

Hotel Heat

The Hot Interview

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Robin Sheppard, founder of management company *Bespoke Hotels*, tells of his struggle back to health after being struck down by a devastating illness

> You contracted Guillain-Barré syndrome ("ghee-yan-bah-ray") just before Christmas 2004. Can you tell us what it is and how it started? It's a rare disease of the peripheral nervous system that affects about 1,000 people a year in the UK, and it's frequently triggered by flu or cold-like symptoms. In my case I had a dry cough and that was a trigger that sent a wrong message to my immune system, so my immune system started to attack itself.

How did the illness progress?

At first I assumed I had a cold coming on because my limbs started to feel very tired and I started to feel numb in parts of my body, then it became difficult to grip things and my balance wasn't right. Two days later when I collapsed and was unable to move I realised something really serious was happening.

I spent five weeks in intensive care. The scary bit is you feel everything closing down – you realise you can't sit, you can't turn. The paralysis was taking a complete hold. They warned me my breathing might collapse as the disease crept into my lungs. Then it happened, and they put me on a ventilator because I couldn't breathe any more. That was when I thought, 'I'm off'. If it affects your breathing about 25 per cent of those cases die, usually through pneumonia.

The prognosis was that there was a real chance of recovery, so I latched onto the thought it might take more than two years, but there was a chance of making at least a 95 per cent recovery. Two and a half years later I probably have 80 per cent of what I used to, so I'm looking for that other 20 per cent.

How did your partner and colleagues cope during your seven months in hospital and your recovery?

My partner Suzanne put her whole life on hold and has been at my bedside since the start – I owe an enormous debt to her. I dropped my work colleagues (Bespoke co-founder Haydn Fentum and chairman David Coubrough) right in it because we'd just bought Home House (in Portman Square, London). They worked bloody hard while I wasn't there and as I've come back they've done their best to help me.

What does Bespoke Hotels do and why did you set the company up?

I was general manager at the Bath Spa when it was taken over and I ended up as regional manager of six hotels. I loved it, but after six years I had to get back into private business and that's when Haydn, who comes from a family of hoteliers, and I decided to get together. We felt the niche in the market was to take individual properties of character and offer a complete management service, but to operate them in a way that celebrated the difference between them rather than trying to homogenise things. Since 2000 we've grown to 12 properties, including 10 three- and four-star hotels and Home House private members' clubs in London and Edinburgh.

How has your role changed since your illness?

I'm still not back to work full time. Mentally I'm OK, but my body just won't let me. Haydn is managing director now and my role is split between overseeing sales and marketing, new projects, and building relationships with potential owning partners.

How difficult are things now?

I've had a lot of physiotherapy and I do a set of home exercises every day. My hand function is still poor so simple things like doing a tie up, cutting food or tying shoelaces require a huge amount of effort. I still need a wheelchair occasionally because I can only walk about half a mile, with lots of stops along the way."

What are your next goals?

Riding a horse and playing golf are on my list, but my immediate goals are to drive again and do my tie up. I went to a posh restaurant recently and was told I could only go in if I wore a tie. I said, 'Fine, if you do it for me, because I physically can't put one on.'

As for Bespoke, we'd like 20 hotels by 2009. We're working with a developer on an 80-bedroom hotel in Bermondsey that opens next year and will be our first complete new-build project. We're looking to do more with the Home House concept. We took on some investors when we expanded the company and their funds enabled us to purchase both Home Houses. That investment will enable us to roll out Home House on a wider basis, starting, hopefully, with one in the country near Oxford, then one in Dublin.

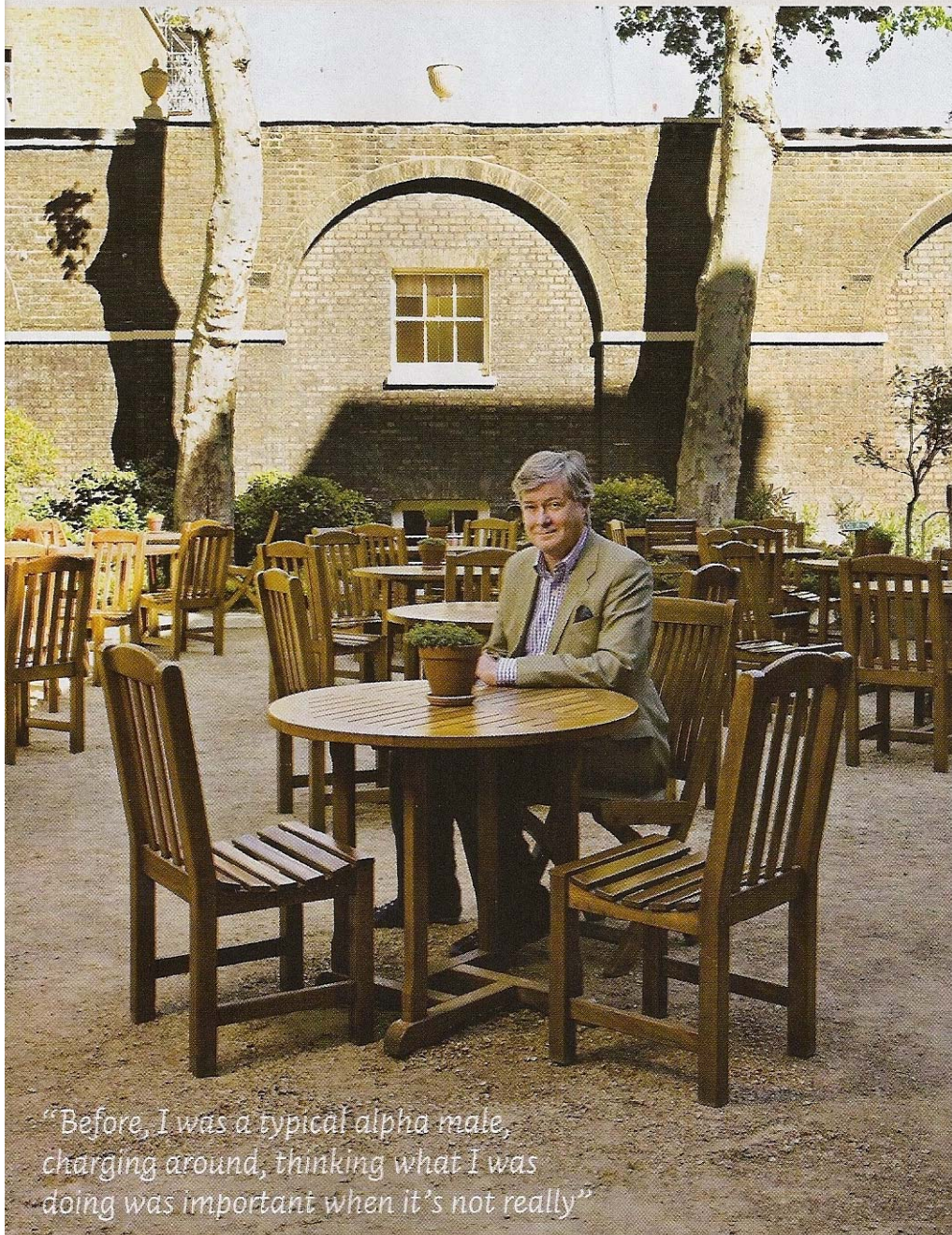
If you asked any hotelier what his ambition with his hotel was, he'd say, 'I'd like my guests to feel it was their private club and come back', and if you asked a guest what he'd like, he'd say to be recognised as if he was a member of a club and belonged. So there's a great synergy with hotels.

Has your ordeal changed you psychologically?

It's given me a sense of perspective. Before, I was a typical alpha male, charging around thinking what I was doing was important when it's not really. I still enjoy being busy, but I'm shameless in saying, 'I'm going to stop and enjoy the view for a moment'.

I've spent most of my career in hotels and you just don't realise how lucky you are to work in these palatial buildings and lovely environments – with manicured gardens and foie gras on tap – until something like this happens. Just like a former boss of mine said, 'Working in hotels, you get to live like a millionaire without the need to become one.'

Robin Sheppard was talking to Fiona Griffiths



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