

Thrings meets...

Andrew and Katherine Graham of Wallops Wood Cottages



Andrew and Katherine Graham, owners of Wallops Wood Cottages in Hampshire's stunning South Downs National Park, discuss accessibility, hot tubs and owl-spotting with Thrings partner Rachel Brooks.

How did Wallops Wood Cottages start?

KG: My grandfather bought this farm in 1948 and my father carried it on for another 50 years, focusing on egg production, dairy and crops, and running a retail milk business. When the land was sold, the farm buildings were developed into offices and light industrial units. The views of the Isle of Wight and the Solent persuaded us to diversify into holiday cottages.

Had you worked in the tourist industry before this?

KG: No! We both studied at Harper Adams Agricultural College, although we met at the Farmers Club in London while I was working in marketing for fresh produce growers. When dad and I secured planning permission to convert the main buildings, Andrew left his farming job to help us with the diversification project.

How has the business developed?

AG: We opened in May 2014 and now

have eight self-catering cottages. Four cottages have wet room bathrooms and guests have access to our indoor swimming pool and jacuzzi. Next year we'll have a large space which will be used as a games room, a yoga retreat and for small conferences.

And the hot tubs, of course.

AG: Absolutely. All of our cottages have hot tubs which everybody seems to love. They are used all year round, even when snow is on the ground. Guests regularly tell us how they enjoy sitting in their tubs at dusk, sipping a glass of something, watching owls hunting across the meadow.

Are your cottages disabled-friendly?

KG: They were designed with mobility, hearing and vision impaired guests in mind, and have been rated under the National Accessible Scheme. We try to cater for everybody – families, children, walkers, cyclists and dogs. But the first thing guests ask about – almost without fail – is the WiFi. Someone recently suggested it's more important than running water!

Has it been easy to promote the business?

AG: Winning awards has definitely helped drive the business forward.

We recently collected a VisitEngland ROSE Award for customer service and have made it to the national finals of the Rural Business Awards in the 'best rural tourism business' category. In April we also won the national "VisitEngland" award for best dog friendly business. Awards are a pat on the back for the team and a validation that we're doing the right thing.

What about your future plans?

KG: We have planning permission to build another 10 cottages in secluded woodland nearby. They will be built on foundations that won't interfere with tree roots – so it's a sort of treehouse development. We're hoping to start building the first three next year. It's going to be an exciting project.

How would you describe your relationship with Hampshire?

AG: I'm originally from Birmingham, but now consider myself rooted here. Hampshire offers something to those who enjoy city life, the countryside or both. The challenge it faces is making sure the economy works for everyone. For us, it's about finding the right people to work here. We're a small team, so it's vital everyone gels together to ensure our guests enjoy a truly memorable stay. ♦

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