

## UK Holidays

### The hotel putting the swing back into Bloomsbury

Edwin Lutyens' building has been relaunched with a glamorous — and highly Instagrammable — new look



The Bloomsbury's Coral Room bar  
Simon Usborne  
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A framed 100-year-old map hangs in my room, dominating the wall above a pair of mid-century blue velvet armchairs. Closer inspection of the chart's seriffed place names and hand-drawn lines reveals a forgotten building on the site of The Bloomsbury, a teenaged hotel originally opened in 2000 and now entering a hipper, grown-up phase after a multimillion pound makeover.

The Horse Shoe Brewery once occupied a large chunk of Bloomsbury, wedged between Great Russell Street and New Oxford Street, at a time when industry still flourished among the spires and soot-stained Georgian façades of central London. The same map showed that a large “Pickle Manufactory” occupied the north-east corner of Soho Square, two minutes away by foot, where film and media companies now dominate.

On October 17 1814, a giant vat at the brewery gave way, unleashing a torrent that burst open several more. Two and a half million pints of beer flooded the surrounding basement slums.

killing eight people. Like Hogarth's "Gin Lane", which had earlier depicted the area's squalor, the great beer flood symbolised a dark era in a part of London that would only later become more famous as the literary stomping ground of the Bloomsbury set.

More than two centuries after the flood, Michael Neve is banking on a long-awaited local revival as he shows me around the hotel he has managed for 17 years. Inside the Coral Room, The Bloomsbury's arresting new bar, painted a vivid coral pink, the cocktail menu includes a Gin Lane, a knowing nod to the area's insalubrious past. As staff put the finishing touches to a bar made of Calacatta Oro marble before a big launch party later that week, Neve offers me a glass of Bloomsbury, an English cuvée. "We have always had a great building," the veteran hotelier from south London tells me. "But when I arrived here 17 years ago, this was a very different place. It would have attracted a rougher element, shall we say."



The hotel originally opened inside the elegant former Central Club of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). Built in red brick on the site of the brewery, its construction and neo-Georgian design, by Edwin Lutyens, pre-eminent architect of his time and a resident of Bloomsbury Square, had to be crowd-funded. Posters on bus stops appealed for Londoners to "stand by your girls" and donate. When the club opened in 1932, Virginia Woolf and EM Forster were still part of the Bloomsbury Group of thinkers who met in drawing rooms around the neighbourhood's grand squares. In

1939, the young future Queen Elizabeth came for tea in the YWCA cafeteria with her sister Margaret and their governess. Charlie Chaplin had performed at the Dominion Theatre, which opened next door in 1929, sharing the old Horseshoe site.

But by the mid-1990s, when upkeep of the YWCA became too costly and the Grade II-listed Lutyens pile went up for sale, Bloomsbury had lost its lustre. The 34-storey Centre Point, completed in 1966 and empty apart from housing activists for years, served as a sort of Brutalist bollard, blocking the way to Bloomsbury on its south-western corner, at the grotty ends of Charing Cross Road and Oxford Street. Apart from the British Museum, a Bloomsbury stalwart since 1753, and the area's numerous university buildings, there was little reason to venture there beyond the hubbub of Soho or Covent Garden.

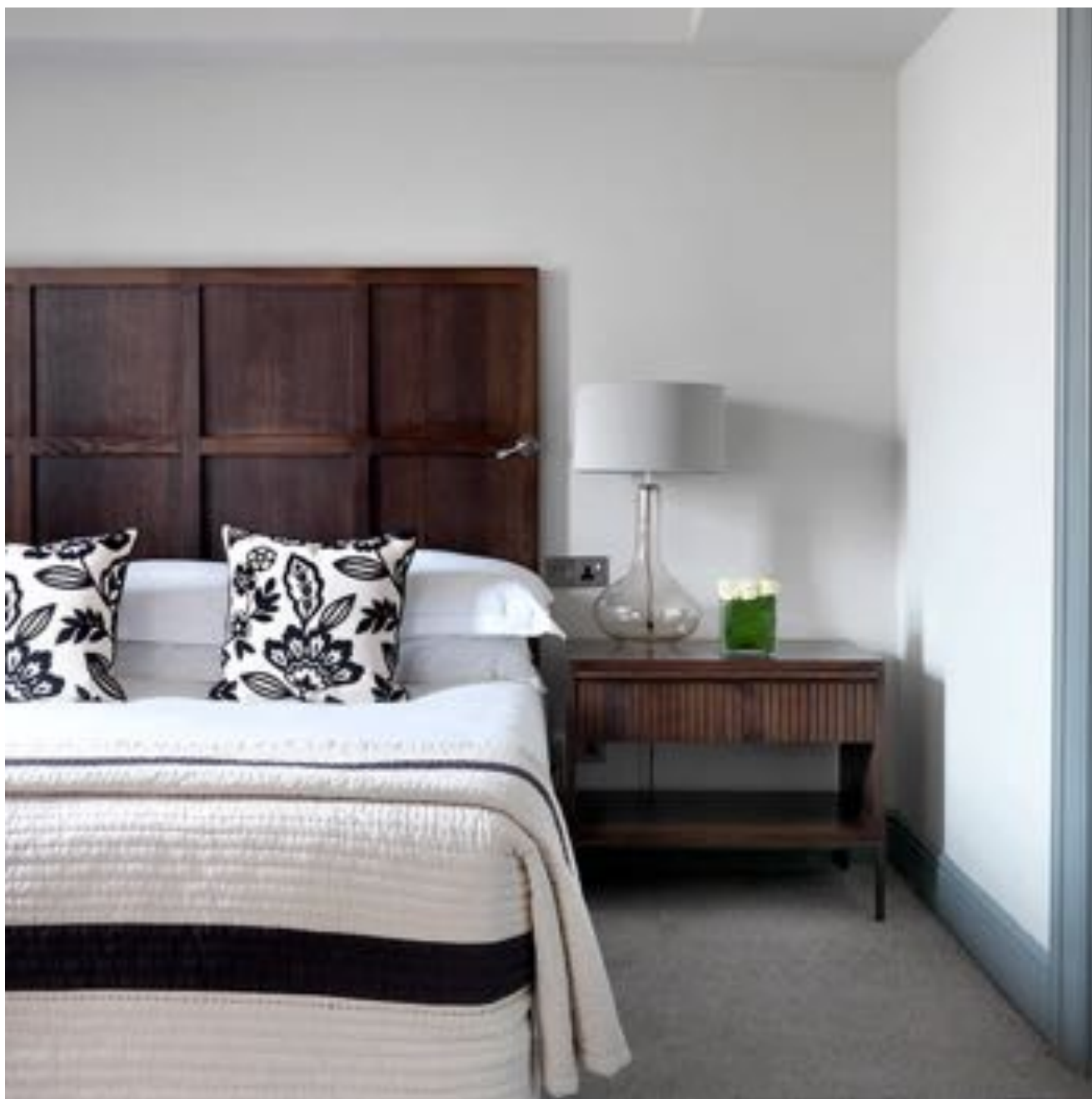
For Irish group Doyle Hotels, which merged with the Jurys Inn chain in 1999, the former YWCA was still central enough to serve the corporate market. “This was a general lobby and lounge area then,” says Neve, who remembers polishing the floors on his hands and knees the night before opening. The hotel preserved the original Queen Mary Hall, a concert room, as well as a chapel and the YWCA library, but the atmosphere was grand if businesslike. One French consulting firm booked more than 2,500 rooms a year. Meeting rooms multiplied. Even the hotel’s original name, Jurys Great Russell Street, evoked, well, not very much at all.



Three years ago, Neve had a meeting with the board of the Doyle Collection, as the group was rebranded after its demerger from Jurys. The family-run luxury group had jettisoned its inns in 2007 and was preparing to make destinations of The Kensington and The Marylebone, its other London hotels. Neve argued that the time was right to do the same with the old YWCA.

By then, redevelopment of the area around Centre Point was under way above the new Crossrail station at Tottenham Court Road. The £1bn hub will open next year, with 30-minute trains to Heathrow. Tech giants including Google had already brought a younger crowd to the streets around their offices at St Giles, while the shops and arthouse cinema at the Brunswick Centre, along with the fashion boutiques and restaurants of Lamb's Conduit Street and Store Street, were drawing people into Bloomsbury. Centre Point itself was getting a facelift; its sandblasted concrete flanks already look crisp as new apartments take shape above a public plaza.

Change was afoot in hotel world, too. The five-star Rosewood London was launched down the road in Holborn in 2013, inside a former Marriott. Early next year, the palatial terracotta and marble Hotel Russell, on Russell Square, will gleam anew as the luxury The Principal London, after a major renovation backed by its owners, Starwood Capital of the US.



A bedroom

Neve quickly won the case for blasting cooler air through The Bloomsbury's corridors too. He brought in Martin Brudnizki to reconfigure the ground floor and turn the draughty lobby into a destination bar. The in-demand Swedish designer has largely defined the contemporary London club aesthetic — think brass-trimmed bars and generous stools richly upholstered in velvets — at The Ivy and its outposts, including Sexy Fish and Annabel's nightclub, soon to be relaunched on Berkeley Square. The Beekman, a hip hotel that he fashioned from a landmark 1880s New York office skyscraper, is bringing a new buzz to Lower Manhattan.

Brudnizki's impact is immediately visible. Hotel guests use a new entrance, off a spruced-up side alley. The 153 rooms, refurbished in phases over the past two years with yet more velvets and marble-clad Art Deco bathrooms, as well as more old maps, are served by a modest reception desk. Opposite is Brudnizki's intimate new sitting room, lined in a deep green botanical wallpaper. But the Coral Room is the main event, and has taken over the elegant twin steps of the old main entrance. In less confident hands, its high-gloss pink would shock rather than awe, but the coral brings a deep, warm — and highly Instagrammable — glow to what was a slightly institutional space. Dark oak parquet and chandeliers made up of Venetian Murano glass balls complete a look that nods rather than clings to a 1920s scheme inspired by Lutyens. "He probably wouldn't have done pink," says Brudnizki, long an admirer of the architect, when I call him at his design studio in Chelsea. "But he loved strong colours and sometimes even used black paint. And he often mixed styles from different periods."



A Coral Room cocktail

I also call Martin Lutyens, Edwin's great-nephew and chairman of the Lutyens Trust. The family founded the trust in the 1980s after an exhibition at London's Hayward Gallery had triggered a resurgence of interest in the architect, who made his name designing mansions in

Surrey before taking on grander commissions in London and Delhi. The younger Lutyens sounds delighted by the new demand for his great-uncle's buildings, not least The Ned, the vast hotel and club opened in the City by Soho House last year, in Lutyens' Midland Bank building. "I think he would have been happy, because they have both done a respectful job," Martin says, while adding that the family was less approving of The Ned's use of Edwin's family nickname: "We prefer it not to have been hijacked like that, but we are where we are."

After my drink with Neve in the Coral Room, I eat ham hock terrine and black bream at Dalloway Terrace, the hotel's restaurant, which opened last year. Lutyens might have approved of the traditional menu, and been tickled by the crowd there and at the bar. Neve says 30-something creatives have largely replaced the suits of yore. Google is now his biggest client. And the work to revive a Lutyens landmark in a resurgent Bloomsbury is not yet done; Neve soon expects to start restoring the old basement swimming pool, which was boarded up decades ago to support yet more meeting rooms. Martin Lutyens remembers visiting it as a boy, when his mother frequented the YWCA. "The Ned gave the Lutyens family a lunch when they opened," Neve says. "I told Martin, instead of giving you lunch, you can be the first person to use the pool. We'll have a Lutyens family swim."

## Details

Simon Usborne was a guest of [The Bloomsbury](#) where double rooms start at £295 per night including breakfast

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