

LIFE TRAVEL

HOTEL OF
THE WEEK
THE OLDE BELL
HURLEY

► This traditional English inn has a rightful claim to using the 'olde worlde' spelling of its name — it is reputedly the oldest coaching inn in Britain, dating back as far as 1135, with a secret tunnel leading to what was the old priory.

Charm? It has in bucketloads — a snug bar, rustic-chic restaurant and 48 simply furnished rooms and suites (although just 11 are in the main house).

It's the quintessential English country hostelry.

Stuck in the past it is not, however. Interiors guru Iise Crawford was chosen for the refurbishment (she has designed such sought-after hotels as Soho House New York).

Here, she has gone for cosy simplicity, using natural woods and pared back colours and textures — plain, even.

The flat oil-based paint in the rooms and staircases is the colour of putty, and there is little in the way of art or adornment.

The simplicity, muted colour and rusticity of the rooms reminded me of 17th-century vernacular Dutch interiors.

It's the perfect place for a quiet break from city life.

There's no iPod connection (although there is free in-room wifi and a TV), but you can tune into the



Cosy simplicity with pared back colours and textures

radio, while soaking in a roll-top bath.

Out in the large lawned garden, the full-size 'summer kitchen' is the foodie version of the BBQ, creating a buzz among patrons on a sunny afternoon.

A recent addition is the walled kitchen garden. While I was looking around, the chef came out during service to handpick some purple sage for a dish. Could you get fresher than that?

We dined in the modern British restaurant, by candlelight. On a menu of, say, eight main courses, there will be one or two fish dishes (plaice on the bone, cucumber, sea

beets, shallot butter) and a veggie dish, and everything is inventive, flavoursome and fresh.

An extensive wine list included heaps of choice in the £25 to £35 bracket.

If you want to explore, then take a stroll in the village. The Thames is only five minutes away, and Henley not much further. Or borrow one of the hotel mountain bikes and visit neighbouring villages at their verdant summer best.

RATES: Rooms from £139
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