

Tyler Morse: the property tycoon turning the BT Tower into a hotel

The American was a baggage handler before a career in hotels that now sees him reviving the revolving restaurant in a London landmark and maybe putting a swimming pool on top

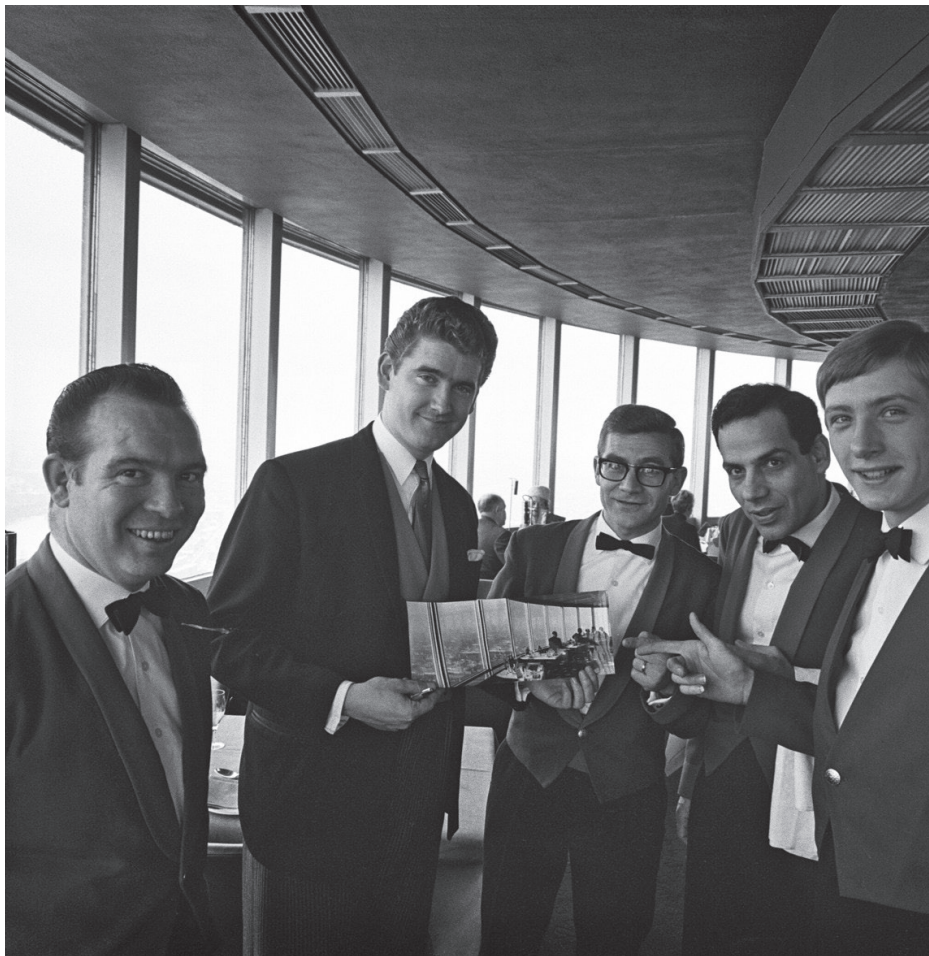


The BT Tower has been a striking landmark on the London skyline for 60 years

Tyler Morse was enjoying a cocktail with friends in Mayfair's Shepherd Market last Tuesday evening when his phone rang. Stepping out into the mild February air to take the call, Morse's lawyers were on the line to give him the news he had been waiting for: he had just bought the BT Tower.

"I left a half-drunk Margarita with the salt on the rim to go out and do the DocuSign," he said.

The following morning, Britain woke up to the news that one of the country's best-known buildings had been sold by BT to Morse's company MCR for £275 million, paving the way for it to be converted into a hotel.



The revolving restaurant, which made the tower famous, will reopen if Morse's plans come to fruition

ALISDAIR MACDONALD/MIRRORPIX/GETTY IMAGES

The question on many people's lips is whether or not the rotating restaurant for which the tower was so famous in its Sixties' heyday, will return for the first time since 1980. For the first time since doing the deal, he is now prepared to give an answer. Yes. "The plan is to bring back the rotating restaurant. We absolutely want to," he said. "To be able to see all of London in 22 minutes — it doesn't get any better than that."

The building has been a key part of London's skyline since it was opened as the Post Office Tower by Harold Wilson, the prime minister, in 1965 and its name is synonymous with the jet-set age and Sixties modernity. But the reality today is far from chic.

It is near-derelict, surrounded by a collection of ugly concrete buildings in the heart of Fitzrovia. The shutters are down over what was the main entrance, with a solitary security guard on patrol. The Tower Tavern pub opposite is boarded up. It feels like a district that London seems to have left behind.



An IRA bomb damaged the tower in 1971, leading to the restaurant's closure

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Not that the size of the challenge fazes Morse. What's more, this 177-metre tall giant will be his first hotel outside the US. "I wanted to start small," he joked.

The son of an oil company lawyer and travel agent, Morse worked at Los Angeles airport loading luggage and dispatching planes while studying at University of California, Berkeley. Other student jobs included a stint in the local cheesecake factory and as a busboy at the Hard Rock Café in Hawaii. There was also a ski season in the Chilean Andes, as well as one nearer to home in the California resort of Mammoth Mountain. He recalls prepping the pistes in the pitch black at 4.30am. "I had a backpack with 22 pounds of dynamite in it. And I pull out a two-pound stick of dynamite and throw it on the ski slope, so that the guests would not get caught in an avalanche," he said.

His professional career began with accountancy firm Ernst & Young, then investment bank Morgan Stanley before a postgraduate course at Harvard Business School, where he met his wife, Rebecca. A move to New York followed to work for Barry Sternlicht, the co-founder of what was then a hotel group and is now Starwood Capital, one of the world's biggest property investors.



Morse quickly got a taste for owning and operating hotels, but impatience got the better of him. After just two years as Sternlicht's "right-hand guy", the Californian struck out on his own with his first hotel in Huntsville, Alabama.

Rebecca and Tyler Morse

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“I raised a little bit of money to build one hotel,” he said. “It did pretty well. So then I raised a little bit of money to do another hotel and that did pretty well, so I raised another one.”

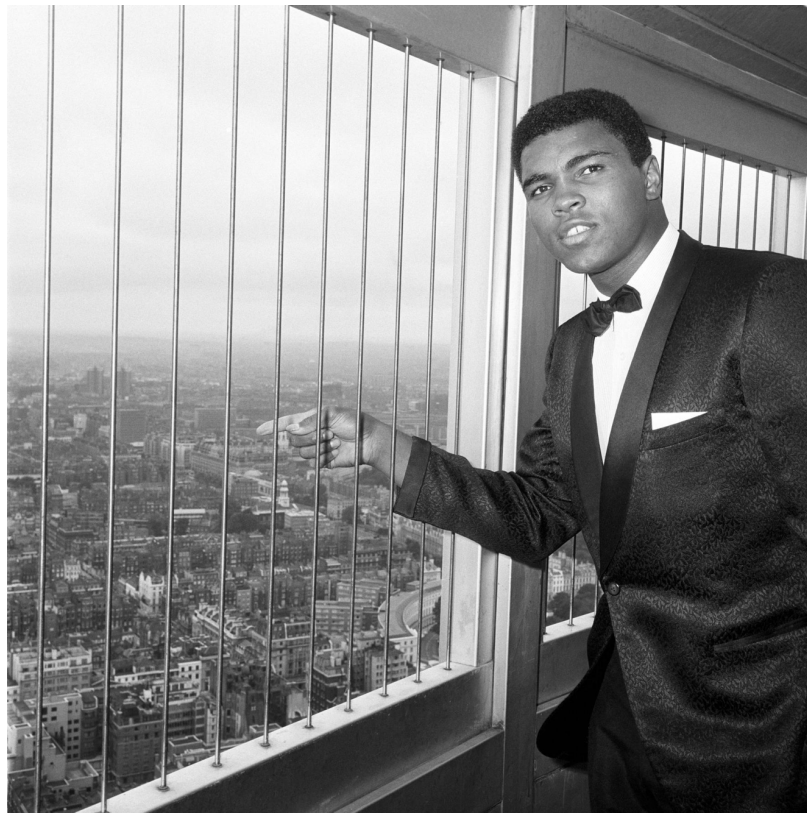
That was 2006. Now MCR has 150 hotels across 37 US states. With \$5 billion in assets, it is the third-biggest owner-operator in America.

Morse has been on a spending spree in recent years, picking up some of New York’s best-known hotels. He bought the 725-room Lexington in 2021 for \$185 million and the gargantuan 1,780-room Sheraton New York Times Square Hotel for \$373 million in 2022. One senior hotel executive gushed at the acquisitions as “stunningly cheap deals”. The five-star Gramercy Park Hotel was tacked on for \$50 million last August. MCR also co-owns and operates the High Line Hotel in the upmarket Chelsea district of the city.

The BT Tower appeared on Morse’s radar two years ago. His “long-term friend” Thomas Heatherwick, the British designer, alerted him to the opportunity to convert it into a hotel. The MCR team has been working with lawyers and structural engineers to understand the “art of the possible” ever since. Heatherwick has been retained to oversee the conversion of the building.

Perhaps wisely, given scrutiny from conservation groups, councils, planning officials and national politicians, Morse has remained tight-lipped about his plans for the tower until now.

The Top of the Tower restaurant was opened by holiday camp tycoon Sir Billy Butlin and Labour frontbencher Tony Benn, the postmaster general, on May 16, 1966. Boasting an “all-electric kitchen” the à la carte eatery quickly became a favourite with celebrities from The Beatles to Muhammad Ali. In 1971, a terrorist bomb led to the tower being closed to the public. The restaurant remained open until 1980 when Butlin elected not to renew the franchise.



The Top of the Tower restaurant was visited by numerous celebrities including Muhammad Ali

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“We haven’t figured out everything yet,” said Morse. But he promises a dining experience that “will be better” than rival revolving restaurants such as that on top of the CN Tower in Toronto, he added.

The MCR team will now embark on a “listening tour” to garner opinions from locals and conservation groups,

opinions that will be crucial to navigating strict planning laws. Morse knows it could take up to two years given the tower's Grade II listed status.

Morse wants to keep the building's original purpose at the heart of the theming of the hotel. "It's about telephony. It's about the telegraph era. But with all the modern amenities," he said.

He describes how "billions of miles of telephone wire" from inside the tower will be woven into hotel wallpaper, for instance. An infinity swimming pool that looks over the city could also be on the cards but, in line with policy at some of MCR's other hotels, guests may find that they have to pay to use it. Retro rotary-dial phones are being considered for every room.

Calling on Heatherwick to spearhead the building's design will stand Morse in good stead. The designer's credits range from the 2012 Olympic cauldron to London's New Routemaster double-decker buses and from Paddington's rolling bridge to Google's headquarters in Mountain View and the 1,000 Trees project in Shanghai.

Meanwhile, inspiration will be taken from Morse's transformation of Eero Saarinen's Trans World Airlines terminal at New York's JFK airport into the trendy sixties-themed TWA Hotel.

Morse acquired the building, opened in 1962, alongside American airline JetBlue Airways in 2015. He turned it into a 512-room hotel featuring classic mid-century architectural and furniture design flourishes.

It costs an average of \$252-a-night (£200), a price likely to be echoed at the BT Tower.



The stylish TWA hotel at Terminal 5 of JFK airport

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“The word luxury is wildly overused these days. You don’t have to be luxury to be world-class,” Morse said. “Luxury is something that our grandparents did. The Ritz in London is luxury. But I think, as the world evolves, people are more interested in interesting products. Stunning views are stunning views. And unique experiences are just that.”

He added: “We’ll have 300 thread count sheets, and all of the services and amenities, but in a fun and interesting environment. Not just fancy for the sake of being fancy.”

The tale of the tower

1961 Construction of the tower begins after being commissioned by the General Post Office (GPO). The building's initial purpose was to support microwave aerials, allowing communications to be transmitted from London to the rest of the UK

1965 Prime minister Harold Wilson officially opened the Post Office Tower. Its location was, bizarrely, covered by the Official Secrets Act because of transmitting military signals. As a result it did not appear on Ordnance Survey maps and taking and storing of photos was forbidden.

1966 Opened to the public as a rotating restaurant begins service on the 34th floor

1971 A bomb explodes after being placed in the roof of the men's toilets at the restaurant. The tower was closed to the public thereafter

1980 Sir Billy Butlin allows the restaurant lease to lapse, leading to its closure

1981 After GPO's telecoms arm is spun off, it is renamed the British Telecom Tower

1984 Noel Edmonds broadcasts his first Christmas TV morning show from the top of the tower

1992 Renamed BT Tower following a rebrand by British Telecom to BT

2003 The tower is granted Grade II listed status by Historic England

2009 A wrap-around screen is installed on the 36th and 37th floors to count down the London Olympics in 2012