

A hotel fit for a king

Louis XVIII lived in exile at sumptuous Hartwell House – and you can enjoy its majestic splendour too...

It was a right royal reception. 'We've given you the king's bedroom,' beamed Jonathan Thompson, general manager of Hartwell House hotel in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire the moment I arrived in the lobby. 'We hope you'll be as comfortable there as he was.'

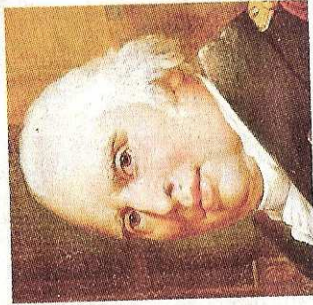
I gulped. Never having slept in royal quarters before I didn't quite know what to expect as I was led through the Great Hall past the imposing baroque fireplace and up a sweeping Jacobean staircase enlivened with curious gargoyles atop the banisters. I was not disappointed. The room in which King Louis XVIII spent his summers during the last five years (1809-1814) of his exile from France is an epic experience. Big enough to hold a modern apartment, it has five enormous windows overlooking the hotel's 90 acres of gardens and parkland including a lake spanned by a stone bridge brought from Kew, a Greek temple and various statues and obelisks of worthies who have stayed or lived here.

In the room itself, a painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds, a founder of the Royal Academy, gazes down from the wall, and the bed is a canopied four-poster affair ample enough to accommodate the corpulent monarch and at least

three of his mistresses had he been so inclined. (Though obesity and gout were beginning to slow the amorous king by the time he got to Hartwell, Louis is reputed to have enjoyed a liaison with a local innkeeper's daughter.)

Fleeing France disguised as an Englishman after the great 1789 revolution, he saw from afar his elder brother Louis XVI and sister-in-law Queen Marie Antoinette executed by the guillotine, and became king-in-waiting when his nephew, Louis XVII, died in a Paris prison. But the welcome he received in England was not exactly warm. Terrified of the revolution being exported from France, and at war with Napoleon, the Government tried to send Louis to Scotland. Then the Marquess of Buckingham offered to lease Hartwell to the king for £500 a year and a grateful Louis and his entourage moved in.

Jonathan led me up to Hartwell's roof to view a bizarre aspect of the French visitors' stay. 'Although the Government gave Louis a subsidy of £16,000 a year, cash always seemed to be short so they turned the roof into a farm,' he explained. 'They kept chickens and grew vegetables in giant tubs.' Proud French aristocrats were reduced to selling their produce at Hartwell's gates. Louis and his Queen, Marie Jose-



Hartwell House and Louis XVIII

phine, enjoyed the biggest rooms in the house (though they were separated; while the king had his mistresses, Marie had a lesbian lover). 'The queen drank herself to death the year after she arrived,' said Jonathan. 'But she was so poisonous no one much minded.'

Louis's restoration to the French throne 200 years ago is being marked by Hartwell this year. Having signed his acceptance of the throne in Hartwell's magnificent library, in April 1814 Louis bid a fond farewell to the house where, he said, he had spent some of his happiest moments hobbling round the grounds inspecting the roses and camellias he'd planted.

The king's gout finally got the better of him – in 1824 his horrified valet, pulling off the royal stockings, found his toes had dropped off. Perhaps mercifully, Louis died soon afterwards.

Hartwell fell on hard times after its heyday and a fire in 1963 speeded the decline. Salvation came in the shape of Richard Broyd, founder of Historic Hotels, who in 1987 commissioned a local architect to restore it to its former glory, and it opened as a hotel in 1989.

Guests today can enjoy an exquisite English stately home, with traditional furnishings, tasteful pictures and sculptures, but there are also tennis courts, a pool, gym and spa with steam rooms and sauna. The restaurant serves superb food – and of course the sumptuous rooms are fit for a king... and a queen! ■

Nigel Jones
Doubles from £290 a night, including breakfast. Call 01296 747444 or visit www.hartwell-house.com.

KNOW YOUR BUBBLES

Champagne Tasting, London

There's nothing quite like a glass of bubbly today's sparkling wine. Knock the fizz out of champagne? One of London's finest restaurants, L'Anima, has launched a tasting evening to help you discover the world of champagne. First up is Anemone, made entirely from white grapes, with an aroma of elderflower and apple, fig, bubble and a low content of 11 per cent alcohol. The ideal every occasion drink – and thank you for the word of mouth it's earned. Fastest-growing Franciacorta Bianco, Cuvée Brut is Italy's celebratory drink, champagne's closest rival. It has the same potential as its French counterpart, 12.5 per cent. With a nose of white flowers and hints of vanilla, it's delicious but very different to French champagne. The final tasting is Ruinart champagne, France's oldest champagne house. With shimmering golden hues, fresh of pear, hazelnut, almond and robust bubbles, it's spectacular. It costs around £35 but the Franciacorta offers a more complex 'champagne' experience and the Aneri Prosecco at £14, a more affordable event fizz.

Lisa S. Know Your Bubbles
*L'Anima Bar, £25 for two, www.lanima.co.uk
tel: 020 7422 7000.*

gallen Hall's Castle Break includes dinner, B&B and entry to Conwy Castle from £260 per nig