

Charles Lucas

Born 1964.

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A Chelsea Upbringing: life at the Wilbraham Hotel in 1980s

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1. From Dorset to Chelsea



The Wilbraham Hotel, Chelsea.

When my brother and I returned from school for the holidays our mother told us that she was to be the deputy general manager of the Wilbraham Hotel, in Chelsea. We would have to move from the rather dismal Dorset village where we had been for a few years and instead live in a flat in the hotel. We had no misgivings. Frankly, between the two places to live, it was an unfair fight. We moved to the Wilbraham in around 1979.

To no one's surprise it turned out that living in a hotel in Chelsea had many benefits and few costs for a teenager. The complete absence of washing up, hoovering, tidying, bed making and other character improving chores smoothed the typically bumpy teen years. The Wilbraham Hotel was a smallish hotel that had been created from three townhouses in Wilbraham Place, a quiet road off Sloane Street.



By today's standards it was eccentric. Not every room had a bathroom, the lifts had heavy, sliding metal grill doors that had to be closed by hand before the lifts would move, and the rooms were more or less randomly numbered. As the three houses did not interconnect on every floor, the guests had to remember which house their room was in before setting off from reception. There was a large staff of porters to guide guests who got lost, and to run upstairs to close the lift doors that were left open by guests used to a greater level of automation.

2. Mr. ffytche and Monique von Kospoth

The creators and owners of the Wilbraham were Mr ffytche and Monique von Kospoth. Both were elderly; one very English and the other very German. It was an unlikely partnership and how they came to be co-owners of the Wilbraham I never knew. They lived mainly in Hampshire where they had established another hotel in a large house that had once belonged to my mother's family. It was this connection that explained how we came to be at the Wilbraham for my mother had no experience of running a hotel. Perhaps because of this, the two owners would visit London frequently to check up on things. Mr ffytche did not have the welcoming demeanor of a natural hotelier and in reaction to his arid disposition, we nicknamed him "ffytchey-baby". Monique von Kospoth was known by all as "Miss Monique" and we may have made up the "von".

Mr ffytche had a special loathing for blown light bulbs and before his visits the staff would sweep the hotel checking the bulbs. It was no good, he had a nose for duds and always found one. He drew his own conclusions about the state of hotel management and its attention to detail. Mr Mulhane, the manager (and mother's boss) was a cheerful and pragmatic man who was untroubled by ffytchey-baby and Miss Monique's predations.

Miss Monique's special area of expertise was decoration. She had a weakness for faded mauvey-pink floral wallpaper and valences which she combined with hard gloss white paint on all the woodwork. The effect was comfortable and stylish enough and it was hard to pinpoint just what was wrong with it but you sensed you would never wish to do it yourself. Indeed that would have been impossible, as to pull off the look Miss Monique relied on the particular craftsmanship of the hotel's handymen.

A couple of amiable Irishmen inhabited a workshop crammed into an old coal hole in the basement of the hotel and took care of the maintenance of the hotel. They scorned right angles and sincerely believed that every aspect of interior furnishing could be made from plywood and beading. Once they paneled an entire room using just these. The hotel was full of their distinctive work and after a while I could instantly recognize their touch much as a furniture expert at Sotheby's could recognize a Hepplewhite.

My brother and I settled in very happily. There was only one rule and that was absolutely unbreakable: be polite to all the staff all the time.

3. The King's Road



We had the Kings Road and Sloane Square on our doorstep, where the two cultural seas of the time met: Punks and Sloane Rangers. Today it is obvious that Punk was by far the more vivid and original but corduroy trousers and the Duke of Wellington pub on Eaton Terrace were irresistible. The Kings Road drew us and our friends.

On the way Peter Jones was ignored. We called it Gos-Jones for its soviet feel, grumpy staff and utilitarian window displays where dusty rolls of fabric slumped listlessly. The Kings Road was a varied mix of shops but with few up-market boutiques. For those you had to go to Knightsbridge and Bond Street. The punks hung around the Duke of York's Barracks being photographed by the tourists and we roamed, glad to be part of the scene. With no money or fashion sense, we paid little attention to the shops and most have gone now save for John Sandoe's. The Chelsea Cobbler stood out with its enticing selection of cowboy boots in the window (even sloanes dreamed small dreams of rebellion) but after my brother got a pair for Christmas and I saw them in action, I decided they were better imagined than worn.

The Kings Road had surprisingly few cafes. When Blushes opened it was almost the only one and you could be sure of seeing George Best sitting outside in the morning with a glass of white wine and later at the Phene Arms still with a glass of wine. The Stockpot sold cheap, simple meals and beyond that was the Kings Road Theatre that showed The Rocky Horror



Show (the live show not the movie). We loved it and went frequently taking our friends imagining we were showing off our London sophistication. Many friends would come to call during the holidays. After all, what could be more welcoming and convenient than a hotel by Sloane Square? They hardly needed to introduce themselves at Reception as they were easy to distinguish from the typical Wilbraham guest.



The John Sandoe bookshop, King's Road.

4. The Guests

The hotel had developed a following among elderly East Coast Americans and they were its staple. They would approach the reception desk carefully and speak with ceremonial slowness:

“May I ask you a question?”

“Yes, certainly”

“The water... is it safe to drink?”

“Yes”

“I only ask because, well, you can’t be too sure and you want to be careful, afterall... Harrods?”

“Harrods?”

“Is it far from here?”

The hotel kept a good stock of cards with its name and address and nervous guests would take one knowing that they could hand it to a cabby and be brought back to safety without having to speak English which in London they treated as a foreign language.

Sitting at the cramped reception desk was an unpopular job but the rota was unforgiving and my mother spent many hours answering questions, the phone and taking bookings which were recorded on a large wall chart which hung at the back of reception next to the array of cubby holes where the room keys were kept. Only the initiated could understand the bookings chart and sometimes not even them. The Wilbraham had a reciprocal arrangement with the Basil Street Hotel to take guests when accidentally over booked.

5. The Team

There was a notable contrast between the two night porters who took it in turns to do the night shift on reception which started at 11.00 each night when the hotel's doors were locked.

Gary was a small, grey, furtive man who thought the worst of everyone. He would never commit himself on even the smallest point and all were wary of him as he was known to be Mr ffytche's spy. It was the night porter's job let in the late returning guests (grudgingly in Gary's case) and to make up the bills for the guests departing the next day. As everything was done manually this job provided a wide scope for fiddles and it was also suspected that he kept many of the tips for himself rather than put them into the central pool administered by Ahmed, the Head Porter. The (probably correct) belief that he had Mr ffytche's ear protected him.

The other night porter was a young South African who loved dance and working at night left the days free for rehearsals and auditions. He was gentle and earnest so his conviction for drug dealing came as a surprise. He smoked marijuana occasionally and sold some of his supply to friends. When by chance he was caught in possession it was these petty transactions that got him convicted and jailed for six months. When he got out my mother made sure he got his job back (it was important for parole) and seemingly nothing had changed, but a London jail was no place for a dance enthusiast.

The Wilbraham's large staff of kitchen porters, chefs, plongeurs, chambermaids, receptionists would come and go and the hotel provided bed sits for them in two staff houses in Battersea. Jesus, a cheerfully incompetent but long standing porter electrified us all by appearing for work one morning with a shaven head. He told a complicated story involving gambling at one of the staff houses which to his mind justified everything. But the fact was, the American guests would be alarmed by a skinhead Spaniard taking their suitcases, however bright his smile and reassuring his name. His cheerfulness saved him and he was moved to kitchen duties while his hair regrew.

Editor's note. For those not familiar with the term plongeur, it describes a person employed to wash dishes and carry out other menial tasks in a restaurant or hotel.

6. An 18th Birthday Party

My brother and I had our 18th birthday party in the hotel's well regarded restaurant, Le Beurre Fondu. Dinner for about twenty of us was followed by dancing at Tokyo Joe's, a nightclub in Piccadilly.

We felt very grown up. Not long after our mother bought a house and was relieved no longer to live at the beck and call of the hotel all the time. We missed the easy life of course, but we were seldom home as university life had started.

7. Demolition

In 2002 the Wilbraham fell prey to property developers. Today only the façades of the three town houses remain and behind them are serviced apartments. I googled the hotel and the only reference I could find was to the glass reinforced concrete used in its reconstruction.

The following is archived from the website of contractors BCM GRC Ltd:



One of the replica chimneys made of Glassfibre Reinforced Concrete.

In the sensitive Sloane Square area this existing hotel was demolished and rebuilt as a residential block. Five floors were demolished and replaced by seven inside, although the front elevation still had to retain the existing format. To replicate the existing chimneys Glassfibre Reinforced Concrete panels were installed on a steel frame fixed to the main roof members. All components were cast in handspray Glassfibre Reinforced Concrete including octagonal chimney pots. The alternative solid cast stone would have required back propping through two floors to carry the additional loads and would have imposed significant lifting and programme related problems.

The following is archived from the website of contractors George Barnsdale:

The Wilbraham Hotel was rebuilt into 33 luxury serviced apartments in the centre of Chelsea, London. The deluxe interiors are modern and contemporary, while the exterior of the building is very traditional. As part of the development, although the aesthetics of the building had to be adhered to, due to very strict planning requirements, the existing hotel was demolished and rebuilt behind the original

façade. The main requirements of this project were to replicate the original windows and reduce sound transmission.

George Barnsdale & Sons designed and manufactured supertilt sliding sash windows and hexagonal pivot windows to exactly match the originals. All of the windows were glazed with acoustic glass to reduce sound transmission by approximately 37dB and benefitted from the modern performance techniques that are built into every George Barnsdale window.

All sashes are glazed from the inside providing enhanced security and improved weather performance, which as a result gives longer life.



A serviced apartment for rent in 2021 in the re-built Wilbraham Hotel, now know as Cheval Phoenix House.
