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## Profile



## FINISHING LINE

### **Maria Court minds her manners at a Finishing Academy for proper lay-dees**

IT WAS a weekend when the national papers were riddled with rumours about Madonna's marriage, yet Guy Ritchie's mum remained the consummate professional.

But Lady Amber Leighton – better known as Madge's mother-in-law – was the epitome of style and grace while lecturing on deportment at a Finishing Academy course in the New Forest.

A survivor from a more genteel era, the only finishing school in the country was making its southern debut at Rhinefield House Hotel. People from all over the world have been tripping over their brogues and Hunter wellies to enrol at the academy (courses have also been held in Cheshire, Shropshire and Scotland) in their quest to become a lay-dee.

They want to become exponents of the good, old-fashioned English style of etiquette. Anything else, you understand, just isn't cricket. After a three-day course, female delegates will return home a little more "polished". They'll know how to walk properly, will understand the correct way to respond to a formal invitation (known as a "stiffy", getting its nickname from the embossed card that arrives on the doorstep – the heavier and more embossed the card, the posher the do) and know instantly which fork to use with their soufflé.

They'll have picked up a few tips on the art of social dancing, and know never, NEVER to leave the dinner table to go to the lavatory.

Old fashioned bally-hoo? Or a much-needed kick in the pants of today's less disciplined society? There was only one way to find out...

As I entered the sweeping drive at Rhinefield, I wondered if my choice of clothes was appropriate. Surely the ladies of today should be in twin-set and pearls, with just the right height of heel?

My worries briefly lifted when I saw one of the delegates arriving in jeans, but crashed again when I noticed others sporting suits, heavy jewellery and floor-length coats trimmed with fur.

Among my fellow pupils were 55-year-old Yetunde Abraham, who runs her own etiquette and grooming company in Nigeria and Stefanie Reissner, a 30-year old lecturer in strategic management, who admitted to needing "more confidence in certain social situations".

The Finishing Academy was founded by businesswomen Penny Edge and Diana Mather. After the launch of an initial course aimed at instilling old-fashioned values in 16-18 year olds they were inundated with enquiries from adults wanting to enrol. Separate courses were introduced for men and women, which are attracting people aged 16 to 60-something.

"Our aim is to take traditional values but put them in a 21st century context," explained Diana, a former actress and BBC Breakfast TV presenter. "The right behaviour will take you anywhere in society, and good manners are classless, priceless, and ageless."

Such values toppled like a pack of cards when the country's finishing schools closed their doors for the final time. At the height of their popularity, it wasn't uncommon for a young lady to attend for a whole year.

One of the first things I was taught at the Finishing Academy (apart from how to put together a floral arrangement "that would make an excellent gift") is that manners and etiquette are treated as two completely different subjects.

"Manners are when you make a person feel completely at ease," said Diana. "So if one of your guests picks up their plate to slurp their gravy, you should do the same."

And Diana stressed the importance of learning to accept courteous acts from men gracefully. Giving up their seat for you, or offering to carry your bags makes them feel more manly, she said.

Etiquette, on the other hand, focuses on the rules by which society lives.

These are the kind of rules that get you invited back to that shooting party or fishing weekend in the country.

A dinner invitation stating "black tie", for example, indicates the party is formal, although women can wear a long or short dress.

A white tie affair (and wing collars should only be worn with white ties) means that ladies can slip into their best ballgowns, gloves and, of course, diamonds.

What about those race meetings? Heels shouldn't be too thin, and you should always complement the hosts by meeting the horses they are racing.

By all means wear a hat to Ascot (pronounced Askut), but take it off in the box (although beware unsightly "hat hair" which is a definite no-no.)

"Point-to-points are a different matter," said Diana. "Wear Barbours and wellies! You'll be eating out of the back of a Land Rover later."

So now I know!

Whatever the occasion, it's important to carry yourself well, and a few bound volumes were wheeled out to help with our department session.

Scott of the Antarctic and I didn't do too badly, although my rictus grin probably let the side down. And we heard the not-so-gentle sound of leather bound volumes on floor as the books came crashing down from our heads.

As this was a finishing academy for the 21st century, we were also treated to a Mo Jive dance lesson (today's equivalent of social dancing), a lecture on interior design, as well as a colour and style consultation with Michaela Jedinak, founder of image consultancy Joy of Colour.

The right hues, apparently, can really bring a little verve to one's wardrobe, and a lot more confidence to the wearer – the underlying ethos of the Finishing Academy.

"We hope to give women of all ages the life skills, confidence and self-belief that are most sadly lacking in many of us these days," said Diana.

And me? I had a lot of fun. What I learned will provide many a topic of conversation at future social occasions.

But if I'm ever invited to a country house weekend, I now know what to wear, what to take the hostess and how much to tip the maid.

Because you just never know when you might get a stiffy in the post...

• For more information telephone 01270 611123/01270 623110 or log on to [www.finishing-academy.co.uk](http://www.finishing-academy.co.uk)

For any queries regarding Society (July 06), please contact Nick Rowe.