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A new British hotel is changing the way we think about country houses

The revived Callow Hall now has the wow factor in spades – but it still feels like a home from home

By Fiona Duncan, HOTEL EXPERT

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Callow Hall in Derbyshire originally opened as a hotel in 1982

The evolution of the British country house hotel, since its inception shortly after the Second World War, has been fascinating to watch. And the transformation that has taken place at Callow Hall in Derbyshire is, I think, a small but significant milestone in its progress.

Callow Hall became a hotel in 1982. As with the vast majority of country house hotels in those days, it was privately owned and run with tireless, hands-on dedication – in this case by David and Dorothy Spencer and their family. When they retired, it fell into the hands of the Von Essen Group, later bankrupted. Then in 2018 it became the first acquisition of a new boutique hotel group called Wildhive. Now, after three years of extensive renovation – plus pandemic and planning delays – its life as a hotel has taken off again.

I remember Callow Hall in the Spencers' day, its gloomy grey stone walls reminding me too closely of my Victorian boarding school. Inside it was, in the style of the day, swagged, draped and antiqued, reassuringly traditional, noted for its food and much loved by regular guests and locals. Wow factor it did not have.



Callow Hall is full of eye-catching colours and patterns that enliven but don't disturb

Now it does. Open the huge front door and your intake of breath is courtesy of interior designer Isabella Worsley. As my eye travelled along the lovely entrance hall to the stunning new glass cube extension that houses the restaurant and bar, I marvelled that I was in a quiet (though lovely) corner of Derbyshire, not even the Peak District and certainly not trendy Somerset or the Cotswolds. The new Callow Hall is both restful and exciting, full of eye-catching colours and patterns that enliven but don't disturb. One room has bespoke wallpaper designed by Melissa White that depicts the hall and surrounding landscape in whimsical, romantic 18th-century style. Another room has rich malachite-effect walls.

Two facts strike me about the advent of the new-look Callow Hall: the impact being made by a band of highly talented female hotel designers such as Worsley, and the increasing appearance of cool places to stay all over the country, not just in the south, whose striking interiors are underpinned by craftsmanship, much of it local.



Wildhive is the brainchild of delightful hotelier Ed Burrows and his business partner Charles Randall, with the backing of wealthy investors. As well as the 15 lovely bedrooms in the house, there are wooden “hives” and treehouses – very rustic and cosy ones – in the woods above for those wanting a more natural experience.

Burrows and his equally personable general manager Jeremy Whitworth are aiming for guests to feel truly at home. Staff are natural, there is a jigsaw puzzle that everyone helps with and plenty of places to flop, while the bar is the forum for cocktails with a kick. When a family walked in and instinctively took off their outdoor shoes, padding about in socks and bare feet, Burrows was thrilled. “Oh look at that,” he beamed. “Just what we want.”

There’s plenty to do. You can have a treatment in the Coach House spa, book a gym or yoga session, play on the games lawn, take directions and gear from the Map Room and go walking, or borrow bikes, including electric ones, and go cycling along the Tissington Trail up into the Peak District. Dawdle in the village of Tissington with its sweet and candle shops – and do see if Tissington Hall is open, where Sir Richard Fitzherbert will give you, by arrangement, an amusing tour of a house that has been occupied by his family since 1609.



Head to the bar for cocktails with a kick

Back at Callow Hall, it’s a pleasure to kick off one’s shoes and relax with a cup of tea, then (probably) put them back on for a stellar dinner in that scintillating glass box. Don’t miss the venison carpaccio or smoked eel pate (or, at breakfast, local farmer Alf Hingley’s wonderful Ash House apple juice). I’m only (very) sorry that breakfast is not included in the room rate; looking at prices on a menu makes me feel as if I’m in an on-street café, not an enveloping, hospitable country house hotel.

Which brings me back to David and Dorothy Spencer, who still live down the road. Far from being shocked by the massive changes at Callow Hall, they are thrilled by them. “We knew it was at last in the right hands the moment we met Ed and Charles and saw their enthusiasm,” they told me. What better place for them to celebrate their golden wedding next month than in their beloved, new minted hotel.

How to do it

Double rooms from £209; breakfast from £15 per person. Mapleton Road, Ashbourne, Derbyshire DE6 2AA (01335 300900; wildhive.uk). For more recommendations of hotels in Derbyshire, see [our guide](#).