



Front of House: **BALMER LAWN**

Their second venture in the hotel sector, Chris and Alison Wilson have worked on restoring the New Forest's Balmer Lawn hotel to its former glory. **TOM DAVIS** learns more about the property's history and its recent £1.5m investment ➔



Tell us about your background and how you got into the industry.

CHRIS: Alison and I met working for a transport company called Exel logistics, we had nothing really to do with the hotel sector.

ALISON: We were staying in an awful lot of hotels and we had a very naive approach. After staying in hotels we thought about what we considered to be wrong and we naively thought that we could do it much better. That's where it all started.

CHRIS: When we got together and became a couple, we always wanted to buy a property-based business because we thought that it would offer some security. We started looking for a 12-bedroom large B&B or guesthouse operation, and then my dad, who was retired by that stage, said he would invest with us. That meant we could look at something a bit bigger. I had

some share money from working at Exel Logistics so we managed to secure the Rose & Crown in Tring as our first hotel purchase. It was a very pretty property right in the heart of Tring. It has 27 bedrooms and three function rooms.

ALISON: We owned that for three years and then we were looking for a second unit to go with that, so we came down to the New Forest to look at some properties. In that process we saw the Balmer Lawn and Christie's - who were our agents at the time - came up with a buyer for the Rose & Crown. We jumped a stage and went from the 27-bedroom operation into a 54-bedroom operation with seven function rooms and a lot more leisure visitors.

What drew you to this property in particular?

CHRIS: We were looking to purchase a different property in the area at the

time, and I went from every single hotel in the region to make sure I understood the marketplace and what was available. When I came into the Balmer Lawn I thought it was a bit of a sleeping giant, it's much larger than it looks from the front and I was really taken aback by how many conference facilities they had here.

ALISON: We both felt it was a unit that needed to be taken over and loved, cherished and grown.

There has been a lot of investment in the hotel, what have you changed during your ownership?

ALISON: When we bought the property 19 years ago it was unloved and rundown. It had gone from what was a very prime property in the New Forest to a tired property. We had a number of difficulties that we faced in the early days, and as independent hoteliers we



didn't come into the project with millions of pounds sitting in the bank ready to invest. In the last five years we have been able to reinvest considerably. It's a top-end four-star unit now, which we are very proud of.

CHRIS: If you look back to the early part of the 20th Century, the hotel was one of the premier properties in the New Forest, it came long before some of the famous new properties came on the scene. It was the place to go in this region. Unfortunately, over the best part of 80 years, it has been neglected really. What we've done, and achieved, is to return it almost to its former glory. There's still a few tweaks to do here and there.

You've made some historical discoveries at the site of the hotel, could you tell us about those?

ALISON: The property has a massive

history. During the First World War it was used as a field hospital and during the Second World War it was used as a training centre and a number of the orders for the D-Day Landing were



launched from the property. We are still finding bits of history that we weren't aware of that literally just pop up from the floor boards, such as documents and bullets - it's an amazing building.

CHRIS: We found quite a lot of documentation from the Second World War under the floorboards in room 10 when we were recently refurbishing. That got a lot of media attention and created a really nice story. We've turned that into a museum-style display in the hotel for our guests to enjoy.

Did you make any structural changes or has the investment been a soft refurbishment?

CHRIS: Initially when we bought the hotel the first few years were tough. We fixed our interest rates, and then interest rates started to fall. In the first year the whole forest was closed down by foot and mouth disease, it





was tough times and we didn't have buckets of money to invest in the property. We had to do things slowly and carefully and pick off the most important items - sometimes they were front-facing items like the guest bedrooms and other times it might have been an essential item like a

boiler or a central heating pump. It wasn't until my father passed away, and we were able to reinvest the money from the sale of his house and his other investments, that we were able to really do a stepchange. We did 20 bedrooms in one go and we really drove the refurbishment programme forward in a much faster way.

ALISON: It's fair to say over the last five years we've probably had about a £1.5m investment programme into the Balmer Lawn to drive it forward.

What are your roles at the hotel and are you hands-on?

CHRIS: I personally review all of the TripAdvisor reviews and respond to most of them, that's a very useful way to keep a handle on what's happening and how guest satisfaction is performing. Alison has a very active role as head of sales and overseeing the finance. We also both have regular reviews with Michael Clitheroe, he's our general

manager and has been with us just over a year now. He's a very good and capable general manager and that has enabled us to take a step back, although not a massive one.

Is being located in the New Forest a big draw for guests?

ALISON: We operate in a national park, it's a beautiful place. We have direct forest access from three sides of the building and it's a huge strength. We believe in, as much as we market the Balmer Lawn, we also should be marketing the New Forest National Park.

What type of guests does the hotel attract?

ALISON: The split is around 70% leisure and 30% corporate and conference guests. We also have a very strong wedding trade, along with a growing restaurant trade as well. Our restaurant, Beresford's, has recently been shortlisted as one of the three in





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Hampshire Life magazine's 'Best Hotel Restaurant of the Year'. Not only are we in a fantastic location but the hotel is also a destination in its own right, we have an indoor pool, outdoor pool, and spa facilities.

It's your second venture in the industry, how does it compare from your first and what lessons did you learn?

ALISON: They are massively different, you can't get two more contrasting businesses, which is great and we have more experience now, if nothing else. The Rose & Crown was 27 bedrooms with a very strong midweek occupancy due to its position just outside of the M25 and a very strong beverage trade from the main bar. Meanwhile, the Balmer Lawn was always a very strong leisure-based destination with strong weekend trade. We have had to work hard on the mid-week occupancy. You learn as you go along.

CHRIS: Hindsight is a wonderful thing and I think one of the key things that I would take away is that I don't think we realised quite how rundown the hotel was when we bought it and quite how much money it would take to bring it to where it is today. I wish we had done



some of the public areas earlier as it's the first thing that people see. We focused on bedrooms and I don't think that was a mistake, but I think it was a question of balance.

What are your future plans for the hotel?

ALISON: The next stage is to really expand on the leisure facilities and improve our spa offering to help boost midweek occupancy. We are really excited about it actually, I feel more positive about the future of tourism and leisure within the UK than we ever have after being in the industry for 23 years.

CHRIS: We are also in the process of applying for planning permission to build six residential houses in the gardens of the hotel. It will still leave the hotel with a nice garden and public spaces, all we will lose is a tennis court that's not used that much. We also have two squash courts and they will be turned into staff accommodation. 🏠