

Polurrian Bay *Cornwall*

Words: Matt Turner Photography: Bob Berry / Ian Kingsnorth

Luxury Family Hotels founder Nigel Chapman has marked his return to the UK hotel market with the launch of a new child-friendly hotel perched on Cornwall's Lizard Peninsula.



The drive from Woolley Grange, in the Wiltshire countryside, to Polurrian Bay, perched on the cliffs of Cornwall's Lizard Peninsula, is a long one. But it pales into insignificance in comparison with the long and winding road Nigel Chapman has travelled along to get from the launch of Woolley Grange – his first hotel – to this, his latest.

When Chapman launched Woolley in May 1989 it reinvented the English country house hotel. He was inspired by his experience staying at Ballymaloe House in Ireland and what he describes as its 'continental' approach to families: "They didn't have any children's facilities as such but children were just accepted as part

of the experience. Whereas the English country house approach to kids was very much to try and keep them out of sight."

The hospitality of its owners, the Allen family, kept Chapman coming back for more. By the time he had started his own family, the appeal of his existing job as an accountant to showbiz types in the West End of London was beginning to wane. So, with three young children in tow, Nigel Chapman and his wife Heather sold their house in London and uprooted to Woolley – a Jacobean manor house on the edge of Bradford-on-Avon, which became both the family home and their entry point into the hotel business.

The timing, at the tail-end of the Eighties, couldn't have been much worse: "Interest

rates were just horrific," he recalls. "We had no idea how difficult it was to get a new hotel off the ground, how much money you'd lose in the early years – the whole thing was a nightmare... and I'd sold the [London] house so we were trapped there really."

Yet they survived the baptism of fire and built Woolley into a successful hotel, assisted by some positive early reviews and the award of the first AA Hotel of the Year.

With his partner Nicholas Dickinson, formerly of Raymond Blanc's Le Manoir Aux Quat'Saisons and Chewton Glen, Chapman would go on to build Luxury Family Hotels – a group of historic properties with a uniquely child-friendly approach comprising Woolley Grange, The Old Bell in Malmesbury, ►





► Fowey Hall in Cornwall, and Moonfleet Manor in Dorset. With the group trading successfully Chapman took a sabbatical in Ireland, only to return to the UK hotel market with a second hotel group – Alias Hotels.

“I was sitting in All Bar One in Bath one day,” he explains “and I thought, the type of people that are in here is an interesting market. They don’t want to stay in a Travelodge – they want something like a funky version, one notch up from that. So we raised some money from our shareholders and did the first two – Kandinsky in Cheltenham, and Barcelona in Exeter.”

Once again, Chapman appeared to have found a niche. “They immediately became the best performing hotels in

their towns, beating the four-stars.”

At this point an opportunity to add Ickworth House, a stunning National Trust property in Sussex, to the Luxury Family portfolio presented itself. At the same time, Alias was making its first move into a major city, with the launch of Rossetti in Manchester. This proved to be more of a struggle than the hotels in Cheltenham or Exeter, but Alias pressed on with the launch of a fourth property – Seattle in Brighton. A plan to open another at the Ropeworks development in Liverpool never came to fruition. “We had quite a lot of interest in financing more Alias hotels,” says Chapman. “But a condition was always, ‘you’ll have to get rid of your interest in Luxury Family

Hotels, because we can’t have you riding two horses’. So I had to make a decision.” Effectively – although you sense his hand was forced – he says his decision was to sell Alias. In 2005, following an abortive joint venture with ill-fated property investment firm GuestInvest, the group was put on the market, with Kandinsky and Barcelona eventually acquired by Swire Hotels for the launch of Chapter Hotels. Rossetti was bought by Andrew Brownsword’s Abode.

Meanwhile Luxury Family Hotels was attracting interest of its own, from Andrew Davis, the enigmatic, flamboyant founder of von Essen hotels, who would later be memorably described as a “five-star fantasist” in a Daily Mail exposée



► of his spectacular rise-and-fall.

As Chapman describes it, Davis swooped on the group from the comfort of his private helicopter. The offer he made proved too attractive for the shareholders to resist. Luxury Family Hotels thus found itself stacked into von Essen's house of cards, the subsequent collapse of which has been well documented in the financial press.

From 2006 to 2010, Nigel Chapman and Nicholas Dickinson occupied themselves with a new venture, taking the family-friendly luxury blueprint to continental Europe, specifically the Algarve town of Sagres where they launched Martinhal resort with investors Chitra and Roman Stern.

All of which meandering brings us back

to Cornwall. Once Martinhal opened, Chapman returned to the UK and re-entered the UK hotel market with the launch of a new company, Halcyon Hotels & Resorts, and the acquisition of Polurrian Bay Hotel – a well established seaside hotel dating back to 1890, set amongst 12 acres of landscaped gardens on the Cornish coast. In the meantime, with the onset of the credit crunch, von Essen had imploded under the weight of its £250m debts. Just as he was relaunching Polurrian, Chapman had the opportunity to re-acquire the properties, this time with the backing of Patron Capital.

"I couldn't have a situation where somebody else bought them," he says. "We were going back into that market in the

PREVIOUS PAGE: The new Vista extension at Polurrian Bay offers panoramic views of the sea, with brightly coloured contemporary furnishings and fabrics ABOVE: Guestrooms have a palette of natural materials with Melampo bedside lights by Artemide and Flos Glo-Ball pendants



► UK, which we'd already done with this Polurrian, and were wanting to do more. If somebody else got hold of the Luxury Family hotels and started really pushing, we would have had some quite serious competition. So I think that we had to have a go at it."

On 8 December 2011, Halcyon re-acquired the four properties sold in 2006 as well as three new properties which von Essen had added to its family collection – New Park Manor in the New Forest, Thornbury Castle north of Bristol, and The Elms, in Worcestershire.

The previous year, your writer had stayed The Elms which was under administration at the time. It was a depressing experience. The vegetable garden had gone to seed. The skeleton staff looked miserable and overworked. The 'air conditioning' in our room was a cheap portable unit with a

plastic tube sticking out of a window, utterly at odds with the luxury surroundings.

A year later, en route to Polurrian, we broke up our journey with a visit to Woolley Grange. Although it was only a couple of months since the hotel had been re-acquired by Chapman, the contrast with our stay at The Elms twelve months prior could not have been more marked. A soft refurbishment had begun to reinvigorate the property but more importantly, the staff were smiling and enthusiastic. It felt like Luxury Family Hotels had its mojo back.

Once we finally made it to Cornwall, Polurrian gave a glimpse of what could be in store for the other properties in the portfolio. Chapman and his team, headed by interior designer Carole Taylor, have repositioned the 41 bedroom hotel with stylish yet comfortable interiors. Subtle touches in the design ►

ABOVE: Carole Taylor and her team have created stylish yet comfortable interiors that are warm and welcoming with subtle touches that evoke the atmosphere of the hotel's heyday as a classic 1950's seaside hotel



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The spacious public rooms have been gently restored to their Edwardian origins. Original features such as the pitch pine parquet floors and imposing wooden doors have been combined with contemporary yet unobtrusive furnishings in natural materials and pastel shades. A coastal footpath leads through the gardens past a children's play area and tennis court – earmarked for future development to an infinity pool – to the hotel's own pristine sandy beach at Polurrian Cove.

The operational blueprint will be familiar to previous guests at other Luxury Family hotels. There's an Ofsted registered 'Den' with plenty of toys, games and activities for younger children; and a 'Blue Room' where older children can play video games, board games, pool or table football. A conference room doubles as a 'movie theatre' showing family films. Food served in the dining room, with its views out to the ocean, is fresh and locally sourced.

But the real jewel in the crown is the 'Vista' extension, added in May 2012 to open up views from the entrance through the centre of the hotel. Floor-to-ceiling windows give 180-degree panoramas

of the stunning seascape beyond.

Here guests can lounge on comfy sofas or designer chairs. In the winter, or even a typical English summer, it is a great spot for storm watching whilst tucked up in front of the open log burning fire. In better conditions, there is a terrace for alfresco dining and sunset drinks.

It was in Vista that Sleeper met up with Nigel Chapman, to reflect on the long journey that has seen him regain control of Luxury Family Hotels. Plans are afoot to add self-catering cottages in the grounds of Polurrian, the combination of self-catering and hotel facilities having proved successful at Martinhal. This time around, he has a handpicked team around him, including longstanding colleagues such as in-house designer Carole Taylor (who started out as a housekeeper at Woolley Grange) but also new faces such as Marketing Director Adrian Burley, formerly of Abercrombie & Kent, and Operations Director Paul Hudson, previously with Neilson Activity Holidays.

The backing of Patron Capital means Halcyon is in a position to reinvest in the properties: "We have powerful partners with big ambitions alongside us," says Chapman. You sense he wouldn't want to let go of them a second time. ■

ABOVE LEFT: The Den is a fully Ofsted-registered creche, featuring furnishings by Vitra and Magis TOP: The cinema room shows family films ABOVE: Another guestroom design

EXPRESS CHECKOUT

Polurrian Bay Hotel
Polurrian Bay, Mullion,
Helston, Cornwall TR12 7EN
UK
Tel: +44 (0)1326 240 421
www.polurrianhotel.com

41 guestrooms
Polurrian Bay Restaurant
Vista Lounge, Pool Bar
Indoor swimming pool and Spa, Tennis court, outdoor pool and small gym +
The Den kids club, Blue Room games room, 2 meeting rooms, children's play area

Owner / Operator: Halcyon Hotels & Resorts
Architecture: CAD Architects
Interior Design: Carole Taylor / In House Team
Contractor: 3MS Construction