

ALL THAT GLITTERS

Words by Karyn Noble & Illustration by Lida Ziruffo

As I'm shown into the sumptuous Powys suite at Palé Hall, I can't help myself: the song that immediately fills my head is not an appropriately sophisticated classical interlude (something that might, say, complement the harpist playing in the lobby downstairs) but Spandau Ballet's 1980's classic *Gold*. Such is the triumphant rush of gleaming buttercup-yellow that greets me - golden curtains highlighting a carpet of seemingly endless daffodils in the gardens below; regally butterscotch tones that glow from the wallpaper, cushions and chaise longue upholstery; glistening flaxen frames around the emperor-sized bed and lining the ornate mirror masquerading as a TV. It's an instant mood booster.

Not that my mood needed boosting following a tour of this extraordinary country house on the edge of Snowdonia, but I did need snapping out of my awed reverie. Especially when faced with the history of the Victoria suite: named after Queen Victoria, who was so taken with her surroundings that she changed her entire itinerary and spent 10 days in this room in 1889. I don't blame her. The original bed, bath and basin she used are preserved and, according to the architect's plans from 1869, this was the only bathroom in the house at the time. Apparently the Queen's belief that Prince Albert had died from contracting typhoid due to the poor sanitation at Windsor Castle led her to request 'good drains' for her tour of North Wales. The recently built Palé Hall more than fit the bill.

After seeing the 1920's hydro-electric generator that heats the hotel's water, I'm agog to learn that 'Michael Caine' occasionally does some cooking here as he's a friend of the owners. I experience a wonderfully surreal cross-purpose conversation about the unknown talents of the British actor, until a bit of research later reveals that it was in fact Michelin-starred chef Michael Caines (that last 's', very important!). The head chef, Gareth Stevenson, is one of Caines' protégés, and my dining experience begins with canapés by the open fire: a warm cheese *beignet*, a chicken liver cigar and a squid ink and smoked salmon mousse.

I'm then led into the Henry Robertson Dining Room and I catch my breath a little at its high-ceilinged opulence. The largest of the dining rooms here, it's named after the Scottish gent without whom there would be no Palé Hall. He bought the original house here in 1868, demolished it and built, with no expense spared, what is now a Grade II listed building, where he resided until his death in 1888. Would he have dared imagine it would become a luxurious hotel, fit for a queen, where one could pop in for an extravagant afternoon tea or linger over an eight-course tasting menu? That it would serve as a military hospital in the First World War, or that the Duke of Westminster would purchase it in the 1950s, primarily to access the shooting offered on its 32,000 acres? As I carve into Welsh lamb loin and breast served with chickpeas, preserved lemon and baba ganoush, I marvel at the unique history that laid the groundwork for one of Wales' most exciting heritage assets.

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