

TRAVEL

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Hartwell House Hotel where you feel like a lord and lady



Hartwell House Hotel and Spa is set within 90 acres of its own parkland.

Laura Nightingale enjoys an overnight stay at historic Grade I property

RICH in elegance and historic grandeur, an overnight stay at Hartwell House Hotel and Spa is a must for any *Downton Abbey* fan.

Hartwell House in Aylesbury is not your average four star hotel.

Set within 90 acres of its own parkland, the National Trust property has a remarkable history stretching back almost a thousand years to the reign of Edward the Confessor.

Retaining many of its original Jacobean and Georgian features, it is therefore unsurprising that the Buckinghamshire country house is quite the venue for any wannabe lord or lady.

My partner and I packed an overnight bag and set off on an hour-and-a-half drive to the 46-bed mansion.

A long sweeping driveway

led us to the Grade I listed stone building, where a porter welcomed us into the spectacular property and after an efficient check-in we were guided through the Great Hall and up a staircase decorated with carved Jacobean figures to our Royal Double room.

Decorated in a cosy and traditional country house style and overlooking the stunning parklands, our large room with impressive sky-high ceilings was classic yet comforting.

Our bedroom, like all others in the beautifully restored 17th century stately home, was superbly furnished with antiques, fine paintings, a sumptuous bed and all the trinkets one would expect in a grand master room.

We felt like we were Lord Grantham and Lady Cora for the night.

Before we got changed into our Sunday bests for dinner in the hotel's 4 AA Red Star fine dining restaurant we visited The Spa.

Through a cobbled courtyard and just a short walk away from the main house is the luxurious indoor heated pool lined with stone statues, steam room, gym, sauna and jacuzzi.

Tranquil and warm, my partner lounged by the water's edge while I indulged in an Aromatherapy Associated full body massage.

Unlike other massages I've had in the past, I was able to pick what oils I wanted smothered into my achy skin.

It was a heavenly 55 minutes and after I pulled myself away from the heated blanket I joined my partner by the shimmering pool side.

The changing rooms at the spa were fabulous, with high

power showers, toiletries, hairdryers, robes and lockers so we showered there before returning to our bedroom to slip into our polished shoes for supper.

The house boasts a number of elegant reception and fancy dining rooms with tall ceilings and historic features for luncheon, afternoon tea and dinner.

We were seated at a round table with thick white linen and heavy sterling silver cutlery, by a window overlooking the marvellous gardens.

The grand restaurant was bustling with well-dressed waiters and guests enjoying seasonal British cuisine from Aylesbury duckling with roasted shallot to salad of forest mushrooms with quail egg.

With a glass of bubbly to start our meal, I chose red mullet as my first course,

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TRAVEL



One of the sumptuous rooms at Hartwell House Hotel.

while my partner opted for smoked chicken and wood pigeon sausage.

With just a short time to wait, our dinner arrived.

The dainty fillet of red mullet was placed in the centre of a pristine white plate. A crunchy, salty skin protected a rich, soft flesh which was beautifully flaky.

Served with a tomato jelly and olive tapenade it tasted as fresh as a local speciality found on the Mediterranean coast.

As we soaked in the aristocratic charm of the venue, the restaurant manager paid our table a visit to make sure we were enjoying our gastronomic experience.

With no complaints our mains shortly followed.

With three menus to choose from - Hartwell Spring, Hartwell Dinner and Celebration Dinner - there was a great selection of main courses from venison loin and sea bass to chicken breast and sea bream.

Carrying on with the fish theme I chose pan-fried fillet of halibut.

Served on a bed of crushed potatoes and leeks and drizzled with a crab sauce, the fish was wonderfully moist and flavoursome and like the mullet, fell off my fork.

Don't expect massive portions, this is a fine dining restaurant after all, but do expect quality ingredients, seasoned perfectly and presented creatively.

Choosing a pudding was just as tricky as picking our savouries, with the likes of caramel pannacotta, cherry and cardamom soufflé, vanilla parfait and milk chocolate tart on offer.

I succumbed to a thick gooey chocolate brownie, baked as you'd expect with a crisp shell and a fudge-like centre. Heaven.

After a deep sleep in our queen size bed, draped traditionally with a floral quilt and footed with a sofa, we woke to glorious Buckinghamshire sunshine.

Breakfast was served in the same restaurant as dinner until 10am (9.30am

weekdays), so we trotted down the sweeping feature staircase to the smell of bacon and warm pastries.

A continental buffet table of stewed fruits, cereals, freshly baked bread and juices were available alongside a menu of cooked-to-order hot breakfasts including full English, Loch Fyne kippers, poached Finnan haddock and smoked salmon.

We enjoyed a morning feast of grilled bacon, sausage, roasted vine tomato, field mushroom and poached eggs - plus a good rummage of the cold spread.

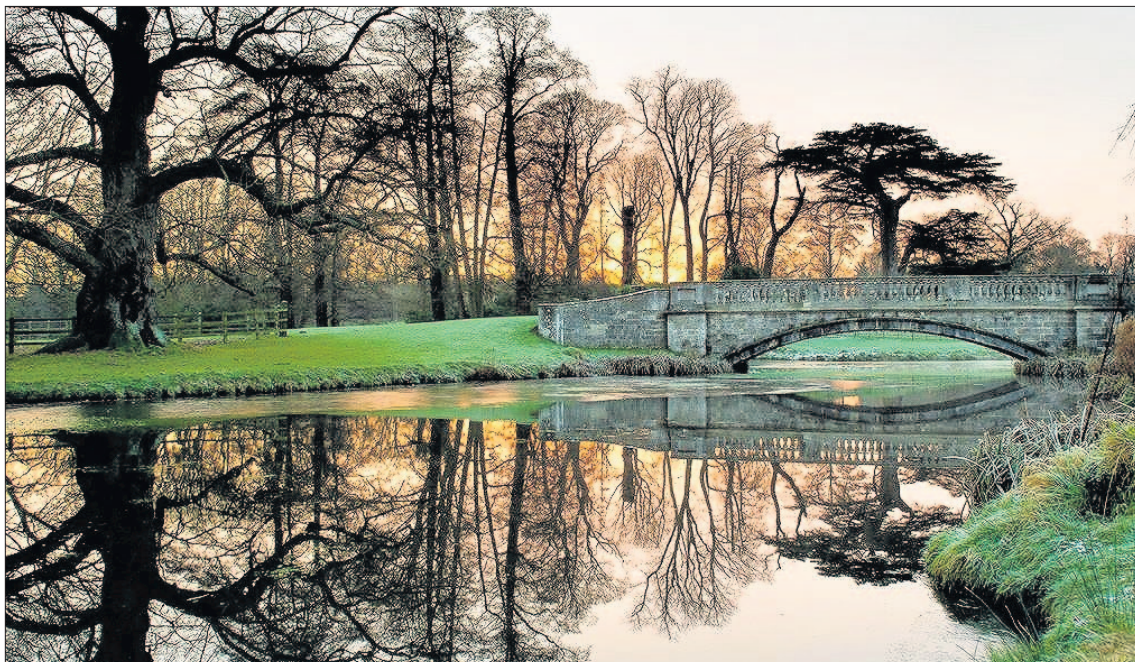
We walked off our morning meal and our visit to Hartwell House with a stroll around the picturesque grounds, on what was a gorgeous start to the day.

■ Laura's stay was provided by Hartwell House. Rooms start from £205 bed and breakfast and include use of the spa facilities and walks in the extensive grounds.

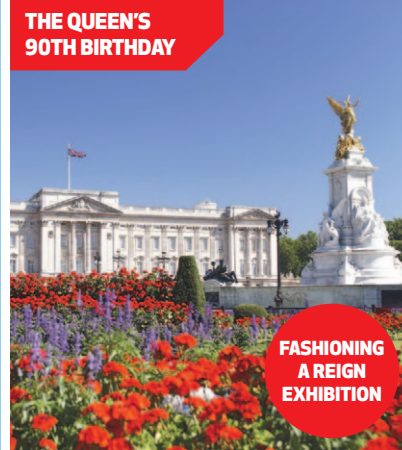
Address: Hartwell House, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, HP17 8NR. Telephone: 01296 747444.



Choosing a pudding was a tricky business.



The extensive grounds at Hartwell House Hotel are a great place to explore.



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