

Who are the real bigots? Christian couple reveal how they have suffered a two-year campaign of death threats and abuse for refusing to let two gay men share a room in their B&B

By Jane Fryer

Susanne and Mike Wilkinson's 'Swiss B&B' is ablaze with flowers, immaculately maintained and tucked away at the top of a single-track lane in the ridiculously pretty village of Cookham, near Maidenhead, Berkshire.

The house, called Uf Dorf, named after a village in Susanne's native Switzerland, has sweeping gardens leading down through a field to the River Thames, a lovely outdoor swimming pool, a vine-covered terrace for breakfast (weather permitting) plus two bright and very comfortable double rooms for £75-a-night, and one single, all en-suite.

Indeed, had Michael Black, 63, and John Morgan, 58, been allowed to check into the large downstairs double on Friday, March 19, 2010, they would doubtless have loved its bright airiness, the triptych of photos of the Swiss Alps above the lovely big double bed, the flat screen TV, the double doors opening on to the garden, the extensive and very generous tea and coffee-making facilities and the acres of clean linen and fresh towels.



Disagreement: Christians Susanne and Mike Wilkinson refused to let gay couple Michael Black and John Morgan share a room at their B&B

But they never made it past the kitchen or the extract from Jeremiah (chapter 16, verse 19) stuck firmly to the fridge.

Because Susanne, 56, and Mike 58, are devout Christians and only allow married heterosexual couples to book into their double rooms. And Michael Black and John Morgan, who hail from Cambridgeshire and have been together for nearly ten years, are gay.

'I'd had a booking from a Mr Black for the Zurich room — a nice big double with an en-suite,' explains Susanne. 'And, naturally, I assumed it was for Mr and Mrs Black. But as I helped them manoeuvre their car into the drive, I realised they were two men and I thought: "Oh dear, this isn't a situation I can go along with.'"

So after inviting them into the kitchen ('It felt rude to have this conversation outside'), and despite her website promising 'a very warm welcome to all visitors', Susanne, a former airhostess and mother of four, told them politely and firmly that she was very sorry but they'd have to leave.

'I said that because of my convictions, I could not go along with two men in the big double bed and I refunded their £30 deposit.'



Scene: The Swiss Bed & Breakfast property in Cookham, owned by Mr & Mrs Wilkinson, caught up in the discrimination row

Messrs Black (an exams consultant) and Morgan (an IT consultant and Lib Dem councillor) were appalled.

'They said they couldn't believe this sort of discrimination was happening in this day and age and that there would be consequences,' recalls Susanne. 'They said it was surely illegal in a hotel.

'But I said: "This isn't a hotel, this is my private home," and that I'd have offered for them to stay in separate rooms if I had any available, but they were all booked.

'So they left. They were polite, but shocked. And that was that.'

Or rather, it was the beginning of two-and-a-half years of hate mail, arson and death threats, obscene emails, filthy texts, bogus TripAdvisor and Google reviews, cancelled bookings — none of which, of course, was posted or encouraged by Mr Black or his partner — and spiralling legal fees.

Meanwhile the wheels of justice ground on, all culminating in a court hearing this week at Reading County Court. The judgment is deferred for a couple of weeks.

Michael and John's claim (funded by Liberty) was made under the new Equality Act (Sexual Orientation)

Regulations 2007 and argued that it was unlawful for a person providing services to the public to discriminate on the grounds of sexual orientation.

Texts were coming in all hours. Most were just obscene. They were very sexually explicit

Susanne and Mike, who are funded by the Christian Institute, claim that the regulations shouldn't apply to B&Bs in the same way as they do to hotels and insist the law has been interpreted badly.

'We are not homophobic,' says Mike, who traded 30 years as a financial director in the City to become leader of a local non-denominational church in Marlow eight years ago.

'We would happily have all our rooms filled with gay folk on a single occupancy basis. But not sharing a double bed because, for us, sex when you're unmarried is a sin before God.'

The backlash started a couple of hours after Michael and John reversed out of the Wilkinsons' drive.

'The lady who ran the Cookham.com website telephoned to say she was removing us from the website for bringing shame on Cookham,' says Susanne.

'Then there were so many hits on our website that the server nearly went down,' says Mike. 'And then the phone calls and emails started.' Because the following day, the BBC took up the story.

'We were bombarded,' says Mike. 'I'm sure they didn't plan for all this to happen, but there were hundreds of emails an hour from all over the world, our phones were ringing day and night. Texts were coming in all hours. Most were just obscene.'

'They were very sexually explicit — I wouldn't really like to tell you what was in them,' says Susanne.



Nightmare: B&B owners Susanne Wilkinson and husband Mike have endured a two-year hate-campaign

And then the bogus TripAdvisor and Google reviews started, most of the Wilkinsons' bookings were cancelled and death threats began.

'They talked about "coming to get us". One was hand-delivered and handwritten in capitals and said 'I am coming to burn your house down" and then lots of filthy words about what they thought of us,' says Mike.

'It was very scary. And we've guests as well as children living here. People started cancelling the bookings. And that's when we called the police.'

Who — strangely you may think — despite trawling through thousands upon thousands of emails, texts and letters, were unable to track a single sender.

'They were all from anonymous sources. It's so cowardly, isn't it?

In over five years of welcoming more than 1,000 guests a year, this is the only time the Wilkinsons had been caught on the hop by a same-sex couple.

'Very, very occasionally we have had people write and say: "We are a gay couple — are you comfortable with that?" And we've said: "We'd prefer not," and referred them on to someone else. No one ever made a fuss. It really didn't occur to us it could happen.'

But what about the discrimination law that came into force just after they started offering B&B? 'To be honest, we weren't aware of it and we were pretty shocked when we did hear about it — that you couldn't determine who could stay in your own home,' says Mike.

'You can say no children and no pets, but I'm not allowed to say I don't want homosexual couples to share a bed under my roof. Just as we would never knowingly allow an unmarried heterosexual couple stay in the same room in our home.'

Indeed they've turned away a heterosexual couple wanting a room for just a few hours. 'It was clear they weren't married,' says Susanne, appalled.

The couple even banned a family member from sharing a room with her boyfriend. 'That caused a bit of a scene. But you have to be consistent and honest.'

There are Bible verses pinned up here and there and Gideon Bibles in every bedside cabinet with a special tract flagged up by Susanne encouraging guests 'to find out more if they're interested'.

'I do share my faith, but I don't Bible bash. I talk about it when it comes up naturally. It's astonishing how often people want to know, particularly when they find out what Mike does for a living.'

There's stuff on Google that's disgusting and illegal — one says everybody should come and smash the house up

The Wilkinsons are not the first devout Christians to fall foul of the 2007 Regulations.

In September 2008, Peter and Hazemary Bull's Christian views got them into trouble with a gay couple from Bristol who had booked to stay in the Bulls' Cornish B&B for a two-night stay with their miniature Schnauzer dog.

In the four years since they politely, but firmly, turned the couple away, the deeply religious Bulls — an elderly couple in poor health — have been through the mill. They were sued for discrimination, bookings plummeted, Mr Bull's health deteriorated and they were in danger of losing their home.

In January 2011, as Mr Bull was recovering from a nine-hour triple heart bypass operation, the Bulls lost their case. They have just been granted leave to appeal to the Supreme Court but are still being persecuted and, earlier this week, their website was hacked and replaced with porn. Again, there is no suggestion that the claimants were involved.

Back in Berkshire, how have things been for the Wilkinsons' four children, aged 17 to 29? 'I think it's not been easy for them,' says Mike, quietly. 'All of them are supportive and all of them have chosen to become Christians — our older boy is in training to become an Anglican priest. But even if they understand and agree with us, most of their friends don't and our daughter at university got all kinds of grief.'

'It's been very upsetting. At least TripAdvisor has removed all the phoney reviews, though Google have done nothing — even though I've written to them over 20 times. There's stuff on there that's disgusting and illegal

— one says everybody should come and smash the house up.'

Ironically, just as things were quietening down and business was picking up again at Uf Dorf, Chris Grayling — then Shadow Home Secretary but now Justice Secretary in the Coalition Cabinet — said that, while hotels should not be able to reject homosexual guests, it was different for B&Bs.

'And suddenly it all began again — the TV crews, the hate mail and phone calls, the cancellations...'
Police patrolled the lane outside for five months.

'It was probably about as bad as religious persecution gets in this country. It made us so sad that people could be so disrespectful of our beliefs.'

Because they need them to operate the business, the Wilkinsons couldn't simply shut down their email accounts and change their numbers. Instead they had to fish through hundreds of obscene missives from senders such as I.M.A. Bigot and worse.

So among all that bile and hatred, did they receive any support? Any emails saying, well done, you've done the right thing standing up for old-fashioned Christian values?

'Oh yes. Hundreds and thousands, from all around the world. Look at this one that came today.' He shows me a handwritten missive from a man called Williams in Preston that read 'Good luck! God made Adam and Eve — not Adam and Steve!'

What a dreadful mess. One can only imagine the nightmare through which the Wilkinsons have lived over the last few years.

Of course, it must have been a grave and shocking affront to poor Messrs Black and Morgan to be turned away from a pre-booked room in a cosy-looking B&B at 6.30pm on a dark Friday evening. And, of course, Susanne and Mike shouldn't be merrily promising 'a very warm welcome to all their guests' if that isn't the case.

Some might even say they shouldn't even be running a B&B in 21st-century Britain.

But surely, whatever the court determines in the next couple of weeks, their 'crime' — sticking fervently to their admittedly old-fashioned views within their own home — cannot be deserving of the vicious torrent of bile, obscenity, hatred, bullying and death threats that nearly swept them away.