

THE PERFECT PITSTOP

Ye Olde Bell in north Nottinghamshire is historically one of the most important coaching inns between Edinburgh and London. The 17th-Century property may have been refurbished, but the warm welcome stays the same. Giselle Whiteaker takes a weekend break.



Coaching inns were a vital part of Britain's inland transport infrastructure, strategically located to serve as a place for travellers to rest their weary heads. While many have morphed into country pubs, every now and then an inn which retains its original charm and function crops up. Ye Olde Bell is one such establishment.

Ye Olde Bell springs up from nowhere near Barnby Moor, just a few minutes off the A1 at the tip of North Nottinghamshire. Close to the borders of three further counties – Yorkshire, Derbyshire and Lincolnshire – and surrounded by the Dukeries: estates of five previous Dukes, with Sherwood Forest, Rufford, Thoresby, Welbeck and the 4,000-acre National Trust Clumber Park on the doorstep, this is the perfect staging stop.

Ye Olde Bell began life as a farm in the 17th Century and given its location on the original Great North Road between London

and Edinburgh, the hotel rose to fame and fortune in the days of stagecoaches and highwaymen. The latter may have vanished, but the stylishly clad walls of the refurbished property today could no doubt tell a thousand tales woven around the history. Many famous faces have passed through here, including the likes of Charlie Chaplin, Bing Crosby, Joan Crawford, Shirley Bassey, Jilly Cooper and One Direction to drop just a few names.

With no fame to our names, my friend Andy and I roll up to the reception desk of Ye Olde Bell and are royally welcomed. We're keen to see how the current owners, Paul and Hilary Levack, have restored the hotel, retaining its almost 400-year heritage but in a contemporary format.

The Levacks have done so in style. Think deep red traditional carpets, sumptuous fabrics, oak panelling and antiques. It's like

visiting the home of an ageing relative – comfortable and homely, yet at the same time filled with intriguing objects d’art, much like a *wunderkammer*. Here an old jockey weigh-in chair, there a life-size statue of a horse, the eclectic collection fuels to the hotel’s allure.

It would be easy to sink onto the bed in our lush suite, fill the claw-foot bathtub with bubbles, and simply while away the afternoon, but there is so much to explore in the area. Our afternoon is filled with a canal-side stroll in the market town of Retford, a few short miles down the road. Connected to the UK Inland Waterways network by the Chesterfield Canal, it is a delightful meander along the towpath. Several fishermen sit patiently on the banks, their flies bobbing on the water’s surface as schools of fish evade the lures with a gentle flick of their tails. A narrowboat chugs past, its passengers eyeing the route ahead, which traces a dappled course through the tranquil town.



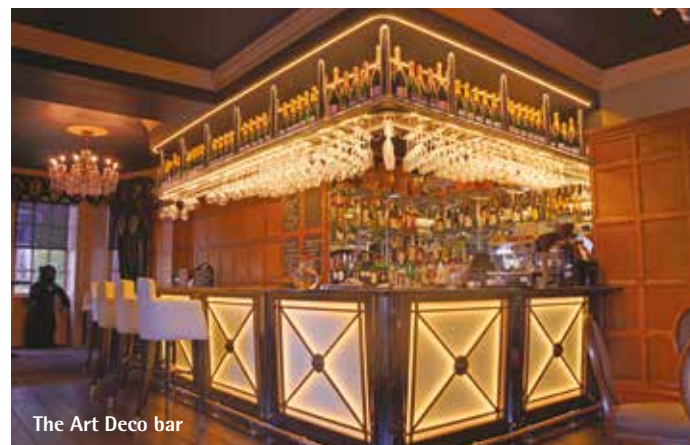
The castle at Newark



The warehouses on the canal in Newark

The fresh air has whetted our appetites, so we dash back to the hotel to freshen up before seeking a table at the Restaurant Bar 1650. Far from a standard hotel dining room, this chic space has as its focal point a trendy Art Deco bar, creating a vibrant atmosphere.

Ambience aside, the menu is packed with a variety of temptations. I can’t go past the seared king scallops with cauliflower puree, chorizo and saffron oil, which simply melt in my mouth. Next is perfectly pink, tender pan-roasted duck breast with butternut



The Art Deco bar

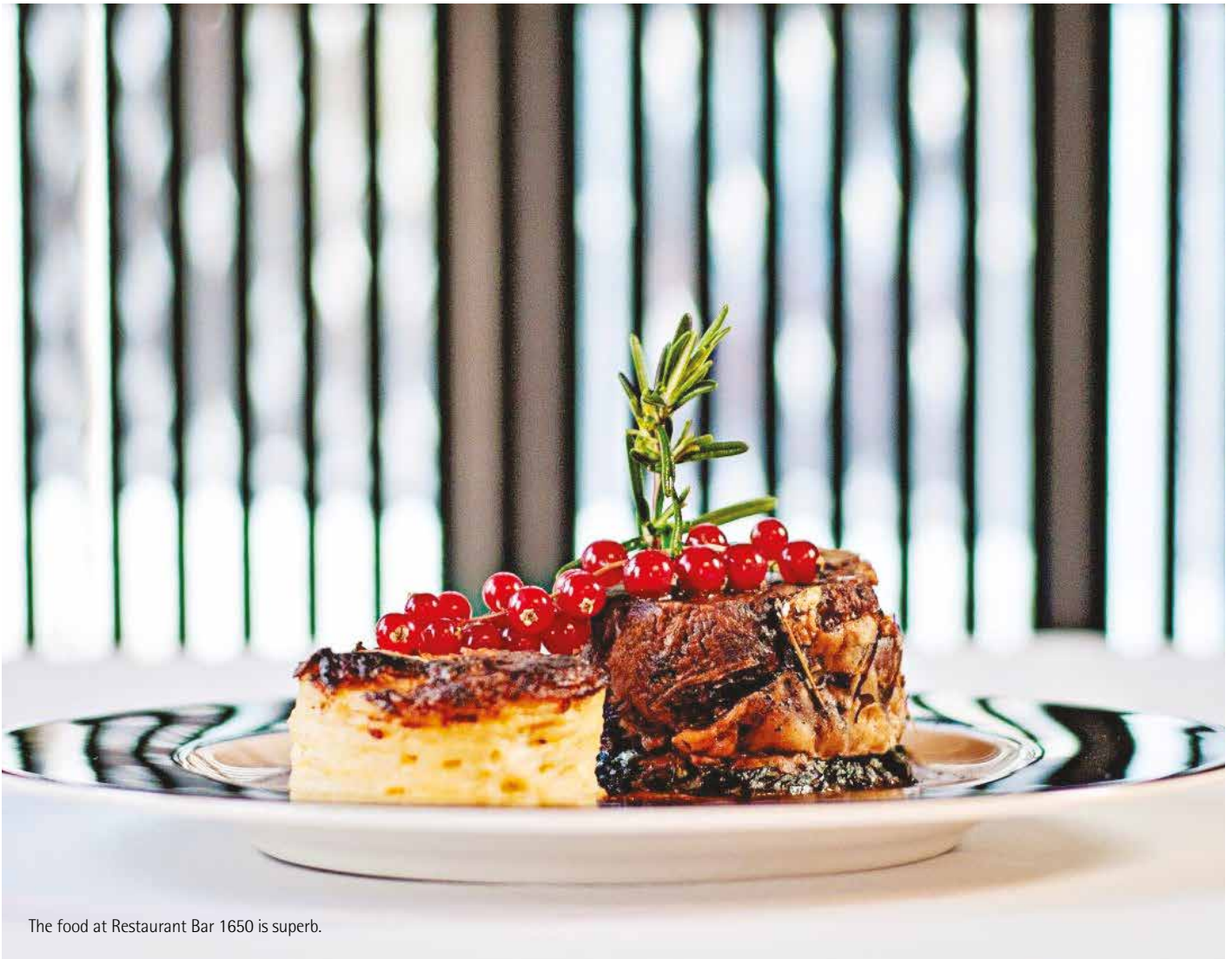
squash puree, braised red cabbage, fondant potato and blackberry jus. Rich and decadently flavoured, this leaves me pleasantly full, but I can’t resist sampling the dessert from the specials board – a chocolate fondant. The dark brown chocolate goo oozes over the moist casing as I dig my spoon in, and I salivate in anticipation of the velvety treat. By meal’s end we are too full for words, sinking into a quiet reverie in our suite.

Waking to another warm morning, we top up with a hearty breakfast served by staff who are clearly morning people – all brilliant smiles and friendly banter. Off to a good start, we motor to nearby Newark. Perched on the Trent River, this lovely market town sprang up around Newark Castle, and boasts a large Georgian market square now lined with historic buildings.

The castle lies in a romantically ruinous state on the edge of the river, its green grass creeping down to kiss the reeds that tickle its banks. The remaining castle walls, gracefully crumbling, border lovely formal gardens, designed by eminent Victorian landscape architect, H.E. Milner and Grade II listed by English Heritage.

Wandering along the river brings us to the Newark Town Lock, surprisingly quiet on this sunny afternoon. The twin locks here allow river craft to negotiate a six-foot disparity in water levels and one is the descendent of the original lock which was built back in 1773. From this point sepia-toned warehouses lining the river are a reminder of the trade that once plied these waters, today so tranquil.

Returning from whence we came, we stop for refreshment at the Castle Barge, a permanently moored Spillers grain barge that once plied its trade between Hull and Gainsborough. Since 1980 it has plied a different trade, as a pub where guests can enjoy a tippie below deck or soak up riverside views from the upper deck.



The food at Restaurant Bar 1650 is superb.

Evening finds us back at Ye Olde Bell, sharing a perfectly proportioned Fisherman's platter of smoked salmon, prawns and peppered smoked mackerel with lemon in the hotel's bistro. Yet there is still one thing on my to-do list. Dropping by reception I book a Turkish Delight massage with LB Therapies, who operate out of the hotel.

The massage starts with a feather, a tickling sensation that alerts my senses, and slowly drifts into gentle stretching with the aid of a length of silk. Originating from Turkey, as the name suggests, this treatment combines stretching with deep tissue massage techniques, providing a total release of stress and tension. As therapist Lizzie digs into the knots near my shoulder blades with a buffalo horn, I breathe out a sigh of relief, sinking instantly deeper into bliss.

When morning breaks, well-fed and well-rested, we prepare to say farewell and see where the road takes us. One thing is certain: should our travels bring us back this way, we will not hesitate to stop. Ye Olde Bell is one of those places. The ones that you never really leave.



A latte at Ye Olde Bell

For more information about Ye Olde Bell
see www.yeoldebell-hotel.co.uk
For information on LB Therapies see www.lbtherapies.co.uk