

A studied affair

Refinement and erudition reign supreme at Cambridge's newly re-opened landmark hostelry, The University Arms hotel



(clockwise, from above) The University Arms' tastefully grand reception; the library; the Edwardian-style bathroom of the Christopher Marlowe-themed suite; Suite 201, dedicated to Stephen Hawking



Few tears were shed in Cambridge four years ago, when bulldozers made short work of the brutalist structure – a smaller, more dilapidated version of Wernham Hogg's monstrous edifice seen in the opening titles of *The Office* – that, in the '60s, inexplicably became the focal point of what had, for the previous 130 years of its existence, been an elegantly imposing, turreted, Regency-style hotel. Now, following an £80-million revamp, the hotel has opened its doors once more, and the result is surely the brightest jewel in the city's hospitality crown.

The renovations were conceived by classical architect John Simpson, a friend of Prince Charles' who designed the Queen's Gallery at Buckingham Palace, and Martin Brudnizki, the Swedish interior designer responsible for injecting some eclectic, playful modernism into Scott's, Annabel's and The Ivy in London, as well as The Beekman in New York. Some might consider it an unlikely pairing, but there's something distinctly Lennon-McCartney-esque in the way the pair's contrasting styles have fused into a harmonious dichotomy.

For now, the new neoclassical extension, which adds a floor and 73 bedrooms to the mix (making 192 rooms in all; suites from £500 a night), looks blanched, overtly pristine, not least the handsome *porte cochère* that has taken on the mantle of being the building's focal point. The newly laid bricks and mortar will soon age and weather, though, and eventually blend in

with the part of the structure that was built in 1834 as a 15-bedroom coaching inn.

Walk through the left-most of three sets of racing-green double doors (the others lead into the Parker's Tavern restaurant) and you'll find yourself in a high-ceilinged lobby that, with its Cambridge Blue timber panelling and marble floor, offers a majestic and light-filled welcome. It's here that the keen-eyed will note the first nod to the city's academic heritage: a painting of Winston Churchill, who came to Cambridge to found the college named after him due to there being a dearth of engineers during the war, hanging above the concierge desk. (A tentative plan to have the staff wear the pinstripe siren suit, Homburg hat and python slippers Churchill sports in the painting as a staff uniform never came to fruition.)

Elsewhere in the hotel's public spaces, visitors can take in sepia photographs of the Boat Race dating back to 1882; a propaganda poster by Edward Penfield, *Every Girl Pulling For Victory*, from World War II; and blow-ups of the covers of weighty reads such as *Astronomicum Caesareum* and the far more recent academic tome *Pseudoscience – The Conspiracy Against Science*.

The bookish theme continues in guests' own private quarters, notably the 12

suites, which are named and themed after famous Cambridge alumni including Alfred Tennyson, Alan Turing, Virginia Woolf and Charles Darwin. Three books are found in every room – Tom Sharpe's *Porterhouse Blue*, *Cautionary Tales For Children* by Hilaire Belloc and Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind In The Willows* (the text of the latter, read by Alan Bennett, is pumped into all the building's bathrooms). Alongside those, guests will find works by the alumni in question as well as what a tutor might refer to as 'Further reading' – works by Simone De Beauvoir in the case of the Virginia Woolf Suite, for example. Mayfair book shop Heywood Hill curated the reading material for each suite, along with the superb collection found in the afternoon-tea-friendly library (the other highlight of which is a stunning fireplace purchased from Cheveley Hall when it was demolished in 1926).

Elsewhere in the suites, nine of which have balconies overlooking Parker's Piece (a square patch of public green credited as the birthplace of the rules of football, trivia buffs), visitors will find soothing colour schemes flecked with hints of Cambridge Blue, yellow and red; retro desks and bookshelves; inexplicably in situ artworks hung on chains from picture rails; and quirky touches such as Warhol-style

portraits of rooms' designated authors on the bins.

The belief in sound sleep here borders on obsessive – think 300-thread-count linens and blackout curtains – while an all-pervasive smell of top quality, brand new materials, reminiscent of stepping into a showroom-fresh Aston Martin or Bentley, greets you at every corner. The suites' bathrooms, situated in the building's previously empty turrets, have an Edwardian feel, with vanity units, claw-footed baths and vast marble sinks, but with underfloor heating and de-misting mirrors ensuring that modernity reigns when and where it should.

The aforementioned Parker's Tavern – a standalone, destination eatery, rather than simply being the hotel's restaurant, hence its separate entrance – is, with its 32 stained glass windows depicting college crests and red-leather benches, Hogwartsian dining hall-meets trendy New York diner; meanwhile the food, concocted by talented Gordon Ramsay alumnus Tristan Welch, regularly elicits audible groans of appreciation around the room. The bacon-infused, gloriously rich spaghetti bolognese and the chargrilled lobster and chips are currently drawing particularly zealous praise, while Welch's attention to detail is typified by his wish to harmonise culinary methods with the origins of his raw ingredients: because the trout he sources swim through the sugar beet fields of East Sussex, he marinates it in molasses sourced from there.

Other facilities include underground parking, a thoughtfully equipped gym and a banqueting suite that fits 160 people. But the real draw here is the way Simpson and Brudnizki have executed the prevalent donnish theme without it seeming like, well, a theme. The abundance of academic paraphernalia and witty references are thoughtful rather than laboured, and the overall décor steers adroitly clear of pastiche.

Many have dubbed this place England's most anticipated hotel opening of the year, and despite the hype, it could only possibly disappoint those with a stubborn aversion to impeccable good taste. – NICK SCOTT