

The inn crowd

The humble British pub is being reinvented, with Michelin-starred food and rooms to rival the smartest hotels. By Joanne O'Connor

From its crooked floors to its low, beamed ceilings, the Olde Bell in Hurley oozes history. In a pretty Berkshire village on the banks of the river Thames, the inn dates from the 12th century and has served as a guesthouse for the local priory, a staging post on the London to Oxford route and a favourite haunt for Hollywood stars such as Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor and Cary Grant, taking time out from filming at Pinewood Studios.

Visitors stopping for a pint in the cosy bar might be forgiven for thinking little has changed here in its 800-year history. But climb the narrow wooden staircase to the bedrooms and a different story emerges. The feel is earthy, Scandinavian in its simplicity, but unmistakably modern, with unadorned white walls and bare floorboards, a free-standing cast-iron bath, an Ercol rocking chair draped with a sheepskin rug, and a bright red Roberts radio providing the only splash of colour.

In the dining room, the antler chandeliers, communal trestle tables and pewter tableware give a nod to the building's past as a hostelry but the menu is clearly aiming higher than traditional pub fare. It's not every day you see scurvy grass and lavender honeycomb on a pub menu. But, then, this is no ordinary pub.

The Olde Bell is one of a new breed of coaching inns redefining the notion of pub hospitality. In the 1990s, the gastropub was born out of the realisation that a cheese baguette was no longer sufficient to entice food-savvy customers so, consequently, the boundaries between pub and restaurant were blurred. Now, it seems, the next stage is the blurring of the boundaries between the humble inn and the five-star hotel.

The Olde Bell's website makes much of the inn's focus on "simple creature comforts" but it's clear that the bar is being set somewhat higher than this. The styling of the rooms and restaurant is the work of celebrated hotel designer Ilse Crawford, whose high-profile projects have included the Soho House private members' club and hotel in New York, Ceconni's in Mayfair and the Grand Hotel in Stockholm. But it's not just the decor that is five-star. For one of the larger rooms at the Olde Bell, guests will pay around £350 a night. You can stay at the Savoy more cheaply. Similarly, the services on offer go beyond the inn's traditional remit of food and lodging. Guests at the Olde Bell can order anything from a ploughman's lunch to an ayurvedic head massage from room service and the activities on offer – tennis, boules, croquet, mountain biking, foraging expeditions – would not be out of place at a country hotel. There are even plans to open a small spa next year.

"The country house hotel is dead. This is the future," says Sam Pearman, as he greets me from behind the bar of the Wheatsheaf Inn, a creeper-clad Cotswold stone coaching inn in the pretty Gloucestershire village of Northleach. He's only half joking. A former professional rugby player who trained as a chef at Langan's Brasserie, Pearman is typical of the new type of innkeeper. Often chefs or hoteliers who have reached the top of their game at London's finest establishments, they now relish the freedom and creativity that running a small-scale operation can bring.

"People don't necessarily want the formality of a country house hotel where you have to dress for dinner and talk quietly," says Pearman. "We're offering the same quality you'd get in a five-star hotel but for half the price and with the atmosphere and informality of a pub."

Pearman and his wife Georgina completed a dramatic refurbishment of the Wheatsheaf this year, turning it from a typical village pub with tired rooms into a stylish weekend bolthole. The 14 guest rooms have been given a makeover, with sultry colour schemes, the finest local linen and the occasional statement piece, such as a stunning pewter bathtub. Downstairs, the bar area has been stripped back to make the most of period features, such as the



wood-panelled walls and fireplaces, and furnished with flea market and vintage finds.

A small outbuilding now serves as a spa treatment room and a decadent private dining room and comfortable sitting room have been added. Pub staples, such as steak and chips, pie and mash and rhubarb crumble, feature prominently on the menu, (locally sourced and perfectly executed, of course), while the all-day brunch with buck's fizz, rock oysters, Bloody Mary sardines and devilled kidneys brings a decadent twist.

Though the couple are tight-lipped about the inn's more famous clientele, it's clear the Cotswold celebrity set have taken this place to their hearts. Guests at Kate Moss's wedding stayed here and a wine-tasting evening was recently enlivened by the appearance of former Sex Pistols frontman John Lydon (aka Johnny Rotten), who treated bemused locals to a medley of Abba songs – something you probably won't find

Hospitality Top: the Beckford Arms in Wiltshire; middle row from left: a dish at the Olde Bell in Berkshire; the Wheatsheaf Inn in Gloucestershire; the exterior of the Olde Bell; bottom row, from left: a log fire at the Olde Bell; tankards at the Beckford Arms; a room at the Wheatsheaf; the Olde Bell

happening in the lounge of your average country house hotel.

Proponents of these "super pubs" argue the hospitality industry was in dire need of a new business model. The Campaign for Real Ale reports that traditional pubs are closing at a rate of 29 a week, while some country house hotels are also struggling – one of the most recent and high-profile casualties being the Von Essen group, which went into administration in April.

Dan Brod, who runs the Beckford Arms in Wiltshire with business partner Charlie Luxton, believes their formula, without the costly overheads of a conventional hotel, is better suited to recession-hit times. The pub, set in rolling parkland on the edge of the Fonthill Estate, just 20 minutes from Stonehenge, has been garnering rave reviews since it reopened this summer. Luxton was operations manager for the Soho House group of members' clubs and

hotels, and was involved in the launch of Babington House, which was credited with reinventing the country house hotel when it opened in 1998.

"Babington House did for country house hotels what we are trying to do for country inns," says Brod. But while at Babington you can expect to pay between £280 and £600 a night, the Beckford Arms has rooms for £95 a night. Not surprisingly, the inn's eight bedrooms are currently running at 100 per cent occupancy at weekends but, according to Brod, this only accounts for one part of the business model's success.

"It's not difficult to fill up a place at weekends. Our success is based on the fact that we are serving 60 for lunch every day from Monday to Friday, and the same again in the evenings," he says.

Local patronage is encouraged through regular events, from boules tournaments to film nights. And the chance to mingle with everyone from the local landowner to the stable boy enriches the experience for weekend guests. "It's what you buy into when you book a weekend in the country: a slice of local life," says Brod.

Nor is this purely a rural phenomenon. It's a model that can work just as well in the city, as the Fox and Anchor proved when it opened in Clerkenwell three years ago. On a typical weekday lunchtime you'll find city traders, porters from Smithfield Meat Market and tourists rubbing shoulders at the pewter-topped bar or tucking into the stridently British menu of oysters, salt beef and dumplings, and ham hock and

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mash. With just six guest rooms, hand-somely kitted out with copper handbasins, lattice windows and chaise longues, it offers far more character than a corporate hotel and a real taste of the local neighbourhood.

Posh pubs, boutique inns – nobody seems quite sure what to christen this new type of hostelry but most in the industry agree their number is set to grow. Already 12 British pubs have been awarded Michelin stars, and last month the Hand and Flowers in Marlow, Buckinghamshire, became the first to win two. Earlier this year the celebrated chef Marco Pierre White purchased Maypole Hotels, a group of six country inns in Suffolk, Norfolk and Wiltshire and is refurbishing the flagship property, the medieval Angel in Lavenham. The owners of the Olde Bell, Tej and Sarina Dhillon, have again enlisted Ilse Crawford to work her magic on their latest purchase, the Liongate Hotel in Hampton Court, which will relaunch in April. The Pearmans have plans to expand their portfolio of country pubs with rooms, as do Dan Brod and Charlie Luxton.

Traditional inns have been on the endangered species list for a long time but now it seems a handful at least have found a new way to thrive. And far from emulating the five-star hotels, when it comes to style and individuality, they are the ones who are setting the standard.

Details

The Olde Bell, Hurley, Berkshire, www.theoldebell.co.uk
The Wheatsheaf Inn, Northleach, Gloucestershire, www.cotswoldswheatsheaf.com
The Beckford Arms, Fonthill Gifford, Wiltshire, www.beckfordarms.com
Fox and Anchor, Clerkenwell, London, www.foxandanchor.com

Two guides have been published this month: the Campaign for Real Ale's 'Great British Pubs' and Michelin's 'Eating Out in Pubs'

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