

THE COUNTRYSIDE: Why rural life is so special

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To the manor born...

Moving house is a daunting task for most of us. Taking over the keys to a family manor house, which has remained relatively untouched structurally since the 1950s along with its 1,200 acre estate, is another challenge entirely. Ned Bigham, Viscount Mersey, his wife Clare and their two young daughters Flora, 7, and Polly, 4, did exactly that last year when they moved from London to Bignor Park just outside Petworth.

Words: Liane Oldham Pictures: Louise Packard

THE Park and Manor of Bignor were held from at least the mid-fourteenth century by the Earls of Arundel. The present house was built in 1826-9 by the Cornish tin miner John Hawkins in the Regency style. He also took an active part in the excavation of the historical landmark, Bignor Roman Villa, half a mile away.

Bignor Park has been with the Bigham family since 1926, when Ned Bingham's great-grandfather, the second Viscount Mersey, bought it and took over the running of the house and estate.

Ned's parents Richard, the fourth Viscount Mersey, and his wife Joanna moved into the manor house in 1992. Richard built a beautiful temple in the

estate's gardens to commemorate his mother Kitty's 80th birthday and Joanna redesigned certain aspects of the garden, injecting her own unique style with a fusion of the contemporary and ancient including the Zen Pond and local sculptures by Geoffrey Stinton and Willow Legge, designed to bring a sense of fun to the estate's grounds.

Sadly, Richard passed away in 2006 and it has fallen to Ned and his family to take up the mantle of running a country estate in times such as these, while also ensuring that it remains commercially viable not only for his own family, but also the wider estate community such as the farmers who continue to work some of its land.

For Ned, who also continues to be a musician and composer, and Clare, who worked in graphic design, Bignor Park is home now and a work in progress. One which throws up as many rewards as it does challenges.

"I suppose it was always in the back of my mind that one day I would move back here to run the estate," says Ned. "But I never felt any pressure from either of my parents from that point of view which I greatly appreciated. My father was a documentary film-maker and in many ways non establishment. My mother is a printer and graphic designer and in fact now runs printing and clock workshops from her studio here on the estate. I am a musician and composer. So, I can honestly say I never



felt a huge burden of responsibility bearing down on me. However, what I didn't appreciate was that it is not just a case of living in a nice big house, it is very much hands on."

The life that we see recreated in TV programmes such as *Downton Abbey* and *Upstairs, Downstairs* has long since melted into the past.

The reality of running a modern day country estate is very different to employing an army of loyal servants, staff and estate managers and then just retiring to your club in London, only to return for the occasional weekend party.

"It still makes me smile when someone rings and asks to speak to the estate manager when it's actually just me and my mobile phone," says Ned.

"Making an estate such as this work in this current climate is a struggle, you have to really consider the infrastructure costs. It's not enough these days just to rely on the traditional revenue streams such as the farming. Farmers aren't exactly having the easiest of times with their reliance on state support and subsidies. It is vital to diversify, to be creative with your opportunity. Which, is why we have opened up Bignor as a back drop to

other worlds such as fashion shoots and film making. It has recently become popular as a venue for marquee weddings on the Croquet Lawns. And now we are taking this a stage further."

To this end there has been much activity at Bignor since Ned and Clare moved down from London last July. Restoration of the early eighteenth century stables and clock tower is due to be completed this May and will offer modern facilities in a setting reminiscent of times past, perfect for weddings, parties or corporate events.

Much care has been taken to retain as much of the original character as possible using specialised local craftsmen, original materials, lathe and plaster ceilings and limewash walls. The courtyard cobbles have been reinstated and you can almost picture Jane Austen's Mr Darcy jumping down from his horse after a morning ride.

Changes are also taking place in the gardens which have a charmingly natural, unfussy feel to them. Many of the old walls are being rebuilt and Chelsea Gold Medal winners Fleur De Lys has been appointed to retain the rustic look while injecting new ideas

to complement it. Clare is also very much involved, alongside her husband, in heralding in this new era for Bignor. "I am very excited about the restoration and renovation of the stable block. It's been fascinating to get involved with something like this and to see it all come back to life and to know that it could be the start of someone's life together as a couple.

"We aren't in the business of conveyor belt weddings. What we want people to do is come and have Bignor as their own home for the day, whether it be a marquee on the Croquet Lawns or party at the Stables."

The manor house itself, which will remain a private home, has remained relatively untouched since the 1950s when Kitty, Ned's grandmother, oversaw work to the interior. "I am looking forward to making some changes to the house, but all in good time!" says Clare.

FIND OUT MORE

For information on the estate and its facilities visit www.bignorpark.co.uk or for weddings/parties/corporate please contact Louise Hartley on 07798 807043 or louise@bignorpark.co.uk

Countryside Bignor Park



Facing page: Viscount Mersey and family in the estate's Greek loggia with, top, the birthday Temple and Zen Pond.

This page: picturesque Bignor Park and, top right, the Dutch garden and, bottom, the entrance to the walled garden



ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY

On the wider estate, more than 400 acres of the farmland has been converted to organic and several miles of new hedging has been planted around the estate.

Enhancing the land at Bignor whilst at the same time encouraging bio diversity and protecting the natural balance is very important to Ned.

"In the late seventies my father planted pine across Broad Halfpenny and Column Hill on the estate," says Ned. "These were commercial plantations, the intention being to harvest them. They were of little ecological value, unlike the ancient woodland that we treasure elsewhere on the estate

"With the help of a grant from Natural England and the support and advice of the National Park Authority, we have felled the pines, destumped the land and reverted it to heathland, as it was historically."

This new heathland is grazed by the Dallyn family's organic cattle and sheep in order to provide a habitat for a myriad of wildlife.

This includes ground nesting birds, such as woodlarks, stone chats and Dartford warblers, insects, such as the rare field cricket, digger wasps, minotaur beetles, tiger beetles and silver-studded blue butterflies, and flora, such as heather and orchids including Lady's Tresses.

In recognition of all this work Bignor Park was awarded the Woodpecker Trophy for Conservation at last summer's South of England Show.

COMMUNITY BASED

Bignor Park is also very integrated with the wider community.

There is an old fashioned, traditional fete held there every two years on 5th June for the five local churches, Bignor, Sutton, Barlavington, West Burton and Coates. It is taking place this June.

Every Wednesday afternoon throughout April and October the garden is open for charity as part of the National Garden Scheme. And come Christmas, long time friend and gamekeeper, Mark Walker, supplies Christmas trees from the estate forests.

Being able to not only preserve but also progress this beautiful part of Sussex is not something the Bighams take for granted.

"It is a joy and privilege to be able to live here but to be able to share it with others will be an even bigger one," says Ned.

