

LUXURY

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SUMMER LOVING

Rivals' Bella Maclean on romance, '80s excess and the joy of Jilly

Forefathers' footsteps

Staying at the newly reopened Waldorf Astoria, Philip Astor describes the vast wealth and petty spite behind the grand hotel that his ancestors built, thereby transforming both the Manhattan skyline and New York society itself

Photographs by *NICHOLAS CALCOTT*



In the words of a classic Cole Porter song, 'I happen to like New York'; in fact I have loved it for longer than I can even remember. I was only two on my first visit – I had just celebrated my birthday during the crossing on the *Queen Mary* – and I still have photographs of a cheery little boy enjoying a carriage ride through Central Park. I do retain memories of my next trip: I was then aged six, and this time we had made the crossing on the *Queen Elizabeth*. Again, I celebrated my birthday on board, but far more exciting was the experience of getting up early to witness our arrival in New York, as the liner steamed slowly towards its berth beneath the city skyscrapers. I've seen many wonders of the world during my lifetime, both man-made and natural, but for my money nothing compares to that initial vision of the iconic Manhattan skyline.

Little did I realise as a child that much of the land those skyscrapers stood on had once belonged to previous generations of my family, the so-called 'Landlords of New York'. The first John Jacob Astor was born in 1763, the son of a butcher in the small German town of Walldorf near Heidelberg. Having emigrated to America, he made his fortune in the fur trade, investing the proceeds in the developing real estate market in New York. This was still concentrated in the southern neighbourhoods of Manhattan; but John Jacob shrewdly predicted that the city would inevitably expand northwards. Indeed, he is reputed to have lamented on his death bed, in 1848, 'I should have bought more uptown.'

At that time, the area that now marks the conjunction of Fifth Avenue and 33rd and 34th Streets was wholly surrounded by farmland; Fifth Avenue itself was no more than an outlying country road, and 34th Street hadn't existed until 1836. In 1827 John Jacob's son and heir, William Backhouse Astor, bought what was known as 'Thompson's farm' on this very spot. It was the size of what would now be about six blocks, but the family had to wait for many years before the city encroached as far as the farmland.

It was not until 1859 that William Backhouse's elder son, John Jacob III, first built a mansion on the 33rd Street half of the block; a year later, his brother, William Backhouse Jr, built an identical brownstone house next

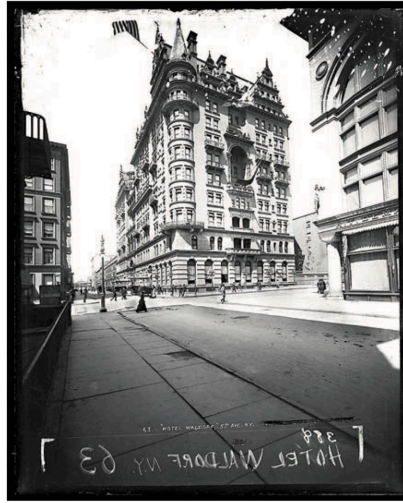


OPPOSITE Philip Astor in the Silver Corridor at the Waldorf Astoria. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The first Waldorf-Astoria hotel, on Fifth Avenue. In a 1930 publicity stunt, hotel waiters serve lunch to steelworkers high above the construction site of the new hotel, on Park Avenue (centre). A 1934 ball at the hotel. Newly engaged Grace Kelly, on Prince Rainier III of Monaco in the Grand Ballroom, 1956. New Year 1940. A lobster dinner, 1941. Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip with US diplomat Lewis Williams Douglas, 1957. A rehearsal for the debutante cotillion, 1951. The Duke and Duchess of Windsor, who maintained a private suite at the hotel, in 1966. Elizabeth Taylor with her fourth husband, singer Eddie Fisher, who is about to perform at the hotel, 1959. Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller, 1957

ALAMY/AP PHOTO, BETTY IMAGES

door. The houses may have been twins, but relations between the brothers were never especially harmonious. John Jacob III was a dutiful, principled, even noble individual, who was proud of his service during the Civil War. His younger brother, William, while bright, was more of a dilettante and at his happiest on his yacht. He was rarely seen with his wife, but enjoyed a reputation for pursuing other men's wives, as well as an unhealthy appetite for alcohol. This is not altogether surprising, perhaps, in light of the fact that he was married to the preposterous Caroline Schermerhorn. She has become a legendary figure in the history of the Gilded Age, for her haughty ambition as the self-appointed queen of New York society. One of the many biographers of the family couldn't comprehend how 'William should have settled for this dumpy, empty-headed, plain and insufferably vain girl'.

In fairness, Caroline, or Lina, could boast an aristocratic Dutch or Knickerbocker ancestry, being a descendent of one of the city's original settlers. But she would forever resent the fact that she was married to



aunt Caroline most certainly cared too, and in breach of even her own code of propriety insisted on being acknowledged as *the Mrs Astor*.

The most infamous manifestation of this petty family conflict occurred in Newport, Rhode Island. William Waldorf had been given by his father one of the prettiest houses on Bellevue Avenue called Beaulieu, just a stone's throw from his aunt and uncle's house, Beechwood. There was much wry sympathy within Newport's highfalutin community for the hapless postman who would have to decide which items of mail to deliver to which Mrs Astor.

Meanwhile, William Waldorf had for some time been thinking of leaving the United States. Unusually for a member of the family, he had pursued a career in politics and served creditably in the New York Assembly and Senate, but failed in his two attempts to be elected to Congress. He was stung by the ridicule and hostile press coverage that this provoked. Although shy, a trifle dour, and probably a depressive, he was unquestionably a cultured, well-read man, who had been educated



the junior member of the Astor family, and one with the middle name Backhouse, which she felt conjured up the disagreeable image of an outside privy, so she quietly dropped it.

The rivalry between the two branches of the family came to a head following the death of Lina's brother-in-law, John Jacob, in February 1890. (It's probably worth noting at this stage that her son was also called John Jacob; indeed there have been several others since, including my brother, who is the eighth member of the family to bear this loyal nomenclature.) John Jacob III had an only son, who in a further familial echo was christened William, but in his case with the addition of the name Waldorf in recognition of the original John Jacob's birthplace in Germany. According to protocol William Waldorf – my great-grandfather – now became the senior member of the family, and chose to exercise his right to identify himself on his visiting card simply as 'Mr Astor'. In turn, William Waldorf's young wife, Mary, could, strictly speaking, have referred to herself simply as Mrs Astor. I doubt she cared one way or the other, but her husband did on her behalf, and encouraged her to use the more senior mode of address. His

One final gesture that William Waldorf made was to pull down the family mansion on Fifth Avenue

ABOVE, FROM LEFT John Jacob Astor I, painted in 1794. His grandson's wife, Caroline Schermerhorn Astor, who fuelled ill feeling within the family. Her nephew William Waldorf Astor, who built the Waldorf (top). Her son John Jacob Astor IV, who built the slightly taller Astoria next door. Philip Astor (William Waldorf's great-grandson) sailing to New York with his family as a small boy

partly in Germany and Italy, where he displayed a remarkable talent as a sculptor. Subsequently, his term as American Minister to Rome (effectively the Ambassador) during the 1880s had been a particularly pleasurable episode. And so it was that in September 1890 he sailed with his family (including his younger son John Jacob V, my grandfather) to England. They all thought they were going on holiday.

One final gesture that William Waldorf made before he left was to pull down the family mansion on Fifth Avenue and 33rd Street; and in November 1890, while he was moving into Lansdowne House in London's Berkeley Square, plans were filed for a new 13-floor hotel to be built on the site. By the time the Waldorf Hotel opened in March 1893, William Waldorf had settled permanently in England and was negotiating the purchase of Cliveden in Buckinghamshire from the Duke of Westminster, having already bought one of the grandest houses in London, 18 Carlton House Terrace.

The critical response to 'the Waldorf' was phenomenal: *Harper's Weekly*, for example, observed, "To endeavour to give any adequate idea of the beautiful decorations... in a short sketch is almost as idle as to try

to make marginal notes of the good things in the printed works of William Shakespeare?

The monumental new Waldorf Hotel inevitably overshadowed the house next door, blocking out the sun for William Waldorf's aunt Caroline and her son John Jacob IV, whose father, William, had died in 1892. This John Jacob was a somewhat gauche, ungainly and socially awkward individual, who received scant respect during his lifetime; indeed the term Jack-ass was an easy but popular tabloid jibe. To his credit, he was responsible for several imaginative mechanical and electrical inventions, and wrote a science fiction book that foreshadowed with uncanny accuracy how the world might have developed by the year 2000. He was not to witness much of that progress, however, as he famously died an honourable death on the *Titanic*. His pregnant young bride survived, and his younger son, John Jacob VI, was safely born.

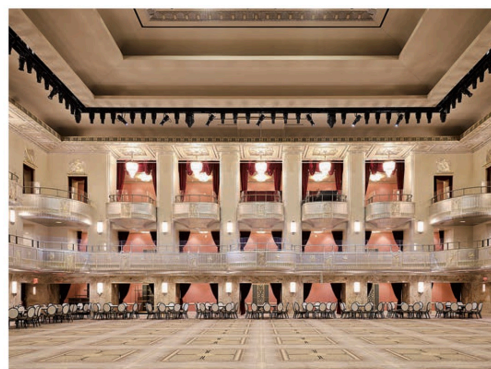
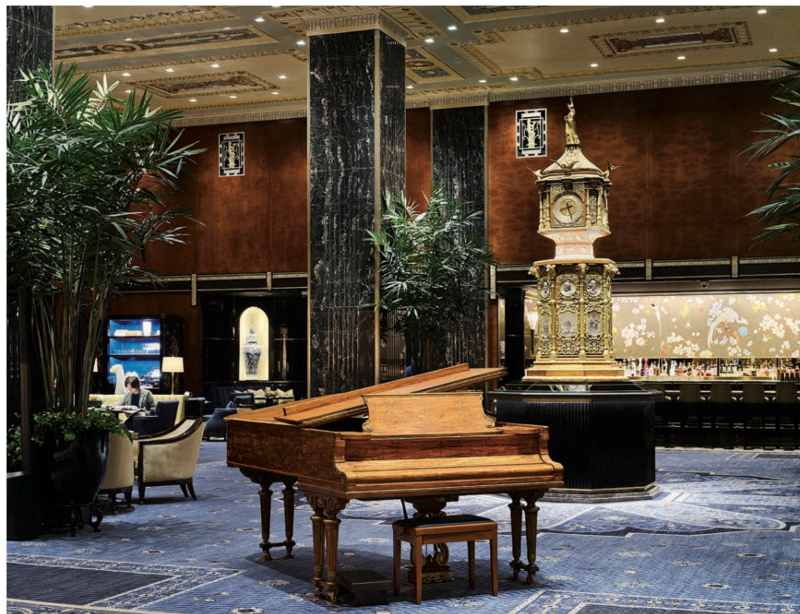
Initially John Jacob IV threatened to erect a livery stable next to the Waldorf to irritate his cousin, but when he saw how successful it had become, both financially and in terms of its prestige as the unofficial 'palace' of New York, he decided to build his own hotel. His name for it, the Astoria, was derived from the first trading settlement west of the Rocky Mountains, which an expedition conceived and financed by his great-grandfather John Jacob I had established in 1811.

The Astoria, which was to be four storeys taller than the Waldorf, opened in 1897; and although the detached cousins ultimately agreed to combine their two hotels, they insisted that if the arrangement failed for any reason, the adjoining walls could be blocked, and the two hotels managed as separate entities again. As it was, the Waldorf-Astoria, then the biggest hotel in the world, proved to be a triumph.

Its most popular feature was unquestionably the so-called Peacock Alley. It is sometimes mistakenly identified as the passage that connected the two discrete hotels. In fact, it was a popular promenade for fashionable New York ladies to show off their gowns and jewels and hats – often several thousand of them in a day, with similar numbers watching the parade. Initially it had been a handsome corridor in the Waldorf, that stretched invitingly to and from its main restaurant; but a few years later, an even grander corridor on the Astoria side found favour, and so the name moved with the fashion.

Peacock Alley also became a lively social hub, as captured nicely by a journalist in 1903: 'The place is like Port Said as Kipling described it in the phrase that, if you stopped long enough there, everybody in the world that is worth knowing would eventually happen along.' Thus in 1896 it might have been the illustrious Chinese soldier and viceroy, Li Hung Chang; or in 1907 Henry James, who visited the hotel during his return to his native country after 20 years abroad and portrayed the Waldorf-Astoria as somehow representative of the new America: 'a revelation of the possibilities of the hotel... an æsthetic ideal... a synonym for civilisation... the hotel-spirit may... just be the American spirit'; and finally the young Prince of Wales, who both stayed and spoke there in 1919, the year William Waldorf Astor died.

I now find myself wondering what William Waldorf would make of the present Waldorf Astoria. For one thing, he would notice that long ago it moved from where he founded it; and while the original Waldorf-Astoria, which eventually closed in 1929 to make way for the Empire State Building, was in its day huge, the present incarnation, which opened in 1931, is an



For Henry James, the Waldorf-Astoria was 'a revelation of the possibilities of the hotel... an aesthetic ideal... a synonym for civilisation'

out-and-out skyscraper. Oh, and his beady eye would spot that it had dropped the hyphen for some reason in 2009.

Beyond that, I would prefer to offer my own assessment. I last stayed in the Waldorf-Astoria during the 1990s, when it was frankly pretty tired. Now, following its lengthy renovation, the whole place genuinely sparkles. What's more, I felt at home there. The staff were without exception delightful; the newly realised and vibrant Peacock Alley is a large space, but not too crowded, not too empty, not too loud – in other words just right; and there are no shops, but delicious martinis. I also happened to be accompanied by my own Mrs Astor, who was impressed by the sublime comfort of our suite, the taste and appearance of the subtly updated Waldorf salad, and just how French and attentive the spa was.

This peerlessly historic hotel may be owned by the Chinese now, but both for me and for those that work there, it's the Waldorf Astoria brand that counts. I'm in no doubt that it has regained its title as the pre-eminent hotel in the city that I still regard as the capital of the world. ●

FROM TOP The clock commissioned by Queen Victoria for the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago is back in Peacock Alley. The art deco Park Lane frontage. The Grand Ballroom today