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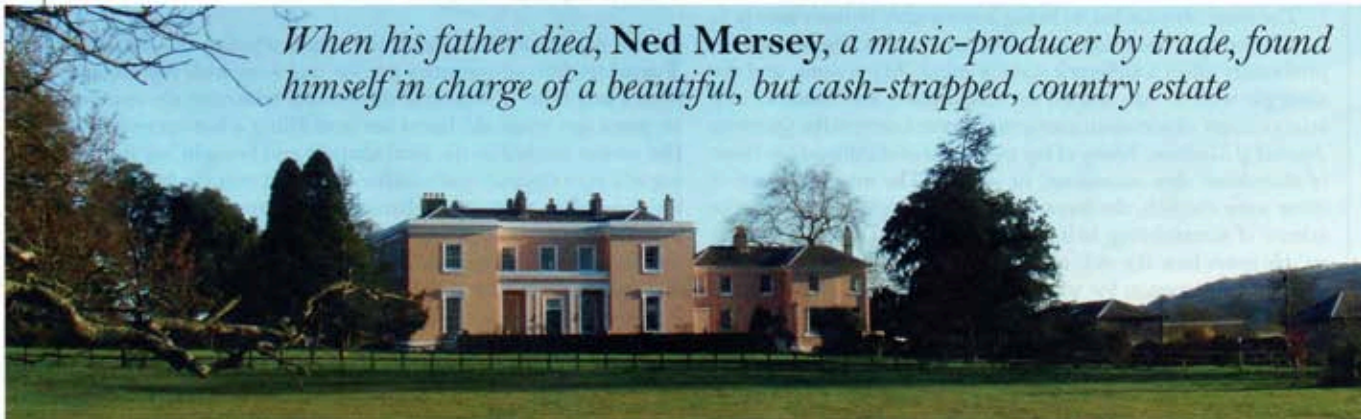


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The HAND-ME-DOWN HOUSE

When his father died, Ned Mersey, a music-producer by trade, found himself in charge of a beautiful, but cash-strapped, country estate



It's 8.30 on a Wednesday morning and the phone rings. 'Hello, please could I speak to the estate secretary?' 'Yes, that's me,' I answer. 'Well, I wondered if you could have a word with the owner of Bignor Park concerning a tree trunk that has just fallen down across the road next to Hazletts cottage.'

'Of course I will, and since that is me also, it shouldn't take long to find myself.'

'Oh, I'm terribly sorry, I didn't realise. Perhaps you could ask one of your woodmen to make it safe?'

'I would be delighted to. In fact we have just taken on a new woodman, who doubles as owner and estate secretary, and my mother has a saw that would be just the job.'

Such is the life of running a country estate in the Twenty Tens. The estate office is a mobile and laptop in a corner of the library. Next to the neglected mug of coffee is a pair of speakers, out of which pours booming

house music, as I record a singer chanting lyrics such as: 'Jump, jump, jump. Jump if you're ready.' You see, I am really a music producer and composer masquerading as Lord of the Manor, and singers of club music aren't used to getting on a train to deepest rural Sussex. In fact after I had given detailed directions to the last singer he helpfully clarified our location: 'OK, so you mean you live at the a** end of nowhere.'

Five years ago my father Richard, the fourth Viscount Mersey, sadly died, and the title passed down to me. The junior(ish) Bigham family thus found itself with a serious project – a beautiful 1,200-acre estate beneath the South Downs, complete with listed Georgian mansion, 11-acre garden, cottages and a selection of buildings in a poor state of repair with crumbling walls. How foolish I had been to follow a career as music producer and composer – if only I had run a lucrative hedge fund, these problems would be solved.

However, help was at hand in the shape of a good agent, accountant, solicitor, housekeeper (through *The Lady*, of course), several uncles and aunts, an open-minded mother and most importantly my wife Clare, full of insight, stamina and unflappability.

Oh, and a strong team of fencers, builders and gardeners, friendly tenants and a gamekeeper who goes the extra mile.

What's the difference between a record contract and a building contract? With a record contract, you are promised the world (sales, fame, fortune) and usually get nothing. With a building contract you are promised a building and usually get one. Result!

So how *do* you start new projects that help towards the huge upkeep costs? Butterfly farms, golf courses, polo matches – what is the recipe for success? I am a



**Above: Bignor Park Manor sits at the foot of the glorious South Downs
Left: Ned Mersey and his wife Clare**



'How do you start new projects? Butterfly farms, golf courses, polo matches – what is the recipe?'

A portrait of Ned's ancestor, Miss Margaret Elphinstone, dominates the drawing room
Top left: The Temple is inscribed with lyrics from a Jacobite ballad by Lady Nairne





Above: Restored walls line the Harp Garden at Bignor Park, while curving box hedges encircle the new herbaceous planting

fan of *Country House Rescue* and it is riveting to see how Ruth Watson goes about turning around the houses she visits. But for us it is happening in an organic-symbiotic-holistic-integratedly-do-it-on-the-hoof kind of way. We have cut unnecessary costs and asked what would make people want to come here.

Best of all are the beautiful gardens and stunning views. We look across to the majestic Downs and you cannot see another house or building anywhere. It is unthinkable that we are only 90 minutes from London; it feels more like a remote wilderness. 'Lo! The radiant star of day/Lights up this lovely scene anew' wrote the Romantic poet Charlotte Smith, who lived here in the second half of the 18th century and fell in love with it to inspire the rest of us. Turner, Hilaire Belloc, Edward Elgar and many others echoed this sentiment.

So, in practical terms, we have appointed an exciting new gardening team, called Fleur de Lys. Gold-

medal winners at RHS Chelsea last year, they have embarked upon an ambitious programme of new plantings and the reinstatement of the herbaceous borders, transforming the formal areas of garden into a panoply of colour. We have repaired the garden walls and restored the late 18th-century stables to their former glory, employing local craftsmen, original materials and traditional techniques such as lath and plaster (ceilings), limewash on the walls and galleting (Sussex flint walls). The eyesore cement in the courtyard has been replaced by cobbles and Fittleworth stone.

We have acquired a licence to hold weddings, and this summer the stables were in action for our first ceremony. I am relieved to say it went very well; the loo rolls did not run out, there were no punch-ups and everyone had an unforgettably wonderful time. Already we have three more bookings for this year and another three for 2012. We want to limit it to 10 weddings a year, and we give the couple exclusive use of the stables and gardens for their celebrations here. What could be more deflating than bumping into another bride on your big day?

Civil ceremonies take place at the Greek Loggia, one of the very few outdoor licensed venues in the country, and couples can also choose to erect a marquee on the croquet lawn for their reception. We have visited endless caterers and from them selected four companies that are absolutely top notch for the couples to choose from. We have also found a marvellous

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'In many years to come, we hope one of our daughters will wish to take over'

person to be our events promoter, Louise Hartley, who works tirelessly to make this into the most special wedding and party venue you could imagine.

We have undertaken major conservation work with funding from Natural England, restoring acres of heathland, planting new hedges and encouraging the habitat of *Gryllus campestris*, the rare field cricket that is only to be found on a few remaining sites in Britain. In recognition of this, Bignor Park was awarded the FWAG Woodpecker Conservation Award at the South of England show last year.

In the library, where I am now sitting, there are two portraits, of my grandmother and great-grandmother looking down on me. In the hall are full-length portraits of my great-great-grandfather (Lord Justice Bigham, judge of the enquiries into the sinking of the *Titanic* and *Lusitania*), my great-grandfather (book collector and historian who we think worked for MI5) and my great-grandmother 'Granny Mollie'.

Do they put their fingers in their ears when the music pounds out? Do they approve of the combination of brick colours we have chosen to rebuild the walls? And peeping around the door are our daughters: Flora, aged eight, and Polly, five. In years to come we hope one of them will take over, and hopefully not look back upon our stewardship as a total disaster. ♦

♦ *Bignor Park House, Bignor Park, Pulborough, West Sussex RH20 1HG: 07799-767888. For wedding/party enquiries please call Louise Hartley on 07798-807043, or visit www.bignorpark.co.uk*



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