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Heckfield Place: inside the UK's most delayed hotel

Six years after it was due to open, the hotel has had multiple managers, chefs and designers — but no guests. Now, things are finally looking up



Simon Usborne 4 HOURS AGO



With a clunk and a whirr, oak gates swing open to reveal a freshly laid asphalt drive. Its smooth surface will soon be covered in gravel, ready to crunch under the tyres of the first guests. Some have waited for years to arrive; the mature birch and beech trees along the way to Heckfield Place will have grown perceptibly in the time it has taken an elusive Boston-based billionaire to create Britain's newest, and most delayed, luxury hotel.

The 18th-century Georgian manor house and farm, set in 400 acres of Hampshire countryside, was supposed to open in time for the London Olympics. In January 2012, The Sunday Times looked forward to the “seriously sumptuous spa”, and the role, as “food curator”, of Tom Parker Bowles. Skye Gynge had signed on as culinary director after leaving Petersham Nurseries, her acclaimed west London restaurant. The general manager, Charles Oak, had come from the May Fair Hotel in central London. He left Heckfield Place after two years without a guest to manage.

Others came and went. Executive chefs Chris Staines and Barnaby Jones joined and departed without wielding a whisk in anger; Henry Gray, the second general manager, is now working for Six Senses in Bangkok. The hospitality industry looked on, bemused, while a succession of PR companies pitched ever-later launch dates: Heckfield Place appeared in newspaper “hot lists” of new hotels to watch for four consecutive years. Nevertheless, by 2015, still empty of guests behind a revolving door of staff and abandoned interiors, the house was slipping off the map. There was speculation that it might never open.

Now, another date: September 1 2018. But this time Gerald Chan says he means business. The Hong Kong-born real estate tycoon, Harvard graduate and philanthropist presides over his family's Morningside investment group. He bought Heckfield Place almost 20 years ago, when it was being run as a corporate training centre. Much of its original charm lay behind ceiling tiles, partitions and an ugly 1980s extension. Chan got planning permission for the conversion in 2009, only to begin a faltering restoration involving more than 100 separate planning applications and an undisclosed fortune.

The owner rarely talks to journalists, and declined to on this occasion, but Olivia Richli, the latest general manager, greets me on the front steps with a hard hat for the first tour. The house's red-brick exterior, newly sandblasted, sparkle on a sunny afternoon. Richli wears her hi-viz vest over a tweed trouser suit. A year ago she was running Soneva Jani, one of the most opulent resorts in the Maldives, and before that Aman's hotels in Sri Lanka and Venice.



General manager Olivia Richli © Tom Jamieson

“I’ve been knocking on our neighbours’ doors with vegetables from the garden and saying, ‘Hi, I’m the new manager,’” Richli says at the house, which is 40 miles west of central London. “They say to me, ‘Oh, what, another one!’ I have to say to them, ‘No, no, this time we really are going to open’. There have been a few changes of mind for sure, but I think until it got to this final look and style, Gerald wasn’t happy with it.”

As vacuum cleaners and cordless drills suck and whirr, and reproduction cast-iron radiators wait to be installed, Richli, who is 53, takes time out from the late stages of preparation. She needs to find a flat area for a helipad, run through fire-safety procedures, and recruit a final workforce of 207, serving 47 rooms. She was lured to Heckfield by Gyngell, who has stayed with the project. (Chan also owns Spring, the London restaurant the chef opened in Somerset House in 2014.)



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Chan and his family visited a week earlier. Richli laid out tables for lunch among banana plants in the farm's tropical greenhouse, part of an impressive collection of plots and growing houses that will supply the hotel. But spring snow had confined the party to the house, where Chan cast his eagle eye over the work. Richli remembers how his interest in art — he keeps a vast collection in a nearby warehouse — has resulted in last-minute changes. “He says, ‘Ooh, I’ve forgotten about that painting, I’m going to

take it back to Boston,’” she says. “Beryl, his wife, is more detail-oriented, so will give me lists of little things, like whether the bath mats should have a rubber bottom.”

The old house itself, which is grand if not palatial, will have 12 rooms upstairs. The rest are spread among sprawling north wings and courtyards, some of which have been rebuilt. On the ground floor, corporate trappings have been stripped back to reveal plasterwork ceilings and oak shutters. Much of it has required careful restoration. Imposing marble fireplaces bear the coats of arms of the first residents. John Lefevre, a London property owner, completed the house in 1790 for his daughter, Helena, and her husband, Charles Shaw-Lefevre, a Whig politician. The family later sold the estate to Horace Walpole, a descendent of another prominent political family; it became a training centre in the early 1980s.

“The Shaw-Lefevres included a lot of ladies and they held salons in here,” Richli says in the south-east drawing room. Light pours in from both directions. “This will be very much a place for conversation.” And for gazing out over the grounds behind the house — a rolling, uninterrupted vista that does nothing to betray the hotel’s proximity to London and Reading, seven miles to the north. In the late 19th century, the Shaw-Lefevres employed William Wildsmith. The noted gardener dug lakes and planted rare trees. A Lebanese cedar and a Monterey pine now tower above the water.

Some of the rooms in the main house are almost finished, including one with a ballroom-sized bathroom with black marble and Edwardian fixtures. It is one of five signature suites, which will start at £1,750, up to £3,000 for the Lake Room (smaller rooms start at £350 per night). But the completed Long Room, a 230 square metre suite with a private terrace, reveals the style that finally won Chan’s approval. I slip protective overshoes over my work boots, lest I scuff the slate floors and antique rugs.



The Long Room

An old Welsh oak table, laid for 10 guests, sits below a portrait of Virginia Woolf by the French painter Marguerite Darbour. The sitting room, on the other side of a freestanding fireplace, opens out on to the terrace above the parterre and lakes below it. The walls, which rise to meet steep eaves, are a blue-grey: the style a very tasteful kind of plush farmhouse minimalism.

Later, I speak to Ben Thompson, the 34-year-old interior designer recruited three years ago to rescue the hotel. “I remember coming into the Long Room and there were too many materials, and too many that were alien to a project like this,” he says. “We took a lot out and tried to get in natural timbers that brought in the beautiful woodland outside.” Thompson also added Irish linen, rough lime plaster, and hand-woven mats of rushes harvested from the nearby river Ouse.

The designer had only been brought in to revive the estate’s pub, the Hatchgate, having modernised a series of inns while he worked under Ilse Crawford, the brains behind Soho House New York and Babington House in Somerset. But after meetings with Chan, he walked away with his first major solo commission. “His message has always been clear,” Thompson says of the owner. “He wanted it to feel like a relative’s country house — laid back but of a very special quality. But what he was being given was an international, five-star offer that could have been anywhere. It was a case of saying to him, ‘Look, we don’t need these huge wardrobes and 22 data points. Let’s be respectful to the old house and use simple, local materials’.”



The hotel grounds

The project had taken so long that tastes in country house hotels had changed. As part of her research, Richli, who grew up in south Wales but has lived abroad for more than 20 years, visited the competition, including Coworth Park, Lime Wood, Babington House and Lucknam Park. Some she found too classic, others too corporate. Thompson wanted to ignore it all. “With Soho House, there was a moment where it started to become a sort of brand rollout — a machine churning it out,” he says. “We wanted to respond to Heckfield itself, and be confident that if it made sense, people would come.”

The less-is-more strategy has not applied to room rates; the Long Room has now doubled in price, up to £10,000 a night. It stretches over Marle, the hotel’s main restaurant. Gyngell has been preparing menus that are similarly minimal, with just five main courses each night. One benefit of the delay is that the orchard’s 700 trees have matured and will soon be drooping with apples and plums. At Hearth, a more intimate restaurant in converted stables, meats will be cooked on the open fire. “It’s just a question of how much bounty we can get from this place,” says Gyngell.



General manager Olivia Richli © Tom Jamieson

Richli hopes to lure locals and Londoners for dinner, even if they don't stay, and will have a fleet of Land Rovers to pick up guests from Hook station, 10 minutes to the south (and an hour by train from Waterloo). She takes me down to the farm, beyond the lakes and the vast walled garden. At the farmyard, with its handsome old tithe barn, a herd of Jersey cows will produce milk and cheese. On the way back to the house, the Bothy Spa is taking shape, with a 17-metre pool and seven treatment rooms.

Back at the house, I look at the underground cinema, which survived in the plans and will open for public screenings. Exposed cables hang like vines from the ceiling above 67 velvet seats. It has been dug out from under the forecourt, to which a new stone spiral staircase rises like an old well.

There is much still to be done. But Richli is brimming with energy and confidence in the project after a decade of false starts. She recalls opening Amangalla in Sri Lanka, in 2004. The Aman Resorts property occupies a 17th-century colonial pile in Galle Fort. Eleven days after the first guests arrived, the Boxing Day tsunami hit. Protected by the fort's walls, the hotel became an official refuge and evacuation centre. "With each opening I've done since, it's been, like, 'If we don't have a tsunami it will be easier than that one'," she says as she returns to her desk.

Bookings are due to open on May 8; heckfieldplace.com

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