

# Haven for the blind

The Russell Hotel, the first in the UK to be purpose-built for the blind and visually impaired, holds itself up as an example of best practice.



**Y**OU COULD EASILY MISS the Russell Hotel as you turn into King's Parade, Bognor Regis, on the West Sussex coast.

It could be mistaken for offices or a care home if it were not for the Russell Hotel and Action for Blind People logo on the side.

Everything about this £4m three-star property is subtle and sighted people might not immediately realise its specialist nature.

The Russell Hotel, which opened on the South Coast in November, is one of four hotels owned and managed by Action for Blind People in partnership with the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association.

The others, which have been adapted, rather than purpose built, are the

Cliffden, near Teignmouth, Devon; the Lauriston, in Weston-super-Mare, North Somerset; and the Windermere Manor, in the Lake District.

You do not have to be visually impaired to stay here. Debbie Goodall, manageress, says the challenge will be to promote it to sighted people – which may be necessary if it is to improve on its current 70 to 80 per cent occupancy rate to the 99 per cent it desires.

The Russell expects to turn over £700,000 this year and is just breaking even, according to Goodall. The *raison d'être* is to improve the lot of the blind and partially sighted, rather than make money.

Accommodation is kept down to £280 per person per week half board

Wide corridors make life easier for the Russell Hotel's special guests and their dogs

in the summer. No extra charge is made for dogs. "We could easily charge another £50 a week but we are trying to reach as many people as possible and competitive pricing is how to do that," Goodall says.

The public are largely ignorant about blind and partially-sighted people.

Goodall recalls the experience of one guest who, while in town, stopped to ask someone the directions to Boots.

He never heard the reply. The helpful person bent down and whispered the directions to his guide dog.

Journalists are ignorant, too. I went to the toilet on arrival – the disabled one. I cringed when I realised there were regular toilets, too. >

**Words by  
Andrew Don  
Photographs by  
Robert Wilkinson**



SIGHT FACTS:

- There are nearly 2m partially-sighted people in the UK, 300,000 of them registered blind
- only 4% of visually impaired people see nothing at all. The other 96% have some vision even if it is only being able to tell where the window is
- only 3% of blind people read Braille
- the Royal National Institute of the Blind runs two hotels that have been specially adapted – The Palm Court Hotel, Eastbourne, and The Century hotel, Blackpool
- there are four main visual impairments: cataracts, diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma and macular degeneration
- blind people use three different types of cane: a symbol cane, which is short, a guide cane, to help with steps and kerbs and the American long cane which has a roller ball on the end and is used in a sweeping fashion
- red stripes mean the person is deaf or has a hearing disability as well

Many assume blind people live in a world of total darkness. Not true. Most will be aware of light and dark and different shades, which the hotel cleverly uses throughout.

Doors and furniture are made of a light pine to help guests locate them. Walls are painted different pastel colours to aid navigation.

Many of the subtle devices employed help orientation such as the red blocked paving at the approach to the entrance.

The porch area was specifically built so that wet guide dogs could be dried.

A bright green towel bin is provided, another for towels that have been soiled and a large bowl of water for four-legged patrons.

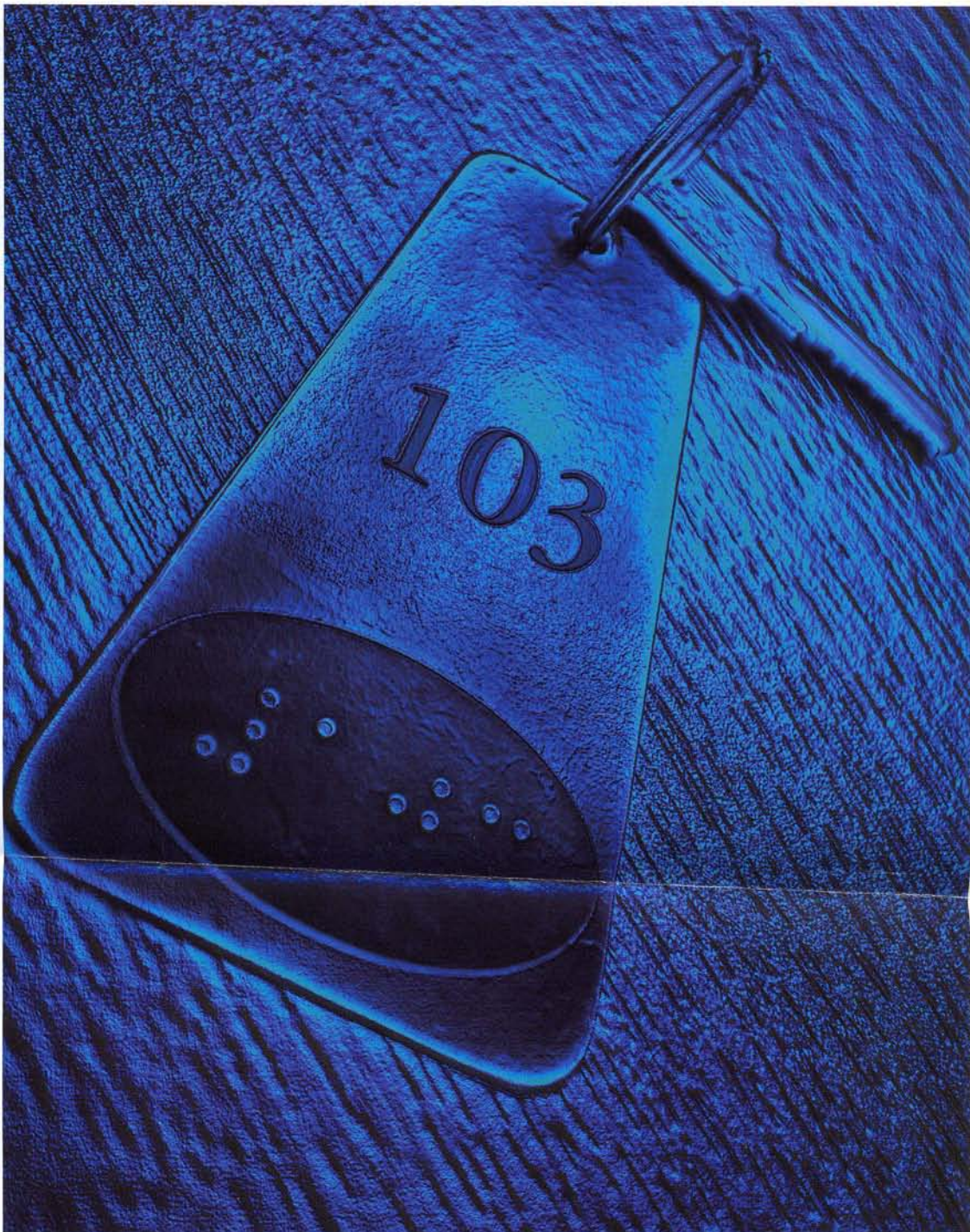
**Dogs welcomed**

Facilities for dogs are a crucial part of the design of this two-storey, 41-room hotel. This is not a hotel for anyone after glitz and if you are allergic to dogs, you are best advised to give the Russell Hotel a wide berth.

But, for its niche market, the Russell goes where no hotel has gone before.

How many hotels have a grooming area for weighing both dog and food with talking scales and showers for mucky pups?

Here, dog lockers are also provided, dog beds, bowls and fleeces. Staff will order in dog food for an extra charge and there is a kennel assistant if needed.



A Russell Hotel room key contains a Braille version of the room number (above)

Extra-wide corridors ensure two guests with dogs can pass each way and large bedrooms leave enough space for two dogs and their owners.

If humans have their own toilets, then why not their pooches? The Russell has a “spend” area fitted with special drains and cubicles for those furry creatures that prefer privacy.

All the staff muck in and even Goodall’s been known to follow a dog in with a hose for slopping out.

A ridged carpet leads from the dry-down area to the next set of automatic double doors that opens into the reception area. A textured carpet leads to the reception desk.

Throughout, rubber or metal ridges warn of potential hazards ahead such as the bar, the reception desk or stairs.

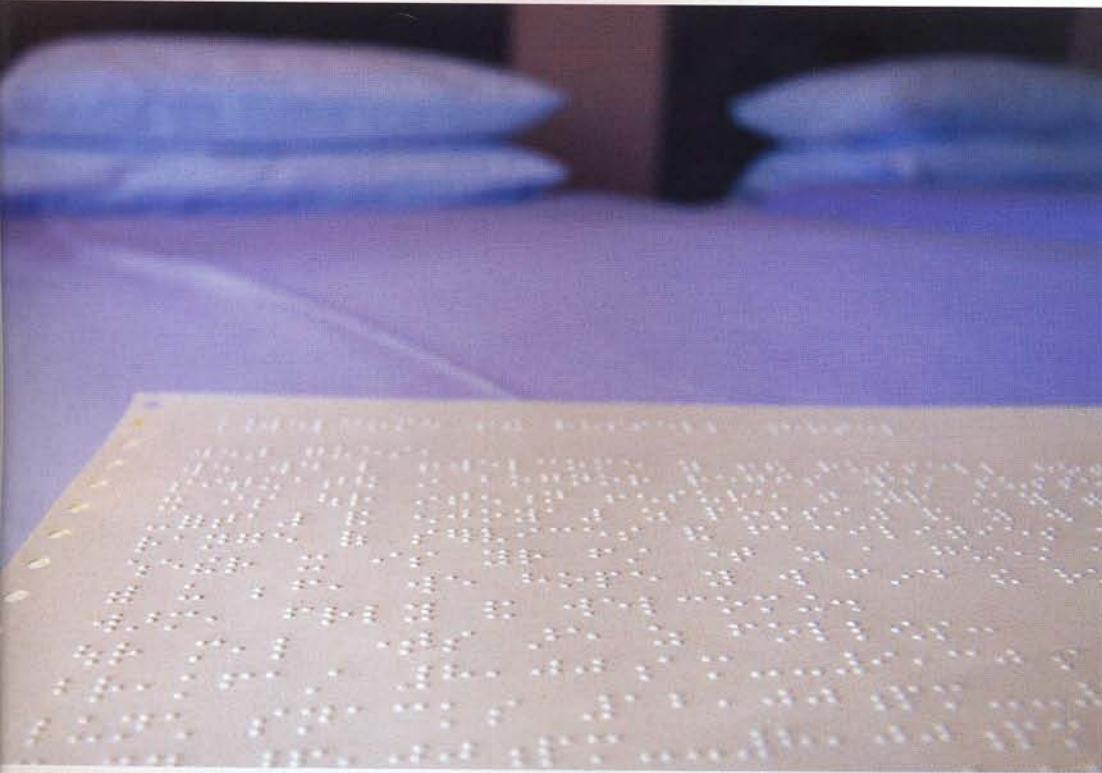
Signs are in extra large print and have Braille underneath.

The reception leads into the dining area where restaurant staff will even cut your food for you if you so wish.

Dogs are allowed in and sit beneath the table. Guide Dogs for the Blind Association, which regulates dogs’ diets, strictly forbids titbits.

The dining room joins onto the bar where a bookcase is laden with “talking books”, and Braille books, including *Harry Potter and The Prince of Azkaban*, and games, some of which, like the Monopoly, are specially





designed by the Royal National Institute of the Blind using Braille.

The hotel has a computer package that can produce all flyers, menus and other notices in Braille but only on demand rather than as standard because Braille indentations can deteriorate.

Corridors have dado rails for guidance and small wooden dowels in them which signal a major door or staircase nearby.

The gymnasium is limited to four pieces of equipment. Small red "bump-ons" on key electronic buttons are the only adaptations.

The indoor swimming pool has walk-in steps rather than a ladder to

make entering the water easier and the depth is a uniform 1.2m throughout. A ridge tells guests they are reaching the edge of the pool so they do not fall in.

The lift controls have regular numbers and Braille and an electronic voice warns "doors closing" and "doors opening".

There are five disabled bedrooms on each floor as well as standard rooms. The disabled rooms have a walk-in shower with a seat but no bath.

Plug sockets are all on the same level at about waist height. The rooms have full-length mirrors, one of the conditions required to achieve three-

Braille menus, talking clocks and liquid levellers, not to mention Braille signage, are all part of the experience at the Russell Hotel, King's Parade, Bognor Regis

star status, even though many of the guests have no use for them.

The telephones have huge numbers on them. Most seeing people probably do not realise that all phones have a bump on the digit 5. This has been incorporated to help blind people find their way around the keypad.

All rooms have hairdryer, colour television and stereo music and radio system where guests can listen to the newspapers that come on cassette. Even if guests are blind, it does not mean they cannot listen to the television.

The rooms have talking clocks and "liquid levellers", a small device that clips into cups and beeps when the boiling water is nearing the top.

Fire regulations are explained to all guests verbally and as in any hotel, are no different just because the guests have a visual impairment.

### Safety measures

The hotel sounds the fire alarm every Sunday, to familiarise guests. If it sounds more than a few times, they know it's a real fire.

The alarms have been designed so that they are more sensitive than most. "If someone squirts hairspray towards the ceiling the fire alarm goes off... it's to be extra safe," says Goodall

The staff, specially trained by the charity that owns and manages the hotel in partnership with Guide Dogs for the Blind Association, understand the special needs of the clientele.

They will be able to identify the degree of people's disability by the type of cane they use and they are trained in how not to cross that fine line between providing help and being intrusive.

"We are not here to spoon feed people. We are here to offer more support if they want it," says Goodall."

Marketing is a challenge and tends to be through Talking News, a service provided for the visually impaired throughout the UK. It also promotes itself through its own brochures but word of mouth is the biggest source of new business.

Blind and visually impaired people often have access to voice-activated computers so they can "view" websites. Guests have come from Germany, Switzerland and Sweden after discovering the Russell on the internet. <