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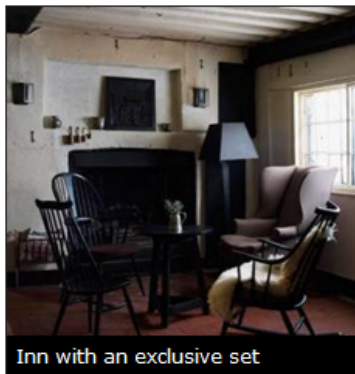
FREETIME

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Inn with an exclusive set at The Olde Bell

By Lawrence Dunhill in Freetime

WITH a guest book boasting names like Gary Grant and Winston Churchill, I felt a tad unimportant to be staying at The Olde Bell inn.



Inn with an exclusive set

Parts of the inn, hidden away in sleepy Hurley, date back to 1135 and it's full of wooden beams, small nooks and general wonkiness.

It was originally set up as a guest house for the nearby Hurley priory, and a small door in the corner of the bar links the two buildings through a narrow tunnel.

In the 1920s and 30s, Hurley and the Olde Bell began to attract a variety of celebrities and build up an exclusive reputation.

The Daily Mirror ran a centre page spread about nude bathing at Hurley lock in 1933, which had people flocking to the village.

During World War Two American troops were stationed at Hurley, and the Olde Bell hosted a meeting between Winston Churchill and General Dwight Eisenhower.

The owners say Liz Taylor, Mae West and Errol Flynn have also been regular guests.

It all seems quite hard to believe when you arrive at the Olde Bell. I imagined it would be swanky and intimidating, but there's something about the coaching inn set-up that makes you feel welcome.



Reworked by designer Ilse Crawford, it's glamorous and stylish, but seems to manage this without being too pretentious.

We sat down for dinner at about 8pm, after driving down the dark lane into Hurley, which lies on the banks of the Thames.

The website had promised British classics 'with a hint of history', but I'm not sure this did the menu justice. With ox cheek and stuffed rabbit saddle among the options, it looked pretty exotic to me.

I went for Cornish squid, with corned beef and beetroot to start. Our seats were in a booth with large wooden benches, backed by

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our seats were in a booth with large wooden benches, backed by rugs and cushions.

Everything on the menu is apparently sourced as locally as possible, with former royal family gardener Mandy Hill looking after orchards, vegetable patches and fruit trees on the site.

This is part of a grand plan to make the inn 50 per cent self-sufficient this year.

After dinner we sipped whisky and red wine in the cosy bar, sitting on beautiful Ercol chairs, with a slab-paving floor kept warm by the fire.

Having drunk a little more than we planned, we headed upstairs to our huge bed, remembering to duck our heads under the low door frame.

Though the luxurious bedroom had modern fittings, such as a flat-screen TV and digital radio, it also had a sort of practical, simple feel.

Quality furniture, rugs and linen could seem excessive and ostentatious, but it all still seemed practical, perhaps with a sort of primitive style.

There was plenty to choose from at a buffet breakfast, with some delicious banana bread being my personal highlight.

You can eat a three-course dinner for £29.50 per head, while rooms are priced from £95. A special weekday lunch menu gives you two courses for £12. The Olde Bell, High Street, SL6 5LX - 01628 825881

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