

Family OWNED HOTELS

By Mark Hayes

In North Wales, you'll meet a man who used to cook guests lunch in his rugby kit. On the Isle of Skye you'll find someone who came from the other Sky, the broadcaster. And in London you may feel grateful you weren't there 100 years ago, when your knickers could have gone flying out through the roof.



Welcome to the sometimes quirky, often delightful world of the family-run hotel. The best of these establishments treat guests as people rather than punters, try to remember their foibles as well as their names, and generally fuss over them as if they were part of an extended family.

As Andrew Beale of Beales Hotels says, many people would never want to stay in a chain hotel or modern roadside lodge and will seek out individuality and distinctiveness. Such guests develop loyalty to those who've pampered them, and this is proving a godsend in providing repeat custom to help family-run hotels through the recession.

But is there a downside in the form of family feuds, set off by the tension of family members working so closely together? Well, not really. We spoke to hoteliers across Great Britain and Ireland and found that they tend to get on rather well with their family. But then it probably takes a patient sort of person to become a good hotelier – after all, they have to spend every day handling the idiosyncrasies and occasional downright weirdness of their guests.

"I was locked away in the kitchen for 10 years"

Martin Bland needed to be quick on his feet when he played for Moseley, Birmingham's premier rugby club, in his youth. He was also fleet of foot in becoming a hotelier. Within weeks of marrying, he and his wife Janette bought a run-down convalescent home in Llandudno, Conwy, converted it into the St Tudno Hotel and opened for business.

That was at Whitsun, 1972. There was no telephone in the hotel, so they had to use a callbox on the promenade. Neither were there any dining chairs on opening day, but by day two that had been sorted

out and the hotel was full of guests, some of whom returned only two weeks later.

"One of the reasons I married Janette is I thought she was a good cook, and I thought she was going to do all the cooking," Martin jokes, "but it was me. I ended up in the kitchen and I was locked away there for 10 years."

The 18-bedroom hotel offered full board, with lunch at £1.50 extra, and with Martin now playing for Llandudno Rugby Club he would often prepare Saturday lunch in his kit so he could dash off to the match afterwards.

Martin's three daughters have all worked in the hotel, but all now live in London and "realise it's too much hard work" to be hoteliers. Janette, who was awarded an MBE in 1999 for services to tourism, passed away in 2005, and with Martin now 65 his thoughts have started to turn to selling up and retiring.

But in the meantime he enjoys chatting to the guests, having long been allowed out of the kitchen. He checks them all in, then when they're leaving he waits until ▷

Opposite: Kinloch Lodge Hotel, Isle of Skye

Below: St Tudno Hotel & Restaurant, Llandudno





Above: The Fitzpatrick Scott – Lennon family

Left: Andrew and Edward Beale, West Lodge Park, Hadley Wood

Right top: Fitzpatrick Castle, Killiney

until they have looked over the bill and are about to pay before swooping downstairs to say goodbye. "I race everywhere – I'm very fit, I have to be," he says, his sports background still in evidence.

"If you don't know what you're talking about you get crucified by the staff"

Andrew Beale, managing director of Beales Hotels, is the third generation of hotelkeepers in his family. His grandfather, Edward, bought West Lodge Park in Hadley Wood, Hertfordshire, in 1945 and lived at the hotel.

"Edward never retired, he was the one who knows everything and can't bear to give it up, and remained chairman of the company until he was 85. He died aged 94 still deeply interested in the business day by day, whereas my father, Trevor, had 40 years with the firm and on his 65th birthday said, 'That's it, I'm off.'"

Andrew wants to walk a line between those extremes. "A family business has more emotion tied up in it than if you were just turning up for work," he says. "There's more baggage and history, but as long as you can get past all of that then it should and could be an enjoyable

thing to be able to work with family members."

Andrew is in his 40s and has no intention of leaving any time soon. But when he does he has five children who could take over, as well as a host of cousins – as long as they follow his example and get thoroughly trained first.

It's the only way to gain the respect of the harshest critics – the staff. "If you're perceived as a shoo-in, daddy's boy or daddy's girl, they see through that in two seconds. You either know what you're talking about or you don't, and if you don't you get crucified by the staff," he warns.

“It was a huge thing to buy my minority shareholders out of the business”

You may spot Bono, the singer from U2, enjoying a drink at the bar. “We have a lot of celebrity guests living close by,” explains Eithne Fitzpatrick Scott-Lennon, owner of Fitzpatrick Castle in the upmarket Dublin suburb of Killiney, overlooking Dublin Bay.

The property now has 113 bedrooms, 11 suites and an array of leisure facilities, but it was “a veritable wreck with no more than 11 rooms” when Eithne’s father and mother bought it in the early 1970s. Eithne and her four brothers have all worked there, but four years ago, after her father Paddy’s death, Eithne took the decision to buy out her siblings.

“That took a lot of bravery on my part,” she says. “It was a huge thing to take on, to refinance and to buy my minority shareholders out of the business.”

Thanks to her father’s careful succession planning, Eithne’s siblings all had their own careers to follow. Two of her brothers have, like her, become hoteliers. John owns the Fitzpatrick Manhattan and the Fitzpatrick Grand Central hotels in New York, while Paul owns The Morgan and The Beacon hotels in Dublin. The other two brothers are builders and developers, whose advice comes in handy when maintaining a building the size of Fitzpatrick Castle.

Eithne and her husband James have four sons and are themselves starting the process of succession planning. One of their offspring, 21-year-old Mark Scott-Lennon, has chosen to do a masters degree in hospitality management so there is at least one potential third-generation hotelier in the family.



“I’ve said to mum I’ll do the flowers, but she won’t let me”

Guests often can’t tell Vivienne Bess and her sister Hilary Caldwell apart. “We’re quite similar to look at and that causes guests some amusement because they don’t know who they’re talking to,” Vivienne explains.

The pair own the 17th century, 32-bedroom Royal Glen Hotel in Sidmouth, Devon. It was home to them both until they were teenagers and before that to their parents, grandparents and great grandmother, the formidable-sounding Grandma Webber, who started off this fourth-generation business in the early 1920s.

Fortuitously for Vivienne and Hilary’s marketing efforts the hotel has also been home to Queen Victoria – it’s where she spent her first Christmas when she was six months old.

The sisters’ mother, Jean, and father, Orson, still help out even though they’re in their 80s. “It was their life for so long they can’t stay away, which can be >



Above: Vivienne Bess and Hilary Caldwell, Royal Glen Hotel, Sidmouth



good and bad. Dad comes in every day to chat to the guests and mum does the flowers. She cuts them from her garden and arranges them in the restaurant – every table has flowers. I've said to mum 'I'll do the flowers, but she won't let me.' Has the strain of working with family ever become too much? "We haven't really had tiffs," Vivienne replies. "I don't think my sister and I have ever had a really bad row. Well, I'm bossy and she's not, you see. With our parents it was quite a tie to tell them to do less and tell dad he wasn't in charge, but we finally got there."

"We get a lot of enjoyment out of it"

Many London-based couples escape the city once they have children, but few get the opportunity to relocate to somewhere as beautiful as Skye. Isabella Macdonald and her husband Tom were doubly lucky – they also got to take over 14-bedroom Kinloch Lodge hotel.

Isabella's parents, Godfrey and Claire Macdonald, had taken on the hotel about 36 years ago. He is High Chief of Clan Donald and was born on Skye; the hotel, originally a shooting lodge, had always been in his family. Claire, meanwhile, spent her time at Kinloch becoming a well-known cookery writer and champion of Scottish food, and her name is still prominent in the hotel's marketing.

Isabella appreciates her luck in taking over seven years ago: "I feel very fortunate that we've picked up the reins on a hotel that already had an internationally recognised brand. But guests' expectations have changed so much over the years that one always has to be thinking ahead and adding special tweaks and being aware of what other hotels are doing. It certainly isn't easy, I can assure anyone that it's not."

Left: Goring Hotel, London

Right: Jeremy Goring



Things are obviously going the right way, with the hotel being promoted to red star status this year, and chef Marcello Tully earning his third AA Rosette for the restaurant.

Tom used to be a reporter for Sky Sports, while Isabella worked in the press office at British Airways. He now looks after the hotel's finances and its alcoholic offerings, while she takes care of "everything else". And they seem to love it. "Obviously it has stresses because we're living within the hotel," Isabella says, "but there's the love, the hospitality side of life, looking after our guests. We're very lucky, we have really wonderful people who come and stay here and we get a lot of enjoyment out of it."

"I'd like to feel that we're still young, a bit of a whippersnapper"

It will be time to celebrate at the Goring Hotel in London as it marks its centenary in 2010 – and time to tell colourful stories about Otto Richard Goring, the German emigrée who built the place on a derelict site near the back gates of Buckingham Palace.

Such as the tale of how his innovative mind came up with the idea of installing a

form of air conditioning. "There was a big fan on the roof and tubes going through the hotel, with an inlet in every ceiling," explains Jeremy Goring, Otto's great-grandson. "If you threw your knickers in the air in passion one night and they got anywhere near this hole in the ceiling they would fly out through the roof."

The system also meant that maids could plug a tube into a hole in the skirting and suck all the dust out of each room. The holes are still there, hidden by brass caps.

Jeremy took over the hotel in 2005 from his father, George, who had run it for 43 years. "I had a one-hour handover with him, he gave me two keys and then went horse riding and boating for three months," Jeremy says. "It was very gutsy of him to draw a line under his reign. I've seen cases where that hasn't happened and I've seen the damage done. You get a mish-mash and conflict."

Jeremy has spent about £20 million in the past five years on refurbishing all 71 of the bedrooms, but he says the best is still to come: "We have 100 years of history, but I'd like to feel that we're not as great as we're going to be – that we're still young, a bit of a whippersnapper." □

What it means to be independent

"It's alien to me some of these hotels where the managers call their guests punters. They barely ever see them. I couldn't do that, it's like a different profession. I get to meet everybody, and I have wonderful guests. That's been the thing over the years that's kept us going and made it enjoyable."

- *Martin Bland, St Tudno Hotel & Restaurant, Llandudno*

"The difference between a family-run hotel and a group-owned one is most seen in the staff – they're more secure, more nurtured, longer serving and there are probably more of them. I know a lot of group hotels and they're stripped to the bone in staffing – it's just a numbers game, not a customer-care game."

- *Andrew Beale, Beales Hotels*

"I want guests to feel they're coming into somebody's house. I want them to lie by the fire if that's what they want, to lie on the sofa and read their book. I don't ever want it to be stuffy and formal. We have three lovely big drawing rooms full of family memorabilia, and people love the family feel."

- *Isabella Macdonald, Kinloch Lodge, Isle of Skye*

"It's a grey old world and everything is becoming homogenised. I think our job as an independent hotel is to rage against that, even when it doesn't make 100 per cent business sense, because people crave something a bit individual."

- *Jeremy Goring, The Goring, London SW1*