

Article

The independent guide to the arts and culture in Northern Lincolnshire

Monthly

Issue 21

September 2009

Free

QUITE GREAT BRITAIN

Cheryl Leaning talks to stand-up comedian Mark Allen about cake, dirt villages and national identity.

He's got his head in a book. It's called 'Life in the UK', the Handbook published by the government for anyone taking the citizenship test. "All British people should read it," says Allen. "It's fascinating. The introductory paragraph alone is a mass of contradiction and confusion. If I was thinking of coming to live in the United Kingdom, I'd take one look at this book and decide not to bother. In fact, it's probably a subversive way to stop immigration all together."

Mark Allen has spent three years studying what it means to be British. His conclusion? "We're quite mixed up. We're made up of three fiercely independent countries, our monarchy is German, our motto is French and our national animal comes from Africa."

Mark has been thinking about this a lot, especially since the disgraceful return of BNP candidates in the European elections. "I don't want to criticise the people that voted, some of them may well be in my audience. It's the misinformation they are fed, the fear that we are under attack from immigrants. In fact, we are a nation of immigrants. We've been invaded for centuries. There were the Celts, the Vikings, the Romans. The Anglo-Saxons - those brave people that the British National Party model themselves on, completely destroyed the place, burning towns and villages to the ground. Whether they like it or not, we are a multi-cultural society.

We've inherited so many fantastic quirks. It's the eccentricity that is the brilliant part."

Part of his research uncovered a tradition going back to the eighteenth century, the election of the Mayor of Garratt - described as a 'dirt village' which no longer technically exists in South London.

"Only two per-cent of the population had the vote back then. Their anti-establishment answer was to hold mock elections where local wig-makers, publicans, anyone who wanted to get up and lampoon politicians, could stand up and incite the crowds, hundreds of thousands of people, to elect them as their 'hero'. It was basically an excuse for a piss up. The tradition died out until the owner of The Leather Bottle Inn in Wimbledon decided to revive it as a celebration of its 250th Anniversary."

On 3rd June, Mark, dressed in a Union Jack, addressed the crowd gathered in the beer garden with his pro-British, anti-BNP rally to reclaim Britain and make us a proud nation once again. "It was decided in a fabulously British way - with a Drink Off, a pint-downing competition. Having spent my formative years practicing that very art, I was returned as the first Mayor for over 170 years." The title bestows no privileges or obligations whatsoever. It's beautifully whimsical.

Mark is clearly a potential future leader. "There is no way I could ever go into politics. There's far too much heckling. I couldn't bear to be moo-ed at and



I certainly could never deliver a speech without a punchline at the end!" An injection of comedy into our political arena might be an improvement on the usual clowns.

Mark Allen appears at Ropery Hall in Barton-upon-Humber at 8pm on 26 September. Tickets priced at £8/10 otd are available on 01652 660380 or from events@the-ropewalk.co.uk