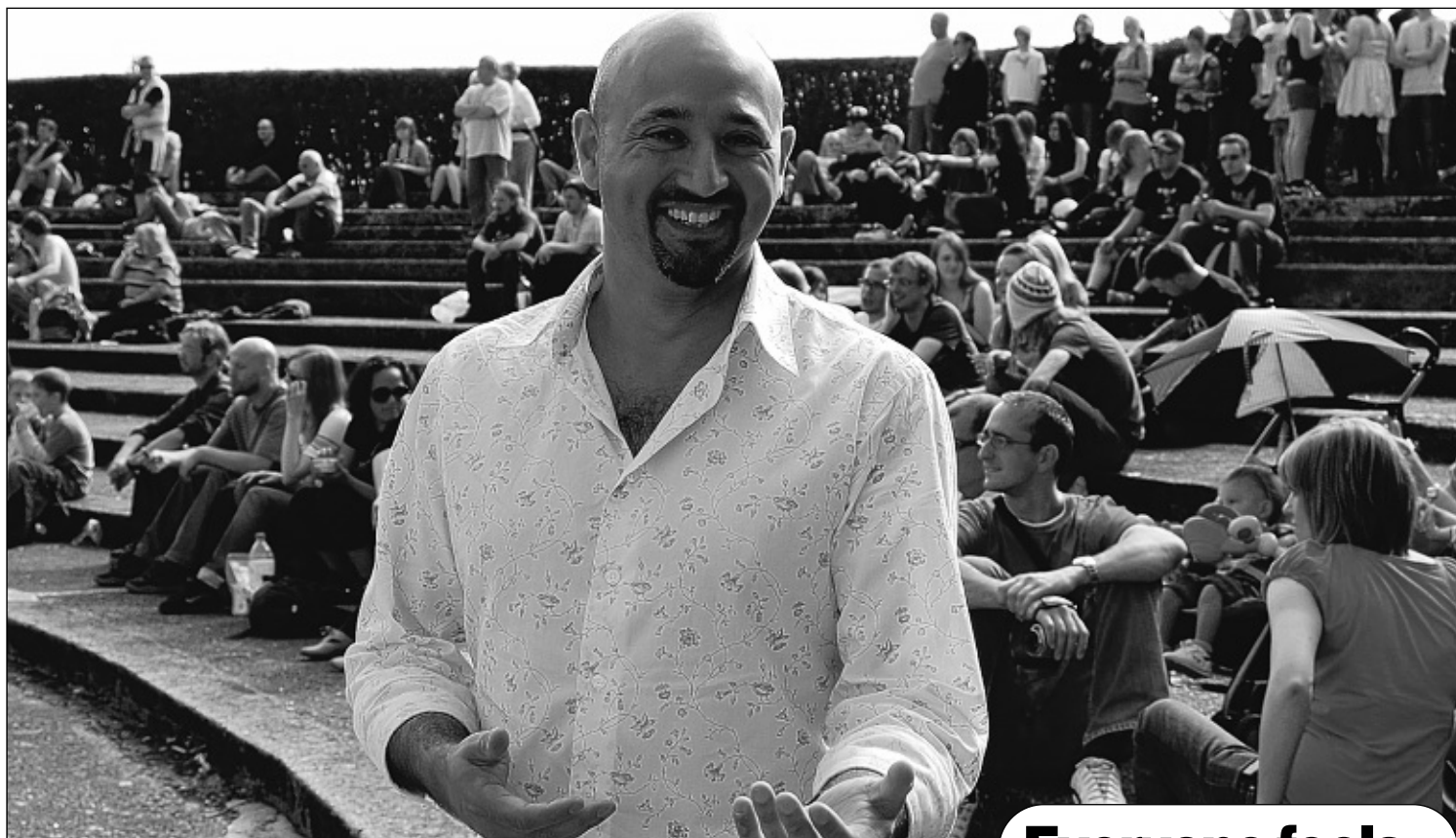
John says he's not out to right wrongs but write the town as he sees it. It helps that he came here as a child, saw the magic and now holds a looking glass to it, warts and all.

It helps that his partner clamours to revisit the resort at every opportunity, having fallen under the spell of the Tower Ballroom, the Pleasure Beach and Winter Gardens, and all the fun and quirky bits between.

"She loves the town. I've seriously considered getting a place in Blackpool." (He lives at Hebden Bridge.)

It helps, too, that he was prepared to get off the beaten tourist track, and meet the locals, and also stand on the Promenade, out of season, and notice the small things that can make such an impression ... such as two winos meticulously placing their empty cans into a seafront recycling bank.

"I walked along the front by Coral Island, and stood on the traffic island in the middle of the road, and saw a ship out to sea with blue lights flashing, the sea far out, and these two drunks, sitting at the bandstand, with all their



An ode to Blackpool

empties from the day in a row, putting them, one by one, into a recycling bin.

"Blackpool had closed down the week before and it was settling down for the winter and the atmosphere of the place just caught me off guard ... and I dashed a poem off in two minutes just to capture the moment.

"Part of the poet's job is to see the bloody obvious. I was there to observe, not criticise, not sentimentalise, or get ridiculous, just open my eyes and write it like it is.

"Blackpool's part of my life. It was my childhood cheap day-return destination. We'd come here to sit on the beach for some mad picnic. I have a real affinity for it.

"There's a real residual affection there. I don't care what anyone else says about the place. If I have any artistic talent it's to take something that others have seen a million times and look at it fresh.

"My affection for the town has grown more in this past year, it has so many plus points. But I can see the minus terms too.

"People seem to take from it financially, but don't really invest back into it, and when they

do, it's like any other town, putting in the same old shops that everybody else has. I'd like to see investment to nourish the town.

"But I'm not going to slide into sentimentality or slag the place off. A town is nothing without its people and I realised quite early on when people talk about Blackpool they are not talking about the people who live there.

"I met veterans, and children, and people with mental health disorders, and others, who enormously gave of their time to talk to me about what it is like to live in Blackpool.

"The one thing that emerged from them all is they all love the sea. Whether it's the shopkeeper who sells doughnuts, the newsagent, or the veteran, or the child, the big factor is the sea ... being able to see it, smell it, be aware of its presence as a constant in their lives.

"One lady in her 70s showed me a poem she carried about in her handbag, something, she said, that reminds her that she's still alive, and which she's copied and given to seven of her friends, too.

And that was lovely because it shows that poetry can make a difference, and can really

Everyone feels power of poetry

SO what impact did John Siddique have on some of those who met him?

Brad James, 17, a Blackpool Sixth Form College student, who made a short film of John's poem *The Sea*, explains: "My main goal is to be a director, and John gave me a copy of his poem, and I jotted down the visuals I saw in my head when I read it, asked him what he would like to see in it, and then spoke to local librarians about it too. I'm interested in music technology, so poetry, for me, is an extension of that, of writing lyrics. I like John's work because it has a real immediacy. It's the Blackpool you know but seen in a different way."

Mrs Edwina Parker, 74, one of the veterans' group, said: "I'm part of the Fylde Dance and Activities Group and we use dance as a means of getting the generations together. Poetry works on that level too. In my day it was traditional stuff, Browning, Tennyson, and felt out of touch. John's work is in touch with what's happening today. We chatted and he took notes and promised to bring something back that was about us ... and that's what we hope to hear today. I'd love to get him dancing though!"

● For a full list of events visit <http://www.blackpool.gov.uk/Services/A-F/ArtsWordpool/>.

connect with people. A lot of poetry doesn't help itself, there's a trend towards being clever, or tricky and complicated. I grew up in Rochdale and if you do tricky and complicated there they beat the crap out of you.

"Being a poet is an insane job, and making a living from it is close to bonkers, so it's important, for me, to keep it real.

"There are people in Blackpool who unlocked the whole thing for me, and made it special."

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It's been another weird week, so join **JOE ROBINSON** for a round-up of the strange stories in the news from the past seven days...



A MASSIVE cannabis factory was discovered this week in a Blackpool Promenade hotel.

Seems a bizarre place to hide something doesn't it? A Promenade hotel? Hardly conspicuous.

But if you think that was an unusual hiding place, try this one.

Mexican authorities this week stopped a truck with a huge load of over ripe, green-looking bananas.

When border officials investigated more closely they caught a whiff of what smelled like pot. Turns out the bananas were a cunning disguise and buried underneath was a whopping 2.6 tonnes of the stuff - .

The driver, of course, got nicked

and said he was bound for Tijuana. It's the latest in a long line of stupid sneak attempts by drug dealers.

One sacrilegious bid saw cocaine packaged inside Virgin Mary statues.

Another saw more powder stuffed inside, get this, a frozen shark!

Moving on and Cristiano Ronaldo may finally get his comeuppance - from a sorcerer. Reports in Spain this week suggest a

love interest has hired a mysterious man named Pepe to nobble the winger who became the world's most expensive footballer when he went from Manchester United to Real Madrid for a staggering £80m.

The Portuguese forward is out of action with an ankle injury and Pepe is claiming the credit. "She paid me to end Cristiano Ronaldo's career and I'm doing that," Pepe was quoted.



MONDAY: A seasoned look at life with Roy Edmonds

"It's a job, I have nothing against him personally, but I'll see it through," he added. He refused to name the scorned woman.

Moving on and in this column I've always tried to steer clear of the many funny stories based on videos.

With the rise of the internet and, in particular, video sharing website Youtube, anything remotely funny or interesting gets released online.

But it doesn't usually translate too well to print - so this is a plea.

If you hate idiots who create violence on our streets at night. If you hate drunken yobos who start fights. If you hate obnoxious people, then please search for "yobs floored by cage fighters in drag" on the old google machine,

Drunken thugs Dean Gardner, 19, and Jason Fender, 22, had been walking around Swansea town centre,

starting fights and being aggressive, while being watched by CCTV.

The footage shows a bare-chested Gardner brazenly marching up to a man wearing hot pants and a pink wig. Gardner, followed by Fender, runs up to the innocent reveller who was dressed up for a stag party, and punches him in the face.

But the victim's friend, wearing a short black dress, stockings and suspenders - suddenly appears behind them felling them both with two devastating punches.

It turned out he was a trained mixed martial artist.

I'm not a violent man and you can't support vigilantism - watch the video though - a well deserved reality check.

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