STATELY HOME VACATIONS

Behind the scenes at some of Derbyshire's grandest houses.

(The Sunday Telegraph, 2008)

'I've spoken to Richard,' said the voice on the telephone, 'and he says he can find you a bedroom in the house which isn't haunted. I'm sure you'll be all right.'

The house in question was Tissington Hall, a splendid Derbyshire manor which celebrates its 400th birthday next year; my host, Sir Richard FitzHerbert Bt. Quite how many of his deceased ancestors were also in residence was something, I decided, I would prefer not to know until dawn had peeped cheerfully in through my leaded window.

Tissington is one of a dozen grand residences on the books of Stately Homes Vacations, a company which promises 'a real insight into the life of an English country house and those who live in it'. To this end, its proprietors – a pair of urbane Old Etonians called Charlie Hurt and Mark Chichester-Clark – have persuaded seigneurs and chatelaines to provide their clientele with personal guided tours, dinner in candelabra'd splendour and accommodation in ancestral bedrooms. Lovers of P.G. Wodehouse should be like the Empress of Blandings in clover.

At present the company is focussing exclusively on Derbyshire. 'It's an extraordinary county,' says Hurt, 'because although not very big it has an amazing wealth of houses of all styles, from the mediaeval gem of Haddon Hall to the Palladian grandeur of Chatsworth. Our aim is to stress the cultural side of them, for people who are really interested in the evolution of the country house.'

The pair are well qualified. Chichester-Clark studied History of Art at Cambridge, specialising in neoclassical architecture; Hurt is a writer whose family has lived at Casterne Hall, a Grade II* listed manor, since 1480. 'Simon Jenkins includes it in England's *Thousand Best Houses*. I think it's

The concrete bleakness of Derby Station, where I arrived for a compressed version of their four-day tour, could not be more at odds with the gracious living which Britain's great houses personify. But once Chichester-Clark's BMW station wagon had carried us into the open countryside, I found myself in a county of unexpectedly wild beauty. For the next two days, the 21st century would hardly impinge on us.

Our first stop was Kedleston Hall, the stupendous neoclassical palace created by the young Robert Adam for the Curzon family. Gazing from the portico across sunny parkland and a series of ornamental lakes, we were treated to a vision of English pastoralism which George Nathaniel Curzon must have dreamed of during the six febrile years he spent as Viceroy of India.

Now owned by the National Trust, Kedleston was closed to the public on the day of my visit. But Hurt and Chichester-Clark pride themselves on being able to open doors, and so I was ushered up the heroic front steps by the Hon. Richard Curzon, great-nephew of the Viceroy, who lives in the east wing. A nattily dressed figure in his late thirties, with a fine aquiline nose and an engaging manner, he looks as if he should have been painted as a devil-may-care hussar playing a hand of cards on the eve of Waterloo.

As we strolled around the house, from the breathtaking marble entrance hall to the ethereal saloon with its 62-foot coffered dome, it became clear that his knowledge of Kedleston was encyclopaedic. But it was not this alone that set our tour apart: snobbish though it may sound, the sense of history provided by a guide whose ancestors line the walls above you cannot be underestimated. Nowhere was this stronger than in Kedleston's thirteenth-century church, where every single effigy and inscription relates to a member of the Curzon family. (Their faithful retainers have been accommodated in the churchyard outside: death, it seems, is not the leveller that some suppose.)

Afterwards, over tea in the garden of the private wing, the conversation turned to Bonnie Prince Charlie's invasion, which – from the way Richard

‘They wanted to steal our horses,’ complained our host. ‘Did they come to you?’

From Kedleston we drove to the idyllic village of Tissington in search of Richard FitzHerbert. We found him in shirt-sleeves and heavy boots preparing to water the tiered garden which rises, with a gorgeous profusion of roses, behind his house. ‘My family built this place in 1609, and we’ve been here ever since,’ he told me. ‘I’m the ugly mug who happens to live here at the moment.’

As he wielded a rusty watering can, he made no secret of the financial struggle involved in running what he calls ‘a middle-sized stately’. ‘When I inherited the house in 1987 it came with all sorts of staff,’ he said wistfully, ‘like the housekeeper who once made the bed without noticing that I had a girlfriend in it.’ A young Labrador came bounding up, and was introduced as Vossy. ‘I call my dogs after the paintings I’ve sold to keep the roof on. This one was named in honour of a Cornelius de Vos.’

Tissington Hall is open to the public, but FitzHerbert says that day visitors are not enough to sustain it, and feels that renting it out for events – and welcoming stately-home vacationers – is a better solution: ‘A lot of people who come with coach parties seem to think that one historic house is much like another. I like the idea of having visitors who are going to spend some time here and show a proper interest in the place.’

This may or may not include staying the night. The biggest question for Hurt and Chichester-Clark is whether their clients are prepared to tolerate the lack of luxury – from draughty corridors to temperamental plumbing – that life in an authentic country house entails. ‘Everyone’s told us that it’s out of the question for Americans,’ says Chichester-Clark. ‘They all want showers, which is something hardly any of these houses have.’ The company therefore offers alternative accommodation in local hotels which boast a full panoply of heated towel rails, hairdryers etc.

Having said all that, my bedroom at Tissington was perfectly comfortable.

surprised to find an en suite bathroom with a plentiful supply of hot water. The furnishings included ruched chintz curtains, a fine chaise longue, an ancient Trinitron television, and copies of *Country Life* dating from circa 1992.

Dinner was a relaxed affair for ten, our numbers swelled by half a dozen of Richard FitzHerbert's neighbours – among them the Scott-Moncrieffs, who arrived in a gleaming Rolls-Royce. (Their other car is a Bugatti.) After Pimm's in the library, where a CD of *Capital Gold Legends* shares shelf space with *Les Chroniques de Froissart*, we sat down to an excellent meal of smoked-salmon mousse, local lamb and summer pudding in the panelled dining-room. Halfway through, with undisguised satisfaction, my host beckoned me out to watch a bat whirling balletically around one of the landings.

Later, as I lay in my bed, I heard the sound of creaking from a room which I understood not to be in use. Was it the master of the house turning out the lights, or something more sinister? I dozed off before I could find out, and slept peacefully until breakfast, at which FitzHerbert regaled me with the stories of his ancestress Wilhelmina, who burnt to death when her dress caught fire and lingers on in spirit, and the ghostly bishop who climbs the 'pulpit' stairs.

Chatsworth was the next house on my itinerary. Sadly, the Duke of Devonshire had not invited us for elevenses, but we were given a masterful introductory talk by the former keeper of the house's collections, Peter Day. Having absorbed the story of astute politicians, advantageous marriages, inspired collectors and almost ruinous death duties, we joined the sightseers milling through the public rooms, and gawped at the baroque splendour of the Great Stairs and the silken glories of the State Bedroom. 'It's a magnificent place,' remarked Charlie Hurt, 'but I'm not sure I'd actually want to live here.'

I couldn't help agreeing. Chatsworth may be the apogee of the English

and cavernous public spaces. It is telling that the Dowager Duchess of Devonshire, who did so much make it viable for the 21st century, should have requested a house with small rooms for her retirement.

By contrast, nearby Haddon Hall is the epitome of Elizabethan grace and idiosyncrasy, perched picturesquely on a hilltop overlooking the River Wye. 'It was left empty from 1720 until my grandfather restored it 200 years later,' explained Lord Edward Manners, the present owner, as he led us across the dramatically sloping courtyard, 'so it wasn't subjected to any Georgian or Victorian modernising. Everything you see is sixteenth-century at the latest.'

For anyone used to exploring houses under the stern eye of the National Trust, there is a schoolboy thrill about having a guide who makes his own rules, striding into the chapel with a pair of wire-haired terriers at his heels or whipping out a pen to chip away at some loose plasterwork ('You've got to let the stone breathe'). As we passed from the tapestry-hung banqueting hall to the exquisitely carved parlour, I was so impressed by his knowledge of the place that I assumed he had lived there all his life. But no: 'I grew up at Belvoir. Have you been there?' I kicked myself – of course any noble family worth its salt has at least *two* stately homes.

Our final stop of the day was Charlie Hurt's own Casterne Hall, a charming Georgian manor incorporating an earlier Jacobean house. Set in high, rugged countryside, it has appeared in a television adaptation of Agatha Christie, who would surely have appreciated the murderous possibilities of its isolated position. But with its doll's-house neatness and sensible proportions it is very much on the homely side of stately, and the dining table laid in the hall was cheerfully suggestive of country squires roistering after a hard day to hounds. My bedroom – plain but comfortable bachelor's quarters with a single bed, and antique prints stacked against the wall – had a splendid view of the sheep-studded hills as the sun sank behind them.

Among the guests at dinner was James Cartland, owner of the horribly haunted Carnfield Hall. (Its contents include a fan taken by a noblewoman to

neighbour extolled the virtues of the local agricultural show, telling me that she had once refused an invitation to Glyndebourne rather than miss it.

Next morning we set off for our last port of call, the vast and bizarre Calke Abbey. Another National Trust property, it was once the home of the eccentric Harpur-Crewe family, and has been preserved much as they left it, from the stags' heads piled up on a rusty bed to the foliage sprouting in the servants' hall. Our guide here was the extraordinarily well-informed Maxwell Craven, co-author of *The Derbyshire Country House*, who seemed to carry in his head the provenance of every painting and strip of wallpaper.

Among the clutter were unexpected treasures, such as a magnificent chinoiserie four-poster, found unused in its original packing cases after 250 years. The overall impression, though, was of the English upper classes at their lowest ebb. 'I knew old Charlie Harpur-Crewe a bit,' remarked Charlie Hurt. 'He used to wear an ancient tweed jacket, and his trousers were held up with baler twine. He basically lived in one room, but if you went to dinner with him he would grudgingly take you to a little parlour dining-room and give you a cold lamb chop.'

Returning to Derby Station, I felt a renewed admiration for the National Trust and the other official bodies who labour to save such houses. But the simple fact is that visiting stately homes is far more fun if you can use the doors marked 'Private' – so take the chance before all the occupants go as mad as the Harpur-Crewes.

Five-day, four-night holidays with Stately Home Vacations cost from £2,000 per person, depending on the type of accommodation chosen. The price includes transfers within Derbyshire, admission to the houses visited, and all meals. For details telephone 01335 310438 or visit www.statelyhomevacations.com