

Decline and fall of a once grand hotel

BY JANE HUGHES

SEVEN MONTHS after it was put up for sale the Midland hotel, one of Britain's finest art deco buildings in the Lancashire resort of Morecambe, is still without a buyer. And it shows.

Streaks of rust stain its white façade and boards cover the welcome signs. Last week the only sounds were the howl of the wind and the footsteps of an elderly deco devotee.

No one has been willing to take on the Midland, even at a knock-down asking price of £850,000. And the longer it waits for a buyer, the more likely it seems that the Grade II listed building, which contains artwork by Eric Gill and Eric Ravilious, will be converted into flats or a rest home.

Its decline is causing so much concern that tomorrow members of the Twentieth-Century Society will hold a meeting to discuss its fate. The hotel, once the pride of Morecambe, is already on the group's Buildings

at Risk register. "The Midland is one of the best known early modernist buildings in England and we are very worried about its rapid deterioration," said the society's casework officer Stephen Senior.

In a final indignity, a large stone relief by Gill – "Odysseus Welcomed from the Sea by Nausica" – was stolen last year before turning up across the Pennines in Pontefract 11 months later.

Designed by Oliver Hill for the London, Midland and Scottish Railway in 1933, the hotel was once acclaimed as a masterpiece of modernism, a shrine to sunshine, fresh air and healthy recreation. But in the chilly Morecambe winter, it looks battered and desolate.

The seaward side that follows the curve of the promenade has been badly weathered and rust from the window frames and

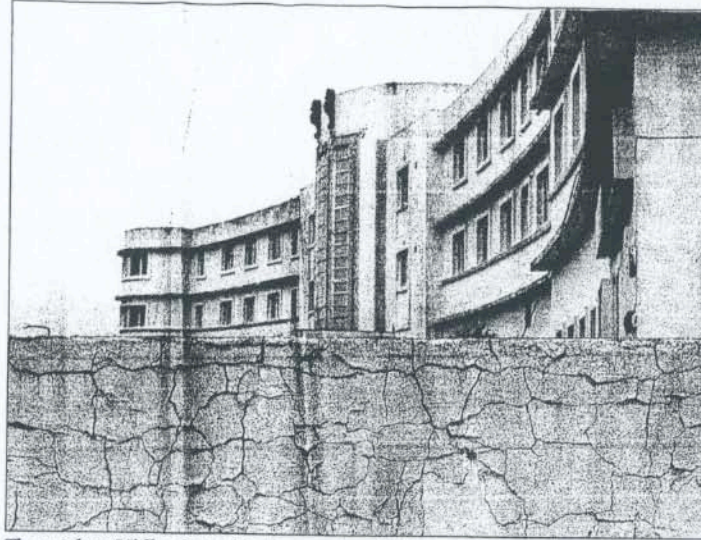
fire escapes has stained the once bold white and turquoise walls.

The rotunda café, decorated with Ravilious murals, which were reconstructed for an episode of the television series *Poirot* in 1989, is closed to the public and several of its windows have been smashed.

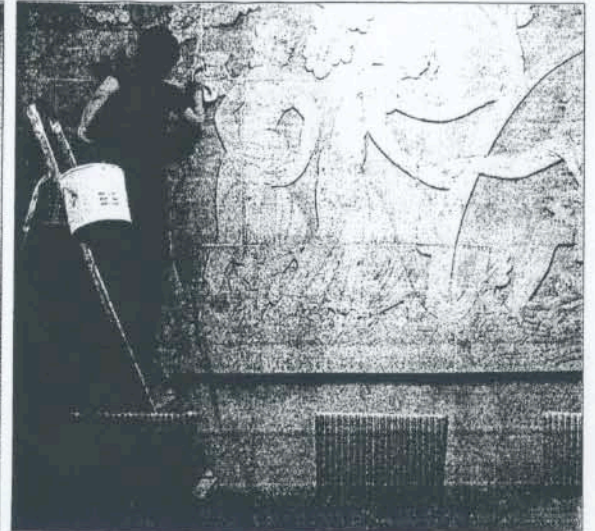
At the gates, the shrubs are full of rubbish. Inside, the air smells of stale tobacco and there are nicotine patches around Eric Gill's famous contribution – a ceiling panel of Triton, at the top of the main spiral staircase.

At £22 a night, the hotel is still popular in the summer months, but out of season the guests tend to be either diehard period fans – such as the American woman who recently came down to dinner in vintage 1930s dress – former staff and retired servicemen who convalesced at the hotel when it was turned into a wartime hospital.

Morecambe's winter seafront is



The art deco Midland Hotel in Morecambe, which contains artwork (right) by Eric Gill, may become a rest home if a buyer is not found PETER BYRNE/GUZELIAN



deserted apart from a few elderly ladies in anoraks and headscarves battling against the wind. Like the Midland, the resort has been in decline for years, surviving on scooter weekends and ladies' darts.

There have been a number of potential buyers for the hotel, ranked 29th in a recent poll of the nation's favourite 20th-century buildings, but the offers

to buy it were either too low or came with too many conditions attached.

In the past few days another possible purchaser has emerged, but meanwhile a band of Midland Hotel devotees has formed itself into a trust to campaign for the building to be returned to its former glory and possibly to oversee its restoration.

They are trying to attract

suitable investors and are setting up a website to highlight the plight of the hotel. They have also secured a grant from the Architectural Heritage Fund to carry out a feasibility study next year into the Midland's future as a hotel.

The local council says its hands are tied beyond drawing purchasers' attention to the grants available and refusing

approval for a change of use – unless the Midland cannot survive as a hotel. The Midland remains open for business, but only just.

Yet this summer, thanks to an ongoing seafront restoration programme and a new statue of the late comedian Eric Morecambe, tourist numbers have soared in the resort. And, according to Sue Thompson of

Friends of the Midland, the hotel could capitalise on the growing interest in art deco.

"There was a time when Morecambe was in such a sorry state it just put people off coming entirely," said Ms Thompson, "but now things are changing and we have the chance to make the Midland a unique asset both for the town and the nation."