

"The Country House in Britain - Yesterday and Tomorrow"

The idea of the 'house museum' is a less familiar concept in Britain than it is in the United States. The idea of presenting houses as narratives of national history, or as symbols of what is perceived as the beauty and serenity of the past, has not been enunciated as a motivating factor in their presentation in Britain, as it has in the States. There is no equivalent to Colonial Williamsburg, and most historic houses (particularly those in private ownership) would not regard themselves as 'house museums', rather as living properties still in residential occupation. Perhaps as a result, formal and informal learning have, at least until recently, been much less developed in Britain than in the USA.

Houses have been open to visitors since the late seventeenth century, and were generally shown by servants to 'polite' visitors who would indicate important works of art and family portraits. This approach lasted well into the twentieth century: in the 1950s and 1960s there was very little interest in social history or the way in which houses were used.

A major change occurred in the late 1970s with the publication of Marc Girouard's *Life in the English Country House*, and the opening to the public of Erddig in Wales, with its collection of servant portraits and poems. There for the first time in a National Trust property, visitors entered not by the front door but through the service quarters.

• OPENING DOORS

This report was published by the Attingham Trust in 2004, edited by Giles Waterfield. It aimed to explore the current state of education, at all levels, in historic properties including country houses, places of worship, archaeological sites, industrial sites and so on, in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. The present talk takes up some of the themes explored in this document (of which copies can be obtained – see the Attingham Trust website www.attinghamtrust.org). A number of case studies are included and provide examples of best practice.

Among the key findings of the report were:

- the fragmentation of educational provision, with very few sites in contact with others unless they belonged to the same organisation
- the extreme lack of resources dedicated to this purpose compared to the funding available for conservation and presentation of buildings
- the emphasis on young school children, with very little provision for older children/students or for adults
- the traditionalism of approach in many cases
- a strong development of educational work in cathedrals; and almost none in parish churches

- EASTON NESTON

This house recently changed hands – an illustration of the fragility of the private sector in the country house field, in which, all the same, much of the most interesting work is being done.

Definitions of the house museum have recently been expanding, notably within the National Trust – one important example is MR STRAW'S HOUSE, Worksop, Notts. This house was built in 1905, and was occupied by William and Florence Straw, grocers, from the 1920s. They died in the 1930s and house was inhabited by their two sons till the 1980s, and not changed at all. It went to the National Trust in 1990.

This acquisition has been followed by the Beatles' houses in Liverpool, the back-to-backs in Birmingham etc.

Education in historic properties has had a less high profile in Britain than in the USA until recently. Up to a generation ago the National Trust, for example, regarded it as a pleasant diversion but not a serious activity. Many of the education programmes that have developed in recent years have been inspired by American examples notably the emphasis on Living.

On the other hand, there is a growing interest among the owners of larger houses in learning activities. The following examples give some idea of how owners, institutional and private, are exploring new ways of involving the public, at all levels, and attracting new audiences to their properties:

- At BURGHLEY HOUSE, a newly completed Visitor and Education Complex in the Brewhouse Centre has been supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, and has been erected at the cost of around £1.5 million. It includes an innovative multi-media Ancestors' Gallery. Beside it a new 'Tudor' trick garden has been created, offering the sort of surprise water games that delighted our Tudor ancestors.

- The National Trust has been active in this field. WORDSWORTH'S HOUSE in Cockermouth in Cumbria was inhabited by the Wordsworth family in the 1770s, when the father of William and Dorothy was a land agent. In the new representation, there is a concentration on the use of the house and the social arrangements, calling on costumed interpreters, authentic kitchen and food, facsimile documents to handle in clerk's office, and a convincing mixture of authentic and replica furniture. In the essentials, this approach builds on the best ideas of Colonial Williamsburg. One interesting aspect is that the question of the Wordsworths' literary achievement is not addressed.

- In some houses, stories that would not have been addressed until recently are now being examined. HAREWOOD HOUSE in Yorkshire, remains in partial family occupation, but is in the hands of a trust, and is an accredited museum (this sort of set-up, with continuing family residence and involvement, represents a crucial difference to USA). The wealth of the Lascelles family of Harewood was largely derived from slavery, a history that was not discussed until quite recently but that now receives full attention, with the family revealing considerable further information.

- **ASTON HALL**

This Jacobean house has been a museum belonging to the City of Birmingham since the 1870s though in the early years it was used as a repository for museum objects rather than being shown as a house museum. Now it is located in an area of social deprivation and runs numerous far-sighted programmes, notably on the construction of the house (including day-long visits to the building for schools, beginning in the attics and ending in the basement) and history programmes.

- At **TYNTESFIELD HOUSE**, in Somerset, a property recently acquired by the National Trust with major support from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the National Heritage Memorial Fund, the education programme is seen as central to the development of the property. The still-evolving programmes emphasises:

- (a) The conservation in progress on the house and its contents are witnessed by the visitor, who has the opportunity to engage with the conservators.

- (b) Involvement of, and consultation with, the local community.

- (c) An active programme for disabled people and people with learning difficulties, especially young ones, involving for example the re-creation of the garden and greenhouses.

A further development has been in the area of **ACADEMIC RESEARCH AND PARTNERSHIPS**. Here some of the most interesting work has been carried out by the **YORKSHIRE COUNTRY HOUSES PARTNERSHIP** (www.ychp.org.uk) over the past decade. This is a collaboration between York University (particularly the History Department, but also Archaeology, Art History and others) and seven major houses in Yorkshire, in various ownership: Lotherton Hall and Temple Newsam (Leeds City Council), Harewood (family trust), Burton Constable (trust), Castle Howard (family ownership), Brodsworth House (English Heritage), and Nostell Priory (National Trust). They collaborate to fund research (by doctoral candidates, as part of the doctoral research), on the collections and archives of the houses, to mount exhibitions and organise conferences, and to create a series of publications.

The Partnership raised the money in 2004 to organise a series of exhibitions on the theme of Maids and Mistresses (women in country houses). Their work continues with an inventory of the libraries held in the houses, and with research on the managements of the estates. For further information, see their website.

The National Trust is also expanding its research and academic activity. One example is the work carried out by the Libraries Advisers on the important libraries owned by the Trust, published in the form of booklets such as the one on **HAM HOUSE**.

GARDENS are also a fruitful area of research and novelty. As visitor figures to houses continue gently to drift downwards, the numbers for gardens increase. Owners, and particularly private ones, have recently become adventurous in their approach both to the restoration of old gardens and to the creation of new ones, on old or new sites. Three examples illustrate how gardens are developing.

- The **GATEWAY GARDENS TRUST** is a charitable trust which arranges for groups of people from various areas of the community who would otherwise not

easily have the opportunity to travel, to visit historic gardens in Wales, where they are hospitably received, shown the garden by the owner or the head gardener, and given the opportunity to escape their everyday worries. The scheme –which extends to old people, young carers, isolated young mothers and further – encourages the visitors, as a group, to say what they would like to visit and to play as active a part as possible in the programme. For further information see www.gatewaygardenstrust.org.

- SCAMPSTON HALL in Yorkshire is a family house, in the ownership of the same family since 1690 and inherited by Charles and Caroline Legard in 1994. It includes a mid-eighteenth century walled garden which had become derelict. A new design was made by Piet Oudolf, Dutch designer, leading figure in the movement known as ‘new wave planting’ or the ‘new European garden style’, interested in a natural approach to planting.

Oudolf is particularly keen on grasses, which are central to his gardens: he explores the colour and movement of grasses and free forms of perennial meadows. He wants to emphasise the natural harmony of plants, mixture of formality and naturalness. The garden opened in 2004.

This sort of innovative approach would hardly be possible outside the area of private ownership, and illustrates how old gardens are embracing the possibilities of the future. At Hadspen House, in Somerset, a similarly bold approach is being taken to the replanning of the walled garden.

- BOUGHTON HOUSE

This great house in Northamptonshire has been in the possession of the Montagu family for many generations. From 1684 to 1709 Ralph Montagu, first Duke of Montagu, created formal gardens to the designs of Charles Bridgeman and others. Montagu was familiar with Versailles, having been British Ambassador there. The gardens were expanded by his son, the second Duke, from 1720 onwards. It was considered the finest formal layout in England.

The river Ise runs through the garden and was canalised by Montagu with a central canal and two tributaries, the Dead Reach and the Little Reach. In front of the house was the Broad Water.

The formal layout with parterres and an elaborate water garden only lasted around 30 years since it was found to be too elaborate to maintain, and it was hard to get the original fountains to work since the river was not powerful enough. From the 1780s the house was shut up and little used. No changes were made from that date, so much of the original structure survives, such as the mound.

Many of the garden features have been restored in recent years, following the creation of a master plan by the last Duke of Buccleuch around 30 years ago. A major restoration programme has taken place in the past two years and is currently half way through, based on site plans and archaeological research including a full survey of the park.

A decision had to be made over how much of the original garden should be reinstated in view of the maintenance problem (the garden is now maintained by the Head

Gardener and five other gardeners). The decision was made not to reinstate the formal parterres or the statuary, or the water gardens. This decision is also influenced by the wish to maintain habitats for wild life. The strategy is to concentrate on the essential elements of the plan.

At present (2007), Little Reach is complete; Broad Water is being completed this year. The project has doubled the acreage of formal gardens around the house.

The final area for consideration is the growth of interest in PRESENTING CONTEMPORARY ART in the context of a historic house. At Harewood, there has been a contemporary art gallery for some years, on the lowest storey of the old house.

At LISMORE CASTLE, the Duke of Devonshire's house in Northern Ireland, a new art gallery opened this year. It is intended to become a cutting edge contemporary art space. In the 2007 season, it is showing works from two collections, belonging to the Devonshire and Rubell families. These include pictures by Gainsborough, Reynolds and Van Dyck from the Devonshire collection, alongside modern/contemporary works from the Rubell collection, which is based in Miami, and contains international works from 1960s.

In conclusion, it appears that recent years have seen a move away from the traditional presentation of country houses primarily as containers for works of art, towards a more dynamic approach in which they become again, as they were in the past, centres for artistic and intellectual life, places where new research and a heightened understanding of their character is translated into a more vivid and varied experience for the visitor.