

RAGGETT'S DEVOTION TO DUTY

A hands-on approach and a commitment to guests and staff alike make Jonathan Raggett, managing director of Red Carnation Hotels, an ideal recipient of the title Hotelier of the Year 2009, sponsored by Casna Group. *Janet Harmer reports*

Sitting behind a desk is no way to manage a hotel, according to Jonathan Raggett, who has been named Hotelier of the Year 2009.

"As a hotel manager, you've got to get out and about and I'm not just talking about being in the hotel lobby," he says. "You've got to help run the breakfast service or room service, or even clean the bedrooms."

Raggett believes that only by being involved in the nitty-gritty of running a hotel can a hotelier connect with his staff. And he is convinced it is his staff, who, through support, encouragement and training, are the essential element of a successful business. Raggett may well be the managing director of Red Carnation Hotels, a burgeoning collection of 13 luxury properties on three continents, but there is nothing grandiose about him. When it comes to leading by example, he has no problem with getting his hands dirty.

SHARED EXPERIENCE

Having initiated the company's Trading Places scheme, which involves staff working for a day in a department other than their own, he has spent a busy Sunday morning as breakfast chef at the Chesterfield Mayfair hotel serving 220 breakfasts and worked as a room attendant for the day. "I now totally appreciate the pressure involved in cleaning 10 bedrooms in one day to a high standard," says Raggett. "To get the job done properly, it took me two to three hours longer than the average attendant."

Working closely with and understanding his staff – there are 1,500 in total – has been a key factor in creating the caring and nurturing environment that has won Red Carnation Hotels a raft of awards in recent years for employee engagement and now the esteemed Hotelier of the Year award for Raggett.

He is absolutely thrilled and delighted about the award, but also enormously humbled as he reflects on his 27-year long career. Raggett entered the industry because he liked being around people, an attribute that has remained

THE RED CARNATION PORTFOLIO www.redcarnation.com

ENGLAND

- The Chesterfield Mayfair, London (four-star)
- The Montague on the Gardens, London (four-star)
- The Rubens at the Palace, London (four-star)
- The Milestone Hotel, London (five-star)
- 41, London (five-star)
- The Egerton House hotel, London (five-star)
- Summer Lodge, Evershot, Dorset (five-star)
- Bbar, London
- Acorn Inn, Evershot, Dorset

GUERNSEY

- The Old Government House Hotel and Spa (four-star)

SOUTH AFRICA

- Twelve Apostles Hotel and Spa, Cape Town (five-star)
- Bushmans Kloof Wilderness Reserve, Western Cape (five-star)
- The Oyster Box, Durban (five-star)

SWITZERLAND

- Hotel d'Angleterre, Geneva (five-star)

USA

- The Chesterfield Palm Beach, Palm Beach, Florida (four-star)

with him and is largely responsible for his success today.

Despite not having any ambitions to become a hotelier during his formative years growing up in Chelmsford, Essex, Raggett says his interest in the industry was ignited during his A levels when a friend showed him around the hotel where he worked. "It was as though a light was switched on and I knew that this was the kind of place I wanted to be," he says.

As a result, Raggett applied and gained a

place in 1982 on a hotel management training scheme run by Norfolk Capital hotels and within two years was appointed assistant manager at the Old Swan hotel in Harrogate. "I was handed a big bunch of keys and I really thought I had made it."

Little did he know of the challenges ahead, the most significant of which in his early career came with his appointment as front-of-house manager at the Highcliff Hotel, Bournemouth. It was 1985, the year after the Conservative party had come under attack during the bombing of the Grand Hotel, Brighton, and the Tories were booked into the Highcliff for the duration of their annual conference.

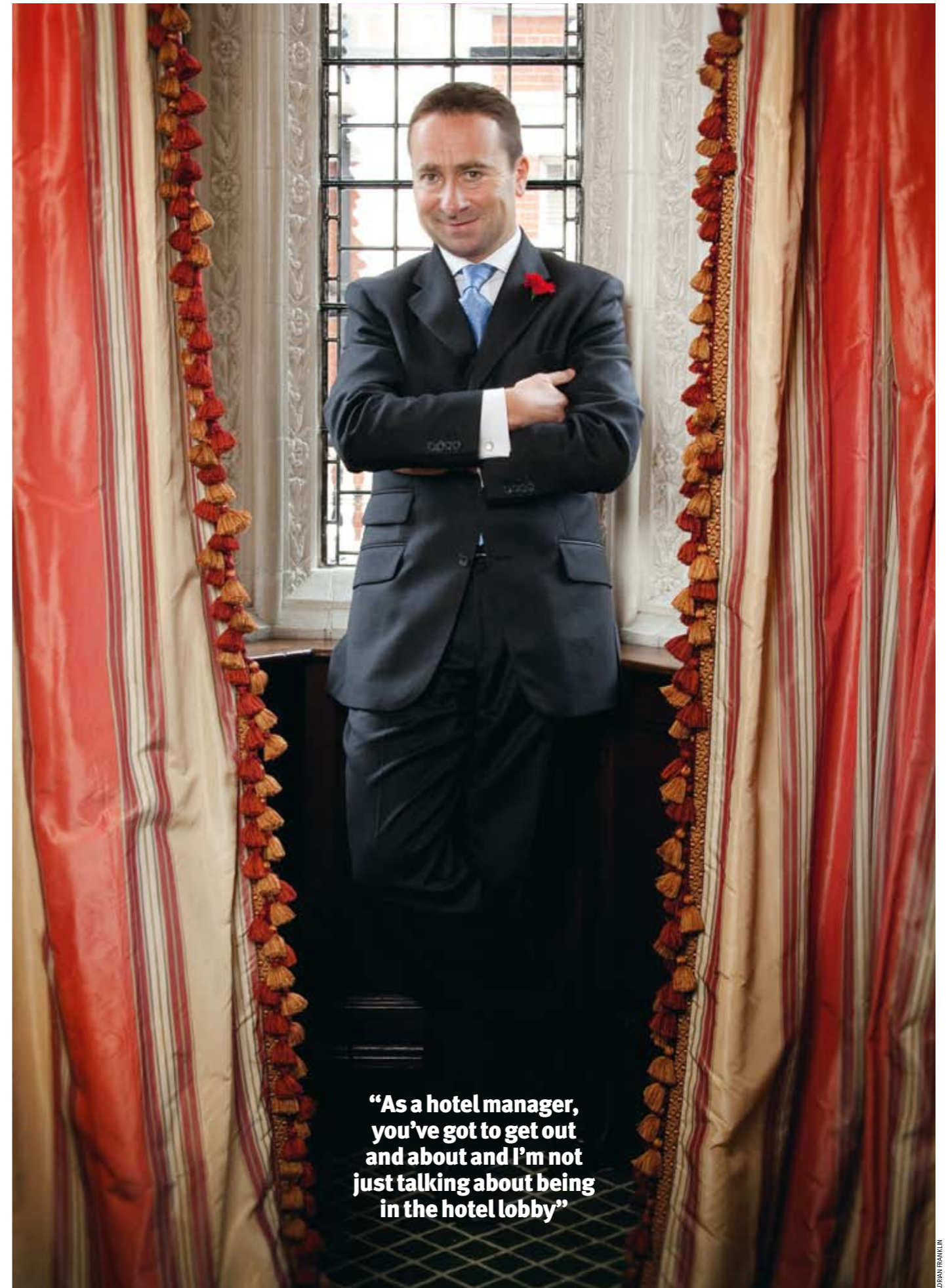
"Being directly responsible for the conference stay, I was involved in countless meetings with the police and security staff," explains Raggett. "We worked hideously long days, but it was enormously satisfying and valuable in my development as a hotelier as the attention to detail was second to none."

After a three-year spell as deputy general manager at the Londonderry Hotel (now the Metropolitan), Raggett headed overseas to Durban, South Africa, in 1990 to take up a role as hotel manager at the Maharani, a five-star 300-bedroom property.

"While I don't believe it is necessary to go overseas to become a good hotelier, it did help me to grow as an individual, broaden my knowledge of culture and help me to become a better all-round manager," Raggett says.

This stint abroad was also significant in the development of his understanding of the importance of good staff relations. "The unions were very big in South Africa and I came to realise that unions can be a useful and good thing if managed properly. They force you to communicate clearly with your employees and if you are going to run a successful hotel it is as important to get across your point of view to the staff as it is to listen to them.

"Sometimes compromises have to be made, but so long as it never affects the service ▶



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Jonathan Raggett's approach to staff development has won Red Carnation a raft of awards in recent years – and now the title of Hotelier of the Year for Raggett himself

◀ enjoyed by guests, that can be a good thing. It helps to create a solid and supportive team spirit among the staff.”

Raggett's next move – to the island of Guernsey – as general manager and director of the St Pierre Park Hotel proved fortunate in more ways than one. Providing him with the opportunity to establish St Pierre Park as a highly successful hotel, golf and spa destination, as well as an enviable and comfortable lifestyle on the island, it also ultimately led to the most important move of his career.

“I was called to the hotel's presidential suite one day by a couple who were regular guests at the hotel – Stanley and Beatrice Tollman,” says Raggett. “They told me that they liked what I had achieved at St Pierre Park. They were building up a collection of hotels in London – Red Carnation – and they wanted me to join them as general manager of the Rubens, which was in the process of a multimillion-pound refurbishment to take it up to a four-star property, as well as oversee the creation of a five-star boutique hotel, 41. Although I had a lot to leave behind in Guernsey, I liked the challenge and as a single man at the time, it was an opportunity I couldn't turn down.”

Returning to London in 1998 proved to be a wise move. The city was booming and on completion of the refurbishment of the Rubens, the hotel's rate increased by 50%, while its occupancy remained at the highly successful 90% it had been for some time.

By 2000, Red Carnation which, at the time, had four hotels in London and one – the Chesterfield Palm Beach – in Florida, was looking to expand and Raggett was asked to take on the role of managing director.

NEW ROLE

“My initial thought was that I had joined the industry to be around people and I was concerned that this new role would take me away from the staff and the guests,” he says. “So I accepted the job on the basis that I would still be very much involved in the day-to-day running of the hotels.”

And, that, indeed, is what he continues to do today. “As well as having monthly meetings with each of the general managers and execu-



tive teams, I also visit each of the London hotels on an ad-hoc basis as that is the only way I can really understand how the business is working. I have brilliant accountants and people to help with health and safety reports, so I have no need to be behind my desk for very long.”

As well as looking after the London hotels, Raggett spends a couple of days a month at Summer Lodge in Evershot, Dorset, and visits each of the properties abroad twice a year.

Raggett's high-profile presence throughout the company's hotels and two restaurants – the Bbar in London and Acorn Inn in Evershot, Dorset – ensures that he is constantly in touch with the concerns and difficulties experienced by both staff and guests.

His horror at listening about the extent of alcohol and drug misuse in the hospitality industry, for instance, has resulted in Red Carnation introducing an alcohol and substance

abuse policy for its UK properties, one of the first hotel companies to do so. “Managers have been taught how to spot any problems that may exist, as well as support staff who are suffering from the devastating damage that can be caused by alcohol and drug misuse,” Raggett says. “The policy has helped reduce absenteeism and we have successfully supported two members of staff through difficulties.”

LISTENING TO CUSTOMERS

When it comes to listening to his guests, Raggett attends informal gatherings between hotel general managers and guests. On a more formal basis, he also holds a focus group – led by an outside facilitator – once every six weeks to which frequent guests are invited. “The idea is to find specific things we can do as a company to help improve the stay of our guests,” says Raggett. “We might receive a request for a specific dish to be added to a menu or a suggestion regarding telephone or laundry prices. Most importantly we've learnt how to reward guests for their loyalty. What guests don't want is the kind of point systems offered by large corporate hotel groups; instead they are more interested in receiving an upgrade to their room or being offered a late check-out.”

There is no question that Red Carnation's guests appreciate the efforts Raggett and his team make in ensuring all their needs are met. Four Red Carnation properties are listed among TripAdvisor's top 10 most highly rated hotels in London by travellers, with the Milestone hotel filling the number one spot.

The recession has had little impact on occupancy figures in the UK, with the four-star hotels in London remaining at 90%, the five-star ones at 70%-75% and Summer Lodge at about 50%. A reduction in corporate business has been replaced by a growth in the leisure market.

As to the future, Red Carnation is actively looking to develop further hotels in the UK and mainland Europe. “We are unlikely to buy an existing five-star hotel, preferring instead to take on a property which we can invest in and grow by adding to the payroll in order to provide better service,” concludes Raggett. He's a hotelier who sees his own personal future with Red Carnation for some time to come.

WHAT THE JUDGES SAY

Andrew McKenzie

Managing director, the Vineyard at Stockcross, Newbury, Berkshire, and 2008 Hotelier of the Year

“Jonathan is a truly worthy winner of the Hotelier of the Year. Despite being managing director of a sizeable business, he runs his group of small London hotels like a general manager and is in all of them most days. The enthusiasm and commitment to customer service in his staff is admirable and he commands great loyalty by continuing to invest in training and development and good old-fashioned care for his employees' welfare. Most importantly, he does it all with a smile and not an ounce of pomposity.”

Michael Gray

General manager, Hyatt Regency London – the Churchill and 2007 Hotelier of the Year

“Jonathan has the desire to deliver the highest levels of service, based on relentless attention to detail, as well as genuinely caring about each member of his team. As a result, he has attracted a deep respect from his peers for who he is, what he does and the values he represents.”

John Stauss

Regional vice-president and general manager, Four Seasons hotel, London, and 2005 Hotelier of the Year

“Although Jonathan has been promoted from general manager

to managing director of the group, he continues to daily portray the highly-valued attributes of a Hotelier of the Year, including strong attention to detail, fair and decisive leadership, and managing by example. Further, Jonathan is committed to the hotel industry, has developed a strong business track record, and shows a strong dedication to his team.”

Giovanni Grossi Automobile Association group area manager

“Several of the candidates for this coveted award share with Jonathan Raggett the exceptional qualities required to be a top hotelier: strong leadership, passion,

dedication and determination. However, for me Jonathan stole the show because in addition to all of these qualities and more, he boasts an endearing, engaging and unique personality. He has a wonderful sense of humour, but more importantly he possesses an incredible level of humility that does not always go hand in hand with all of the other outstanding qualities required for this highest of industry accolades. Jonathan is not only a true professional and a great ambassador for the hotel industry, but he is also a genuinely caring person. He demonstrates exceptional levels of enthusiasm and understanding towards his customers, his team and his peers.”