



PENDLEY'S PEOPLE, PLAYS AND PEACOCKS

BY BOB LITTLE



I first sampled the delights of Pendley Manor many years ago when, as a child, I visited its Shakespeare Festival. I was instantly impressed by the atmosphere of the place - an impression that's never been dispelled over a number of visits in adulthood.

Pendley - with some echoes of the above stairs lifestyle of a latter day 'Downton Abbey' - offers a glimpse of late-Victorian gracious living but with the facilities now expected of a modern country house hotel. Although I've been to Pendley for business meetings, my most recent visit was for some relaxation one winter weekend.

After checking in, my wife (Helen) and I put our bags in our room - a large room in the more modern part of the hotel. The room not only had its own dining table, settee, coffee table and dressing table but it also featured a super-king sized bed that, from its

ample width, looked like it was made for three rather than two people. Other rooms - particularly in the original house - have four poster beds but not so many dining and coffee tables.

The next task was to go in search of a cup of tea - which was easily accomplished in the leather armchaired splendour of the Shakespeare Bar. Over the ornate giant Victorian fireplace there was a newly erected certificate, reassuringly proclaiming that Pendley had been highly commended in the 'large hotel/townhouse of the year' category of The Beautiful South Awards 2011, organised by Tourism South East.

Edified and fortified, we set about researching the hotel's leisure facilities. In the bowels of the old building - once upon a time, the cellars - is an archetypal country house snooker room and



a gym. The gym is more than adequate for the casual 'keep fitter' and, judging from its other occupant on our visit, for the serious workout fanatic too.

We met our gym partner again a little while later, in the much newer swimming pool complex, sampling the effects of an instant flatulence machine otherwise known as a spa bath.

Connected to the pool area by a subterranean passage are the sauna and steam rooms. We found that a visit to these necessitated a further trip to the instant flatulence machine in order to chill out.

To the delight of those who don't want to - or feel they daren't - chill out too much at Pendley, the hotel provides free wi-fi access which even a technophobe such as I found easy to access.

The evening heralded our eagerly awaited dinner appointment in the restaurant. Experience has taught us that the quality of the food at Pendley is excellent. This time - ably served by waiters, Edward and Cyril - we chose from the à la carte menu and, once again, found the food and drink a delight.

Since it was winter, although the weather was bright, we didn't feel intrepid enough to brave the elements and trek around the 35 acres of the Pendley estate, much of which is woodland. In the

better weather, however, the Manor's gardens and grounds - about a 40 minute train journey from London - provide welcome havens of rural peace.

From time to time, however, the peace of Pendley's grounds is shattered by the call of the Manor's tribe of ten or so peacocks/peahens. They tend to roost in the big beech tree close to the house but they roam the grounds, getting into whatever mischief they can. Apparently, they'll deign to appear in wedding photographs - or not - in inverse correlation with whether or not you want them to.

A chat with Rene, the duty manager, revealed that Pendley's two baby peacocks had recently been given to a local farmer, after their mother had been killed by a fox.

"The adult peacocks roost in the big trees here - out of the way of foxes," he explained. "But the young birds stay on the ground and hide. One morning, however, we found the youngsters but the peahen had died defending them."

For all I know, it might have been Dorian Williams who introduced the peacocks to Pendley. Or they might easily pre-date a man whom few people, today, remember. Those who do, probably recall him as the BBC's voice of televised show jumping - but his last

broadcast was in 1985, a few months before he died, aged 71. Yet – apart, possibly, from peacocks - he left two major legacies for us all.

At the end of the Second World War, Mr Williams turned his home, Pendley Manor, into an adult education centre. Two years later, one of the centre's groups performed some scenes from Shakespeare plays in the Manor grounds and, two years after that, the Pendley Shakespeare Festival began. Now in its 63rd year, this year's productions are Romeo & Juliet and Much Ado About Nothing.

Every July and August, the Manor's grounds are turned into an open air theatrical Glyndebourne, as picnickers party in the summer evening sun before enjoying a dose of Shakespearean culture. While rain is not unheard of in Tring, it's rare during the Festival, so there's a good chance of combining a fine picnic with a fine evening's entertainment.

Dorian Williams' other legacy was his grade 2 listed country house and its grounds. At a mere 140 years old, the current house is the latest in a line of manor houses at Pendley from before the Norman Conquest. The village is first recorded in the fourth century, so it's reasonable to assume there's been a manor house in Pendley for some 1,800 years.

Bob and Helen Little stayed at Pendley Manor, near Tring, Hertfordshire (<http://www.pendley-manor.co.uk/>)

Pendley Manor is an award winning (including two rosettes for its restaurant) 4 star country manor house. It has 35 acres of wooded parkland, 73 double bedded rooms, a ballroom for up to 200 guests and a spa with swimming pool and snooker room. It caters for conferences (up to 250 people), banquets, weddings and civil partnership celebrations. It can also offer afternoon tea.

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