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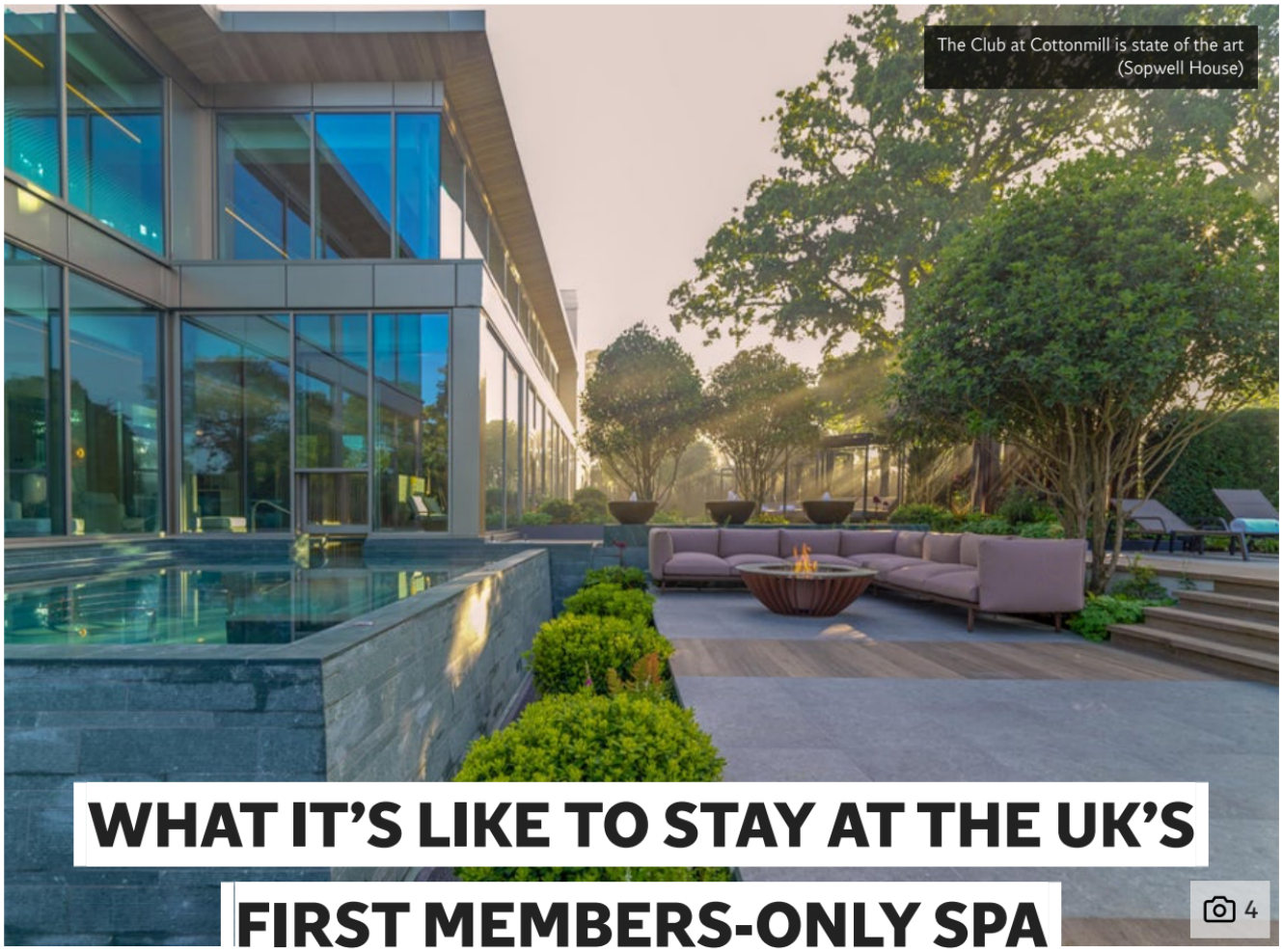

The Club at Cottonmill is state of the art (Sopwell House)

WHAT IT'S LIKE TO STAY AT THE UK'S FIRST MEMBERS-ONLY SPA

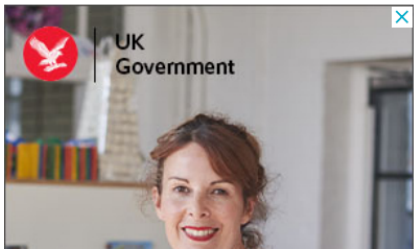
4

Helen Coffey checks into St Albans' new wellbeing club

Helen Coffey | @LenniCoffey | Monday 10 February 2020 13:29

The last time I went to Sopwell House, a spa hotel in St Albans, it was for – unusually for my local comp – a "fancy" sixth-form ball. As I recall, I spent a large part of the evening drunkenly hunting for my contact lens on the function room floor after it popped out of my eyeball (spoiler: I never found it).

And, boy, has it changed since the early Noughties. At the time, I



remember finding it a bit dated and stuffy – the kind of place your mum would want to take you for a celebratory lunch rather than, say, the all-you-can-eat buffet at Pizza Hut (my preferred option as a teenager with impeccable taste).

Since then it has undergone a miraculous transformation. The biggest change is the new £14m Cottonmill Spa, unveiled last year, which purports to be the UK's first "members-only" spa: it's all about "building a lifestyle community", according to the brochure. Despite the members-club claims, hotel guests can access the facilities too, although there's a somewhat cruel two-tier system in place: while guests can relax in the revamped Cottonmill area, with pool, hot tub, steam room and sauna, they don't automatically gain access to the swishiest new facilities, cosseted in an inner sanctum dubbed the Club at Cottonmill (unless, of course, they pay more). Which is a shame, considering this is the real draw for wellness aficionados.

Understated luxury at the Club *(Sopwell House)*

Although much improved, stepping from the original spa into the Club feels a little like passing from Soviet-era Eastern Europe to the dazzle of the consumerist west. You even need a special electronic bracelet just to get through the door, adding to the feel of exclusivity as you strut past the hoi polloi, who stare daggers as you leave. Stare away my pretties! For I will soon be ensconced in luxury…

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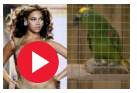
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Where the original spa looks nice enough, The Club is all stylish muted tones, pale wood and matte-gold accents. Both the ground and first floor relaxation spaces are set against floor-to-ceiling windows to let in the daylight, allowing guests to let their gaze linger upon the manicured spa gardens, dotted with loungers and outdoor hot tubs. The indoor-outdoor hydrotherapy pool (a must if you want to be taken seriously in the spa game these days) is wonderfully hot, steam billowing from it into the crisp winter air when we visit.

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The upstairs area has the added bonus of being a quiet zone, meaning those who prefer their relaxation companions to be seen and not heard (definitely my preference – how else can one concentrate on one's trashy magazine?) can lounge at ease. Alongside all the accoutrements you'd expect at a state-of-the-art wellness facility (multiple saunas with views and themed steam rooms – one of which is so searingly hot I'm mildly scalded on the hamstrings), there are also some unexpected delights.

My inner neophile adores discovering a feature I've never come across before – at The Club, this turns out to be a sci-fi relaxation room complete with space-age "pods", optimised lighting and "soundscapes". It feels like being in an alien incubation chamber and I LOVE it.

4

Alien incubation chamber, anyone? *(Sopwell House)*

The only thing I love more than a never-before-experienced spa room? A never-before-experienced spa treatment. Sopwell House has upped its range of treatments and treatment rooms as part of the new Cottonmill opening, and I opt to try a signature Sound and Sand experience. It sounds intriguing. It *is* intriguing. I'm invited to clamber onto a bed of warm, rose-quartz sand that moulds to my body (there's a cover over the top to ensure I do not sully the sand with my sweat, fear not). Some kind of singing bowl is placed on my back and hit at intervals so that I get the benefit of the humming vibrations. Somewhere among all of this is a full-body massage, which I enjoy when not distracted by all the gongs.

After all that excitement, there are splendid digs to return to in the form of the Mews Suites. These too are a huge improvement from the hotel of my memories, and were added in 2015. Separate from the main hotel, the Mews has its own private gates and suites are set in landscaped gardens created by RHS Chelsea and Hampton Court Palace Flower Show gold-medal winner Ann-Marie Powell. Some of the suites feature four-poster beds, private terraces and cedar wood outdoor spa baths – all offer access to a large central hot tub, the focal point of the gardens. Style-wise, it's country living-cosy-meets modern, with white shutters on the doors, tartan sofas and a neutral colour palette; pictures of stags and frolicking foxes in frock coats dot the walls. The bathroom, stacked with Elemis products, is furnished in grown-up slate and wood.

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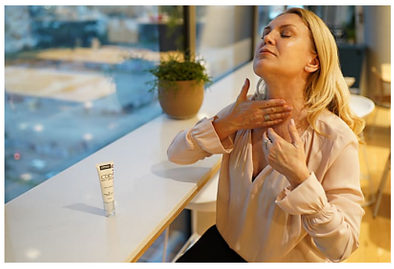

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Sopwell House Mews has the hotel's plushest suites *(Sopwell House)*

The only bit that really takes me back to 2004 is a corridor in the main hotel that's lined with signed football shirts in frames. Sad and faded, they look like they've been there for 20 years – and they probably have been. It's an incongruous detail against the lacquered luxury of all the new facilities.

Still, you can always squint as you pass through it to reach the restaurant, where finessed British classics such as 62-degree egg with salt-baked celeriac and truffle, and monkfish with garlic pomme puree and tempura crab, replace the calories you've burnt off by doing… oh yes. Absolutely nothing.

All-in-all, I'm satisfied that 17-year-old Helen would be utterly dumbfounded by the remarkable transformation Sopwell House has undergone since her somewhat naff sixth-form ball. Now all I need is a membership. Or, failing that, an all-you-can-eat Pizza Hut buffet.

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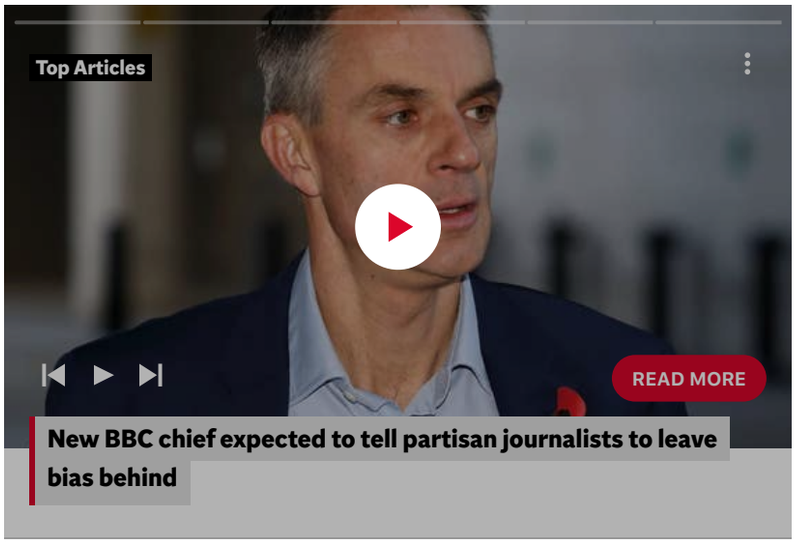
Membership at Cottonmill from £130 a month; membership at The Club from £258 a month.

The Club Winter Indulgence package, available until 27 February 2020, includes overnight accommodation in a Mews suite, full English breakfast and full use of The Club at Cottonmill facilities. From £194.50pp (Sunday-Thursday) or £219.50pp (Friday-Saturday).



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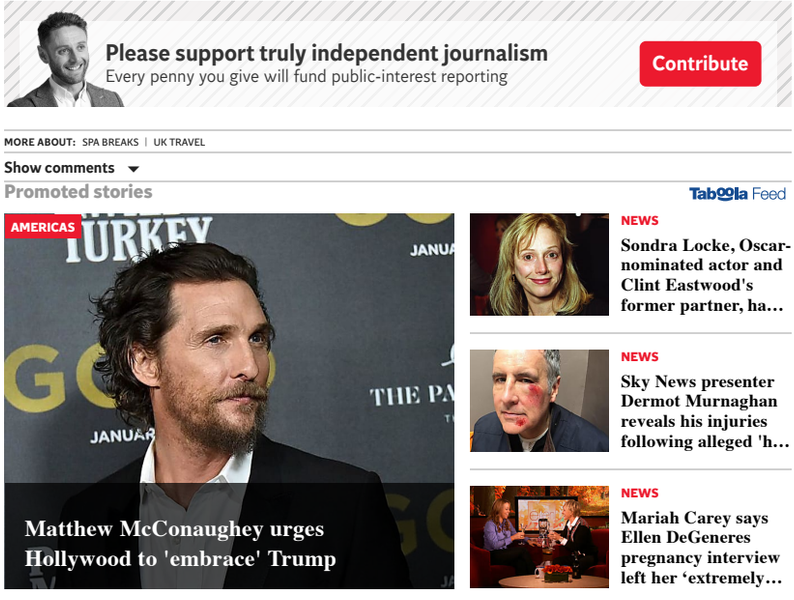

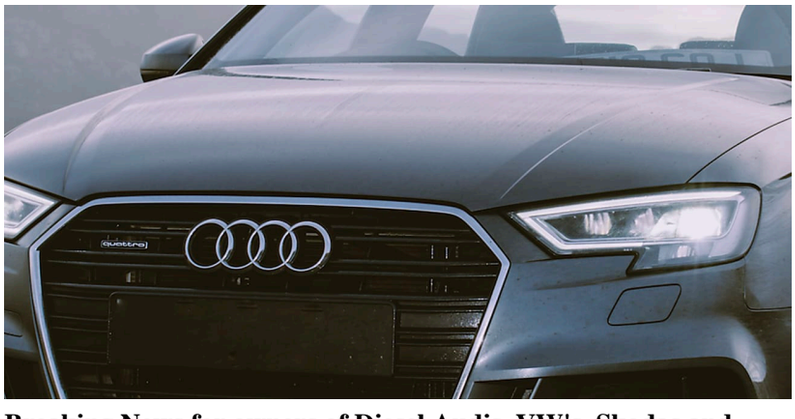

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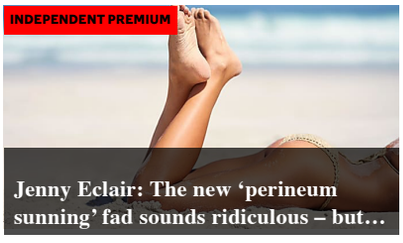

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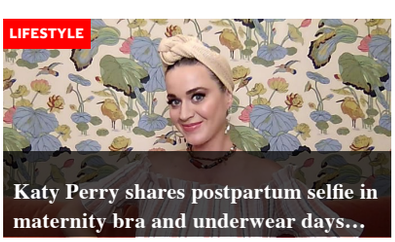

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