

Family hotels company reaping the reward of £10m investment

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Suffolk-based Gough Hotels is continuing to transform its presence in both Bury St Edmunds and Ipswich. DAVID VINCENT reports

THERE has always been a bit of friendly rivalry between Ipswich and Bury St Edmunds.

One has got the cathedral, the other has got the most successful football team (usually).

But Gough Hotels is one independent Suffolk business with a considerable investment in and commitment to the success of both towns.

Robert Gough has developed and re-positioned the family hotel business considerably in recent years.

In Bury St Edmunds the Angel Hotel has lost its ballroom, and garages, and developed more bedrooms.

In Ipswich there has been the move to the Waterfront and the new Salthouse Harbour Hotel as part of a £10m investment in its future success.

It was a visionary move from the former Marlborough Hotel in Henley Road, set in a prime residential area of the town.

The Salthouse Harbour is partly a conversion of a Victorian warehouse, owned by John Goode, with a new extension built alongside to complement it, and yet in contemporary style.

The re-designed and remodelled Salthouse has been receiving guests since October.

"We have had a very successful year," said managing director Robert Gough, "Even when times are tough, if you are doing things well you will be OK."

"It is partly due to the vast investment we made as a company and intended to make the two hotels better for the future.

"When we first saw the site here, and purchased it about 2001 and we were involved in planning the project, some people thought we were barmy. Now people are saying we were lucky.

"We were fortunate to see the potential of the Waterfront. It has been a very exciting year and as a company we have had a record year.

"The Angel was 39 bedrooms and is now a 75 bedroom hotel. This hotel was originally built as 43 bedrooms and is 70 bedrooms now.

"When we opened this hotel, six years ago in 2003, it was the first four star hotel in Ipswich.

"The extension opened in October, six weeks ahead of schedule, with the help local companies.

"We were delighted with the support we have had from local businesses.

"It was also under budget.

"The architect is Roger Gilles of Barefoot and Gilles, the extension was built by ISG Jackson and others including MLM Consulting Engineers. Our project manager was Martin Cartwright. We even had the same foreman.

"The Angel Hotel has won the award for best large hotel in the East of England for the past two years.

"Guests who have stayed at the Salthouse Hotel too have been very complimentary. We have had some great reviews and emails from guests.

"We had an extremely good year this year and are looking forward to 2010 which is looking very promising.

"We have raised expectations locally. It is our job to surprise and delight.

"If you don't keep developing, and moving forward, you are probably going backwards.

"We have been here six years and have completely reviewed everything and attempted to improve as many elements as we can.



RE-DESIGNED: Robert Gough, managing director of Gough Hotels at the Salthouse Harbour Hotel on the Waterfront in Ipswich, below, Robert Gough and in the background Mary Gough

Photos: ANDY ABBOTT

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"We are going back into the Angel now and making more improvements there.

"There is still plenty to do between the two hotels," he added.

Robert shares his time between the two buildings.

On Christmas Day, he shared his time between the two, checking everything is right for the holiday guests.

"I don't have an office. The one I had in Bury has gone in redevelopment, to a letting room.

"We had two function rooms and the ballroom. Now we have 75 bedrooms.

"The garages there were the most expensive garages in Bury.

"We still have a lot of wedding guests, but they have come to stay from other venues or hotels. There are a lot of licensed venues for weddings now in the area, including Ickworth.

"Bury St Edmunds itself is developing. The new arc and the restored Theatre Royal are big attractions and Ipswich has the Waterfront, which is very exciting.

"The town is moving in this direction. Dance East opening has very been good for us and there are new restaurants and attractions.

"We are working with the university and we are having an art installation being produced for us, for the New Year, by an art student following a competition. It is good to encourage local artistic talent."

The Salthouse Harbour extension has allowed a complete re-design of the ground floor, creating a new entrance, a reception lounge and an extended restaurant.

The entrance has been turned round, to the side, and is now under cover.

It has the feeling of an individually-styled boutique hotel and Robert's wife Claire has been involved in the interior design.

They have travelled the UK and Europe looking for design ideas.

Even the hotel music is specially selected and



compiled for use in the public areas, to give the right ambience.

Some new bedrooms have picture windows and views across the marina, some with £3,500 free-standing copper baths, some with bathrooms.

In the bathrooms you can choose to "frost" the glass panel for more privacy.

Robert and Claire have also collected contemporary art from exhibitions and auctions in London and the South East to dress the extended hotel, featuring unknown artists and well-known names such as Blek Le Rat, Peter Hoissey, urban artist SPQR and Natacha Ivanova.

There are some original works, some prints,

from the likes of Damien Hirst and Gilbert & George.

"We revolve the works, both here and between the two hotels," he explained.

"Art always produces opinions. It is a personal thing, isn't it?"

In the hotel and restaurant business development had to be continuous, he added.

"We know the market. We know we have to provide excellent service and excellent food at the right price because if people are happy they will come again."

"Our business is to ensure that people enjoy themselves spending their hard-earned cash."