

STAYING POWER: THE SAVOY, LONDON

In the first installment of a series profiling world-famous hotels, *Nick Scott* charts the history of the only five-star hotel on the banks of The Thames.

Oscar Wilde was a devoted regular, despite characteristically acerbic references to the wallpaper in his room (“one of us will have to go”) and the plumbed-in washstands (“If I want hot water, I call for it”). It was in the hotel’s long-celebrated Grill—today a space in which 1920s-style English and French fare masterminded by Gordon Ramsay is served—that Vivien Leigh once dined next to a nascent Hollywood superstar who would go on to become her husband: Laurence Olivier.

It was the first hotel in Britain to have elevators and electric light; Peach Melba and Melba toast were both invented here, by maitre-chef Auguste Escoffier for the great diva Dame Nellie Melba in the 1890s; Winston Churchill, an account holder as soon as he came of age, founded a private dining club behind its Art Deco-slash-Edwardian edifice; it was from his fifth-floor balcony overlooking the Thames that

Claude Monet painted his London series; a sweet named after it, the Savoy truffle, provided inspiration for George Harrison, wanting to shake off the “mystical Beatle” mantle, to write a paean to one of his friend Eric Clapton’s less destructive vices—a fondness for glucose.

A hotel that has seen the likes of Tallulah Bankhead, John Wayne, Ava Gardner, Frank Sinatra, the Marx Brothers, Laurel and Hardy, Bob Hope and Marilyn Monroe come through its lobby doors over the decades has, in the post-war years, seen Dylan and The Beatles traverse the short road to its entrance off the Strand (the only road in Britain, trivia buffs, where vehicles drive on the right). More recently Duran Duran used the hotel to shoot a video, Taylor Swift did a photo shoot for *Vanity Fair* in the black-and-gold-leaf splendour of the Beaufort Bar, and Rihanna worked on her 2011 album *Talk That Talk* there. As the saying goes, if walls could talk—or, even better, write voluminous society novels,



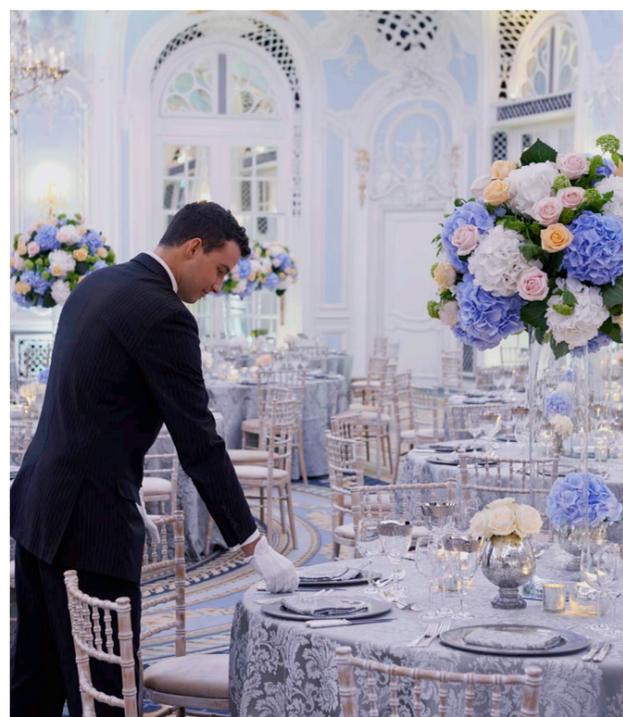
busting refit, softened tap water, Wedgwood china and, in the case of some suites, use of the hotel’s Rolls-Royce Phantom.

The staff, meanwhile—if you don’t count the contemporary vocabulary—conduct themselves just as those catering for Sinatra and Churchill’s every whim would have done, in flagrant (and, when stepping these particular floors, welcome) disregard to the formality-free style of guest interaction colonising much of the luxury hospitality industry (and there’s nothing wrong with that—just not here, please).

But no amount of restoration and modernisation could ever exorcise the ghosts which, figuratively speaking, dwell within these walls. “There are so many stories that it’s hard to choose just one or two,” says Susan Scott when asked to recount her favourite Savoy anecdote, “but one that really springs to mind is the Gondola Party in 1905, at which the central courtyard of the hotel was turned into the Grand Canal in Venice by means of scenery, a very large gondola “set” containing a long dining table, and actual water which flooded the courtyard to a depth of about three feet.

“Among the guests was the famous tenor Enrico Caruso, who sang a few numbers after dinner; and then a baby elephant came over the raised walkway onto the gondola, carrying a five-tier cake on its back. And, of course, the cake also revolved and was lit by tiny fairy lights. The whole dinner was for only 24 guests. The Lancaster Ballroom was built into the central courtyard in 1910, so this party could never be replicated in any meaningful way today.”

Maybe not—but we can be confident that future chapters in The Savoy’s narrative will prove to be London folklore in-the-making. *River view suites at The Savoy start at £2,950 per night. thesavoylondon.com*



thus launching a new literary genre by the name of ‘savoyeurism’...

Built on the site of a grand palace burned down during the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 by impresario Richard D’Oyly Carte using the gargantuan profits from the Gilbert and Sullivan opera productions, The Savoy was “the first and only purpose-built luxury hotel for most of the 1890s in London”, says Susan Scott, The Savoy’s resident archivist. It remains, she adds, “the grand dame of London hotels.” And it’s hard to disagree, not least in thanks to a £220 million, three-year, elixir-of-youth-style restoration completed in 2010, which saw the building stripped back to its early structure, then stabilised and afforded modern infrastructure, its wooden fixtures, marble floors and plasterwork friezes being exfoliated, resuscitated and refreshed.

Designer Pierre-Yves Rochon and a team of more than 1,000 craftspeople and artists overhauled all 268 rooms, as well as adding a two-bedroom Royal Suite, 38

river suites and guestrooms overlooking the River Thames, nine suites paying tribute to illustrious former guests such as Charlie Chaplin, Marlene Dietrich and Frank Sinatra, a gazebo under a glass dome and the Art Deco Beaufort bar. Upon its completion, Stephen Fry tweeted: “Aware that I am of course outrageously lucky to be new Savoy’s first guest”, before hungrily taking up the role of “blogger-in-residence”.

Ten years on, the impeccably maintained hotel calls to mind a captivating symphony, until recently only heard by modern visitors on crackly magnetic tape, remastered and committed to warm, intimate-sounding vinyl. As well as the opulent surrounds, contemporary guests—many of them Middle Eastern royalty and executives from around the world—can expect dark wood and silvery tones in the Edwardian rooms, caramel hues and breezily upholstered furniture in the Art Deco ones. Trappings include tactile bed linen, mattresses that go no little way towards explaining the budget-