

Southern BELL

IMPLANTED IN THE VERDANT GREEN JUST OUTSIDE LONDON, THE 900-YEAR-OLD OLDE BELL INN OFFERS A BEGUILING COCKTAIL OF HISTORY, HAND-CRAFTED CUISINE AND ILSE CRAWFORD INTERIORS. IT'S COUNTRY LUXE AT ITS MOST UNFORGETTABLE

WORDS | KATHRYN CLARK

"We're trying to achieve fifty percent self-sustainability by the end of next year," says Mandy Hill, head gardener at the Olde Bell Inn in Hurley, Berkshire. With a pretty face only slightly telling of a life outdoors, Mandy spends her days lovingly organising the inn's walled garden into neat rows of organic herbs and vegetables. It's a place that erupts with such taste and freshness it would make Alain Ducasse weak at the knees. One garden bed contains prize tomato bushes extravagantly curling up wooden stakes like green brocade, and another wild English strawberries spilling out of terracotta pots. All are destined for the tables of the Olde Bell's restaurant, which is so good that it has slid into culinary celebrity almost without anyone noticing. "Would you like a strawberry?" Mandy offers.

Every so often, one comes across a property so special that it seems to generate history itself. Thirty minutes from London, the five-star Olde Bell Inn is one such place. Having made its simple offering of food, drink and lodgings to travellers since 1132, the Olde Bell has witnessed a plot to overthrow the monarchy, held critical meetings between Winston Churchill and president Eisenhower and hosted a parade of celebrities. Its back catalogue of stories would put the Cohen brothers to shame.

A golden era arrived in the 1940s, when the Olde Bell became a second home for Hollywood's original starlets who would come to the UK to shoot at the Pinewood Studios nearby. Elizabeth Taylor, Mae West, Eroll Flynn, Carey Grant and Marlene Dietrich were among

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The Olde Bell provides creature comforts such as fine cotton sheets and Jakob's wool blankets; desserts are a highlight at the restaurant; much of their produce is grown at the walled garden onsite; the dining room at the Olde Bell; warm fires in winter; tasty local delicacies



those who rolled their gleaming cars down its gravel driveway. The old inn was also popular with the politicians of the day, who used it as a sanctuary to escape wartime London.

Now the Olde Bell wields this rich history to stunning effect, exuding a storybook charisma that only Tolkien could have conjured from the ether. Sitting with Mandy at a heavy oak table in the meadow garden, the Olde Bell's white walls and peaked red roof seem etched into the summer sky as if etched into the universe itself.

Today the Olde Bell is at the forefront of an exciting movement that is injecting a dose of heart and history into the British hotel industry, trading on the very things that make the English, well, English. The antithesis to Philippe Starck minimalism, coaching inns and historic homes are being snapped up by independent operators who are dressing them up into welcoming, unpretentious weekend escapes that are glamourising history and rekindling the romance with the English countryside.

For its part, the Olde Bell has been quietly charming the London fashion, music and art set with its irresistible mix of laid back luxury, sympathetic interior design, luxuriant gardens and award-winning cuisine. Erdem Moralioglu, Agent Provocateur's Anna Chapman, Rachel Weiss and Judy Dench have all taken up residence recently.

Caru Sanders, the director of Delilah PR, is perched on a wooden stool at the well-stocked bar, chatting with some locals who have stopped in for an end-of-shift drink. Rough white walls illuminated by glass-box lamps carry a motley assortment of historic pictures, and a flagon of summer flowers sits at the end of the bar. The Olde Bell has been an epicentre of Hurley village life for centuries, its inviting public spaces hosting locals and visitors alike and serving as the heartbeat of the place. "What's that black iron thing outside?" one workman asks her. Ordering two glasses of ice-cold sherry, Caru says it's an old water pump.

"Ilse Crawford did the design," she says, sinking into a leather armchair, referring to the legendary British designer who counts the stunning Babington House in Soho, the Grand Hotel in Stockholm and consultancy work for Swarovski and Waterford among her handiwork.

"She wanted to stay true to the property," Caru continues. "She kept the wonkiness and the exposed beams. She left those pictures on the walls. She consulted on the uniforms and even the food. It's a very sympathetic design."

It's so sympathetic it's almost invisible – almost. Instead of making grand statements, Crawford opted for subtle details such as hand-woven Welsh blankets, local Ercol furniture and Inglenook fireplaces, giving the inn a wearable authenticity that makes the inn feel like home.

Whilst there's no denying Ilse Crawford's Midas touch, the Olde Bell's modern rebirth dates back to 2005 when it was purchased by Tej and Sarina Dhillon, almost on a whim, after realising the property's star potential. It was the start of something – the Dhillon Group now own five unique properties, of which the Olde Bell is the jewel in the crown. In addition to honouring each property's individual character, the other Dhillon constant is simple, well-cooked food. Presided over by executive chef Warren Geraghty, the Olde Bell has won several awards including the best restaurant overall at the Restaurant and Bar Design Awards in 2009.

At 7.30pm I am happily ensconced on a high-backed hardwood settle, wrapped in a patterned wool blanket. Glowing under the light

fine CV littered with Michelin-starred establishments – including London's Chez Nico and Richard Neat's restaurant in Cannes – the chef's advice is most welcome. But choosing between his lovingly-crafted dishes smattered with local produce and seasonal cheeses is almost impossible. Eventually, I go with his advice and order the pollock. Beginning with a tray of oysters doused in a zingy orange mignonette, the evening passes in a blur of that special money-can't-buy satisfaction usually reserved for occasions such as jumping in a clear mountain river after a long day's hike.

When chef Warren brings out a featherweight Hampshire strawberry pavlova for dessert, I realise that nearly three hours have gone by. I am not surprised. Time almost seems irrelevant at the Olde Bell: it's good food, good company and good memories that go to the heart of its offering. It's a simple formula that clearly works.

These solid white walls have welcoming people for nearly 900 years; and thankfully, some things never change. ☺

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of the centrepiece antler chandeliers, the restaurant exudes a historic loveliness. Hand-painted plates depicting local legends, folklore and ghost stories hang on the walls like portholes to the past. As I settle in for the night's feast, a couple giggles over glasses of red wine in the candle light, whilst a party of twelve takes over the main dining table.

"If you like fish, I recommend the salted pollock, which comes with crushed jersey royals, samphire and nasturtium pesto." Chef Warren has appeared out of nowhere. With a

