

Langar Hall this year celebrates its first quarter of a century as a country house hotel. JEREMY LEWIS visits the historic house – beloved alike by local diners and celebrity guests – and meets owner Imogen Skirving ...

A haven for the tired and hungry



Business at Langar Hall, with its rich ochre exterior, has been built up by owner Imogen Skirving (below) over a quarter of a century

Twenty-seven years ago Imogen Skirving's association with her family home almost came to an end. Langar Hall was crumbling and any chance she had of selling up depended on finding £1,000 for renovation. It was money she did not have and, as she recorded in her memoir *The Reluctant Restaurateur*, "offering dinner, bed and breakfast to American tourists seemed a good idea."

A very good idea, as it happened. So good that plans to sell were abandoned and since 1985 Langar has thrived as a country house hotel and restaurant, pleasing countless local diners and a celebrity clientele ranging from the late Dame Barbara Cartland – whose favourite room was decorated Cartland-pink – to media star Janet Street-Porter and plummy-voiced cricket commentator Henry Blofeld.

"Langar was given to me by my father," recalls Imogen. "The stocks and shares went to one of my brothers, the land to another and a house in Ireland to a third. Nobody wanted Langar Hall so I took it on and divided it into two so the family always had somewhere to live. My father was here quite a lot but when he died the house was something of a millstone and I started doing bed and breakfast."

Langar Hall, to be found at the end of an avenue of lime trees leading from the Langar-Cropwell Bishop road, was once the home of Admiral of the Fleet

Earl Howe, who in 1794 was the victor of the Atlantic battle known as "The Glorious First of June" – the first major fleet action of the French Revolutionary Wars. The 1st Earl, with other members of his family, is interred in the church adjoining Langar Hall, which was acquired in 1860 by Imogen's great-grandmother Annie Bayley during an estrangement from her politician husband.

The house passed first to Imogen's grandmother Muriel Huskinson, then to Muriel's son Geoffrey Huskinson, a director of Digby Colliery Company which owned the Gedling and Calverton pits. Geoffrey's daughter Imogen was christened in the room now known as the White Sitting Room.

She remembers Lancaster bombers based at nearby RAF Langar almost falling into the gardens. "If there was an air raid it was the best possible thing because we could go down to the cellars; as children we had no fear."

"To this day I check the bins to ensure nothing is being wasted. Meat can go to the cats and bread to the birds and vegetable waste

'I check bins to ensure nothing is wasted. Put it down to a wartime childhood'



to the compost heap. Put it down to a wartime childhood!"

As we chat at lunchtime over cold platters of pork pie, ham, smoked salmon, in-season asparagus and salads, Imogen conveys the variety of life at Langar. Staff have just catered for the annual "Glorious First of June" party, the previous night a dinner was served for Cropwell Butler WI, paid for by a bequest, and that very day plans were being made for a Jewish wedding for a couple from Goa.

"It's 24-7 now but it was not always like this. In the first ten years I didn't even have a drinks licence. The staff left at 11pm and there was me next morning, cooking breakfast for the guests. I'm sure that



Langar Hall head chef is Gary Booth (above), who trained at Southport College and with Brian Wareing – brother of Marcus Wareing. *Nottinghamshire Today* photographer ROBERT HAYES looked on as Gary prepared three dishes: Head and Toe of Colton Bassett Pork, using trotter and cheek of a locally-raised pig (below) ... Steamed Lemon Sole with Tarragon Gnocchi, Braised Little Gem, Sapphire and Mussel Sauce (main picture) ... and a spectacular Knickerbocker Glory (right) whose ingredients include orange and passionfruit jelly, pannacotta, summer berries, Turkish syllabub and vanilla ice cream