

## TRAVEL HOTELS

# A chain reaction in the country

Sophy Roberts looks at the identity crisis for English country house hotels as family-owned properties become rarer

On a recent holiday weekend, I was stuck in traffic heading out of London. I saw the sign for Cliveden, thought to be among England's great country house hotels. Cliveden is also well known for its insalubrious place in British parliamentary history, for this was where the showgirl Christine Keeler met John Profumo, the then secretary of state for war, ultimately leading to the fall of the Macmillan government. I admit my car is not a Maserati and my child no baby Beckham, but otherwise we were looking pretty respectable. I spoke to the doorman and asked for a lunchtime table. Fully booked, he told me.

Now there was no mistaking the star that appeared at the entrance to the bowler. I know that look. As I headed off to the local pub, I rang Cliveden on my mobile. The maitre d' said there were a number of tables free. I asked to talk to a manager, to see how this could happen. About 10 minutes later, that same gentleman was found creeping through the pub, red rose in lapel, to offer an oleaginous apology – including afternoon tea at our leisure (by then he knew I was a journalist).

Is the first rule in luxury hotels not to distinguish between who walks through the door? I don't care if you park my car around the back – if the credit card works, don't knock my custom.

And then it struck me – the country house hotel in England seems to be losing its way in a rapidly expanding marketplace. What for so long meant a cosy, chintzy, weekend bolthole is now a catch-all phrase for just about anything. In recent years, the most conspicuous change of all is the regrettable demise of the family-owned property.

Cliveden, for instance, is now part of the von Essen Collection, headed by Andrew Davis who has spent the last seven years buying up properties as

some women shop for handbags (Cliveden, which is National Trust-owned, is on a management contract). The portfolio of 17 includes Sharrow Bay in Cumbria, The Royal Crescent Bath and Bishopstrow House in Wiltshire.

In 2002, Orient Express Hotels snapped up Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons (in "partnership" with chef-proprietor Raymond Blanc). Then there is Four Seasons, which recently landed in Hampshire. As to whether or not it can deliver, I will wait to see once the conferences have left – in my experience rooms have so far been surprisingly hard to come by.

I am not suggesting these hotels be avoided simply because of ownership. Most let it be known that they can cope with the demands of lucrative corporate shindigs. And by recent experience at Northamptonshire's Fawsley Hall – the same owners have Grayshott Spa in Surrey and The Park near Bath – they can certainly throw back-to-back weddings (the fireworks kept me from sleeping). But chain-ownership (even if the chain is not obvious) is just one aspect of a rapidly fragmenting country house hotel market.

Other trends include the Babington phenomenon (Babington House in Somerset is the country sister of London's Soho House, the members' club). You can also throw Cowley Manor into this much-copied collection of trendy contemporary urban hotels in the provinces – one that appeals to Londoners who don't really want to leave London, or Notting Hill to be more accurate. From my early experience (perhaps things have improved), neither hotel really knew the meaning of good service, in a spirit of silver service prices. Whately Manor outside Bath also almost fits this category, although here the Swiss owner has installed a more formal kind of European waiter.

Then there are the country resorts. Chewton Glen in Hampshire can be put



Individual touch: the Hotel Endsleigh's resident pot-bellied pig, Georgina

into this bracket – it has flashy new hydrotherapy facilities – and it is still family owned, which hits you like a fresh scent of roses as soon as you walk through the door. But it is The Grove in Watford that represents the resort trend par excellence. And does it deliver. To kick the tyres, I turned up with my son – nothing for him but a change of clothes. They had everything to hand including a kid's club, kid's pool, kid's food, kid's mug, kid's room service, teddy bear, toys and short-notice babysitter. Sure, Watford is

hardly Thomas Hardy's Dorset, with its hairy lanes and tractors, but there are putting greens in view and some relatively attractive gardens. You can do pretty much anything – eat where you like, when you like, dress how you like. When I passed by the outdoor pool, there were even guests learning to scuba dive.

Which takes me to my point, which isn't necessarily nostalgic. In this fast developed market, where is the English country house that is still both rural and convivial, where you are a guest

rather than a room number fighting for a table or a facial, a tee-time or a massage? There are a few old stalwarts – north of the border, I would recommend Kinnaird in Perthshire – and, since August, Hotel Endsleigh on Dartmoor's western fringe.

Endsleigh is an early 19th-century cottage orné designed by Sir Jeffrey Wyattville. It is set in 108 acres of parkland landscaped by Humphrey Repton, with fanciful grottoes, follies and tinkling waterfalls. The River Tamar runs below. It is owned by Olga Polizzi,

who reinvented the seaside hotel with the 1999 opening of Cornwall's Hotel Tresanton, Endsleigh, which currently has 15 completed bedrooms, is managed by her daughter, Alex, who lives on property.

To see the niece of Rocco Forte wipe down breakfast tables and wait for the last guest to finish dinner speaks of a fundamental grasp of what luxury hotels are all about – even in the country.

For Endsleigh is a labour of love, and it shows in quirky details, from the immaculately restored hand-painted wallpapers, to Georgina, the miniature Vietnamese pot-bellied pig that follows her owner about the garden. The interiors I adored – an unpretentious mix of simple textures, chintz and period Regency panelling. For the Notting Hill Billies there are some fashionable pared-back spaces (much more chic than Babington), including a library with one of the best collections you could hope to devour in a lifetime. Even the flowers seem effortlessly stylish, the vast vases stuffed with dusky pink hydrangeas.

I booked the cheapest £210-a-night rate and was given a double room almost equal in square footage (with a bit better view) to the one I enjoyed at The Grove, which was priced at a few times that amount.

I didn't have a babysitter but left my

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door ajar so the bellboy could keep an ear out for my son. He checked on him throughout dinner, leaving me free to enjoy the food, which was unusually memorable: £38 for three courses, from Dorset lamb to Cornish scallops, without a hint of the leaden jus that's still dribbled over plates in more conventional establishments.

The chef, Nick Shopland, came from a local pub. And what a find. I preferred the kitchen to Devon's great gastro establishment Gidleigh Park (from £40 a night for two including breakfast and dinner). The cooking at Endsleigh is lighter, simpler, more modern. In fact, Endsleigh has not it all sewn up – and it's (0)1822-3700; [www.hotelendsleigh.com](http://www.hotelendsleigh.com). Doubles from £210; suites from £350. Rates include bed, breakfast and VAT.

*Hotel Endsleigh, Milton Abbot, Tavistock, Devon, 0119 2824; (0)1822-3700; [www.hotelendsleigh.com](http://www.hotelendsleigh.com). Doubles from £210; suites from £350. Rates include bed, breakfast and VAT.*