

IN PERSON

'IT WAS ALWAYS MY DREAM FROM 16 YEARS OF AGE TO OWN MY OWN HOTEL'

WHEN David Levin left his home city of Glasgow behind, on a path that was to take him to the pinnacle of his career, he didn't look back for a moment. "I never come back now," he says. "I don't think Glasgow or Scotland were particularly kind to me and I don't have particularly good memories. I didn't get on terribly well at school because I didn't like it, and my father died when I was 18."

To make matters worse, his dreams of being in the hotel industry were frowned upon by all and sundry. "I'd been to hotels and seen managers with black jackets, striped trousers and shiny white shirts and thought they were film stars. I just wanted to go into that business. But, coming from a middle-class background, it was anathema.

"Everyone thought I was insane," he says. "They just couldn't understand why anyone could possibly take a 'job' - because nobody considered at that point that it was a career. Hotels were considered a drop-out industry.

"It wasn't like that in France, Germany or Switzerland, where it was a very honourable profession, but certainly not in Scotland. So that is why I turned away, because Scotland made me do that."

Instead, he travelled the world training, honing his skills and his vision until eventually settling in London where, brick by brick, he built the hotel he had imagined owning as a teenager.

"It was always my dream - from 16 years of age - to own my own hotel," he says. "Madness! You think of 16-year-old kids now and they don't even know what day it is."

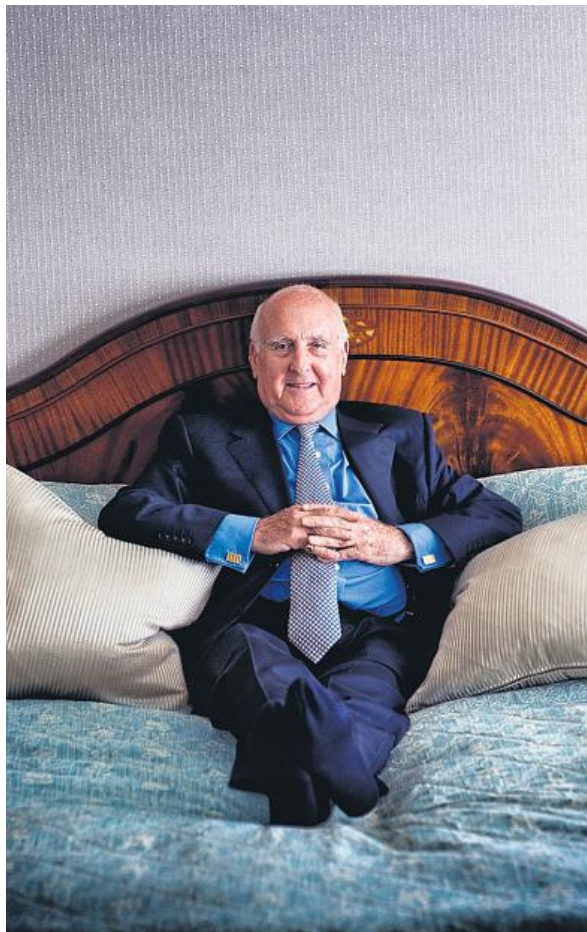
The Capital, in the heart of Knightsbridge, celebrates its 40th birthday this year, and Levin is rightly proud of what he has achieved. Inspired by his time managing Hotel Lochalsh in Kyle, he demolished the existing building in Basil Street and built his dream.

"I created a boutique hotel with 50 rooms and a nice restaurant - the word 'boutique' probably started with me. There weren't any first-class small hotels in London at the time. Everyone said, 'don't do it, it won't work.'"

It took two years to create, and within months of opening he was a bona fide success, thanks to a glowing review in the *Evening Standard*. His fortunes have gone from strength to strength. Levin was Restaurateur of the Year in 1991 and Hotelier of the Year in 1994, while The Capital was the *Good Hotel Guide's* London Hotel of the Year in 2008 and was awarded Most Excellent Hotel Restaurant the same year by Condé Nast Johansen. The key, as it always has been with Levin, is the food.

"You could see into the kitchen," says Levin. "That's nothing new now but back then it was completely different. We had a charcoal grill - we got our charcoal from France; the vegetables were crunchy, not boiled to death. All these things that sound very boring now, I can assure you were revolutionary in those days."

It was one of the first hotel eateries to be awarded a Michelin star, and it gained its second in 2001. In the intervening years, Levin has nurtured the careers of



PHOTOGRAPH: GRAHAM JEPSON

great chefs including Brian Turner, Gary Rhodes, Richard Shepherd and Paul Merrett. The latest chef to preside over The Capital ovens is Jérôme Ponchelle. And Levin already has a new Michelin star in his sights. "Absolutely," he says, "watch this space."

As for this anniversary year, he's embarking on a redecoration and, this being a family business, his daughter Kate is working as general manager. "We have another little hotel next door and a block of flats we let," he adds. "We have a bakery which supplies other hotels and restaurants, we have an outside catering company, and I have a vineyard."

Ah yes, the vineyard. Conveniently for someone named Levin, he has created a state-of-the-art winery in the Loire Valley. Does he have no plans to slow down a little, perhaps retire to France and indulge his passion for fine wine and good food? He's appalled at the suggestion.

"I'm more enthusiastic and courageous than ever," he insists. And he has never regretted turning his back on those who scoffed at his hotel dreams. "This is the finest occupation you can have. I demonstrate that to people by saying, 'You want to study law in Edinburgh? Fine. Then try getting a job in Australia. Even in England. You're not qualified.' If you are a really top manager, you can go anywhere in the world and it is the most fantastic and most satisfying, interesting career one can take." ■

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RUTH WALKER

ARE YOU A... PROBLEM EX

1 You have just opened a Facebook account. Do you?

A Immediately put your ex's name into the search engine, and before he has a chance to adjust his privacy settings, conduct an audit of his life: relationships, place of work ... come to think about it, what if you happened to "bump" into him on the way home one night?

B Invite him to be your friend, but only after you've posted photos of you looking fabulous. All that misery made you to lose loads of weight. He needs to know what he's missing.

C Use it to plan a holiday with your best pals. You have been single for six months now and it's time you got out and enjoyed yourself again.



2 You are going to a friend's wedding and your former love will be there with their new partner. How do you respond?

A With a new diet, wardrobe and, what the hell, personality too. Your ex always said you were a psycho, so lull them into a false sense of security by being sweetness and light, then corner them when their new love goes to the loo.

B Now that you don't spend every night scoffing kebabs and watching *The Good Life*, you look fabulous. A new dress and a positive attitude will get you through the introductions. Then you can sob your eyes out in the toilets to your heart's content.

C By introducing them to your hot wedding date. With any luck you'll be sitting at the same table and you can all have a proper catch up

3 A good friend mentions they have heard from your ex and that drinks after work have been suggested. How do you react?

A By donning a disguise and following them to said drinks. Next, find a quiet corner from which to monitor their revelry, before confronting them at the end of the night. OK, screaming like a banshee while dressed like an extra from *Whatever Happened To Baby Jane* may not be your best look, but you know what they are up to and aren't about to let them get away with it.

B Explain that while you wish your ex well, you are not quite ready for everyone to be best buddies yet. Cry yourself to sleep that night.

C Tell them to say hello. You have an exciting new date that night.

MOSTLY As They say psycho, you say victim. Anyway, who says surveillance techniques can't be a form of wooing?

MOSTLY Bs Problem? What problem? Most of the time you feel absolutely fine. It's the times in between that are difficult. Sob

MOSTLY Cs You have bigger and better fish to fry than your ex. You wish them all the best.