

Tanya Wheway and her late husband Allan launched Champneys at the Tring estate in 1972



ATTITUDE *is* ALL

TANYA WHEWAY has spent her career creating world-class spas, including Champneys in Tring and now runs retreats. Julie Lucas talks to a remarkable woman about her life

Long before Jane Fonda was telling us to 'go for the burn' in unforgiving leotards – there was a health and fitness movement across the water that had been going on for decades.

Champneys is synonymous with health and beauty, but its original Tring site, known as the Nature Cure Resort, opened in 1925.

After studying naturopathy, Latvian Stanley Lief purchased the Tring estate from the Rothschild family, offering holistic health treatments and naturopathy.

The majority of guests were put on strict fasts. 'It was four glasses of water a day, often for many days and sometimes a few weeks,' explains former manager Tanya.

'There were two dining areas, one of which was called the light diet room where guests were on a strictly controlled diet of 200 calories a day.'

A newspaper at the time described the resort as 'starved, irrigated and beaten, but in a good cause.'

Tanya, now 78, and her late husband Allan took over the management of the resort in 1972 when the ailing spa was bought by Allied Investments, one of five owners during the couple's time.

'It was a baptism of fire,' remembers Tanya. 'We came from a hotel background. But we just loved the concept and developed it. I think we were the pioneers of holistic wellbeing.'

The antiquated and dilapidated building had suffered years of neglect, but over a 16-year period, the couple transformed the facilities, giving it a new name, Champneys, taken from the nearby hamlet and attracting a new clientele.

Their vision was to treat the individual – to provide them with a healthy holiday and to teach as well as treat.

'When we arrived, it was more of a "body shop". We realised when we worked with our clients what was important was what was going on in their heads.

'If the way you think is not right, then it's just not going to give you the results you're looking for. It was mind, body, spirit; we made truly holistic.'

At the time, mental health was not discussed in the way it is today, so Champneys' psychologists were called lifestyle consultants. 'I would say to people: "Having aromatherapy treatment is wonderful, but the benefits probably last between three hours and three days.

'If you see one of our lifestyle consultants, the benefit could last a lifetime.' Allan used to say: "It's important what you're eating, but what's more important is what's eating you."

While the service was first-class the facilities were not quite what they are today. With no gym, exercise classes were offered in the drawing room, with the furniture pushed back to make room for active bodies.



Tanya with Gloria Hunniford

'I think we were the PIONEERS OF HOLISTIC WELLBEING'

The couple decided to market the spa to companies, inviting their top executives to visit – a ground-breaking concept at the time. On one occasion two men dressed in the requisite toweling robes were overheard talking – one asked the other what he did. 'Oh, I just have a few shops,' he replied.

'It was Lord Sieff, chairman of M&S,' smiles Tanya recalling the conversation. The revamped Champneys also attracted the famous including Barbra Streisand who loved that she was 'treated like a normal person', Bianca Jagger and Princess Diana.

The seaweed baths of the 1970s were replaced more relaxing ones such as the *Rasul* an Arabian ritual that combines mud, steam and heat to cleanse and relax the body and mind. 'Your skin feels beautiful after it,' recalls Tanya.

She also did this while balancing life with a family, returning to work just 10 days after having her first child.

'The amount of time I had with my children was limited, but we made those times really count. You may be in the room with your children but are you truly present, focused

100 per cent on them? That's what children love most.'

The couple reluctantly left Champneys when it was under the ownership of Guinness, though later returned as part owners for a brief period.

They went on to manage the Sanctuary in Covent Garden and then took on consultancy work creating award-winning spas around the world.

Tanya's favourite, she says without hesitation, is Chiva-Som in Thailand, the name means 'haven of life' in Sanskrit.

'The founder, Khun Boonchu really embraced the health-resort philosophy that we believed in.

'The resort has stayed true to that philosophy and has now been operating for 28 years and won multiple awards, including top destination spa resort in the world.'

Still full of vitality, Tanya returned to Champneys in 2012 and now runs an Attitude is All retreat at Tring. She still lives in the grounds in a house she bought with Allan 50 years ago.

'I call it Attitude is All because I believe your attitude is absolutely everything – your health, your relationships and your quality of life,' she says.

The three-day program covers positive mental attitude, relationship management, effective communication, stress management, nutrition and fitness and workshops on what guests want out of the next stage of their lives.

'In business, we all know about strategic and corporate planning, but when it comes down to our own lives which should be the most important, we kind of let it run us.

'I'm suggesting you get in the driving seat of your life.'

Tanya believes you need vision, passion and action to be successful.

'Some people are great visionaries, but they never put that vision into action. There are others who are very active and busy, but they don't stand back and see the bigger picture and have the vision. When you put the three together, it's amazing what you can achieve.'

She begins her day with the five elements, a moving meditation. 'I teach it to people who come on my retreat. It's a derivative of *tai chi* but much easier to learn and to do and it only takes four minutes.'

Favourite treatments include *Shirodhara*, a therapy using oil dripped on the forehead, which she describes as, 'an amazing experience' and *Watsu*, which is a mix of water and *shiatsu*.

After a lifetime in the industry, what has Tanya learnt?

'Your health, your relationships and your time are your most precious assets' – she calls it HRT. 'Take the greatest care of all three.'

'When it comes down to time, obviously at 78, I realise my active mental and physical >



There has been a health spa on the site of Champneys in Tring since 1925



As she got older Tanya began challenging herself, doing a parachute jump aged 68

time is limited. Time is hugely important to me and so I've created a list of what I want to do with it.

'Even at 78, I still want to learn, to grow, to achieve and I want to contribute; I would like to leave a positive legacy and I also want to have fun.'

She is very spiritual. 'I think humanity is so incredible that there must be something, a bigger power. I don't mind whether that power is called Allah, God or whatever.

'The comedian Dave Allen would say at the end of his sessions: "May your God go with you". As soon as you name a religion, I feel you divide people rather than unite them.'

She lost Allan to cancer in 2008 but feels his presence still. 'I've had so many signs from him, but I quite understand that for most people this is difficult to embrace.

'He was such an amazing guy with a special inner strength, and we were so connected. We lived together, worked together and played together almost 24/7 for 42 years... we really had an incredible bond.

'On the subject, is there life after death, as Shakespeare put it in *Hamlet*: "There are more things in heaven and earth Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

'I always say to keep an open mind – because there is no absolute proof one way or the other.'

It was during this next stage of her life, Tanya realised that she needed to be open to new experiences.

She decided to challenge herself. 'I'm a great believer in people pushing themselves out of their comfort zones. That is where real growth happens.'

Her first challenge was Go Ape.

'It was scary for me because I don't like heights, I did it and thought: "If I can do that, what else can I do?" It opened doors.'

Next, she did a parachute jump – she was 68. And has since walked the Camino

de Santiago, all 500 miles of it on her own, raising money for The Hospice of St Francis in Berkhamsted.

Aged 69, she travelled with her granddaughter, circumnavigating the globe and she is considering doing a wing walk when she's 80.

As well as hosting retreats, Tanya offers private life-coaching sessions and is busy with her six grandchildren.

She has also found time to publish her memoir, incorporating it with life lessons she has learned along the way.

And returning to Jane Fonda, she recalls a section from the actress's book *Prime Time*.

'We used to think about ageing as a humpback bridge, but we should think of ageing as a staircase.

'As you get older, we will lose some physicality but what we hopefully gain is experience, knowledge and wisdom. That's where I am, I'm on that staircase.

'I believe you should learn till the day you go ga ga or meet your maker.

'Learn from the past, plan for the future but make sure you live in the moment.' ●

Tanya's Attitude is All retreats are available to book online from: champneys.com

Dance Me to the End of Time... by Tanya Wheway is published by Chalk Stream Books, priced £20. chalkstreambooks.com

