

Sir Bill and his wife, Bridget, with Margaret and Denis Thatcher at Upton Cressett Hall



Elizabeth Hurley and Henry Dent-Brocklehurst outside the Gatehouse at Upton Cressett Hall

SLEEPING WITH BRITISH HISTORY

As an owner of a stately home that needs to make ends meet, **WILLIAM CASH** has no qualms about boasting about his roll call of guests over the years, even if he can't quite prove it

Owners of properties that offer a slice of history along with stately accommodation – a Scottish castle, a stately home hotel or an Elizabethan Gatehouse, say – have never been shy about showing off their guest books as a form of marketing. It's good business – especially with the pound at an all-time low and tourism booming – to boast that previous guests include royalty, prime ministers and some of Britain's best-known historical or society figures, as well as famous writers. But how many of these claims are really true?

At Upton Cressett Hall, where I live in Shropshire, our Gatehouse includes a choice of either staying in The Thatcher Suite in the exact same bed in which Lady Thatcher slept with Sir Denis when she came to stay for two nights in 1994; or up a further floor guests



ABOVE: The Gatehouse
BELOW: The Thatcher Suite

can stay in The Prince Rupert Suite where the Royalist Commander hid from parliamentary forces during the Civil War. Depending on the sort of guest enquiry we get, the latter is also occasionally marketed as the Elizabeth Hurley 'honeymoon' suite, as she has stayed there several times and has been kind enough to call it 'the most romantic escape in England'.

I can vouch for the fact that Hurley really has slept in the four-poster bed – decorated with Zoffany Arden fabric – as I will never forget the look on my gardener-turned-occasional butler after he went up to the bedroom to deliver some tea and found a half-naked Elizabeth lying like a graceful swan in white silk pyjamas; and I know for certain that Lady Thatcher did sleep in the bed and managed to get through a decanter of whisky left for her in the suite next door (now called the 'Whisky Suite').

But do we really know if Prince Rupert actually slept the night in the top floor of our Gatehouse? All the history books say is that he arrived with 'a troop of 60 royal horse'. On where he slept, they are silent.

The booming vogue for sleeping with a slice of British history has much to do with the fact that people don't just want to escape to the country for the weekend – they also want an 'authentic' historic experience. When I show people the Thatcher Suite, what they like most is that the actual bed she slept in is still there – with the same upholstery and decanter that she helped herself to Macallan malt from. This is a backlash from the National Trust trend for populating houses with staff dressed up like a low budget costume drama and history reduced to a Disneyland historical 'theme park' approach.

It is much better to experience the real thing, such as staying at Cliveden House in Berkshire, where you can spend £1,535 a night to stay in the Prince of Wales suite or the Lady Astor suite, marketed as one of the 'very grandest in England'. Located on the first floor of the main house, it boasts high ceilings, private terrace, antique furniture, sweeping views over the parterre and the River Thames and an 'honesty bar'.

Ah, yes. Historic honesty. Yes, we know that Lady (Nancy) Astor lived at Cliveden and that it was the salon of the 'Cliveden Set' of the 1920s and '30s. During the 1960s, Cliveden – and its swimming pool – became the stage set for the notorious Profumo Affair. Yet this is not referred to on the hotel's website. Also there is nothing suggesting that the Lady Astor suite was actually Nancy Astor's own bedroom.

Naming private bedrooms after illustrious former guests – whether prime ministers staying for just a night (with their secret service agents booking into the local pub), to authors who show no inclination to leave – can be fraught with social and political difficulties. Firstly, can you name a bedroom after a famous guest who is still alive? The answer is surely 'no'. It should be reserved as a form of memorial. They can however, unlike blue plaques, be named swiftly after a person dies, but there has to be some



The Ritz London where Lady Thatcher died



RIGHT: Christine Keeler, renowned for her role in the Profumo Affair, revisits Cliveden 20 years after the events
BELOW: The Lady Astor suite at Cliveden



PHOTOS: REX FEATURES

protocol. When we decided to name the Thatcher Suite, I sought permission from her son Sir Mark. It was the first bedroom 'suite' (where the public can stay) to be officially named after Britain's first female prime minister.

Thatcher's friend, Lady Carla Powell, has called for The Ritz to name the suite where she had been recovering after an operation and eventually passed away. Regardless of The Ritz, however, it won't be long before dozens more Thatcher Suites will emerge around the world. There are endless Churchill ones, including at The Savoy, London, Hôtel de Paris in Monte-Carlo and the Mena House Oberoi Hotel in Cairo, where Franklin Roosevelt, Chinese General Chiang Kai-shek and Churchill all stayed.

Perhaps one reason for the diplomatic silence from The Ritz is that they may want to distance themselves from any accusation of opportunism. A hotel death can be good for business – the bungalow in which John Belushi died in 1982 at the Chateau Marmont in LA remains one of the most requested.

It's important, however, not to preserve the room in aspic, turning it into some sort of Miss Havisham-style mausoleum. At L'Hotel Paris, where Oscar Wilde died in 1900 for example, the suite named after him has been remodelled by contemporary French designer Jacques Garcia, who has framed the original begging letters from the hotel manager to Wilde demanding that he pay his bill. This chic style of 'designer debt' works well.

Part of the fun of staying in such a suite is that it is educational. In our Thatcher Suite, a signed hardback copy of her *The Downing Street Years* and the new Charles Moore biography sit together on the desk in the Elizabethan sitting room where Lady Thatcher used to make herself, what she liked to call, a 'proper' Scotch.

But is there something fundamentally exploitive or boastful about naming a bedroom after a former 'celebrity' guest? Is it really a way



ABOVE: The Oscar Wilde Suite at L'Hotel Paris
RIGHT: Oscar Wilde

of honoring somebody – or is it just a grandiose form of visitor book name dropping?

Although the ‘celebrity suite’ business can be a darkly disingenuous business, naming a bedroom after a guest is surely one of the highest forms of social compliment. The very act of ‘naming’ – whether it is the terraced street off the Pimlico Road in Belgravia, where Mozart once briefly lived, or the Oliver Messel suite at the Dorchester Hotel – is an act of respect, as well as a form of remembrance. The young Mozart lived for not even two months at what was then called ‘Fivefields Row’ – from 5 August to 24 September 1764 – following which the street was later re-named ‘Mozart Terrace’.

But often it’s just a gimmick. Dig beneath the PR gloss and you can find the associations – or the facts – are tenuous. For hotels, or even a historic house trying to attract visitors (especially if they are of the \$10,000 a week American cultural ‘stately house party tour’ variety), naming a suite or bedroom after a celebrated historical figure can be commercially canny – even if any sort of real connection is non-existent.

Take the famous Monet Suite (rooms 512 and 513) at The Savoy Hotel. Before the hotel was refurbished a few years back, The Savoy used to charge £720 per night for Monet lovers to stay in the rooms which he turned into a private studio for six months in 1899/1900 in order to paint his famous views of the River Thames. Yet, embarrassingly for the hotel, a scientific paper published by the Royal Geographical Society proved that the hotel had actually got the suite numbers wrong and that the painter had in fact stayed in the room next door.

The main reason I am glad to have re-named ‘The Prince Rupert Bedroom’ as the ‘Thatcher Suite’ is that I’ve always liked to think of the English country house as being the ultimate stage set for the social mobility – as a reward for hard work – that has always set Britain apart from its European neighbours (one reason why we never had a French-style revolution).

Politics – like Elizabethan theatre – has always been a game open to anyone with enough talent and ambition to succeed. In many ways the Globe Theatre itself was like a sprawling country house, with its downstairs ‘pit’ for the lower orders and the best seats reserved for the wealthy merchants, aristocrats and courtiers. But one thing that has always made Britain unique is that anybody, from whatever background, can always leap up onto the stage at any time to play their part. Shakespeare was the son of a debt-ridden glovemaking from Stratford; Thomas Wolsey – who built Hampton Court – was the son of a builder from Ipswich. Lady Thatcher belongs to this tradition.

So it seems only fitting that, in our own very humble way at Upton Cressett, with Prince Rupert of the Rhine now being booted upstairs (where servants would have slept on the floor on rough horse-hair mattresses), that triumph of social elevation is dramatised through a bedroom change-over.

When we opened up the Thatcher Suite to the public, one of our house guests was William Dartmouth, UKIP MEP for the South West, 10th Earl of Dartmouth and no stranger – as the grandson of Barbara Cartland and the son of Raine Spencer – to the nuances of English social elevation. His comment summed it all up: ‘Good to see a grocer’s daughter from Grantham pulling rank on the nephew of a king – how wonderfully English!’ ■



The Monet Suite at The Savoy