



SCANDAL ON THAMES

Cliveden, Roger Wheeler finds, has a raucous past to live up to

Very few people under 60 will have heard of **Cliveden**, one of the grandest neoclassical Palladian country houses, situated on the **Thames** in Buckinghamshire, near Slough. It was here one weekend in July 1961 that a government minister, a Russian spy and a showgirl had some fun that contributed to the defeat of the Macmillan government in 1963. It was the Christine Keeler/John Profumo affair that got started that weekend. She was the 18-year-old who was sleeping with Yevgeny Ivanov, a KGB agent, while also having an affair with John Profumo, the British Secretary of State for War, at the same time. The newspapers found out and the rest is history. *Scandal*, the 1989 movie of the affair starring Joanne Whalley and John Hurt, featured the house and made it famous.



Today Cliveden – pronounced *Clivd'n* – is a hotel. The estate and house were left to the National Trust by the fabulously wealthy Nancy and Waldorf Astor, who had owned it for many years. Nancy Astor was the UK's first woman MP, and with her in charge the house became famous for very grand parties. In the late 1930s it was where the 'Cliveden Set' met. This was a group of government ministers and the like who, it was rumoured, supported Hitler and the German war. Regardless of whether this is actually true or not, Cliveden is a house steeped in history where the great and good over the centuries have come to play.

We went for a weekend, not particularly to play, but we did anyway. Anywhere that is owned or managed by the National Trust will invariably suffer from being preserved and sanitised out of existence. The grounds, which should be fantastic, are actually quite dull, nicely preserved of course but with not a lot of colour or interest.



The house is glorious but the hotel managers can't even change a lightbulb without a committee meeting with the Trust. All that being said, the hotel is fabulous. All the rooms are lovely, of course; ours was almost a suite: huge bed, two settees, big TV, great bathroom. They have been restored to exactly the way they were when the Astors lived there and you almost feel part of a party.

As the property is owned by the National Trust and just leased to the Von Essen Hotel Group, it is obliged to be open to the public twice a week, which means that tour groups wander round gazing at the works of art – that was us!

There have been houses on the site for more than 300 years. The current one was built in the mid-19th century and is amazing. The Great Hall is hung with large family portraits and tapestries, loads of big sofas and armchairs. It is a very grand house indeed.

Dinner was very nice; my fillet steak was the best I've eaten in years and my partner's calves' liver was beautiful with fantastic puds. At £59 it was incredible value for money and you don't have to be a resident.

Cliveden has a spa – as all hotels do these days – and this one is, naturally, special as it features the pool where Ms Keeler frolicked (love that word; I haven't frolicked for years) with John Profumo in the early 1960s. In fact there is an indoor and outdoor pool too, a huge Jacuzzi, steam and sauna with a large range of treatments on offer. My partner, Mike, had an excellent de-stress massage – no soft girlie aromatherapy stuff. He enjoyed a thorough going over by a lady who, he said, really knew her stuff (I didn't ask for details).



The gardens are completely under the control of the National Trust and are quite nice, but not exactly stunning. You can walk right down to the River Thames just down 200 steps.

I have been criticised for not mentioning the cost of these country house hotels. The reason is simply that no one actually pays the 'rack' rate quoted on the websites. The official cost of our room at Cliveden with dinner and breakfast was well over £500. But ringing up a few days beforehand can get you a huge discount, so just ask for the best deal. Rooms there officially start at around £200 and are well worth it.

Just to get our feet back on the ground, Butlins invited us to its new Ocean Hotel in Bognor, West Sussex. We went and it certainly wasn't Kansas! They have spent £20 million on a new designer boutique hotel that was very nice and absurdly cheap. But it's still Butlins and really not for same-sex couples. More about Butlins soon.

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