



A Thoroughly Modern Manor

Hampton Manor in the village of Hampton-in-Arden may have a long history, but it's moved with the times. Giselle Whiteaker turns lady of the manor.

The sky looks set to open when I take a stroll around Hampton Manor in Hampton-in-Arden, lending a particularly dramatic air to the grounds. Like the village, which appears in the Domesday Survey of 1086 as owned by Norman knight Geoffrey de Wirce, the property has an air of history about it, although in de Wirce's time, the manor was known as Hantone. In those days, it encompassed 120 acres and included a mill and woodland.

Today, the imposing property is still surrounded by mature woodland, albeit whittled down to 45 acres.

Tiny yellow wildflowers dot the lawn in a reminder that spring is here, despite the fat raindrops that are signalling an imminent downpour. Perhaps further explorations are best left until tomorrow.

Hampton Manor has passed through some illustrious hands in its time, from knights to lords (Lord Robert de Ardene) and prime ministers (Sir Robert Peel). Since 2008, Derek and Jan Hill have been at the helm and they've added their own flair, combining legacy and levity. The lilac and lime hues in the floral wallpaper in the parlour are reflected in comfortable chairs,



Hampton Manor

made for lounging, and an enormous art deco chandelier casts a golden glow over the reception area. With artfully positioned sofas and chairs around each corner, the ambience is relaxed, embracing guests of all station.

The 15 individually designed rooms are equally as eclectic and chic, each named after a character with significant involvement in the manor and grounds. I'm in the seriously sumptuous George Fentham room, where charcoal grey meets fuschia pink. Designed by a discerning eye, the décor blends colours and patterns – the oval coffee table is zigzags in grey, the drapes are deep pink, and the large circular light matches the black headboard of the plush bed. Throws are draped artfully across chairs that gently rock, the bookshelf is stacked with literary works, and delicious home-baked chocolate chip cookies await my attention, as does a beautiful double-ended boat bath. Nibbling a cookie while soaking in a rose and lavender scented bubble bath seems a good place to begin.

By the time evening rolls around, my hair smells of sage and lemon shampoo and rose geranium and sweet orange conditioner, my hands are scented with grapefruit and Roman chamomile and I'm slathered with lavender and chamomile body lotion. I smell so good that I forgo perfume. I take a seat

in the parlour and wait for my friend Rob, ordering a Parfum Citron cocktail to whet my palate. It's a refreshing aperitif and the mixologist wafts a spritz of lemon scent over the top, adding that touch of panache that I'm beginning to expect.

The four-course tasting menu at Peels is equally as exceptional, starting with an amuse bouche of celeriac veloute, pickled celery and grated walnut, and a selection of delightfully crusty bread with hand-churned Lincolnshire Poacher and wagyu-fat butter. Ignoring the calories, we dive into both, the latter leaving a delicious aftertaste of charcoal barbecue on our tongues. Next to tantalise our palates is white and garden asparagus with slow-cooked egg yolk, creamy burrata and crispy chicken skin in a fermented asparagus and chicken stock. "It looks great," says Rob, "...but it tastes even better."

The Sea trout comes two ways – cured and as smoked trout mousse, with crème fraiche, dill, pickle and cucumber, and I take time to deliberately savour the flavours that I don't want to end. Then it's time for another double up. The prelude to the main, Wagyu beef number one, is a cube of braised cheek in golden breadcrumbs with truffle mayonnaise and freshly grated truffle. For wagyu number two, we are led into the tasting room, an intimate oak-panelled private dining room with a window into the kitchen. The beef is served on a bed of red cabbage

with black truffle and Madeira jus and a dollop of cauliflower cheese that leaves me wondering how something so ordinary can become so sublime.

The pre-dessert of spiced pineapple and coconut foam with calamansi and lime zest and a sprinkle of Malvern rock salt cleanses the palate, paving the way for a grand finale of nitro-frozen chocolate mousse and sherry caramel with cookie crumble, chocolate custard, roasted hazelnuts and hazelnut ice-cream. It's simply superb. It's not only Rob that catches me licking a stray dollop from my finger. "You know the window works both ways," he reminds me, pointing to one of the chefs who is doing his best not to smile.

Along with the wine pairings, dinner has left us flushed with happiness and we retire to the parlour for tea. Not just any old tea, though. This is tea with aplomb. We are guided through a specialist loose-tea selection that ranges from the Himalayas to India.

The next morning, determined to walk off my excesses, I set off on one of the countryside strolls in Hampton Manor's field guide, which is so detailed that my negligible sense of direction can't lead me astray. I roam through the village and down quiet laneways, across fields and through the West Midlands Golf Club. At Barston Lake, anglers line the banks, competing in the Anglo-Welsh Women's Carp Cup, and rabbits scamper as I ramble through the nature reserve. It's a lovely way to end my stay.

There's so much more to do in the area. The National Motorcycle Museum is close by, with the largest collection of British motorcycles in the world, and Kenilworth Castle is a short hop away. There's a tennis club and golf, and Birmingham is next door. Warwick Castle and Stratford-upon-Avon are less than a

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half-hour's drive away and Grand Union Canal lures boaters with barge trips down the peaceful waterway. Or, you can just kick back, relax, and indulge in an on-site massage at Hampton Manor.

Whatever your pace, this is the place. ■

For more information on Hampton Manor and Peels restaurant, see hamptonmanor.com



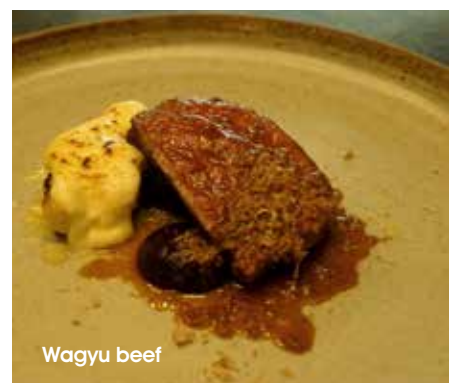
The George Fentham room



The intimate tasting room



Sea trout



Wagyu beef