

# AN ENGLISHMAN'S HOME

## 1,000 best houses: my second odyssey



These buildings are a national resource beyond value. Their pictures collectively would match the National Gallery. Their furnishings would throw the V&A into the shadows

England's stately homes are our finest badge of nationhood, says [Simon Jenkins](#) of *The Times*, as he sets off to explore chambers, towers, kitchens and great courts beyond compare.

The great houses of England are summoned to the nation's service. In centuries past, they supplied men, money and oak to defend Britain against the threat of foreign invasion. Now they must do the reverse. With Britain's biggest export earner, tourism, in government-induced disarray, the houses must help that invasion take place.

They must do more. They are magnets of the new rural economy. Great houses that once depended for their prosperity on agriculture must now offer agriculture their support. They should be one of the reasons visitors are happy to leave the towns and cities and spend money in the country. Not just Chatsworth, Hever, Beaulieu and Castle Howard, houses and gardens throughout the land will have to become primary 'people draws', employing staff on a scale not seen since the eighteenth century. They must run up the flag, lower the drawbridge, throw open the gates.

Having explored England's 'thousand best churches', I am setting off on a second English odyssey, to search out the nation's 'thousand best houses'. Wales and Scotland will, I hope, come later. Architecturally, this is like moving from medieval plainsong to the whole of classical music.

Churches were glorious, but of a kind. The word 'house' covers a multitude of purposes. Good houses come rich, poor, active, passive and often ruinous. As places to live, they can be hopelessly inefficient. As places to visit, their appeal remains mostly in its infancy.

England's great provincial houses are the truest manifestation of nationhood. Nobody can know England who has not walked the ramparts of Warwick or seen the Great Hall at Penshurst, who has not climbed Packwood's yew mound or marched the avenues of Blenheim. England is Cotehele in Cornwall as much as it is Alton Towers. It is the Labourer's

Cottage on Bucklers Hard as much as it is Kedleston and Holkham. We can enjoy the countryside, walk what survives of the coast and potter in historic villages. But the history of England is bound up in its great houses.

I believe that these buildings, in whatever ownership, are a national resource beyond value. Their pictures collectively would match the National Gallery. Their furnishings would throw the V&A into the shadows.

They embrace the entire sweep of English architecture, from Norman Berkeley to twentieth-century Eltham. They sit in the finest landscape, surrounded by gardens beyond compare. Their towers, courts, chambers, staterooms and kitchens outshine those of any country in the world. These houses merit all the help they can get.

A remarkable number are still occupied by the families that built or rebuilt them centuries ago. The stories of these families put flesh on the bones of an old house. I find that a tale of human agony or joy is worth a dozen fine rooms. I cannot visit Moseley Old Hall without hearing Charles II tapping the door late one night to plead sanctuary from Cromwell's army. I am unable to visit The Wyne, in Hampshire, without imagining John Chute worrying over whether his new 'Gothick' will be approved by his antiquarian cronies in London. I cannot visit Osborne, most moving of England's royal palaces, and not see Victoria and Albert struggling to create a normal family life away from the court, or the bereaved Queen hiding from the world on Albert's death amid the trappings of her mourning.

At Chastleton, in Oxfordshire, the penniless Clutton-Brock family gazed upon a house bequeathed them by the seventeenth century and left it that way until the 1980s, hoping against hope that cobwebs and dust would hold it together.

At Calke Abbey, in Derbyshire, the house in which Harpur Crewes had lived since 1701 was dumped on the nation's doorstep in 1984, its contents intact down to the last bedstead and gin bottle. Thus it remains.

At Wightwick, in Staffordshire, a local paint manufacturer, Theodore Mander, hired William Morris and his friends to create the



most up-to-date house that money could buy. His son filled it with Pre-Raphaelite art. It remains the finest work of that period in England.

Many of the best English houses have depended for their rescue on rich obsessives. A young American named Charles Henry Robinson saw a picture of Ightham Mote when visiting London before the Great War, then glimpsed it by chance on a cycling holiday. Many years later and with a fortune under his belt, he saw in *Country Life* that the house was for sale. Sensing fate, Robinson came to England and bought the house on the spot. He repented his rashness as he travelled home on the *Queen Mary* and wrote withdrawing the offer. He forgot to post the letter, returned again, paid for the house's restoration and gave England's most loveable Tudor manor to The National Trust.

At Packwood, in Warwickshire, a Midlands tycoon named Baron Ash restored another manor in such immaculate detail that no book or log of wood was allowed to be moved from its place. Visitors who were a minute late would be turned away by the butler. Mention of money was banned. Ash would have been mortified by James Lees-Milne's comment that no true countryman would have had his trousers so carefully creased.

The American John Jacob Astor, in his day the richest man in the world, declared in 1890 that America was 'no longer a fit place for a gentleman to live'. He yearned instead for an English Palladian palace and a Tudor castle.

He bought Cliveden, in Buckinghamshire, and Haver Castle, in Kent. Round the latter he created a Tudor village and grounds that would outshine Randolph Hearst's San Simeon. The best houses are infused by ghosts: Sudeley Castle by the indomitable Emma Dent; Ham House by the scheming Duchess of Lauderdale; Dove Cottage by Wordsworth; Batemans by the sad, ageing Kipling.

At Jane Austen's house in Hampshire, we can still imagine Jane peeping through the curtains at the comings and goings of Chawton outside. Restoration House, in Rochester, has been meticulously reinstated to the last panel, stair, sconce and stick of furniture, so that Dickens' Pip might still recognise it as the place of Miss Havisham's self-imposed retreat.

At Lacock, in Wiltshire, we can recall the Talbot ladies, last of an aristocratic line, fussing over the wind-up gramophone for the last dance on a winter's night, the old house crumbling around their ears. They had no clue how to save it, until the arrival of The National Trust.

The style in which these houses is presented is changing fast. Allowing the public to see 'the big house' has been a feature of noblesse oblige since the eighteenth century. The plot of *Pride and Prejudice* revolved round such a visit.

At Sissinghurst, Vita Sackville-West called such visitors her 'shillingses', no small entrance fee in those days. I have lost count

### Ightham Mote: 'England's most loveable Tudor Manor', donated to The National Trust by Charles Henry Robinson

of the kindly couples who love an old manor and find reward enough in the pleasure of showing it off. Who cares, they might say, if the opening hours are obscure and the facilities minimal? Let us not turn all the lesser country houses into garden centres, Michelin restaurants and venues for the *Antiques Roadshow*.

Save them, too, from the museum. I love museums in their place, but museum-itis and its politically correct henchman 'education' are now a raging disease in English country houses. Filling old rooms with signs, captions, notices and waxworks does not amount to a 'lifestyle message'.

This tendency is no longer confined to local council houses, but is seeping, like dry rot, through the rooms of The National Trust and English Heritage, infecting them with video rooms, staff quarters and health and safety signs.

A notice in Southampton's Tudor House warns visitors to report all cases of racial harassment. Nottingham has reduced Smythson's mighty Wollaton Hall to an infant-school treasure trail. I could find no

English Heritage and The National Trust should see their buildings as primarily houses, as places of family or court residence throughout history

guidebook and no member of staff who had heard of Smythson.

Many of these properties are obsessed with making themselves accessible to young people. Most do so by making the house as much like a schoolroom as they can, surely a counter-productive approach. Some houses are easy for children to appreciate, others frankly less so.

The private sector tends to be best at achieving this balance. Houses such as Woburn, Penshurst and Beaulieu are child-friendly without beating visitors over the head with 'education'!

Parties of reluctant schoolchildren being dragged noisily round an old building, usually admitted free to boost overall numbers, merely spoil the experience for the serious visitor. Using a building and its story to illuminate history is an admirable goal but it is best interpreted by inspiring teachers. Many houses eager for custom would do better to attract older people who are their natural market.

More than a third of my 'best houses' are owned by two organisations - The National Trust and English Heritage. Long may they last. They have rescued more of old England than anyone else, often salvaging the hardest cases from ruin. Without English Heritage a hundred castles would have disappeared below ground. Without The Trust's tactful negotiations, families would have sold to companies, and many houses would be ruined and bare.

Yet both organisations are reaching old age - arthritic and bureaucratised. Their staff occupy quantities of space with private offices and flats, space that could be let profitably to others if not used for display. Both of these organisations could usefully let lesser properties to custodians on long leases and free them from bureaucracy.

Enter a property owned by English Heritage or The Trust and house style is at once familiar. The former will usually be bare, as if awaiting the arrival of the next team of archaeologists. There is no excuse, given the science of modern display, for the bleak emptiness of Kirby Hall or Portchester Castle.

The National Trust is more generous. It still hates waxworks, about which I am equivocal, but which can bring alive some old buildings in a way no less authentic than a book or a sign. The use of waxworks at Cromwell's House in Ely or by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust is admirable.

As for the Trust's guidebooks, they are academically splendid, but for the casual

visitor hopelessly difficult. They should take lessons from such excellent private house guides as those to Hever and Warwick.

There remain the private houses, many of them members of the Historic Houses Association. Apart from their Neapolitan opening hours, they are always my favourites. Enter a privately owned house and you never know what to expect - the worst and the best at displaying their wares.

The worst need help, and masses of it. They need more than grants and tax assistance. They must be assisted in lengthening their opening hours and marketing their wares. It is unfair that they should bear VAT when rival public-sector attractions are calling down lottery funds.

It is also absurd that millions should be wasted on youth training, which could be spent on jobs keeping old houses open to the benefit of the local economy. Few of these houses make money. Most are private charities in all but name.

Nothing is more enjoyable than to be shown a house by its owner or occupier. A house inhabited is a wholly different experience from a house as museum or visitor attraction.

English Heritage and The National Trust behave increasingly like nationalised museums, committed to extraneous attractions to maintain visitor numbers, and committed also to the convenience of their staff. They should see their buildings as primarily houses, as places of family or court residence throughout history. To this end they should go to every length to re-establish a link between properties and their former occupants. They should be able to say: '*Le patron habite ici.*'

I am not romantic about old houses. I simply find them beautiful and interesting, their gardens a delight in summer, and their interiors, where they are open, a delight in winter.

They are precious for their continuity as much as for their diversity. English culture is richer, not just for there being a National Trust, but also for there being Devonshires in Chatsworth, Pembrokes in Wilton, Baths in Longleat and Northumberlands in Syon and Alnwick.

Long may they remain so, or at least see out my odyssey.

© Simon Jenkins/*The Times*, London 28 April 2001