




WEEKENDERS

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The Princess Royal: A class act for a good time

A vivid new venture by the Cubitt House group sees a 140-year-old pub turned into something regal. By **Fiona Duncan**



Do you know that feeling when you walk into a hotel, a restaurant, a bistro or a bar and you instantly know you are going to have a good time?

“I love this place,” declared my dinner companion, one of the pickiest people on the planet, as he settled into a deep-pink velvet armchair at our table in the airy garden room with its prettily striped banquettes and attractive tiled floor. There we remained, loving the place, for an inordinately long time, sharing starters, devouring main courses and puddings, and generally quaffing and carousing like comic supporting characters in a Shakespeare play.

Or, more accurately, like comic supporting characters in the film *Notting Hill*, for everyone, including the waiters, seemed terribly attractive, in a Hugh Grant bookshop-proprietor sort of way, and if he and Julia Roberts had strolled in, we would hardly have turned a hair.

**The Princess Royal
Notting Hill, London**

8/10

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5AH

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cubitthouse.co.uk

Not bad for a 140-year-old Victorian boozier with so many incarnations it's hard to keep track. Last year, it was Pomona's, "a piece of southern California in London". Before that it was a Slug and Lettuce, and before that, the Commander. But when the Cubitt House group, the latest owners, began refurbishment, they uncovered in the porch a fine

original mosaic tiled floor decorated with the words Princess Royal, which must have been the pub's first name. Now, those words are emblazoned across the front of the pub's handsome forest green façade, distinguished by two huge wrought iron lanterns. Hopefully, this incarnation, unlike its predecessors, will stand the test of time. And it now has four bedrooms, named after princesses, of course, making it the only pub with rooms in the area, and one of only a handful of hotels.

A newly renovated pub is hardly news these days, and however much improved, it rarely has class. So, what makes this classy joint stand out? Why did we feel we had stumbled into a pub version of the Wolsley or the Ivy, with similar staff and similarly excellent, feel-good service?

Because we had, that's why. Many of the staff have backgrounds at those places, as well as Soho House and other similar establishments. Ebullient general manager Rosie Johnson has an impressive track record, and the food is courtesy of Ben Tish, a television regular who has left his restaurants in Charlotte Street and the Stafford hotel to join Cubitt House.

Here at the Princess Royal, the cooking has a strong Mediterranean slant, including Sicilian pesce crudo, on the menu as a starter or served, along with oysters and beef tartare, at the elegant Raw Bar, which stretches across the back of the huge horseshoe bar in the main room.

It's a construct, but in the hands of designer Georgie Pearman, it's an awfully good one

Tiled floor, horseshoe bar, tin ceiling... It's all a construct, of course (almost nothing original remains), but, in the hands of designer Georgie Pearman, an

awfully good one.

One original feature that does remain is the staircase, whose too-narrow steps mean you have to walk on them like a duck, feet splayed out. They lead to two stunning "feasting rooms" for private functions and the four guest bedrooms. Mine, Diana, featured a dreamy bed, deep, decadent bath in the room and huge walk-in shower from Lefroy Brooks, 100 Acres botanical fragrances, carefully chosen books, a wall of dramatic wallpaper (Osmunda Silhouette from Soane), and thoughtful lighting.

Cubitt House began with the Thomas Cubitt in Belgravia, the Orange in Pimlico and the Grazing Goat in Marylebone. As a group, it was flagging, but now it has major new investment and a new dream team guiding its ambitious renovation and expansion plans. That team includes Georgie Pearman and her husband, Sam, who have a fine record of creating warm, stylish and vibrant places to stay in the Cotswolds, including the Wheatsheaf in Northleach and No 131 in Cheltenham, and they still run the Double Red Duke in Clanfield and the Chequers in Churchill.

For 10 years, Georgie was a lawyer, but her heart wasn't in it and she switched to interior design. Expect British fabrics and wallpapers, and a bold use of colour, including in the statement artworks on the walls. The Princess Royal also has the benefit of a spacious garden designed by Jinny Blom and filled with old olive trees.

Breakfast the next morning – fresh fruit and pastries, and a poached egg for me – at the horseshoe bar, as the sun slanted in, was a calm, lazy affair after my Herculean dinner the night before. It needed to be.

Doubles from £150 per night, including breakfast