

GETAWAY

Wish ewe were here

A cosy pub in Stow-on-the-Wold provides the perfect weekend break for **STEVE HOWARTH**

THE picture postcard perfect north Cotswold hilltop market town of Stow-on-the-Wold is one of my favourite places to stay in the UK.

Stow has got everything I need for a relaxing weekend – lots of quirky and historic buildings to explore, many antique shops to browse, and great pubs serving good beer.

Our home for the weekend was the newly-refurbished and renamed Sheep Hotel, on Sheep Street, of course.

The Sheep's sister hotel The Porch House lays claim to being Britain's oldest boozier, with parts of the building dating back to 947 – a fact backed up by carbon dating of some of its timbers.

Across the street is The Sheep, which is not quite so ancient and was only acquired at the start of this year by owners Southern brewery Brakespears and reopened after a total refurbishment in July to provide the charming, quirky 'boutique-style hotel' we see today.

It boasts 22 rooms and a large "pizza and burger" style restaurant, which can also run to a delicious steak, plus a cosy patio/beer garden area which was bathed in late evening sunshine when we arrived.

It proved the perfect spot to unwind with an excellent beer after a journey which should have taken

just over two hours but ended up at five thanks to a motorway vehicle fire.

The Sheep, originally three buildings dating back to the 17th century, was initially a B&B before becoming The Grapevine Hotel in the 1980s after the previous owners built a conservatory dining room around a 120-year-old grapevine.

The large conservatory is now the main dining area complete with full length bar, while a cutting of the original grapevine has been transplanted into the new garden area.

As well as the impressive bar and cosy fire, there's an open kitchen and a wood-fired oven. The kitchen is

open all day, giving those not lucky enough to be staying the chance to come in for breakfast. There's an à la carte menu plus a wide range of freshly cooked pizzas throughout the afternoon and evening, with a special menu for children.

To complement the contemporary restaurant and bar, the garden and rear patio features an outdoor dining area, built around a feature fireplace.

When our food arrived it was superb. I tucked in to a fantastic burger while my partner enjoyed a great pizza, and all helpings were generous and hearty.

The welcoming restaurant was



The stylish dining room



The Sheep Hotel, top, and above, the honeymoon suite

NEED TO KNOW

■ **STEVE HOWARTH** was a guest of The Sheep Hotel, Stow-on-the-Wold.

■ **DOUBLE** rooms are from £90 to £150 a night B&B. Tel 01451 830344.

■ **FOR** more info, or to book, visit thesheepstow.co.uk

packed with hotel guests and locals during our visit – always a good sign.

The ancient town of Stow-on-the-Wold has such olde-world charm that it draws visitors from all around the world with its narrow streets, quirky shops and ancient inns. It is a perfect base to explore this beautiful part of the English countryside.

Overseas visitors could be forgiven for thinking Stow is a theme park re-creation as its buildings so perfectly match the popular view of the historic English village.

As you walk around the town some of the structures, including the hotel, are so old and lopsided they do look like something straight out of a Harry Potter film set.

And while we were impressed by the buildings we were delighted with our great bedroom in what was once the loft of this centuries-old structure.

All exposed beams, but with luxurious fittings and a spacious en-suite bathroom – it was no surprise to find out that it was the honeymoon suite.

History buffs are particularly well catered for in Stow, which has a very eventful past including being the site of the final battle of the English Civil War. The tattered remnants of King Charles's army were finally cornered by superior Roundhead forces in March 1646.

The battle began a mile or so out of the town but as things unravelled for

the Royalists they fled into Stow-on-the-Wold where they made a last stand and legend has it the "streets flowed with blood".

After their surrender the remnants of the king's army were locked up overnight in Stow's St Edward's Church before being marched away the next day.

With Oxford, Cheltenham and Stratford-upon-Avon all in easy driving distance alongside many historic buildings, stately homes and gardens, there is no shortage of things to do and see.

The Sheep and Stow-on-the-Wold cannot be recommended too highly and really should be on your 'to do' short break list.



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