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high life

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ON HER MAJESTY'S SECRET SERVICE

David Morgan-Hewitt, aka 'Mr David', from the Goring Hotel in Belgravia is arguably the best-connected man in Britain. Over the past 28 years at the Royal Family's home from home, he has saved the Queen from a drunken intruder,

welcomed Kate Middleton to the Royal Suite and become the undisputed master of afternoon tea. **Sophia Money-Coutts** meets the bon viveur with an anecdote for every occasion.



The Goring

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By royal appointment
David Morgan-Hewitt
in The Goring's reception.
The Goring has only closed
once in its 108-year history
– for renovation in
2015. It remained open
during both World Wars.



It is 2.30pm on a Monday and David Morgan-Hewitt and I are two hours into lunch at the Goring Hotel, of which he is managing director. ‘Mr David’, as his staff call him, has a favourite table by the dining room’s fireplace and we have eaten from this table like kings – *boudin* (French black pudding sausage) followed by cod on a bed of cucumber and parsley for him; the Queen Mother’s favourite egg dish (of which more later) and fish pie topped with lobster for me. Pudding menus are in front of us.

Suddenly, a waiter discreetly slides up to our table and hands Mr David a note. He opens it and smiles: “Oh good, I don’t have to hurry.” Turns out another member of staff is going to cover a meeting for him. We decide against pudding but order coffee. This comes with a plate of *petits fours* – macarons and fat cubes of fudge. Lunch goes on for another hour.

It isn’t often that I have a three-hour lunch, but then I’ve not lunched with Mr David before. Calling him a raconteur doesn’t come close. He is one of London’s jolliest characters, a modern-day Mr Fezziwig who radiates bonhomie and likes nothing more than people enjoying themselves. “Cut me open and I’d bleed hospitality from my veins,” he says, beaming at me. No surprise the Duchess of Cambridge stayed in his hotel the night before her wedding, as did the rest of the Middleton clan. I want to stay here too. Heck, I want to move *in* here.

Calling it Morgan-Hewitt’s hotel is a touch



Crowning glory

The lights in the bedrooms at the Goring have four settings: bright, calm, cosy and oooh (use your imagination for the last one)

misleading because, although he’s worked here for 28 years, it belongs to the Goring family. Tucked away just behind Buckingham Palace in Belgravia, the Goring opened in 1910 when owning a hotel in London was all the rage. William and Marianne Claridge had opened their hotel a few decades earlier, the Browns had Brown’s, Richard D’Oyly Carte flung open the doors of The Savoy in 1889, and César Ritz followed with the Ritz in 1906. Slowly but surely, however, the original owners sold up. All, that is, except the Gorings. “Not one of the grand luxury hotels is owned by the family that built it,” says Morgan-Hewitt, 55. “This is the last one in London. And that makes a big, big difference. The family are true hoteliers.” Jeremy Goring, the current CEO and the fourth generation of the family to be in charge, is often in the hotel and carries guests’ bags if he spots them requiring help in the lobby.

Jeremy Goring’s great-grandfather’s hotel was impressively modern when it opened... by Edwardian standards. “It had a bathroom and central heating in every single bedroom,” Morgan-Hewitt says, proudly. “It was unique.” In the ensuing 108 years, the Goring has had many big moments. In 1919, Winston Churchill’s mother moved in. In 1953, during the Queen’s Coronation, →

MR DAVID IS ONE OF LONDON’S JOLLIEST CHARACTERS, A MODERN-DAY MR FEZZIWIG WHO RADIATES BONHOMIE

several truculent royals from abroad chose to stay at the hotel instead of at Buckingham Palace because it was more luxurious (those bathrooms!).

It was where the Queen Mother made her last public appearance in 2002. It is where the Queen often nips in for lunch. In 2016, the press reported that Morgan-Hewitt had taken an intruder by the scruff of the neck and thrown him out of the hotel while the Queen was lunching there. The hero of the hour? Not at all, he says calmly. "Someone who'd had a bit to drink just wandered in and was asked to leave." It's such tact that led, in 2013, to Her Maj giving the hotel a Royal Warrant for services to hospitality. It's the only hotel in the world with one.

But the biggest highlight, the event that really boosted the hotel's standing,

Standing to reason

Jeremy Goring took over from his father George as CEO in 2005. George retired by handing over the two brass front-door keys, then walking out of the hotel. He didn't return for three months

was the part it played in the royal wedding in 2011 when it hosted the Middleton family. This came about after Morgan-Hewitt asked Buckingham Palace whether the hotel could help with preparations. He expected a few guests. They got the stars of the show. On the day itself, two billion people worldwide watched the wedding on television, which means two billion people saw Kate Middleton carefully climb into the maroon Rolls-Royce that carried her and her father from the hotel's main entrance to Westminster Abbey. She had stayed, naturally, in the hotel's Royal Suite (yours for £8,400 a night). It's a two-bedroom suite

decorated with antiques, including a letter from Queen Victoria, an old British military uniform and a grand piano. The sage- →

TWO BILLION PEOPLE SAW KATE CLIMB INTO THE ROLLS-ROYCE THAT CARRIED HER FROM THE HOTEL TO WESTMINSTER ABBEY



green silk in the master bedroom is the same one that lined the walls of the *Titanic's* first-class dining room. Should you book the suite for the night, personalised bathrobes and slippers are thrown in. The Duchess of Cambridge probably still wears hers at home in Kensington Palace.

“One shouldn’t overblow what we did, because we were just a hotel that the bride’s family decided to stay in,” says Morgan-Hewitt. “But it was wonderful to have been a very small part of that.”

The hotel was cordoned off for security purposes and Morgan-Hewitt’s 182 staff members were asked to hand in their phones to avoid any photographs being leaked. “Even if we hadn’t, I don’t think it

Room service
Celebrity guests who’ve stayed at the Goring include Russell Crowe, who was allegedly thrown out after jumping on the bar and reciting a poem at Richard Harris’s wake

would have been a problem,” says Morgan-Hewitt, loyally. The famous Alexander McQueen wedding dress arrived the Friday before in a huge box. “Lots of people ask what the dress looked like,” he continues. “And I say, I don’t know. The first time I saw it was in Westminster Abbey.” Because, naturally, such is his standing among the royals that he was invited to the wedding. The hotel won’t play a similar role in Prince Harry and Meghan Markle’s wedding next month because that’s taking place 25 miles away in Windsor but, says Morgan-Hewitt deftly, “Surely Prince Harry and Meghan want to do things their own way? As in most families, if you have siblings they tend not to have the same style of weddings.”

Morgan-Hewitt’s close relationship with ‘the Cambridges’ has continued. When the Goring reopened in 2015 after a refurbishment of its entrance hall, Kate (or ‘Catherine’, as Morgan-Hewitt properly calls her) returned to do the honours. “She very kindly said that she would come and reopen us,” he says. “And rather than cut a ribbon, I asked her to finish off the wallpaper, so she painted a mane on the unicorn and did it really well. It was when she was heavily pregnant, but I think she had a jolly time.”

No doubt. You’d have to try quite hard *not* to have a jolly time at the Goring. Around us in the Michelin-starred dining room, uniformed waiters move smoothly with Champagne bottles, and the cheese trolley glides between tables like a cruise ship. Morgan-Hewitt tells me a story about a particular couple from six or seven years ago – “Sir something and Lady something or other” – who would come in for lunch once a week. “They liked a stiff cocktail beforehand, and then a bottle or two of wine,” he recalls. “One time the lady returned from the lavatory and appeared behind myself and the restaurant manager. She was wearing quite a low-cut number and one of her bosoms had fallen out. She was telling me and the restaurant manager how much she loved the lunch and somehow, without anybody noticing, without her noticing, the restaurant manager got that bosom back into its dress. No embarrassment, off she went back to her table.” That’s service for you.

The hotel’s reputation as a discreet bastion of tradition is, in large part, thanks to Morgan-Hewitt, a neat dresser who gets his bespoke ties from royal shirtmaker Turnbull & Asser, wears handmade shoes from John Lobb and owns more than 200 pocket squares – although he never intended to work in hotels. The son of an insurance man, he grew up in Norfolk and went to Durham University to read law. He hated law but developed a love for the hospitality industry while working in hotels during the holidays.

“My father didn’t want me to go into hotels,” he says. “He thought it was a trade and not a profession. But it’s not. It’s the most amazing →

AROUND US, WAITERS MOVE SMOOTHLY WITH CHAMPAGNE BOTTLES, AND THE CHEESE TROLLEY GLIDES BETWEEN TABLES LIKE A CRUISE SHIP



Hall of fame
Footman Harry Sellick (bottom left image), stands in front of the wallpaper that Kate Middleton helped to finish off – with a mane on the unicorn



profession. It's probably the second oldest profession in the world. We all know what the first one is. The second one is just putting people up. I just utterly fell in love with it." Inn-keeping, he calls it at another juncture.

After Durham, Morgan-Hewitt worked in food and drink PR, then did a few stints in London restaurants before going to work in a country house hotel in Kent. The position as restaurant manager of the Goring became available in 1990. Morgan-Hewitt took it: "I intended to stay in the job for a couple of years, then try and move across internally, which I did, maybe get another year under my belt and go somewhere else. And my plan went swimmingly well, apart from the fact I never left." Nor will he, he says. He lives in Kensington, west London, during the week, but recently bought a house in Wells, Somerset, slap bang next to the cathedral. Rumour had it he was plotting his retirement. The Goring family must have panicked? He shakes his head. He will remain in charge of the hotel for a good while yet. Phew. He's essentially the hotel's ambassador, as much an institution as the place itself.

It's a busy time for them, too. "London now is, I think, the best city in the world for hotels and food," says Morgan-Hewitt. In a year, the Goring serves 20,000 afternoon teas (you can now get gluten-free scones, should you wish), starches 15,000 napkins and pours 11,000 bottles of Bollinger. If you're visiting and fancy seeing a pocket of Britishness, this is where to come. There are 69 rooms, so it's not huge, but that means the staff make a big effort with each guest. When I leave after our extended lunch, the doorman knows my name and offers me a cheery goodbye. As Morgan-Hewitt told me: "Whether you're Her Majesty or you've never been here before, you are the most important person to walk through that door."

Oh, and the Queen Mother's favourite egg dish? It's Eggs Drumkilbo, named after a stately home in Scotland that she used to visit. Traditionally a heavy combination of eggs, mayonnaise, prawns and gelatine, the Goring has created a lighter version of delicate crab mayonnaise with a quail's egg on top. It's splendid. No wonder the royals like the hotel – and Mr David – so much. Sensible people. ■

🐦 @sophiamcoutts

Sophia Money-Coutts's debut novel, *The Plus One*, is out on 9 August (£12.99, HQ). thegoring.com

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