

Travel

Hotel insider After a £37m

refurb lasting almost five

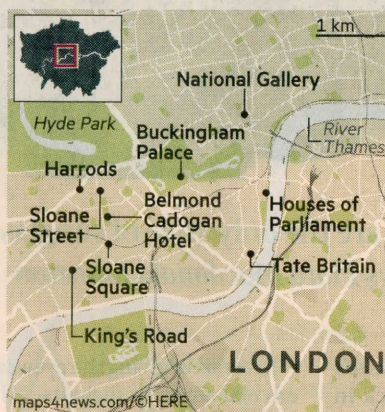
years, the Chelsea haunt of

Oscar Wilde has reopened its

doors. By *Henry Mance*

How good can a hotel be? So good you don't want to leave? So good you'd rather be arrested than check out early?

The Cadogan Hotel in Chelsea is best known as where, in 1895, the police detained Oscar Wilde on charges of gross indecency. He knew what was coming, and his friends had urged him to emigrate by train to France. But he remained in Chelsea, awaiting his fate and drinking heavily. As Brexit



approaches, perhaps there is a lesson here for all of us.

Almost five years after it shut its doors — and more than two years behind schedule — the Cadogan has finally reopened, nestled on the same spot between Sloane Square and Knightsbridge but given a £37m makeover to lure in those with an eye for both art and luxury. It is still owned by the aristocratic Cadogan family (along with 93 acres of the surrounding area) but will now be managed by Belmond, the travel brand recently acquired by French luxury group LVMH.

Belmond already has a UK presence — it runs Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons, a hotel and restaurant near Oxford, and Pullman trains, with excursions to historic English towns and coastal resorts. But this is the first time London has appeared in its “carefully curated collection of travel adventures”. Belmond hopes the Cadogan will be a gateway to its “European portfolio” — not least the Orient Express, which glides travellers from northern France to Venice, home of the original Belmond, the Cipriani. The brand wants to reclaim Chelsea's once avant-garde image from the Russian oligarchs and moneyed Sloanes, and to polish it again as a home of fashion and culture.

“Today, it is London's most stylish neighbourhood, renowned for its world-class flagship stores, characterful independent shops and thriving cultural scene,” says an optimistic promotional booklet marking the relaunch (and largely written by the editor of GQ, Dylan Jones). In my suite, I found the autobiography of designer Mary Quant, which harks back to the 1960s when Chelsea “suddenly became Britain's San Francisco, Greenwich Village and the Left Bank . . . its name interpreted as a way of living and a way of dressing far more than a geographical area”.

The leather-booted “Chelsea girl” look — which Quant described as the “contemporary counterpart of a gay musketeer” — may no longer be such a feature. But Quant's designs have inspired the Cadogan's staff uniforms. And the decor pays its own tribute to the swinging Sixties. “Quite groovy, isn't it?” I overheard one guest say of the bright breakfast room. “Quite weird,” replied his companion, reasonably. There are 430 pieces of art throughout the 54-bedroom hotel, many of them specially commissioned. Five female British art-

Wilde nights in Chelsea



From top: the tea room at the Belmond Cadogan; one of the hotel's 54 bedrooms, all of which feature specially commissioned artworks; the Cadogan takes up an entire block on Sloane Street; the lift lobby, lined with books cast in bronze

ists spent two days assessing the site last year, then produced large pieces that hang above each of the beds. It's a feast for the eyes.

The motif, echoed everywhere from the carpets to the coffee cups, is botanical — a tribute to Hans Sloane, the aristocrat-naturalist whose collection laid the basis for the British Museum, and whose second daughter's marriage brought together the Sloane and Cadogan estates. Any guests who want real greenery can cross the street and access the private Cadogan Place Gardens, the site of London's 18th-century botanic gardens, now complete with tennis courts.

The hotel's major attraction is its location — and Wilde, who stayed here on and off between its opening in 1887 and his arrest in 1895. He stayed in plenty of other establishments in London too (this was, in part, his downfall) but only his stay at Cadogan was immortalised by the poet John Betjeman, who wrote: “He sipped at a weak hock and seltzer / As he gazed at the London skies.”

With Wilde on my mind, I tried ordering a hock and seltzer at the Cadogan bar. The bartender looked unimpressed, an attitude that was only reinforced when I produced a copy of Betjeman's words on my phone. “If you bring me a recipe from 1937...” he said, shaking his head. Anyway, some searching revealed hock and seltzer to be basically a white wine spritzer, so I stuck to the more ambitious cocktails.

Betjeman's poem is gently scathing of the hotel and its staff: “They are all little better than cretins / Though this is the Cadogan Hotel.” Wilde's loyalty, even in the face of arrest, owed less to its features than the fact his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, was staying there. Wilde's great friend, the socialite Lillie Langtry, also lived next door. For years he taught her Latin, while she would provide the beauty and glamour at his parties.

Langtry eventually sold her house to the hotel, on the arrangement that she could keep her room. Today, her bedroom, with its ornate floral ceiling, is

available for guests to stay in, and her dining room is part of the restaurant. The breakfast room has feathers in its coving, in tribute to her affair with Albert Edward, the Prince of Wales.

Belmond has done its best to leave traces of Wilde, too. The chairs are purple suede, mimicking his smoking jackets. A peacock statue, decorated with Swarovski crystals and named Oscar, stands on a plinth outside the restaurant. Upstairs, the room in which Wilde was arrested, 118, has become part of the royal suite.

More London launches

The Stratford The latest project from Harry Handelsman, the developer behind Chiltern Firehouse and the St Pancras Renaissance Hotel, is a 42-storey skyscraper overlooking the site of the 2012 Olympics and due to open in May. Inside will be three “sky gardens”, two restaurants, 145 hotel rooms and 248 “loft apartments” which can be rented nightly, weekly or monthly. *Doubles from £199; one-bed lofts from £225/night or £1,365/week; manhattanloftgardens.com*



A loft at the Stratford

office block formerly used by Camden council, right beside the traffic-choked Euston Road. A dramatic three-storey roof extension and top-floor restaurant could help transform the building into an unlikely new evening destination. *Doubles from £305; standardhotels.com*

The Standard The hip hotel brand founded by André Balazs — and with star backers including actors Cameron Diaz and Leonardo DiCaprio — has five properties in Los Angeles, Miami and New York. In July it is due to open its first non-US outpost, a 266-room hotel in the distinctly non-starry setting of a 1970s concrete

Mandarin Oriental In June 2018, the Mandarin Oriental, beside Hyde Park, was just emerging from the biggest refurbishment in its 116-year history when it was hit by a major fire. Its re-relaunch is due on April 15. *Doubles from £630; mandarinoriental.com*

On that day, he only arrived in mid-afternoon, from court — and was arrested by 6.30pm, according to Matthew Sturgis, his most recent biographer. Belmond will be hoping today's guests stay long enough for dinner and, unlike Wilde, don't fall into tragic penury shortly after.

The rooms are not huge, but they are truly elegant and well-equipped. In my suite, a table looked out over Cadogan Place Gardens and a marble bath looked out on to a television. Outside, the 19, 22, 137, 452 and C1 buses chuntered down Sloane Street. But fear not, the Cadogan's double-glazing is so effective you are more likely to worry you've gone deaf than be woken by the traffic. The only thing that reassured me of my own hearing was the inescapable hum of the air-conditioning.

Over the years the Cadogan swelled to encompass five separate buildings — an entire block. Today, it manages to feel smaller than it is, which is the homely feel that Belmond intends. The atrium leads subtly to the bar, once a Thomas Pink shirt shop, which in turn leads round to the restaurant, which is in the hands of Adam Handling.

Handling has a penchant for the best of British and an instinct for mixing flavours — this is the place to come for a white chocolate and artichoke dessert. The running theme is “Mother”, dishes inspired by the chef's childhood. Handling's mother, it turns out, is best evoked by celeriac and truffle. She is also seen in the tea cosies, which she has knitted herself, in the rooms and at breakfast. “With love, by Adam's mum”, reads a label on each one, although she may have felt differently by the time she'd knitted the 100 or so more needed. We're not quite in Norman Bates territory, but the thought did occur to me.

Dylan Jones extols the Cadogan as somewhere you can behave badly. I can't say I got that vibe. The real challenge for the Belmond Cadogan is to play on its history without becoming a theme park, to do luxury without becoming too formal, and to be artistic without becoming garish. It pretty much manages it. I can imagine staying here countless times, and still being sad to leave. Whether I would stay here if it meant getting arrested is another matter.

Henry Mance was a guest of the Belmond Cadogan Hotel (belmond.com). Double rooms cost from £470 per night