



## IN THE KNOW

The Fleece, in the heart of Cirencester, has 28 rooms, with doubles from around £115 (\$240) a night including breakfast. It also offers a Sunday night getaway package with dinner, bed and breakfast.

[thefleececirencester.co.uk](http://thefleececirencester.co.uk)

“We’re a bit posh,” reads the chalkboard on the pavement.

At The Close Hotel, an elegant townhouse dating from 1535, I settle into a seat at a table next to French doors opening onto a sunlit walled garden with a tinkling fountain. Lunch is modern-British: Cotswolds gin-cured salmon with horseradish and lemon gel. Laughter drifts from neighbouring tables; somewhere, a cork pops. It’s as if I’ve wandered into a discreet members’ club where everyone either knows a royal or owns a horse.

Tetbury is also the nearest town to Highgrove, the private residence of King Charles III and Queen Camilla. “You sometimes see him driving around in a battered Jaguar, wearing a flat cap,” my taxi driver, Pete, tells me after I arrive at nearby Kemble, just over an hour from London by train. “And he always turns on the Tetbury Christmas lights.”

The royal connection extends to polo, too. While much of Rivals’ polo action was filmed at Beaufort Polo Club outside Tetbury – with Berkeley Castle, an 850-year-old medieval fortress a 30-minute drive away, providing the backdrop for the Rutshire Cup – Cirencester Polo Club is royalty-blessed.

Back in 1975, Charles – then the Prince of Wales – was photographed gazing into the eyes of Camilla Parker-Bowles beneath the large beech tree that still shades the lawn next to the clubhouse. Inside, snaps of victorious teams line the walls. Princes William and Harry are there, on separate squads, alongside wonderfully Cooper-esque names such as Tamara Fox, Tarquin Southwell and Lachie Appleby – my instructor.

The club sits within the 3000-acre Bathurst Estate,

the ancestral seat of the Earls Bathurst. After my hour-long lesson I venture beyond the pitches to explore this large tract of woodland. Deer graze in meadows bordered by ancient trees. Long grassy avenues slice through the forest with geometric precision, creating vistas that stretch for miles: that way, the Queen Anne Monument, a 15m limestone column erected in the park in 1741; the other way, the soaring tower of St John the Baptist Church in Cirencester.

There are old follies, modern sculptures, hacking paths and a children’s Fairy Trail. At the heart of the estate stands Cirencester House, a Palladian mansion that remains the family home of the Bathursts and is occasionally open to visitors. There’s enough acreage here to disappear for a day. I stop at The Old Kennels, a clutch of Grade II listed limestone buildings renovated to include a pilates studio, dog-washing service, a pizza place serving venison toppings and an award-winning restaurant called Roots & Seeds.

Cirencester Saddlers is here, too, crafting bespoke tack for poloists and riders such as Princess Anne and her daughter Zara Tindall. Master saddler Laurence Pearman, stitching a bridle, knew Cooper well: “Her husband had a double life,” he tells me of the affair Cooper revealed in her newspaper column. “Let’s just say she bounced back.”

It’s all a glimpse into the rarefied world that inspired Cooper’s novels: inherited wealth, sprawling estates and chukkas on the field and off. On the other side of the world’s largest yew hedge, the estate merges seamlessly into Cirencester itself, often described as the capital of the Cotswolds. Founded by the Romans, who knew it as Corinium – also the name of the television station owned by Rivals bigwig Tony Baddingham, played by David Tennant – the town was the medieval epicentre of the Cotswolds wool trade and Britain’s second-largest settlement after London.

Today, its walkable broad streets and restored alleyways are lined with listed period buildings occupied by the likes of Little Bonbon traditional sweets; Octavia’s Bookshop, which has a forthcoming children’s book signing featuring a real pony; and a bakery that announces half-price pastries via a staffer who, each day at 5pm, stands and rings a bell outside.

Having indulged in a delicious £1.50 carrot cake, I opt for starters only at The Fleece, a characterful 17th-century coaching inn that deftly combines heritage with comfort, and whose kitchen favours fresh ingredients

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sourced locally: salt and pepper chicken wings with chilli jam followed by grilled asparagus gnocchi with lemon capers and vegan parmesan.

I pair the meal with a glass of zippy Bacchus sparkling wine from Woodchester Valley, a family-owned Cotswolds winery established in 2016, then retire upstairs to my room.

Lying back against the plush headboard of my king-size bed beneath exposed wooden beams, I take in the nature-inspired William Morris wallpaper in shades of blue-and-green. There’s a seating area with upholstered armchairs and a leather Chesterfield sofa, while through an open door sits an ensuite with star-patterned tiles and – joy! – a huge white roll-top bathtub. It’s been a long day. I turn on the taps and pour in enough luxurious bath gel to create silky bubbles. Removing my invisible shoulder pads, I pour myself an imaginary glass of Dom Perignon and climb in. Somewhere, I suspect, Rupert Campbell-Black would approve.

*Jane Cornwell was a guest of the Fleece and was assisted by Cotswolds Tourism and VisitBritain Australia.*

[cotswolds.com](http://cotswolds.com)  
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The Highgrove shop in Tetbury, top left; a view of Cirencester, above left; room at The Fleece, top; the writer on Dash, her polo pony, right