

Conservative innovators

The Beales, who operate two hotels in the U.K., have sustained their business through eight generations—owing largely to their willingness to make changes.

BY BARBARA SPECTOR

TREVOR BEALE retired as managing director of Beales Hotels on his 65th birthday—nearly ten years ago—but the gray-haired English gentleman still greets staff by name and chats with each employee as he proudly guides a visitor on a tour of West Lodge Park. The traditional country hotel, located on 35 acres in Hertfordshire, 12 miles from central London, has been owned by the Beale family since 1945 and is one of two operated by their business, which dates to the 18th century.

“When I’m at home, I don’t think about the business all that much,” Beale says. But he confesses that when he returns to the hotel after an absence, he notices if furniture has been moved. That’s not surprising. “This was my home as a boy,” Beale explains as he shows off the original building.

Beale’s son, Andrew, 46, who trained at the Swiss Hotel School in Lausanne, is the firm’s managing director and represents the eighth generation. “I’m thrilled that he’s enjoying running it,” Trevor Beale says. “He’s put his own stamp on it.”

Andrew has a rich tradition on which to draw. The family enterprise was founded in 1769, when John Beale opened a bakery in London. The Beales’ first catering venture was launched by fourth-generation member William Beale, who after the day’s baking was done delivered dinners to customers via horse and cart. In 1889 he opened Beale’s Restaurant, which featured a bakery,

banquet halls and a food store.

William’s three sons (who “didn’t get along at all,” Trevor notes) managed to continue the business into the fifth generation. Sixth-generation member John Beale ran the bakery side (which at one point included 12 shops) until 1969; his brother Edward (Trevor’s father) ran the restaurant and catering operations before he acquired West Lodge Park in 1945. Edward added central heating and



West Lodge Park is one of two hotels operated by Beales, whose motto is ‘Generations of Excellence Since 1769.’

private bathrooms, hired a gourmet chef and created an arboretum on the grounds.

Edward Beale also began to assemble an art collection for the hotel, including paintings by Mary Beale (1633-1699), the first English woman to make a living as a painter. The hoteliers can’t place Mary Beale, who painted many members of Charles II’s court, in their lineage, but they say there’s likely some connection.

Also decorating the walls are memorabilia from the firm’s long history—portraits of Trevor’s grandparents, invoices from 1910, a program for a staff dinner from 1898 and photos commemorating visits by for-

mer Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Margaret Thatcher.

Trevor Beale, who became managing director in 1970 and chairman in 1999, oversaw the building of three additions to the hotel and added amenities such as mini-bars, trouser presses and room safes. “One of the most enjoyable parts of the job was traveling around to other country house hotels” to compare notes, he recalls. “My wife would complain

that I wasn’t paying attention to her; I was always measuring the bathrooms.”

Andrew, too, has spearheaded extensive renovations. In 2004, he demolished Beales’ other hotel, Hatfield Lodge, spending £5.5 million to create the ultra-modern Beales Hotel Hatfield, decorated with works by local art students.

“We’re totally different now to when I joined the firm in 1958,” Trevor says.

“You have to be thinking ahead.”

Andrew has strengthened relations with the firm’s 21 family shareholders, including twice-yearly meetings, a newsletter and a password-protected shareholder website. Complimentary vouchers allow shareholders to stay in both hotels and dine in their restaurants.

Though his father continued to live on the premises even after handing off day-to-day management, Trevor says he is happy to step back and let Andrew do business his way. When he retired, Trevor notes, he relinquished the chairman’s title; today, he’s just one of the shareholders. “I’ve done the rounds,” he notes with a smile. **FB**