

Hotels | Wilton Court

A mere five miles from the Welsh border at Ross-On-Wye the Wilton Court Hotel enjoys a stunning location on the banks of the river. Swans glide idly past the mullion leaded windows and Peregrine falcons and kingfishers all contribute to the rich landscape with even the odd otter popping up its head if you are very patient and very lucky. Cotswold Essence went along to have a look at a hotel that is so remarkable even the Welsh tourist board has conferred on it a Visit Wales Gold Award.

Words by Sue Smith

THIS beautiful Elizabethan building served as the Magistrates Court for the town in the 1500s and, like the surrounding area, it is steeped to the gunwales in history.

Its Medieval stonework rises up from the lush rolling fields to overlook the picturesque and historic Wilton Bridge which leads directly to the market place with its Tudor timbered houses tightly clustered around the market hall.

The Wilton Bar which was once the old courtroom is now stuffed with artefacts and textiles brought back from the Far East by hands-on owners Roger and Helen Wynn who as well as learning their craft at London's Dorchester Hotel also spent years employed at the Shangri-La Hotel in Hong Kong.

"Our friends joke that we had no choice but to buy a hotel to house all our purchases," says Helen.

"You can get a bit carried away when you know you can put it all in a container and ship it home one day."

And ship it home she did.

Dark wood, well-worn leather, deep rich red chenille and vibrant Indonesian rugs beckon visitors to kick back and enjoy the ambience in the communal areas.

The décor in the bar was inspired by Roger and Helen's favourite restaurant in Phuket while upstairs the ten ensuite bedrooms which were once the judge's chambers are more traditionally English with four posters, William Morris and Sanderson wallpapers and pretty pinch-pleated curtains.

All the beams and stone fireplaces in the bedrooms have been restored, some boasting a flick-of-the-switch 'wood burner' while at the same time discretely housing the latest flat screen TVs.

Crisp white kimonos are provided in every room, as well as ample fluffy towels and Gilchrist & Soames toiletries come in no-nonsense generous quantities.

Staff are friendly and warm and chatty



without being intrusive to the point that we felt like seeking them all out to say a personal goodbye after only one night.

A light, airy conservatory with cream Lloyd Loom tables and chairs has been added to the building and houses the Mulberry Restaurant named after the 300-year-old tree of the same name which stands imposingly outside the windows.

Its berries are turned into sorbets and pies in the kitchen by head chef Michael Fowler and his team who pride themselves on using the finest ingredients from Herefordshire and the neighbouring counties of Worcestershire, Gloucestershire and Monmouthshire.

Dishes might include beetroot tartare with orange jelly, capers and horseradish cream for starters or lobster ravioli seared langoustine, Savoy cabbage and lobster bisque or carpaccio of fillet of Herefordshire beef with pickled chicory.

For mains choose between slow braised shoulder of mutton with seared loin, boulanger potato and haricot blanc, or fillet of seared tuna with Provencal vegetables, cockles and clams or loin of Herefordshire venison with parsnip puree and chocolate oil.

Desserts include pistachio cheesecake with chocolate bonbons and lime confit, dark chocolate mousse with mandarin



caramel served with spearmint ice cream, apple panacotta with caramel cannelloni and apple sorbets or a selection of home-made ice creams.

A taster menu of goats cheese canapés, lobster ravioli, beef carpaccio, seabass and mutton was outstanding.

All the dishes were executed with flair and each course extracted a gasp of admiration. The taster menu was offered as an example of how good the kitchen really is and left us in absolutely no doubt that we were eating some of the finest food in the country.

Wilton Court has been awarded a Visit Wales Gold Award 2009 for its outstanding quality and exceptional comfort and hospitality which will come as no surprise to anyone who has stayed there.

It also holds three AA Stars and two AA Rosettes and in 2008 was invited to advertise in the AA Britain's Best Hotels 2009 – an invitation extended only to the top 20 percent of hotels in their inspection scheme.

Wilton Court is ideally situated as a base for visiting attractions such as the Brecon Beacons, Black Mountains, Forest of Dean, Malvern and Hay on Wye, famous for its book shops.

The easy journey to Hay is a gentle meander through the Golden Valley which has not been given its name lightly and a drive through the rolling hills bathed in sunshine is a sharp reminder that nothing competes with the beauty of England when it is showing off its very best.

There's also walking, cycling, golf, clay pigeon shooting and canoeing on offer nearby as well as Hereford Cathedral with its outstanding treasure of the Medieval world, the Mappa Mundi - a record of how scholars interpreted the world in both spiritual and geographical terms.

Wilton Court would be an ideal base for anyone visiting the Literature Festival in Hay in the late summer but put your marker down as gems like this get booked up quickly.

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