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Inspirational solutions to the challenges facing hospitality operators

Tewkesbury Park

When the McIntosh family bought Tewkesbury Park in Gloucestershire four years ago, they faced a mammoth task – not just in repairing the ancient buildings, but also in restoring its reputation with guests and staff after years of neglect. *Rosalind Mullen reports*

Few country house hotels have been as unloved and neglected as Tewkesbury Park. That is until April 2014, when the local McIntosh family bought it from Washington Hotels and turned its fortune around.

It's certainly had a choppy past. Washington Hotels had most recently brought in Licensed Solutions to operate the business, replacing Delight Hotels, which had taken over when previous operator Brompton Hotels went into administration. In fact, for 38 years, the hotel had struggled under a list of companies that had owned or managed it, but often failed to invest – sometimes staff even complained of unpaid wages and utility bills.

Undaunted, the McIntoshes saw the hotel as an investment opportunity. Linda McIntosh a keen golfer who was familiar with the hotel's 18-hole golf course, suggested the potential of the site to son Chris and daughter Claire White. Since taking over four years ago the family have invested £10m to bring the hotel back into the competitive marketplace.

"We didn't buy it as a quick turnaround to sell on," says White. "We bought it with a view to making it important locally and providing [good hospitality]. We saw its huge potential with the views, accessibility and location."

The setting is undeniably unique. On a hill surrounded by 176 acres of grounds on the historic site of the 1471 Battle of Tewkesbury, the hotel has panoramic views of Tewkesbury Abbey and the Cotswold and Malvern Hills. The estate includes the main house, which dates back to the late 18th century, plus new wings, which were added from the 1970s onwards, an 18-hole golf course and leisure facilities.

The family's first move was to bring in Focus Hotels Management on a contract. Although White had worked in HR at Mitchells & Butlers, she had no experience of hotels and Chris's background was in investment.

"We brought Focus in for the first two years, but once we had a strong in-house management team, we were in a position to move forward ourselves," says White.

By 2015, the family had recruited Patrick Jones, formerly at Peter de Savary's boutique hotel the Old Swan & Minster Mill in Oxfordshire, as general manager. Jones, who has



General manager Patrick Jones and co-owner Claire White



“Anything we do, we do properly, or we leave it until we can do it properly, so we are confident that we don’t have to go back and do it again a few years down the line”

Claire White

The numbers

Bedrooms 93 (84 rooms in the newer wing, comprising 54 Just Right, 30 Touch of Class, and nine historic suites in the main house – three Indulgence and six Opulence)
Turnover Just over £4m (doubled since 2014)
Occupancy North of 50%
Staff 80-100
Room rate From £121 single occupancy up to £406 for dinner, bed and breakfast

more than 30 years’ experience of hotels throughout Europe, had exactly the credentials they needed, having helped guide the Old Swan & Minster Mill, which has a five-AA-star inn rating to a 40% improvement in turnover, which translated to more than a doubling of management earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation. He had also worked with the team to drive sales and position the property in defined and luxury markets.

“There needed to be a fresh look [at Tewkesbury], and it needed someone with a natural affinity with independent properties,” says Jones. “I had to come to terms with the enormity of the job – because you can’t do it all at once.”

But it seems they have now done it. Four years on, Tewkesbury Park has 93 bedrooms, a new restaurant, Mint, meeting and events suites for up to 200 guests, plus the golf and leisure club. Room classifications start at Just Right and go up through Touch of Class, Indulgence and Opulence. Among the many details of which the team are proud are electric car-charging points in the carpark. It has earned them a string of awards, from 2019 Condé Nast Johansens Awards for Excellence UK & Ireland – Best Venue for Weddings, Parties or Special Occasions to the VisitEngland Award for Excellence Bronze winner.

Jones believes the remarkable turnaround of Tewkesbury Park can partly be attributed to the fact that as a family business they can respond quickly to demand. For instance, in the recent unexpectedly hot summer Chris bought fans and light-weight duvets – a quick and practical decision that didn’t involve laborious administration.

“We are going back to the true art of hotel-keeping. It is talked about, but few people put it into practice. There is a huge attention to detail here – that is a key difference with a family business,” says Jones.

The challenge

When the McIntoshes took over, occupancy at the then 85-bedroom hotel was below 50% and annual turnover was just £1.9m. Not only was the reputation of the hotel in shreds, the business potential of the main historic building had been consistently ignored. So, in a market where country house hotels offer pop-ups, treehouses and appeal to several markets, Tewkesbury Park was at a disadvantage. Yes, it had the beautiful building, the rolling acres, the views, the golf course, but few of the previous operators had invested in its assets.

“The biggest issue was its reputation. It was so rundown that it needed a complete turnaround,” says White. “I love staying in other hotels, so it helped in working out the vision for this place. We knew we never wanted to become branded and we knew the style would have to be top quality.”

Her vision was to create a hotel that was welcoming and not pretentious. She says: “Everything we have done is to ensure good quality. We know there is a lot more potential, so it is important that we get the building blocks in place and lay solid foundations.”



Better Business

As well as the dated room stock, the McIntoshes had also inherited staff who had been neglected and sometimes left unpaid by previous owners.

"When the family took over, there was a great sense of goodwill and relief towards them after such a turbulent period," says Jones. "One of the challenges was instilling confidence in the team that positive change and investment was actually going to take place. However, once the refurbishment began, that challenge was soon overcome."

The solution

Refurbishment and repositioning was urgently required to attract the short-break and golfing market – and to create a conference market (see panel). But, while the McIntoshes have been keen to invest, their mantra is to put quality first.

"Anything we do, we do properly, or we leave it until we can do it properly, so we are confident that we don't have to go back and do it again a few years down the line," explains White.

The first phase of the interior refurbishment, which cost £2.5m, was completed in 2015. As part of the overhaul, 54 of the 85 bedrooms in the 1980s wing were given a "light refurbishment" by local interior designer ADS-Design and are classified as Just Right rooms. The other 30 rooms have been fully refurbished into executive rooms – dubbed Touch of Class. The bathrooms have all been updated, too – 10 have a shower over the bath and 20 have walk-in rain-showers. All rooms have Smart TVs, Nespresso coffee machines, Hypnos beds, locally woven throws, local artwork and little touches, such as hot water bottles in woolly jackets.

What really baffled the new owners, however, was that the imposing historic main house had been allowed to become a jumble of neglected staff rooms and meeting rooms.

"The main asset was underused. It was nuts," says Jones. "[Refurbishment] had been considered [by previous owners], but was ruled out because of the expense."



White, Jones, and Linda and Chris McIntosh



The Cocktail Lounge

The family, therefore, invested £1m into creating nine luxurious suites: six Opulent and three Indulgent. To attract families and groups, six of the rooms can be cordoned off into suites. The refurbishment included structural work and took a year, finishing in March 2016 in time for Cheltenham Race Week. The grand historic rooms are air-conditioned and named after key players in the Wars of the Roses, such as Margaret of Anjou and King Richard III. As well as Zoffany and Osborne

& Little fabrics, luxuries include Bramley and White Company toiletries, walk-in rain-showers and roll-top baths, with one room housing a copper slipper bath in the bedroom. Original touches include the doorstops that also act as 'Do not disturb' signs.

Downstairs, the public areas have just been completed, with the 70-seat Mint restaurant, which opened in November after ADS gave it a facelift, kissing goodbye to the brown swirly carpets. The relaxed, light-filled room has the

The conference and events centre

One of the big challenges for the McIntoshes has been to increase the meetings and events capacity of the hotel and generate 24-hour business. In the main house, the Duke of Gloucester, which takes 20 people, and Earl of Warwick, which takes 10, are beautiful historic rooms that can be used for private dining or meetings, but state of the art facilities were needed to drive numbers.

So, in 2016, the family created a £2m new-build conference and events centre accessed from the main house, knocking down the previous golfers' bar and relocating it to the leisure centre. The resulting

Cotswolds Suite and Berkeley Bar & Terrace, which opened in 2017, maximise the breathtaking views, with vast glass-wall windows – in fact, Jaguar drove its I-Pace car in through the sliding windows for a presentation.

The Cotswolds Suite can be divided into three spaces and has capacity for 150 guests seated at round tables and a feature wall that softens the interior for weddings. There is a nine-screen video wall that can be used for conference presentations – or for fun Skype calls or photo-reels during wedding receptions.

"Chris was the driving force for

the video wall and it has come into its own. He is into the detail – he will sit in every seat to make sure everyone gets a view," says White.

The suite is serviced by the Berkeley Bar, which stocks local Chase gins and vodkas and Clifton Coffee from Bristol. The bar opens out onto a terrace with a wood-fired pizza oven and barbecue, popular for conference lunches. "We want [delegates] to feel they are on a short break and to encourage them to come back for leisure," says Jones.

Since its launch last year, the Cotswolds Suite is attracting an average of two midweek

conference bookings a week and one or two weddings at weekends.

"The suite is designed to fit the size of the property so that it attracts overnight business. And it is designed so that weddings don't impinge on Mr and Mrs Shortbreak," says Jones.

"Before, there were day conferences and low spend – the average room rate was £36 and you can't run a business like that. These properties are costly to run. We now have a 24-hour business."

White adds: "We are doing a similar number of weddings as before – but the type of wedding has changed."



Margaret of Anjou suite

same feel as the Pig hotels and complements the nearby 30-seat Orangery and cocktail lounge, redesigned by Jane Clayton & Company. Both spaces are open all day, from breakfast through to coffee, lunch, tea and dinner.

Under executive chef Anuj Thakur, the seasonal menu changes every eight weeks and offers locally sourced produce. "We get the lamb from Kevin Mace Butchers, but it comes from a local farmer in Grafton, whose kids go to school with mine," says White.

Some 60% of business is leisure-oriented, so the family have also refurbished the indoor swimming pool, sauna and steam room and created an outdoor area with a hot tub. Equipment in the state of the art gym has been updated and spin bikes have been added, and staff are offered CrossFit classes as a perk. Similarly, the Number 19 golf club has been refreshed, with a grab-and-go food area that offers an alternative to the hotel restaurant. Last but not least, the spa, with its two treatment rooms and nailbar, were relocated from next to the squash courts – themselves unusual in a hotel – to the 1980s wing.

"Without the leisure offering the challenge would be steeper," says Jones. "Take the spa – guests might not have a treatment, but if we didn't offer a spa, they would possibly discount staying at the hotel."

Although they have had to build the hotel's reputation "from nothing", Jones has fixed the room rate and refuses to discount. Rates start at £121 for single occupancy and £134 for dou-



Lord Hastings suite

"We are going back to the true art of hotelkeeping. It is talked about, but few people put it into practice"

Patrick Jones

ble occupancy in a Just Right room, rising to £406 for dinner, bed and breakfast in an Opulence room. He does offer packages, however, which often include tickets to local events, such as the Spectacle of Light at Sudeley Castle.

"We don't vary rates because we want to give the right message that we already offer good value and it maintains consistency. Nobody increased business by discounting. There is a pressure to do it, but this pricing strategy positions the hotel correctly and consistently," says Jones.

"It comes back to expectations. You can't set

package prices high or low [at different times] because it doesn't look consistent. And you are allowing people to cherry-pick. That is why we are fixed – at the moment. We have put a marker down and said 'this is what this property stands for'," he says.

The strategy seems to be working. Occupancy has been climbing and is now north of 50%, but turnover has doubled to £4m. "We have gone from non-viable to viable," says Jones. "Everyone is paying the right price, but we need more occupancy. It has gone up significantly this year."

Needless to say, the sales and marketing strategy has been crucial. Jones created an effective team under Amanda Baker with a remit to target the local corporate market and the 24-hour market. This she achieved by pre-marketing to set the scene before the facilities were ready as well as afterwards.

He also brought in PR Sally Firth to draw media interest and create excitement around the leisure and short-break markets with events for golf and leisure club members as well as familiarisation trips. "It makes a difference and gets people talking about you," says Jones. "We are trying to put it on the map."

But the work is far from over. "Once you have done the physical refurbishment, it is easy to think the job is done, but you need to continually evaluate your offer, keep making it interesting and stay ahead of the game. The world has changed," he adds. "People want experiences and you need to keep an eye on the competition."