

Mind your Manors

Britain's country estates are not just magnificent, imposing testimonies to a nation's recent history, but are packed with spicy folklore.



*“The stately homes of England
How beautiful they stand!
Amidst their tall ancestral trees,
O'er all the pleasant land”*

The poem that coined the phrase “stately home” was written by Felicia Hemans - whose most famous protagonist, a boy, once stood on a burning deck at the Battle of the Nile - in 1828. When it comes to why Britain's elegant pastoral contours are dotted with lichen-pocked, palatial residences set in acres of lush, bucolic splendour, though, Noël Coward's mischievous reworking of the stanza's last two lines more than a century later pay more dividends:

*“To prove the upper classes.
Have still the upper hand”*

For centuries, Great Britain's country estates were the seats of landowners who literally lorded over the masses of Blighty (hence the existence of “town houses” in our cities). Manor Houses, as all but the most bombastic of modern owners would prefer they be called, have also been a national literary obsession for as long as they've sprung from Britain's verdant soil. From Pope to Waugh via Austen, Forster and Wodehouse, writers have adopted country piles as a setting – and why not? As a narrative milieu, they pack mythology, intrigue, grace and gentility, not to mention the scope for assembling a large group of diverse characters into one setting. For the cameras, of course, they also offer aesthetic charm in spades and, for Americans, a voyeuristic indulgence of a long-standing preoccupation with the British upper class. So potent a fictional symbol have they become, in fact, the made-up ones - Pemberley, Manderley, Baskerville Hall, Brideshead, Downton Abbey – are better known than the real ones.

Even outside the fertile imaginations of fiction writers, though, these tend to be places with richly storied pasts. While many have become world

famous for simple reasons of association - Blenheim Palace is famous as the birthplace of Winston Churchill, while Bletchley Park will forever be etched in the nation's consciousness for hosting Britain's intelligence efforts during the war – many more have come to the broader consciousness due to the distinctly fruity flavour of the narratives that have unfolded between their thick sandstone walls. Brocket Hall in Hertfordshire is the former residence of Lady Caroline Lamb, who had a notoriously public affair with Lord Byron. Dunham Massey was the setting for a major scandal when owner George Grey, the seventh Earl of Stamford, decided to take as his bride a former circus bare-back rider.

Walton Hall in Warwickshire became the talk of the land in 1869, when Lady Mordaunt revealed that the Prince of Wales was just one of her many lovers, and recent restoration work on Apethorpe Hall in Northamptonshire revealed a secret passage linking James I's bedroom to that of George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham. Priggish gazes were cast towards Chatsworth in Derbyshire in the late 18th century when William Cavendish, the fifth Duke of Devonshire, decided to live in a ménage à trois with his wife, Georgiana, and his mistress, Lady Bess Foster, for over 25 years. And, of course, it was at Fort Belvedere in the grounds of Windsor Castle that Edward VIII carried out his affair with Wallis Simpson.

But Cliveden, a country house in Berkshire,

perhaps takes the gong for the Stately Home with the ziestiest back story. Having played host to the Countess of Shrewsbury's affair with the Duke of Buckingham as well as Elizabeth Villiers' extracurricular shenanigans with William III, it is more famous for a scandal that's far fresher in living memory, which came in the wake of an up-and-coming Conservative Secretary of State for War, John Profumo, having an affair with a young model by the name of Christine Keeler who was also the alleged mistress of a Soviet spy.

Strolling the gravel driveways of these imposing edifices, though, and drinking in their Palladian facades it's not so much a whiff of scandal that Britain's manor houses seem to give off, as one of eternal imperiousness. Such is the human capacity for temporal solipsism, one can neither imagine a time when they were not there, nor conceive them to be anything but invincible. In fact, they are, and have always been, in a state of abject vulnerability. Whimsically demolishing and rebuilding country homes became a hobby during the 18th Century, when rumbustious young nobles came home from the Grand Tour newly minted with ancient artefacts and treasures. Then, the political system which led to manor house's existence in the first place, and underpinned their entire political significance, was dissolved with the Reform Act of 1832.



Much of the government compensation paid out following the abolition of slavery the following year (equivalent to £16.5bn in today's money) went into buying, building or refurbishing some of the greatest properties in the British countryside, but the boost was relatively short-lived. Agricultural crises and further reforms took their toll on properties that literally went through the wars in the 20th Century (many were commandeered as hospitals, schools, barracks, listening and monitoring centres). Factor in dwindling revenue streams and land sell-offs for developments, and the stark reality now - since 1900, more than 1,200 country houses have been demolished in England alone – doesn't seem so surprising: especially given that countries with an abundance of heritage tend to have such a nasty habit of assuming it infinite, and preserving it with complacent abandon.

The fate of those neither bulldozed nor bankrolled by ancestral owners to this day has been mixed. Madonna purchased Ashcombe House in Wiltshire, the former home of photographer Cecil Beaton, for £9m in 2001; Dumfries House was saved from the knocking ball when the Prince of Wales drew £20m from his Charities Foundation and persuaded the Scottish Government, the National Heritage Memorial Fund and other heritage charities to join in the rescue; perhaps most presciently of all Leon Max, a Russian-born fashion designer, bought Easton Neston – a baroque mansion set in 550 acres of Northamptonshire countryside - for just £15m in 2008 from John Major's former House of Lords Chief Whip. The National Trust's work in this arena remains exemplary, while The Goodwood Estate demonstrates the power of utilising these places as events, thus sharing their magnificence with tens of thousands of people while generating revenue for their upkeep.

Whatever the answer is, it'd take a cold individual not to concede that there needs to be one - or more likely, several acting in tandem. To coin a new take on those final two lines of Hemans' stanza:

*“Long may their lofty aspects
Lay siege against the bland”*

