

GYM'LL FIX IT

...OR WILL HE? ROGER WHEELER INVESTIGATES WHAT'S ON OFFER IN BRIGHTON & HOVE

An American friend recently commented that since his last trip to the UK, about ten years ago, he'd noticed that we had got bigger, he felt quite at home! We know that we need to keep healthy, eat sensibly, not smoke or drink alcohol and generally have a pretty boring, if long, life. It is a generally acknowledged fact that no one needs to go to a gym to keep fit, so why do around 12% of the population pay anything up to almost £100 per month to belong to one? In a word, self-discipline, or the lack of it. The UK health and fitness industry is now worth in the region of £3.8 billion, it's big business and still growing.

Here in Brighton & Hove there are over 20 gyms, possibly nearly 30 if you take into account the entire area. Indeed, over 30,000 people have gym memberships, the demand is apparently incessant and, I am told, we have not reached saturation yet which is estimated at an amazing 20% of the population.

There is an enormous range of facilities on offer as well as a huge price differential. Clever marketing and competition has given Brighton one of the biggest choices in the UK. Quite simply you get what you pay for. The industry is divided into the large corporate companies and small privately run gyms, providing similar facilities on vastly different scales. And so I set out to visit as many as I could to see exactly what was on offer and for how much. Virtually all the corporate gyms have a joining fee from £20 to £125 and they also have cancellation penalties. You have to be very careful of any contract that you sign, some even insist on a 12 month cancellation notice, although most seem to expect three or four months.

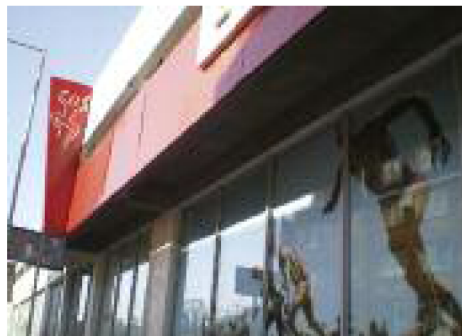
Top of the range is Virgin Active's recently acquired **Brighton Health & Rackets Club**, at **Falmer**. The 5,500+ members pay up to **£95** per month for just about as much as you could possibly want by way of luxury; an enormous gym, swimming pools, saunas, steam rooms, tennis, squash, restaurant, bar, very comfortable lounge. It's very family orientated, and on occasion can have lots of children and yummy mummies, so maybe not



to everyone's taste, but it does without doubt have the best facilities. It's a nice place, with friendly and committed staff. However, you'll need a car, though parking is free.

Next down the line is **David Lloyd**. They didn't want to be included in this review; however as I was a member for nine years I feel reasonably well informed, so I'll mention them. Their Brighton Marina branch is one of the smallest in the group. The size of the site means the facilities are a bit restricted, although they're still luxurious. The cost is around **£80** per month which gives you a very extensive gym, 22m swimming pool, sauna, steam and all the attendant classes. The club room is great, having a licensed bar (they were owned by Whitbread) with one of the best views in the city.

Keeping to the corporates, with 156 gyms is the UK's biggest group **Fitness First**. Their Brighton gym, opened eight years ago, is interesting. It's right next to Brighton Station, and 2,300 members pay up to **£45.95** per month. The gym facilities are modern and extensive, though there's no pool or parking, both of which would be impossible in the location. Members are mostly local, the staff are very friendly but there's no real 'club' atmosphere.



Just down the road is **LA Fitness** in North Road. This is the epitome of corporate gyms, with 86 sites. The message here is on margins, profit that is. I had an interesting chat with their regional manager, who certainly didn't use any of the facilities. He claimed that as there was little money in running gyms, they had to maximise the income, revenue stream was his mantra. All the staff are uber-attractive, extremely smart with big smiles, and they're all qualified gym instructors. It's all very trendy, with business folk pounding the state of the art equipment and concentrating, hard. The average age is between 25 and 40, with no children under 16. There's a very comfortable lounge area with huge flat screen TVs. It also has a small swimming pool, with the usual sauna and steam room. Of course, they regard themselves as the market leaders. They say

that they have 3,000+ members who pay **£45** per month. There's also a Hove branch, formerly Dragons, in St Helier Avenue, just off Portland Road. It has a totally different vibe from the Brighton branch, and is a bit cheaper too at **£41** per month. It's very nicely appointed, with a pleasant bar and restaurant and excellent exercise facilities. The pool is quite small, but the 2,300+ members seem happy.



The last of the big groups and the latest addition to the Brighton fitness scene is **The Gym Group**, on Madeira Drive next to the Sea Life Centre. Opened just 12 months ago this new group, which has 17 branches, has completely reinvented the whole fitness market, with no contracts or cancellation fees, membership is just **£16** per month and it's open 24 hours a day seven days a week. It's simply a gymnasium and not a club. A vast amount of new equipment takes over the acres of space; it's all very clinical and clean, though not famous for its friendliness, but that's not why people go. All membership is done online, no membership cards just a pin number that you type on the keypad at the entrance. Without doubt it's the most successful in town, with a membership of around 6,000. It does exactly what it says on the tin; it's a gym with showers, but no pool or rest areas with comfy seats. For the price it's simply unbeatable. This is virtually a self-service gym, you manage your membership yourself and costs are kept to a minimum with few staff.

There are several other companies now offering exactly the same price and facilities, not least of which is Stelios Haji-Ioannou who is rolling out **Easy Gyms** and he means business. **FitSpace Gyms** is opening across the country, has the same price structure but are even cheaper at **£12** per month. 'Experts' say it's the business model for the future, can the smaller independent gyms survive?



Riptide, situated right on the beach at the bottom of West Street, opened in 1996, and is owned by 41-year-old local boy Matt Bartsch. This is a proper old-fashioned private, independent gym. It's all very personal; they know most of their 600+ members by name. Matt rallies against what he calls the 'McDonaldisation' of gyms. He has a point, but it depends on what you want from your gym. It's true that the big groups are impersonal and can be rather clinical whereas the smaller private ones are very personal, friendly and quite 'clubby'. Riptide is in a building that was built in 1880 which gives it a unique feeling of real, old Brighton. It costs just **£35** per month with no joining fee, no children and no pool, a smiling manager just points out of the window to the biggest swimming pool, the sea, which is literally a few steps away. They have all the latest facilities and equipment, in fact they have everything that all the others have, only less of it.



from straightforward gym users to freestyle wrestling, right up to thai boxing and mixed martial arts, they even have fight nights in their special 'ZTfightskool'. Six-hundred members pay **£35** per month with no cancellation penalties or joining fee. The range of sports and classes available is large. They are tied into local schools, rugby clubs and even the British Motocross team. Right next door they have a terrific ZTfitkool for kids, this is an entire gym in soft-play style for children. This is a very popular local facility used by all the community.



Opened in 2002 in the Portland Road Industrial Estate in darkest Hove, **Fit for All** is another truly independent and friendly gym that is constantly reinventing itself, says owner Brandon Harris. He says that this is a novel approach to gyms "we are the Madonna of fitness", where's Guy Ritchie when we need him? Quite a few gyms have ladies' only sections and this one is no exception. In fact they have a special floor just for women with a special 'quickfit for women' programme. They also have an 'over 50s club'. There is no pool or steam room but a small mixed sauna. All gyms offer a programme of classes; this one has a huge selection with the now ubiquitous Zumba (don't ask).



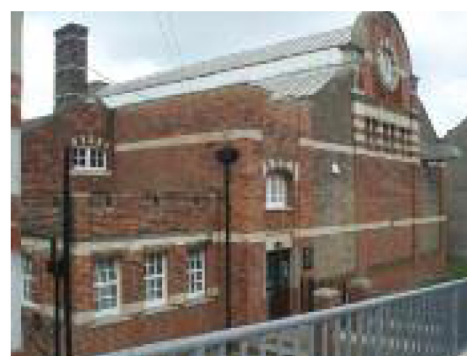
Alive in Castle Street, Brighton was opened 27 years ago and has a well established membership. When I visited they were just about to renovate and re-launch. Membership costs **£38** per month with a **£20** joining fee, which I understand they rarely charge. With 700 members, who are mainly local, this is another small friendly independent gym; they have all the equipment and most of the usual facilities including a crèche, so children are in evidence. There's no pool or steam room but there are two separate saunas, for both males and females.

ZT (Zee Tee) way over in Hove, just opposite Hove Station in the Hove Business Park, Fonthill Road, is possibly one of the most innovative and interesting gyms in town. Owned and run by 35-year-old Sol Gilbert, who in his own words, is passionate about gyms. These days everyone is passionate about everything but in this case it is believable. This is an extremely friendly place, a real club, catering for just about everyone,

Coral's in Nevill Road, Hove, better known as the greyhound stadium, has a gym with all the usual facilities including squash courts. The cost is **£44.50** per month, with no joining fee and no contract. They claim to be the best kept secret in Hove. I didn't visit, by now the lure of keeping fit was wearing a little thin.

The seafront hotels, **The Thistle**, **the Hilton Metropole** and **The Queens Hotel** all have small gym facilities and even smaller swimming pools. Surprisingly these are not just for hotel guests but are quite popular with the public.

Finally we have the gyms and pools owned by Brighton & Hove City Council, now managed by **Freedom Leisure**. They're in the unenviable position of inheriting some iconic buildings with the heavy handed council breathing down their necks. A total of £1m is being spent on revamping the rather tired sites: **The Prince Regent**, **The King Alfred**, **Withdean Sports Centre**, **Moulescoomb Community Leisure Centre**, **Stanley Deason** and **St Luke's**, which is just a (very beautiful) Victorian swimming pool. These six buildings



belong to the community and for just **£43** per month, plus a **£20** 'admin fee' you can use any of them. They have a minimum of three months initial contract, after that there is just a 15 day cancellation period. Total membership across the sites is around 4,500.

Is a gym essential to your general health? It can certainly help but no one needs to spend hundreds of pounds on gym membership although many thousands do, every day. You can keep perfectly fit and healthy by adopting a sensible lifestyle, but that would be too much like hard work. It's much easier to pop down the gym two or three times a week and come away feeling very virtuous and then enjoy all the goodies that you know you shouldn't eat and drink; but, hey, I've been to the gym, so that's okay then. Gym membership has become part of our culture. All the gyms offer basically very similar services. You get what you pay for, there's no best or worst, we're spoilt for choice.

Sorry got to rush now, as I have an appointment with my personal trainer. Did you know there are 1600 of them to choose from in Brighton?



Cheetahs Gym is the grand daddy of them all, at the King Alfred in Hove, opened in 1962 and still going strong. This is a gym for serious body builders with four floors of gyms with all the specialist equipment any gym bunny could dream of. Owned by Mark Harper (or Doc as he is known) since 1993, Cheetahs is the real deal with six training rooms dedicated to the various parts of the body - chest, back, arms etc, with a women only gym too. The 3,000 members pay just **£210** per annum, just **£17.50** a month, no joining fee or contractual penalties; they offer huge range of membership options right down to a day pass at **£4**. There's also a very special deal for the over 65s which is unusual.