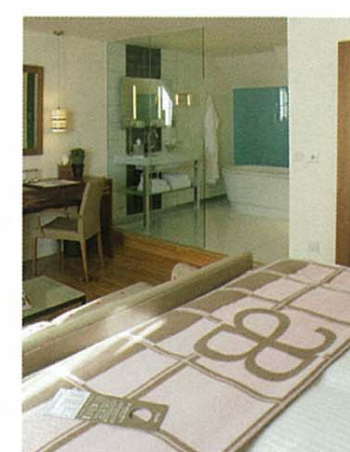


WORDS BY KAREN GLASER PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE TODD

ABODE CANTERBURY



ABOVE: The historic exterior of the County hotel contrasts with the crisp, modern interiors



Plumtree Mee's restyling of the former County Hotel for Abode Hotels latest property offers an atmosphere of chic informality whilst preserving historic elements of the original building.

The devil-may-care passion you once had for your partner has gone – it's been hijacked by the daily routine of work, domesticity and the demands of your little darlings. Twice-nightly is a very distant memory. What are you going to do about it?"

It is a saucy opening for an article in a hotel brochure. The next paragraph of Abundant Pleasures, which appears in the launch issue of Abode Hotel's magazine, Live It, is less arresting, but

still good marketing for the chain: "The predictable thing," it gently chides, "would be to book a weekend away in some secluded country house hotel in the honeymoon suite with a four poster bed, whirlpool bath and dinner served by efficient but slightly superior staff. But" it continues, "while the country hotel thing might work for many, some of us prefer to rekindle those sparks in an atmosphere of chic informality – in a hotel that offers country-hotel service, but which is

located in a place where you can take in some nightlife and serious retail therapy." All of which neatly summarises the Abode offer: country-hotel intimacy blended with city-centre boutique chic. Or, in the words of Andrew Brownsword, the man behind the group: "properties my wife Christine and I would want to stay at...in towns we enjoy visiting." Plus, a night of passion. Hard to top, really. Actually, Abode Canterbury, the

chain's latest and third hotel, now two and a half years old, is pretty hard to top. Designer Plumtree Mee's root-and-branch £6m refurbishment of the Grade II listed County hotel is at the heart of the city, a hassock's throw from the cathedral where Thomas Beckett was murdered in 1170. It is located on an intimate and pedestrianised high street with more smart clothes shops than you can hurl an Armani trouser suit at. And if you are holidaying with your family,

as many of Canterbury's annual 2.5 million tourists do, well, just leave out the passion part of the Abode offer. This summer, three quarters of the hotel's 73 rooms were occupied by some of those 2.5 million tourists. They were on to a good thing. There has been a building at 30-33 High Street since the medieval period and, thanks to Plumtree Mee's rigorous gutting and filleting, the remains of those 800-year-old timber frames are now on stirring show – the best example

being a dragon beam over the ground floor bar. Elsewhere, the miles of plastic-beam and linen-fold panelling that covered large sections of this rambling, four-storey building, which incorporates many phases of work, have been replaced by a contemporary palette. On the ground floor, pub-crimson carpet and dark partitions have traded places with limestone and glass, giving guests oblique glimpses into the champagne bar, on the right when they

enter reception from the high street, and through to the restaurant at the back. With its decidedly uncorporate-looking oak floor and walnut screens, the restaurant, formerly two Tudor-pastiche function rooms, is a fine setting for the food of Michael Caines, the two-Michelin-star chef who frequently graces our TV screens and who trained under the legendary Raymond Blanc. It was a good day for Abode when Caines decided to go into business with

Brownsword: dishes such as rainbow trout rilette with crème fraîche jelly and iced apple parfait have proved a big part of the Abode pull and are at least part of the reason the chain has managed to establish itself as a potential rival to Malmaison and Hotel du Vin. Such rivalry will no doubt intensify when Plumtree Mee, which has designed all of the group's hotels, starts work on Abode Manchester next summer: the hotel will be bang opposite Malmaison Piccadilly.



Fine cuisine needs of course fine wine which, in turn, requires the right conditions to keep it so. To this end, Plumtree Mee have designed a temperature-controlled, UV-bonded glass wine wall for the restaurant which doubles as a partition wall – invaluable for private parties and the like. So invaluable, in fact, that wine walls are to become a feature of all future Abode restaurants.

Fine cuisine also needs a decent kitchen; the new one at Canterbury Abode has been created out of the existing kitchen and what was a windowless restaurant. It's just one of several remodelling exercises which have transformed the tired old County Hotel into a sanctuary of contemporary cool. On the ground floor the biggest of these interventions is The Tavern, a courtyard bar-cum-café fashioned from the former internal



staff carpark and laundry. With a sliding glass roof, Farrow and Ball-painted walls and gastro-pub nosh, it's a new kind of after-hours venue for England's most famous cathedral city.

Moving upstairs, the bedrooms fall into four categories: comfortable, desirable, enviable and fabulous. The grading system is the same across the chain as are the room prices of £125, £145, £175 and £250. A cursory stroll around Canterbury suggests the lower-tier prices are competitive, and while £250 might be a lot to spend on one night's sleep, the hotel's fabulous room certainly merits its name. Actually, formed as it is from three small attic rooms and a linking corridor, 'fabulous' is much more than a room. It is a penthouse suite and roof terrace, built on the flat roof of a side bedroom block, with magnificent views across the cathedral precincts. Views which so

impressed a recent and very wealthy Russian tourist, that he hired the suite for an entire fortnight.

One floor down, the hotel's ten enviable rooms have earned their name too. Noticably bigger than corporate hotel rooms in the same price bracket, they were built by stealing space from adjacent rooms and, in some cases, by knocking two together. In addition, they have both baths and showers (sanitaryware by Capelano, fittings by Grohe) and nice touches such as the bedside lamps with adjustable LED reading lights.

With the exception of the funky Paul Smith-esque stripy carpet, supplied by the Danish firm Ege, none of these pieces break any design barriers. Rather, they are tasteful, understated design solutions which make comfortable and very relaxing interiors. All in all, a perfect place to get loved up.



EXPRESS CHECKOUT

ABODE

High Street,
Canterbury, Kent
CT1 2RX
Tel: 01227 766266
www.abodehotels.co.uk

- 72 bedrooms
- Michael Caines Restaurant
- Old Brewery Tavern, Champagne Bar
- 2 Meeting Rooms