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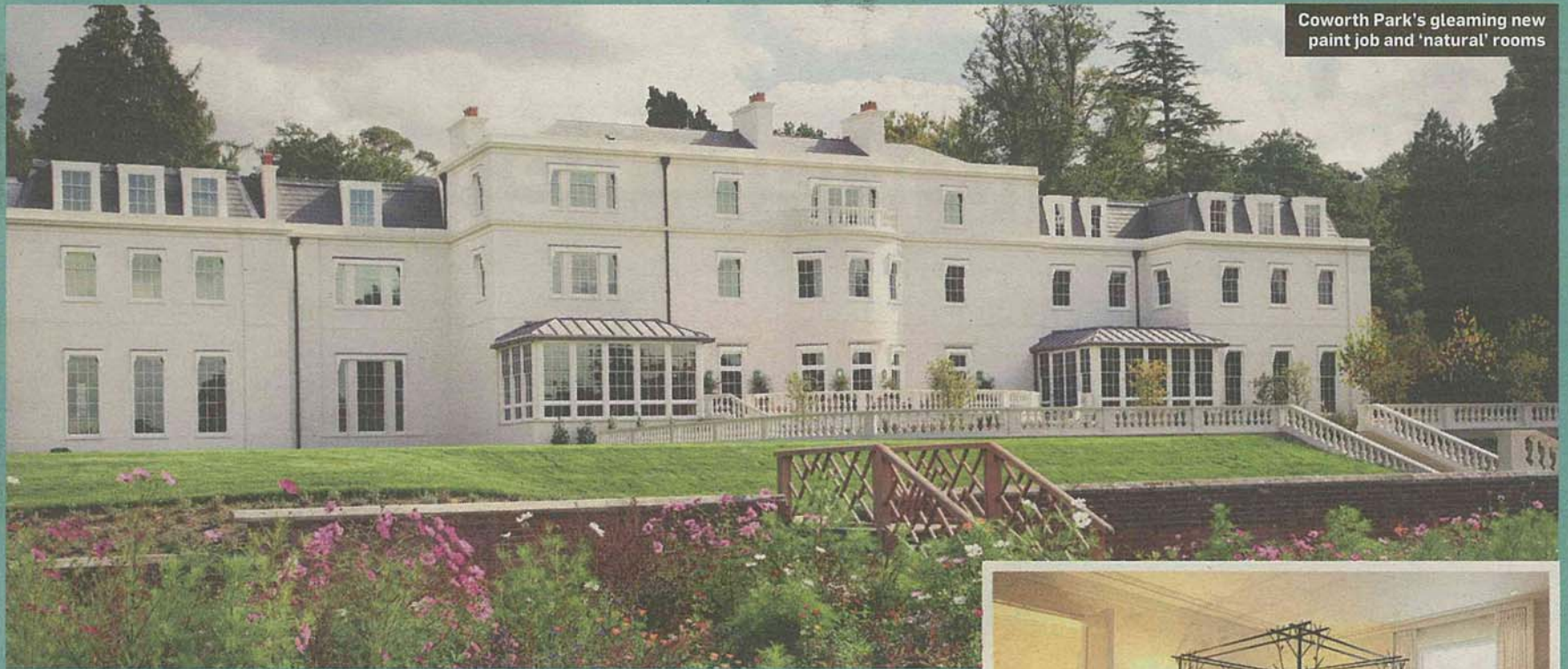
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Coworth Park's gleaming new paint job and 'natural' rooms

THE DORCHESTER GOES TO THE STICKS



Toby Glanville

What did you say? One of London's swankiest hotels is opening a rural outpost? Will that work? Susan d'Arcy is the first to find out

The Dorchester is the most opulent of London hotels, a place where even the blackest of credit cards can reach its limit. If you walk in off the street and ask for a double for the night, you'll get little change from £700 — a suite could sting by as much as £2,250. That's oligarch territory, for people with their surnames on oil wells and copper mines. The question is, does that clientele fancy a nice weekend in the North Downs?

The Dorchester's Asian owners think so, and Coworth Park, an elegant Georgian manor in 240 acres of pedigree parkland outside Ascot, is their gamble on it. It opens tomorrow. The Brunei Investment Agency has spent three years and an undisclosed sum on the property (as the company is worth \$30 billion, add a couple of noughts to your wildest guess). I feared the blinging worst — but, after a sneak preview, I'm impressed.

Coworth Park is a thoroughly modern, thoroughly British affair, crammed full of covetable pieces by up-and-coming British artists. It's whimsical rather than trendy, but definitely not the National Trust kitsch fest I had anticipated: there are fireplaces adorned with broken pieces of Spode china, "cable-knit" sofas and chandeliers fashioned from copper pots and pans. It's a style that is less likely to appeal to siliconed Russian socialites than to us Brits, especially given our unshakeable belief that a weekend

away must involve a tortuously long walk, several blisters and, if at all possible, a drenching resulting in a serious drop in body temperature. Because, stunning as Coworth's interiors are, this place isn't about strutting indoors but striding outdoors, so it's surrounded not by manicured lawns, but by wonderfully unkempt wild-flower meadows.

The management's fervent hope is that guests will sit down to dinner in the Barn, too exhausted from their exertions to have changed out of their muddy boots. How the head of housekeeping will laugh. And the Michelin-starred chef, John Campbell, is unlikely to whoop with delight if you rock up to his fine dining room with straw still in your hair.

His fabulous food certainly merits a very posh frock. The emphasis is on locally sourced British cuisine, and, again, it's surprising. Campbell suggests that diners match his crab starter with a beer. Not any old beer, of course — like everything at Coworth, from the furniture to the flowers, the soap to the staff's natty tweed jackets, the ale has been specially commissioned.

You sleep in one of the 30 bedrooms in the Mansion House, each with huge Georgian windows, high ceilings and bucolic backdrops (the only sign of civilisation being the house where John Lennon wrote Imagine), or the 40 in the Stables and the Cottages. This is a modern extension (built by a

former owner, the Selfridges supremo Galen Weston, in the 1990s), but you won't feel short-changed. The battered brick and black-slatted exteriors and cobblestone courtyard make it cosy and, although you sacrifice views, the rooms are lovely. As in the Mansion House, the decor is neutral and natural, with smoked oak floors and gorgeous freestanding copper baths. The only note that jars is the graffiti-scrawled wardrobes. To me, they resemble a bus shelter in a dodgy part of town.

As this is part of the Dorchester Collection, there's plenty of swank factor. It's the only hotel in Britain with polo fields, you can hack in Windsor Great Park on Grand Prix dressage horses, and its spa is the first in the world to offer facials by Dr Alkaitis — Gisele's a fan, so who cares if you're paying £120 for lotions made with brussels sprouts and cabbage? Your room key also buys you a round of golf at nearby Wentworth.

I imagine this is also the only hotel serving beech tea... stay with me. Guests can tap the estate's beech trees and turn the sap into a delicious brew, epitomising Coworth's desire to be both quirky and quintessentially British.

❖ Coworth Park has doubles from £235, B&B; 01344 876600, coworthpark.com

SIX MORE GREAT BRITISH OPENINGS

SOUTH SANDS, DEVON

This 27-room boutique, shoehorned into a luscious bay outside nautical Salcombe, has breezy New England decor (think driftwood, ropes and marine pastels) and appeals equally to the yachtie and totty markets: board shorts mingle happily with little black dresses on its ocean-liner deck and in the glass-fronted restaurant. *Doubles from £120, B&B; 01548 859000, southsands.com*

BLYTHSWOOD SQUARE, GLASGOW

The reincarnation of the Royal Scottish Automobile Club's HQ is racy in all the right ways: a grand sweeping staircase, sexy bedrooms with vast marble bathrooms and a lush champagne bar with scarlet-fringed lamps (a nod to the fact that this was once the city's red-light district). There are also tasteful reminders of its former glory days, with vintage motoring photographs everywhere. *Doubles from £120, B&B; 0141 208 2458, townhousecompany.com/blythswoodsquare*

LIME WOOD, HAMPSHIRE

This super-stylish bolt hole has been an instant hit. With a budget of £30m for just 29 rooms, it's no surprise that the quality is several cuts above the norm. Bedrooms are in restful moss greens and dove greys, there's a seriously glamorous bar and, at the cool all-day diner, the Scullery, you can tuck in to bloody mary on toast for £6. *Doubles from £245, room-only; 023 8028 7177, limewood.co.uk*

THE SCARLET, CORNWALL

The eco-chic, adults-only Scarlet is unquestionably the most desirable Cornish address right now. The 37-room hotel overlooks a dramatic stretch of splash at Mawgan Porth and rooms, all with balconies, terraces or courtyard gardens, are an ode to organic minimalism. The restaurant keeps its food miles as low as they can go, and the ayurvedic spa promises a carbon-free journey for mind and body. The height of decadence is a dip in its log-fired, cliff-edge hot tubs. *Doubles from £180, B&B; 01637 861800, scarlethotel.co.uk*

ROCKLIFFE HALL, CO DURHAM

It's the biggest country-house opening in the north for years — a £60m restoration of a Victorian gothic pile in pretty countryside, about 20 miles from Durham. Granted, some of the interior design verges on the blingy, but in its favour are the spa, which has an impressive thermal suite, the food, overseen by the Michelin-starred wonderkid Kenny Atkinson and the service, which manages to be five-star yet friendly. *Doubles from £190, B&B; 01325 729999, rockliffehall.com*

SWAN HOTEL, LAKE DISTRICT

This 17th-century coaching inn at the southern tip of Lake Windermere reopened in May, after a £4m face-lift — with a freshly floral English country decor. It has 52 rooms, an olde-worlde pub serving Dickie Doodle (that's an ale, not an old colonel) and a fancy spa with fabulously unfancy prices (90-minute Espa facials for £70 — that's half what you'd pay south of Watford). *Doubles from £99, B&B; 015395 31681, swanhotel.com*



SUNDAY TIMES ONLINE

ST Watch a video of Susan d'Arcy testing out Coworth Park, at thesundaytimes.co.uk/travel