

His mission:
To test hotel
hospitality
to the limit

AN INSPECTOR CALLS



THE man of the house walked into the kitchen and my wife's legs went a little wobbly. 'He's the best-looking man I have ever seen,' she said later, as I tried not to get a glimpse of my bedraggled self in the car mirror.

And she had a point. He must have been in his 50s but there was definitely a bit of the Paul Newman (circa 1980s) about him: ruddy complexion, gentle but bright eyes, soft, curly hair and a warm, unfrightening smile. Come to think of it, his wife wasn't bad looking either. What we have at Manor House Farm is a beautiful couple in a beautiful almost-stately pile, with a beautiful garden in a beautiful part of Norfolk, near Fakenham, about 20 minutes from the beautiful coast.

They have two immaculate but cosy rooms that they offer to guests, both set apart from the main house in what used to be the harness room.

We were paying £40 each, which seemed a lot as we were heading north on the A1065 from Swaffham, but which proved to be perfectly fair by the time we had enjoyed a peaceful night's sleep in such idyllic surroundings.

We swept up the drive shortly before 10pm. It was still light enough to admire the weeping willows, the stables, the rambling farm buildings, the herbaceous borders.

We were shown to our room by a friendly but no nonsense Mrs Ellis, who told us the other guests were an American couple but that they had gone to bed early, so we had sole use of the sitting room that the two rooms share.

If you can't sleep well here you should see a doctor. The guest

book agreed with me. 'Too many superlatives for this space!' a man from Stockport had written. 'Sensational in every way.' Which is correct. With its sea grass flooring, freshly painted walls and huge bed with a surplus of plump pillows, our room had everything that many posh country house hotels promise but fail to deliver — at double the price.

Before breakfast, we explored. Manor House Farm stands next to a small 13th-century church, which we wanted to visit but there was too much to see in the Ellises' garden. Or, rather, the Ellises' gardens, several of which are sectioned by heaving hostas, leaping lupins and rioting wild rosemary.

The American couple were already in the dining room — the family dining room in the main house — by the time we got there.

Eating with strangers is an acquired taste, but here it was perfect. The couple were on a tour of England's cathedrals. They had done Ely and were on their way to Canterbury after a brief stop at Palladian Holkham Hall on the north Norfolk coast. After sampling homemade pureed apples, blackberries and stewed gooseberries, we all tucked into eggs and bacon, with delicious coffee.

You can buy the eggs. We asked for a dozen — and that was when the handsome one appeared. My wife was reluctant to leave. Me too, but not for the same reasons.

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Doubles from £40 B&B*

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