



Magical manor

Brimming with history, home cooking and comfort, **Laura Cartledge** finds Ocklynge Manor to be much more than a B&B

Ocklynge Manor isn't just a B&B, it's a home from home – a getaway with that extra special something that you just can't put your finger, or words, on.

If perfect wasn't such an overused word I would apply it here.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. The stay began with home-made lemon sponge cake and tea served in the breathtaking gardens, so I'll start there.

Wendy's warm welcome quickly wiped the weary day of travelling from our minds as we were shown around the beautiful property.

Every inch is decorated with impeccable taste, keeping the house true to its historic origins while preventing it from feeling like a time capsule.

After a quick tour and drop-off of bags in our immaculate room, we resisted jumping straight into the softer-than-soft Egyptian cotton furnished beds and headed outside to talk to owners Wendy and David Dugdill.

Finding out the couple have been at the manor for 20 years makes it very hard not to become instantly jealous. Annoyingly, they are so nice it is impossible to



have such feelings and instead they are quickly replaced by feelings of privilege in being able to share in a slice of it. Speaking of which, Wendy's cake-making skills will leave you lost for words... in every sense.

Stunning gardens

The couple help unravel the magic of the manor for us – from tales of knights using the watchtower to spy French ships to a Saxon village that was discovered just 300 yards away.

The property was once inhabited by Mabel Lucie Attwell – an illustrator best known for being asked by JM Barrie to illustrate the gift-book edition of *Peter Pan*. It is easy to imagine the Lost Boys scurrying in the flowerbeds here or Peter himself perching in the tree branches.

Sadly the garden changed a lot before Wendy and David's arrival. "When we arrived, it was just blank grass and three big trees," says David.

The $\frac{3}{4}$ -acre walled garden has come a long way since then, as this year saw the gardens open for the first time through the National Garden Scheme. The success

of which, came as a surprise to the couple. "We had 650 guests in just two-and-a-half hours!" David explains. "It was fantastic. With help from the ladies from the church we raised £2,800 for charity."

It is easy to see the attraction, with features of the garden including an 18th-century gazebo – rumoured to be an original look-out tower for the London stagecoach – which is now dwarfed by a 300-year-old holm oak.

There is also a deep well, an orchard and a manna ash, which at an estimated 150 years old is the only mature one on record in England.

The ash seems to know it is special as it stands majestically in the main part of the garden, treating onlookers to flowers around the first week in June. A Roman font was also found on the site and is now at the Towner Art Gallery.

While the gardens and manor are undoubtedly magnificent, it is the hard work and attention to detail of Wendy and David that make a stay at Ocklynge special.

Their teamwork is even evident in the furnishings, with Wendy manning the sewing machine to create beautiful additions to the rooms – including bed canopies and curtains – and David handcrafting the furniture.

With so much to choose from, what would the couple say is their favourite part of the property?

"Apart from me," David jokes, as

Wendy racks her brains before deciding, "it is probably that it is like a doll's house – the mouldings, the fabrics. It makes it a very special place to live.

"Opening the house to visitors is a great way of retiring. The guests are always so different – it is never dull. We've had some really entertaining ones in the past, to the point no-one wants to leave the breakfast table."

The homely environment makes it easy to see how such an occurrence would happen – you certainly don't feel like just another guest at a B&B. From the time you step in the front door you feel like extended family.

Home comforts

Having been well fed and watered and with stories of knights and Neverland filling our heads it was time for bed.

Our room for the night was Room 3 – a gorgeous twin room with en suite and all the mod cons, including tea-making facilities, hairdryer, fridge and television, the latter of which is carefully concealed within one of David's tables to ensure that with a swish of fabric the traditional charm of the room can be restored.

It seems just seconds after our heads hit the pillows that it is time for breakfast. Refreshed and relaxed we wander down to the dining room to be met by four other guests and a table laden with fruit, fresh juice, yoghurts and cornflakes – which is just the start to tide us over while Wendy cooked a full English.

The conversation is as free flowing as our morning cuppa, as we discover more about each other and Wendy explains the intriguing collection of photographs on the walls – including one of Mabel Lucie Attwell outside the manor.

While the tea was good, the conversation fascinating and the full English very tasty, it was Wendy's delicious home-made jam served on fresh home-made bread that stole the show – and the table's attention.

With all this on offer it is hard to want to leave the manor, but it's an ideal location just over a mile from Eastbourne's sea front. Theatres or walking in the South Downs Way National Park are just two of the very tempting options.

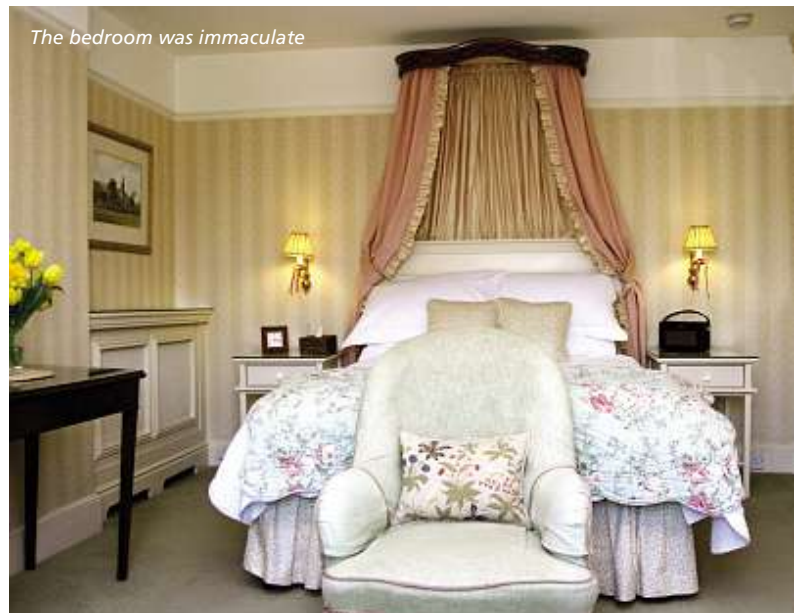
The only downside to Ocklynge Manor is that it only has three bedrooms, limiting guest numbers to a very lucky seven each night.

Even this however works to enhance the homely feel and the knowledge that what you are experiencing is extra special.

■ *Ocklynge Manor, Mill Road, Eastbourne, East Sussex. BN21 2PG. Call 01323 734121 or visit www.ocklyngemanor.co.uk for details*

■ *To find out more about The National Gardens Scheme, visit www.ngs.org.uk*

The bedroom was immaculate



The 18th-century gazebo in the garden



Wendy's breakfast was delicious