

Better eats and full theatre seats

Theatre, leisure and gastronomic improvements to Barking and Dagenham have transformed the London borough in the last few years. **James Wood** reports



Pictured: Ballet Theatre UK brought *Romeo and Juliet* to The Broadway Theatre in January.

A LIVELY NIGHT-TIME offer and the opportunity to lead a healthy lifestyle can contribute towards people's decision to move and settle in an area. Though Barking and Dagenham is perhaps not known as the most fashionable part of London, residents have started to note improvements to the quality of life in the borough.

Crowded house

The Broadway Theatre, which was renovated in 2004, is a major boon for Barking's night-time offer. Designed by architect Tim Foster, first-time visitors to the town are said to often comment on the attractiveness of the glass-clad facade. The auditorium

seats 341 people and the theatre prides itself on attracting diverse audiences through its range of shows.

The Upbeat Beatles performed at The Broadway in January 2017, just a few months after the release of Ron Howard's box office hit film, *The Beatles: Eight Days a Week, The Touring Years*. The tribute act covered

the Fab Four's trajectory through the 1960s, from their early days playing at Liverpool's Cavern Club to performing on the rooftop of the Apple building in central London, 1969.

Other events during the year's first quarter include wrestling, tribute nights to musicians ranging from Matt Monroe to The Beach Boys, a ballet performance of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and a contemporary dance and visual arts show called *Beyond Boundaries*.

Double Palme d'Or winner at the Cannes Film Festival, Ken Loach, backed the theatre in 2012 when it faced closure. The Broadway survived and today is central to the borough's cultural offer. It is managed by Barking and Dagenham College, where its School for the Performing Arts and Technical Theatre is located. Students make use of the facility's recording studio and rehearsal and music technology rooms, giving them access to industry-standard equipment. Ticket prices for shows are aimed at being kept affordable, encouraging all parts of the local community to turn out for events.

Food for thought

The recipient of a Time Out London food award in 2016 and the winner



of a TripAdvisor Certificate of Excellence the year before, Cristina's Steak House is one of the most popular restaurants in the borough. TripAdvisor, the online traveller advice website, is brimming with glowing reviews of the establishment, which overlooks Barking Abbey in the town centre. The menu features affordable steaks and an "untraditional" Sunday roast is also popular – trimmings with roast beef include sautéed kale, roasted butternut squash and braised cabbage. Many guests have enjoyed

Cristina's homemade "beefed up" Scotch eggs too.

The steakhouse was set up in June 2013 by Cristina Bumbuc as a response to the perceived lack of independent restaurants in the area. With its homemade signs, furniture and 'stripped-down' look, Cristina's popularity has grown steadily since then, with turnover increasing year-on-year. A model cow outside the building is a draw for tourists and schoolchildren. Chris Foster, Cristina's marketing manger,

There is a definite feeling of change in the air and you can really see how much potential there is in Barking



Pictured: Cristina's on the high street in Barking offers prime steaks to rave reviews online.



says many people stop outside the restaurant to take selfies with the life-sized animal.

"I think we have shown that people in Barking really value having a restaurant that isn't another chain, which can really hinder the development of the area," he says. "There is a definite feeling of change in the air and you can really see how much potential there is in Barking, just by walking down the high street. I think the area struggled for a long time in finding a sense of identity but it's really starting to find its feet now. The council has been brilliant at offering a network of support for small business such as ours, which has really fostered a sense of community."

While there is still some way to go before Barking becomes a gastronomic hot spot, ventures such as Ezo Bistro (above, left) in the station concourse – which opened in late summer 2014 – do a roaring trade, suggesting a healthy appetite for independent cafes and restaurants.

The quirky cafe's paintings by

homeless artists bought through charity Café Art, stacked bookshelves and a variety of crepes and sandwiches persuade punters to stay.

Fighting fit

Another important criteria for a successfully developed area is giving residents the opportunity to stay active. National charity OnSide Youth Zone, which sets out to provide activities in deprived areas for young people, plans to create a purpose-built facility in Barking and Dagenham, named by local people as 'Future'. It is expected to be completed in 2018 and will be located where Parsloes Park meets Porters Avenue, offering access to a range of facilities for £5 annually or 50p a visit. A planning application has been submitted.

Leisure centres which have opened in the borough in recent times are successful. Barking and Dagenham Council established the Active Leisure brand in May 2011, pledging £24 million to create Dagenham's Becontree Heath Leisure Centre,

which features two pools, a "jolly jungle" for children, a gym and exercise studios. The centre is very popular – the Amateur Swimming Association named its swimming pool as the UK's busiest in 2014 – and annual footfall figures are 1,370,000.

Barking's Abbey Leisure Centre (above) was established in March 2015 with council investment of £14 million.

It attracts 440,000 people annually and features Barking's first luxury spa – The Abbey Spa – as well as a 140-station gym, a softplay area called The Idol – designed by Turner Prize nominee, Marvin Gaye Chetwynd – and two pools.

Both centres have received a Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity award for pool safety.

With improvements to the health and leisure offer starting to be matched by highly acclaimed restaurants and cafes, Barking and Dagenham is now rivalling other London boroughs as a great place for dining, exercising and socialising.