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Elegance is an attitude

Jennifer Lawrence



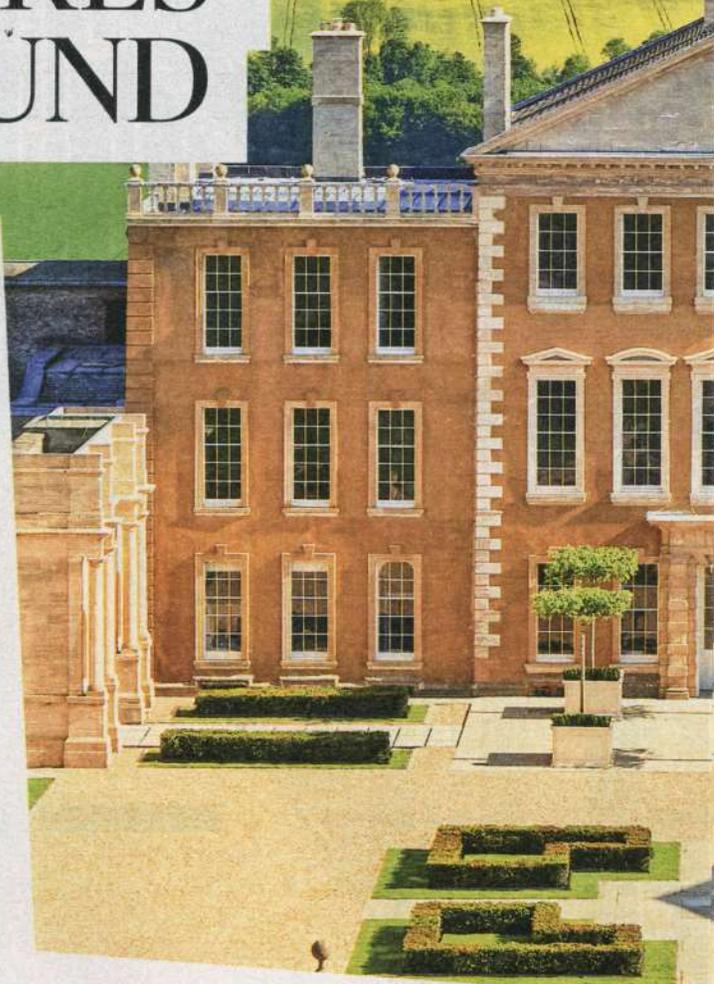
LONGINES  




# WELCOME TO THE COST LOADS THE BILLIONAIRES' NEW PLAYGROUND



Actor Regé-Jean Page, left, with the CEO of US interiors giant RH, Gary Friedman, at the brand's UK launch at Aynho Park earlier this month. Right: the grade II listed members' club Estelle Manor. Opposite: the exterior at Aynho





It already has private clubs, A-list spas and hedgefunder retreats. But just when you thought posh Oxfordshire couldn't get any more luxe, along comes a super-rich American with big plans. And he's not the only one. Simon Mills hangs out in the Cotswolds

**A**lavish, bucolic bacchanal straight out of Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby* movie, the party is firing now. It's early June, DJ Idris Elba is on the decks with Pete Tong, Ellen DeGeneres and Portia de Rossi joining him in the booth, and the sound system is pumping out Kylie's *Padam Padam* summer 2023 anthem. There's a huge raised dancefloor with a negroni bar on one side and martini mixology team on the other. Canapés are flowing from a kitchen teeming with chefs.

This isn't a party in Los Angeles or Miami. We are instead looking over Capability Brown-landscaped gardens and closely mown ha-has as herds of deer graze in the green and pleasant distance. Architect John Pawson and former Tory party co-chairman Ben Elliot are admiring Sir John Soane's mastery of symmetry, scale and light as Regé-Jean Page from *Bridgerton*, Sydney Sweeney from *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Avatar* superstar Zoe Saldana step from fleets of black limos on the gravel apron outside, into the 17th-century house's grand entrance.

Welcome to Aynho Park, north Oxfordshire, a handy nine miles from Soho Farmhouse and 20 miles from the Daylesford Organic farm shop, meeting place for anyone enjoying the Cotswolds One Percenter Parcs experience. The estate, which under its previous owners played host to Jade Jagger's wedding in 2012 and Noel Gallagher's 50th birthday in 2017, has been revamped and jet-setted by new California-based billionaire owners.

The house, once Aynhoe Park, is now called the Gallery at Aynho Park, taking the name of the quiet village next door. At a cost that may be more than £50 million, the house has been transformed into an immaculately rendered temple to aspirant taupe and white, its high and airy halls and drawing rooms home to precisely curated exhibitions of cabinets in engineered teak and forged bronze, kayak-sized day beds, smoothly finished tall boys, marble-topped drawers and console tables and section sofas of rich, clean-lined, low-profile modernism. Instead of bright colours, there are 50 shades of grey and even more variations on white.

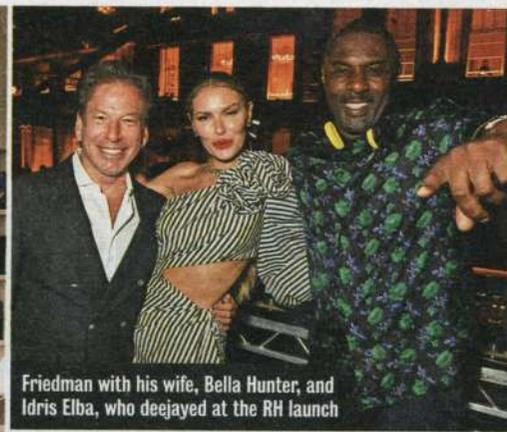
This is the first UK outpost of the American cult furniture brand RH, aka Restoration Hardware, which boasts Kylie Jenner, Jessica Alba, Gwyneth Paltrow and Meghan Markle among its celebrity clientele. (Its Prado teak coffee table in weathered grey sat between the Duke and Duchess of Sussex and Oprah Winfrey during their 2021 interview.) You can't stay here – it's essentially a showroom with restaurants.

This is an experiential retail concept that monetises the old aristocratic "at home"

## The Gallery at Aynho Park



Friedman in Aynho's architecture and design library



Friedman with his wife, Bella Hunter, and Idris Elba, who deejayed at the RH launch



The Orangery restaurant at Aynho

## The entry level for a weekend bolt hole is £3 million

invitation. Come to RH's country house crib for a wood-fired truffle pizza at its outdoor Loggia restaurant (imagine a transplanted slice of Malibu), a glass of chilled blush on the sunset-adjacent terrace, or to browse the weighty design books in the Soane-dedicated library, and then decide to buy the suite of garden furniture you are sitting on, or the famous RH Cloud modular couch (a three-piece sofa is \$8,000, around £6,400) that you just admired in one of the bedrooms upstairs – it's just like the ones Naomi Watts and Kendall Jenner have.

RH has more than 70 of these "galleries" across America, mostly in townhouses or converted warehouses in places where there is established and newly arriving money: Palm Beach, Los Angeles, Manhattan. There are also two jets, the RH One and Two, and RH Three, a superyacht sailing the Mediterranean and the Bahamas. And now this house near Banbury, on the edge of the Cotswolds.

Meanwhile, near Kingham, the Daylesford Organic brand's expansion has seen it move from posh farm and furniture shop to a full-on, campus-style five-star wellness experience with pool, spa and padel (it's a squash/tennis hybrid) courts. At the Club by Bamford, membership costs from £2,250, plus a £500 joining fee.

And 20 miles south of Aynho there is Estelle Manor at Eynsham, an outlet of blingy Mayfair members' club Maison Estelle, owned

by Ennismore, the hospitality company behind Gleneagles. A country club concept decadently reimagined by Kate Hudson's favourite interior designers, Roman and Williams, it is a maximalist adventure in texture and tactility set in a grade II listed, 1908 neo-Jacobean hall. Membership fees are £3,600 per annum, plus £500 joining fee.

Back at Aynho, RH's American CEO, Gary Friedman, is having lunch, a smoked salmon salad, at the sun-dappled Orangery restaurant, on a comfy banquette that you might like to own one day, talking about John Soane's genius and Regency-era neo-classicism. A self-confessed autodidact, the billionaire with a deep tan, good teeth and a new 33-year-old Australian wife called Bella Hunter (they just got married in Ibiza) is 65 years old and wears white jeans and tobacco suede sneakers. He freely admits that, before he came to Aynho – which he first clocked in an estate agent's brochure while sitting in the private jet lounge at Luton airport, before flying in for a viewing by chopper from the heliport at Battersea, obviously – he'd never heard of the Cotswolds, Soane or Capability Brown and had no idea what a ha-ha was. Why would he?

Friedman grew up poor in Sonoma, California. He was not a great student, was expelled from community college and was the kind of person who thought that a colour TV was a signifier of wealth. He took a job at

## Estelle Manor



The living room at the private members' club

## Daylesford



Daylesford Organic's farm shop

## The Lakes by Yoo



A lakeside villa at John Hitchcox's upscale development

## Soho Farmhouse



The bar and dining area

Gap where he was promoted to store manager by its CEO, Millard "Mickey" Drexler, soon becoming the youngest regional manager at the company. After Gap, Friedman was poached by Pottery Barn, which he grew into a billion-dollar home furnishings company. After 14 years Friedman left to take over Restoration Hardware, a former "mom and pop" home fixer-upper outlet that specialised in boomer-baiting accessories including garden gnomes and hand-cranked pencil sharpeners. In 2001, with the company "on the edge of bankruptcy", he saw an opportunity for reinvention.

Channelling the approach of European furniture makers like the upscale Ligne Roset, Poltrona Frau and B&B Italia, and influenced by the work of the British architect and designer Anouska Hempel, RH went big on Aman Resorts-style space, rigour and restraint. With the help of investment from Warren Buffett, the brand became a cult lifestyle look. People didn't just buy one piece at a time but went for the total "Resto" thing in the same way that people in the UK do, say, Arts and Crafts. Shunning all in-house social media – RH has no branded Instagram account – it cleverly became the most instagrammed furniture company in the world.

With a valuation of around \$5.86 billion, the RH brand extends to interior design services, hospitality, guest houses and property. So, is Europe next in line for RH domination? "Americans aren't really known for taste," Friedman says candidly. "All the luxury brands in the world are basically from Europe and the UK. Yes, we had Tiffany, but then the French bought it. What we're trying to do with RH is something no one's ever done – to take an American brand that started probably at the base of what I call the luxury mountain and turn it into a genuine American luxury brand. To climb that mountain." Britain, he admits, will be a challenge. Particularly, this very specific little Britain of the Cotswolds? Friedman is keen for enlightenment.

The dining table talk is about the varnishing, zhoooshing and smartening up of the already opalescent Cotswolds around Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire, the area's remarkable transformation from rural to retail, the notion of more brass than muck sloshing around its villages and estates these days, Chelsea tractors far outnumbering Massey Fergusons and country inns charging Mayfair prices. The way that the Cotswolds is also, variously, "The Cost Loads", "the Coutts Wolds" (TM Nicky Haslam) and, inevitably, the C\*\*\*swolds.

The entry level for a weekend bolt hole is now around £3 million, but if you really want to impress like-minded locals, you'll need to spend at least £5 million, say Cotswolds regulars. The pages of Country Life's recent Cotswolds property special offer its readers,

"A six-bedroom Cotswolds stone house on the edge of Little Tew... Rural outlook and within close proximity to Soho House," for £4 million, and Edgeworth Manor in Gloucestershire – baronial, nine bedrooms, with a barrel-vaulted dining room – for £18 million.

This is all good news to Friedman, who works on instinct and gut feeling rather than excessive due diligence and extensive research. He's a man who, despite spending more than \$1 million on Aynho's staircase alone (complete with a supercamp statue of Hercules, multiple wall-mounted intaglios and huge mirrors), plus a further \$5 million on antiques and decorative exotica for the house's interiors, doesn't really know where his £1 million staircase is, exactly.

Someone around the table offers an explanation. "Basically, the Cotswolds is to London what the Hamptons is to New York." We all nod in agreement. Certainly, Friedman and his RH team like this idea – the direct, 90-minute drive out of London on the M40, the nearby Oxford airport with its private jet facilities, the abundance of chopper pads on people's front lawns, are all good for the brand launch. We reel off the plethora of new openings and happenings in this land of (organic almond) milk and honey-coloured stone and area of outstanding international snooty: in addition to Estelle Manor, the sprawling extension of the Lakes by Yoo waterside residential development and its new Kate Moss-hosted spa over by the pretty village of Lechlade.

Then there's Range Rover House, a car clubhouse for well-heeled, clean-wheeled 4x4 enthusiasts on the Daylesford campus and the recently green-lit plans for a £150 million Norman Foster-designed Mullin Automotive Park at Enstone airfield, just down the road from the still growing Soho Farmhouse. The inflow of money, the free availability of sourdough, scented candles and bottarga-sprinkled salads, the whirl of Sikorsky blades overhead. This new Cotswolds is a weekend escape protectively domed by affluence and achievement that even the British riff-raff can't spoil.

What has triggered this rampant Hamptonsisation? How come the Americans are suddenly interested in the once quintessentially English "sheep enclosure in rolling hills", and why are estate agents now referring to the prime Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire territory as "a brand destination"?

One has to acknowledge the influence of *Downton Abbey* – village scenes were filmed at Bampton – and Cameron Diaz and Jude Law in the perennially cosy movie *The Holiday*, parts of which were shot at Cornwell Manor near Chipping Norton in Oxfordshire. Then there's the success of *Clarkson's Farm* (at Chadlington) on Prime Video. ➔

The seemingly never-ending influx of A-list residents: the Beckhams, Goldsmiths, Johnsons, Cowells and Camerons, industrial designers Marc Newson and Sir Jony Ive, formerly of Apple. There's the celebrated notoriety, stamina and indulgence of the original "Chipping Norton set" (Blur's Alex James et al), the constant trade and revamping of public houses by blue-chip landlords – Lady Carole Bamford has added to her portfolio with the Fox at Oddington and the Bell at Charlbury, once JRR Tolkien's favourite boozier. The locations may be rural, but the speed, ambition and budgets, the menus and lunch cheques and interior design concepts, are all distinctly urban.

Not everyone is happy – least of all some residents of Aynho village, which dates back to Anglo-Saxon times, who fear a stream of 4x4s roaring through their village all year long. Indeed, the wave of citification is a problem for anyone not of the Range Rover or chopper classes. As far back as 2015 AA Gill railed at the Cotswolds' "desperate slums of snobbery, mired stews of avarice, envy and garden-furniture insecurity", its "Hades... of urine-coloured stone and twinkly, antiquified retirement" and "the great pursed lips of smugness".

Eight years on, Nicky Haslam, who keeps a small manor house at Oddington on the Bamfords' estate, complains that the food offering in the Cotswolds is "too much like London's". "It's not what the country's for, being turned into the town," he says. "Convenience in the country is what's wrong. I want to make it more inconvenient, make it wilder." (Haslam clearly hasn't heard about a proposed BT-funded "Project Skyway", which will create a 165-mile drone corridor above Reading, Oxford and Milton Keynes. The UK's first drone superhighway, the largest and longest network of its kind in the world, will facilitate package delivery, making it possible to eat Berkeley Street-prepared sushi on one's Little Barrington terrace.) Of course, these glum first-world moanings fall on deaf ears and cannot be heard anyway in one's soundproofed Land Rover Defender XS Edition.

Astride his e-bike, developer and Range Rover driver John Hitchcox says he is loath to describe his vast and still growing the Lakes by Yoo property in hack-friendly soundbites. His PR team, he says, have advised him not to describe it in terms such as "Countryside-lite", "Smuglins" (ie Smug Butlin's), "West London-sur-Lac", or "Center Parcs for Hedgefundlers". But as we whizz around the gravelled paths and lakeside dirt tracks, across meadows and among the 500,000 trees Hitchcox's team have planted, to Simon and Yasmin Le Bon's new house, past Kay Burley's immaculately furnished

turnkey apartment complete with brand-selected coffee-table books and Indonesian objets, Philippe Starck's incredible three-storey, pagoda-roofed construction now nearing completion, the hangar where Jools Holland stashes his classic Bentley, the new marquee restaurant where Natalie Imbruglia just played a private gig, past the *Succession* meets *Swallows and Amazons* aesthetic of wood-clad, water-adjacent, £14 million weekend retreats owned by various bankers, sheikhs and Bloomberg sorts, and the art park with its sculptures by Kaws and Yoshitomo Nara, past that Kate Moss-branded spa, the pool house that hosts a massive, multiscreen David Hockney digital work in its lobby, the house the Google team rents for its annual get-together, the idyllic stretch of water where Manchester City's Phil Foden recently landed a huge pike, it becomes very evident that the Lakes by Yoo might not be, well... for all of you.

## The wave of citification is a problem for anyone not of the Range Rover or chopper classes

Hitchcox first came here back in 1999, introduced to the Cotswolds by his friend Matthew Freud (now living in the magnificent Burford Priory, just down the A361). Having co-founded the successful Manhattan Loft company in the city, Hitchcox had a hunch that there was a group of well-off, urban-dwelling people who, like him and his young family, wanted somewhere to go and something nice to do at the weekends. Ruling out anywhere further than 90 minutes from London, he landed on a plot of Gloucestershire farmland, transforming it into a sort of Scandi/Minneapolis, wetlands estate/resort project, punctuated with *Grand Designs*-style prefabricated wooden homes that extend out over fresh water. It took a painful ten years to get the planning permission through.

"Everyone thought I was mad," Hitchcox says. "They said no one would come." He persisted, partnering with designer Philippe Starck on some house concepts and starting small with just a few plots. More than a decade later, the Lakes by Yoo is now 170 houses on 850 acres with prices ranging from £1.3 million for a cabin to £10 million for a house on a two-acre plot. A new project, Cotswolds Waters, will comprise a further 160 acres, 74 houses and 63 apartments with prices pitched at £2 million-£6 million. With some of the houses at the Lakes already

designed by the likes of Elle Macpherson and Jade Jagger, a Lakes at Yoo x Restoration Hardware collaboration is surely in the offing.

Hitchcox explains that his clientele, like RH's, are "cash-rich, time-poor" banker, family-man types who have scanned Country Life for olde Cotswolds stone properties with leaky roofs, decided they don't want that and then been delighted to discover that there is a place where all the decorating and fitting out is already done, the heating works and there is a kids' club and a Pilates studio for the Euro-missus. "Wealthy people don't just want stuff," Hitchcox says. "They want a lifestyle and community, safety, security and a sense of wellbeing." A bit of profit too – properties here have enjoyed 10 per cent annual growth in the past 20 years.

A recent insurance assessment, Hitchcox tells me, valued the Lakes by Yoo development at £900 million. The raft of new openings signifying the apparently unstoppable rise of the Cotswolds is good for business, he says, smiling.

The Cotswolds weekender finishes with cocktails and a 150 quid-a-head Chinese dinner over at Estelle Manor, which is geographically convenient to my own modest, three-bedroom semi-Cotswolds stone detached home near Witney. David Beckham's best pal, Dave Gardner, and Jessica Simon, daughter of the Accessorize retail tycoon Peter Simon, are sitting at neighbouring tables. Later on this year, the 60-acre hotel and country club will add Eynsham Baths, a Roman spa with a tepidarium bathing hall (and five pools), to its 108 rooms and suites and four restaurants. Members will want to disappear in its damask folds and silk fringes, its velvet cushions and bolsters and its flattering low-lighting, and stay for a month or two drinking negronis and snacking on haute cuisine dim-sum. Estelle's founder, Sharan Pasricha, says he wants the wowzering design to feel "eclectic and layered... Almost like a well-travelled family friend's home, comfortable but filled with curiosities and trinkets."

Who will come? While Soho Farmhouse remains a magnet for millennials and social media influencers, Estelle Manor's decor and prices mean it will cater instead for multimillionaires and fund managers. There will be families as well, Pasricha insists. "These days, many people are either working from home or happy to commute from Oxford to London," he says. The Covid pandemic, Pasricha believes, was a major reset moment for the Cotswolds, with "formerly urban families making big lifestyle changes and moving out of London to Oxford and the surrounding areas for more space and a more beautiful setting", he says. "Estelle Manor is for those people."

I am not so sure. ■