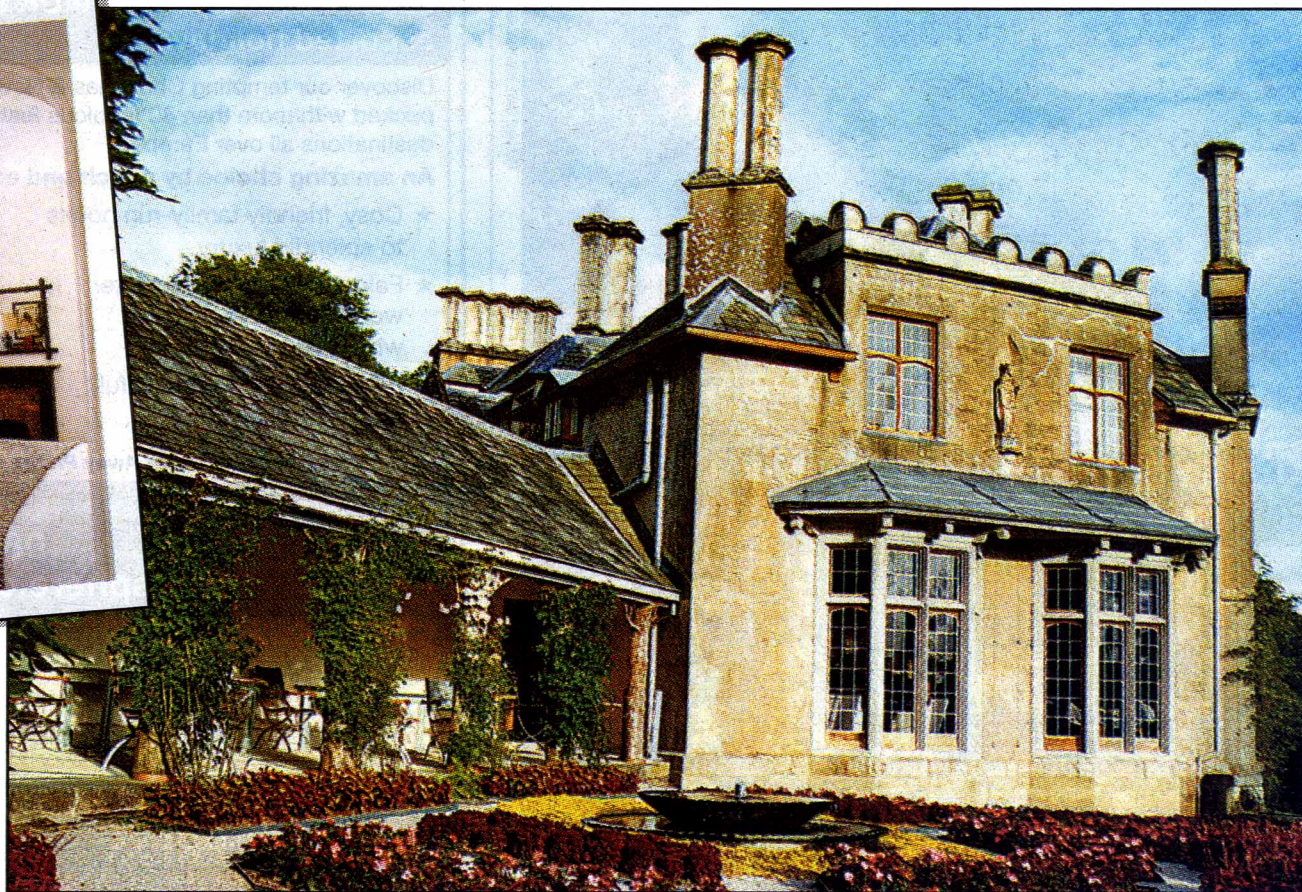
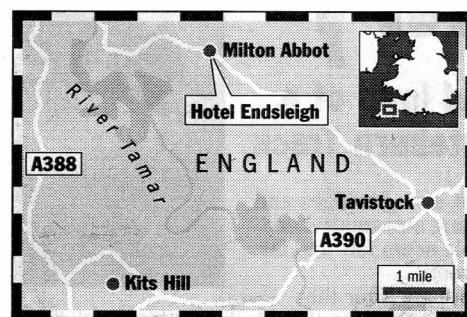


Class shines through at this aristocratic retreat

With the kids back at school and forecasters predicting an Indian summer, it's a great time to enjoy a more grown-up side to the South-west. **CAROLINE FITTON** kicks back at Olga Polizzi's sumptuous new hotel and tracks down the flavours that are making Devon a foodie heaven

ESCAPE IN STYLE: With its elegant interiors and stylish bedrooms, Hotel Endsleigh provides the perfect getaway for those who enjoy the finer things in life



IF I owned a third of Devon I'd build a modest 16-bedroom country retreat with views over Dartmoor somewhere on the banks of the River Tamar, just within striking distance of a lovely market town, say Tavistock.

That is precisely what the Duke and Duchess of Bedford did in 1812. Endsleigh House was the hunting lodge to which the Bedford clan annually decamped, leaving behind their palatial life at Woburn. With its gardens designed by Humphrey Repton – the fashionable horticulturalist of the day – no stone was left unturned in creating a bucolic paradise.

Now rejuvenated as Hotel Endsleigh, under the artistic hand of hotelier Olga Polizzi and her daughter Alex, it's a county away from their other success story, the Hotel Tresanton at St Mawes, on Cornwall's south coast.

Opening just a fortnight ago it's a class act, and a place ripe for a late-summer visit, as my husband and I discovered.

We dawdled along the treacle-smooth Tarmac driveway, drinking in the wooded surrounds, the air rich with the pungent aroma of trees, ferns

and the scent of soil. Reflecting the woods outside, the Endsleigh interior is defined by thick architraves and door frames, and solid oak floors balanced by elegant fabrics, period furnishings and art.

We were shown to our room by Stephen Blatchford, the caretaker from when the house ticked along as a fishing club, and he is very evidently proud of the house, its history and the recent changes.

In our cafe-creme-toned room with carved bedside tables and striped bedhead, the bedside reading matter comprised garden poems, Oscar Wilde and Joanna Trollope. It was enough to keep me happy for hours but there was more to explore.

My curiosity was aroused by the sight of a number of

peculiarly carved heads. First an intriguing installation in boxes in the wide entrance hall, followed by a massive stone head with fish balanced on top facing the reception area.

Then into the library where from a tabletop a carved wooden lady gazes down, and elegantly positioned at the end of a long corridor another white stone bust surrounded by glass candle holders. Other candles were placed liberally throughout the hotel. Simultaneously lit at 6pm, they provided a romantic serenity.

The engaging Alex presides, ensuring that guests are greeted, have their needs met and are waved goodbye. Maps and more solid heads lend a suggestion of antiquity in the drawing room. "Mum says those

two are like my Nonno, my Italian grandfather," said Alex, pointing at a matching pair of defined Romanesque noses.

THIS was our post-supper relaxation, where we had been most pleasantly plied with dry-cured ham and figs, Dartmoor lamb with honey and organic smoked salmon, leaving just enough room for a late summer pudding.

Large platters of fruit were more than sufficient for breakfast – pineapple, mango, kiwi, apricot, with compotes, yogurts, seeds and fresh brioche. A memorable spread, all eaten from the prettiest bone china. Taken from the original

Humphrey Repton designs, each cup, saucer, bowl and plate (specially commissioned) bears a simple leaf pattern – oak, beech, sycamore, willow or fern.

Sadly there hadn't been enough time to stroll the banks of the Tamar or promenade the Rose Walk. We settled instead for the view from the terrace to Kit Hill tin-mine monument – a timely reminder of the ore that fed the local economy for centuries. That has turned to "awe" at this fine hotel.

GETTING THERE:

Hotel Endsleigh (01822 870000/www.hotelendsleigh.com) offers double rooms from £210 per night (two sharing) B&B; three-course dinner £38pp. Devon Tourism: 0870 608 5531/www.discoverdevon.com