

# OLGA POLIZZI

Somehow, in between designing hotels for her brother's Rocco Forte Hotels group, Olga Polizzi has found the time follow up the Tresanton in Cornwall with her second personal project, Hotel Endsleigh in Devon. Catherine Chetwynd meets a designer as comfortable dealing with listed Regency wallpapers as urban newbuild hotels...

As Olga Polizzi's latest project Hotel Endsleigh in Devon opens its doors to the public, her reputation for putting the soul back into properties that seemed to have lost the will to live is reconfirmed. This is Polizzi's second property and follows on from Tresanton, which put the village of St Mawes in Cornwall back on the map. Both projects are secondary to Polizzi's day job, which is design director to RF Hotels, the ever expanding hotel company run by her brother Rocco Forte and jointly owned by Forte, father Charles Forte and herself. After art school in Rome, Polizzi started working for her father's company Trusthouse Forte, latterly Forte Hotels. But when the group was taken over by Granada and then Compass, she lost her enthusiasm for the industry.

"The whole takeover was rather miserable and I didn't really want to start again. My father always used to say you have to have been dropped on your head at birth to go into the hotel business.

"I tried to get into something else but no one really wanted me," she says. "I have only ever done hotels. Then Rocco made up his mind he wanted to do hotels and I stuck with him. It has been quite nerve-racking. The hotel business is very capital intensive. You put money in and it is slow to make a return but we're doing quite well now. It's starting to be more fun." Polizzi talks as though she is constantly on the verge

of nervous breakdown but she clearly thrives on the pressure. She bought Endsleigh in a fair state of dereliction and turned it round in a year. "A friend told me there was an amazing place for sale with lots of follies, an extraordinary garden and cascades," she says. "So on our way down to Cornwall, William [her husband, writer and journalist William Shawcross] and I went to have a look. It was pretty frightening. Both the house and garden are Grade I Listed and were in very bad condition. It had never had any heating, it didn't have enough water, a lot of the windows had to be re-made and there was some dry rot. It wasn't the right time – my father-in-law had just died – and William said no, we can't do it. We drove on. I wish we had carried on driving!"

But the property came back to haunt them in the form of a For Sale advertisement in Country Life and a 'panegyric', as she describes it, by the magazine's editor Clive Aslett, who eulogised the beautiful Regency house and said it should be saved for the nation. "I thought perhaps we had made a mistake, so we went to have another look and were hooked," she says. "I knew all the way through I shouldn't really do it but I always seem to give myself new challenges." Polizzi is working for the first time with daughter Alex, an Oxford graduate, who did a management course at Mandarin Oriental Hong Kong and then worked in

RF properties in Rome and St Petersburg. "She was keen to do a hotel," says Olga Polizzi. "I would not have done it if she hadn't wanted to because I haven't got time to be in Devon. She has been living there, overseeing the work and she opened the hotel. "I couldn't have done it without her. On the whole, she has concentrated on the service side, I do the look of it – and we interchange now and again."

Endsleigh belonged to the Duke & Duchess of Bedford, in 1820/1830, when they owned one third of Devon. One of the dukes died there and the family sold it to the duke's fishing friends. The Endsleigh Fishing Club ran it as a hotel for use when fishing on the River Tamar, which runs through the bottom of the garden. It is one of the best salmon fishing rivers in England. But it got run down and the club wanted to sell it. Endsleigh has seven rods on the Tamar, so two guests can fish every day of the season, plus another fifty days. Polizzi has given the stretch of river back to the club, so members and her guests can now fish the whole river.

Turning the place around in a year was a miraculous feat. "There is a two-mile drive down to the house and we had to dig a trench all the way down the drive to bring in water, gas, telephone lines, electricity; and we put in a new cesspit. We had to strengthen various parts of the building and put a fire escape down from the second floor, otherwise, we couldn't

use the top floor. You name it, we've done it." And that's what you don't see. "All the bathrooms have been totally redone," says Olga Polizzi. "There were some lovely old baths and we refurbished them and made the bathrooms a little larger. We also tried to put some integrity back into the bedrooms by taking out bathrooms from the corners of rooms and putting them into linen cupboards. It was a huge job." There are 16 rooms in all.

Polizzi says working within the confines of Grade I Listing was not difficult because Endsleigh already had planning permission. "The difficult part was putting in heating," she says. "I used cast iron radiators – as few as possible – and hid them so that they don't intrude. I thought about installing under-floor heating but it would have meant taking up the floors and that would have ruined them."

Some of the floors were in a good state, some not. "The ground floors are in reasonable condition and on the whole have polished up well," she says. "I put carpets on the floors that were ruined and put new wooden floors in the all bathrooms. I have done them in slightly differing colours so that they look of today." Today – modern style – is Polizzi's passion, so she particularly enjoyed designing RF Hotels' The Lowry, a newbuild property in Manchester. "Doing The Lowry was fun and easy – all the rooms were roughly the same," she says, meaning in shape and size, not design. Polizzi draws on the character of a building but mixes old and new with consummate ease.

She likes clean, uncluttered lines and admits to having some recognisable characteristics. "I have certain signature traits – I like painting walls [rather than paper] and if I've found a wonderful lamp for one hotel, I will use it again." However, some of the wallpaper at Endsleigh is listed, including that in Queen Victoria's bedroom. "It is quite bright with birds and I had to put plain fabrics with that," she says. "I have gone a bit flowery at Endsleigh, which I haven't done for years – I have used Bernard Thorpe materials with a lot of plain fabrics. I don't know whether I was completely right to do it." She believes a building and its environment will speak

for themselves. "Tresanton is on the sea, there's a lot of sunlight, it's blue outside. It tells you what it needs. At Browns, there are more city colours, greys and whites, a little bit more London." The gardens at Endsleigh have had some influence. "We have gone quite green and used Regency colours, which has been fun – rather bright yellows and blues." One room came out particularly vibrant and Alex asked her: "Are you sure?" Yes, yes, Polizzi said dismissively: "But I did tone it down a bit when I saw it," she says. And she likes working with natural fabrics. "My favourite is linen, I love it. I know it creases but it always looks good and you can get wonderful colours. Silk has the same wonderful colours – I can use it in a city but not anywhere else," she says.

In her work for Rocco Forte Hotels, she says there is no unifying theme. "I have looked at each property separately and how it works in its environment, which country it is in and what type of building it is. We have bought each hotel and done it as a whole, so you get a look all the way through." But it was different with her father's properties. "It was such a huge company," she says. "We did 10 rooms here and 20 there, a bathroom in one place, a dining room, a conference room somewhere else, so you never got a big picture." The Forte family obviously works well together and operating alongside her brother seems to be relatively problem-free for Polizzi. "Rocco is more interested in the design side than he used to be," she says. "He gets involved when I have done a couple of prototype rooms for a hotel and he'll say I really do or don't like this. And if he doesn't, I'll change it. He's the boss," she says. "If I feel strongly about something, I may try and persuade him. I will stick to my guns if I think it is something really important." But she is pragmatic: "You can do a room 25 different ways and it will still look good." Polizzi's creative muse clearly works hard for a living.

Olga Polizzi is self-deprecating. "I think I am rather ordinary as a designer, quite run-of-the-mill in a way," and then adds in masterful understatement: "But I'm quite good at the hotel stuff because I've been doing it for years."

She contradicts herself quite a lot. To acquire Endsleigh – £2.6 million – her mother invested some money and she borrowed the rest. "I prefer to do it like that because otherwise it gets so complicated. I have had some offers but I would like to keep it in the family." And regarding venture capitalists: "I don't like being told what to do – I've been told what to do for too long."

Later, she says: "I have always been bossed about by the males in my family – my father, my brother, my husband, although he will say he doesn't. I quite like being bossed about, I think," she says with complete equanimity. "I don't like being told what to do" seems nearer the mark. It is more likely the bossiness sails over her head and she just does her own thing. She also describes herself as "pretty disorganised – I always get there by the skin of my teeth", but commercial imperatives dictate she has to do everything at full tilt. "If I had more time, I could say no, that is not *quite* right," she says. "You really need a good year to plan a job, pull together all the drawings and get them signed off, and then six months to go out to tender, speak to builders, find the best ones, go out again if necessary – and then start. Then it is the perfect job. I've never managed to do one like that yet. "I know my brother thinks we are slow but actually it all happens quite fast," says Polizzi, who is working on the Richemond in Geneva for RF Hotels. "The operators have to decide exactly what they want, how many meeting rooms, health club, how many suites. They always do that at the last minute and it's the fault of the design side if there is a problem. Then we put in a prototype room and however fast we are with that, they say it is too late to change the electrics." If this sounds like carping, it is not. Polizzi describes it all with great energy, and although she frowns with frustration, she is obviously heartily enthused by what she does.

Polizzi recognises the value of outside influences and works with other designers on some projects. "We are using John Stefanidis at the Richemond, I got Martin Brudnizki into Frankfurt [Villa Kennedy] and Richard Daniels Design in Prague," she says. "Tommaso Ziffer

did Rome with me and is now doing the Berlin hotel. I worked very closely with Tommaso in Rome because it was the first time he'd done a hotel. He has wonderful taste and extraordinary ideas and it is nice to have the input of somebody else, otherwise it can get boring. Good designers do not mind taking on my ideas. They know it is my hotel and I have strong views but it is still a mixture of them and me."

Olga Polizzi's influences are eclectic. "Philippe Starck opened our eyes to something new," she says. "I have never stayed at one of his properties but I have looked round them. He's a bit of a genius. And I admire Jacobsen and Le Corbusier – I like that period. I also quite like some of the minimalists like David Chipperfield; and Norman Foster has done some marvellous things. I like what he did at the Royal Academy, the Sackler Wing – it merges so well with the building."

Polizzi sources as much as possible locally – from food to artworks. Some of the sculpture at Endsleigh is made by Cecile Johnson Soliz, an American who lives in Wales and whose work Polizzi used in The St David's Hotel & Spa. And through English Heritage in Devon, she found a couple to renovate faux wood-panelled walls that are trompe l'oeil painted.

Polizzi loves shopping. She is imaginative and resourceful and of course, shops at speed. "I have done a lot of the buying from London – I have not really had a chance to go and look for furniture in Devon, except on Saturdays. I will go into shops and pick up three chests of drawers here, two tables there. And I bought some broken statues and had marble tables and shelves made from them by a very good marble man, who wrote to say he was in Devon when we bought Endsleigh."

She sees infinite possibilities in items other people have written off. In fact, her entire life seems to be one of infinite possibilities. Although she makes passing mention of retirement, there is still so much to do – and of course, not enough time to do it in.

*Hotel Endsleigh, Milton Abbot, Tavistock, Devon, PL19 0PQ [www.hotelendsleigh.com](http://www.hotelendsleigh.com)*