

Country life

# Departing from their customary manor

Owners of big houses face a dilemma when their children grow up: sell up or stay put. **Max Davidson** looks at different approaches

To sell or not to sell? For owners of big country houses, who have lavished years of love and attention on their properties, it can be an agonising choice.

Sell and they kiss goodbye to a large part of their life. Stay put and they risk ending up in a house that is too big, expensive to maintain and crumbling around them.

It can be very difficult to strike the right balance between nostalgia and pragmatism, particularly about a beloved family home.

"This house has been a labour of love," says Julian Bannerman, owner of Hanham Court, in Gloucestershire. "I think of it as a republic, self-contained, a world within a world. But there is no point in clinging to the past. You have to move on."

Julian and his wife, Isabel, are award-winning garden designers, responsible, *inter alia*, for the British 9/11 Memorial Garden in Manhattan and the Stumpery at Highgrove. They have worked at some of the best-known stately homes in England, from Waddesdon Manor to Arundel Castle, but it is Hanham Court, which they acquired in 1993, that is their pride and joy.

In 2010, Hanham was voted number one Dreamy Garden in Britain in *Gardens Illustrated*. It is easy to see why. The gardens – open to the public two afternoons a week in summer – have a fairy-tale quality, seducing the eye and beguiling you with their subtle scents. There is a formal area, bordered by

lilies, old roses, tree peonies and fountains. A woodland garden is overrun with tree ferns, snowdrops and magnolias, while meadows of wild flowers overlook the River Avon.

Everything any gardener could ever wish for, and much more besides, is seamlessly blended into the 26-acre estate. Whoever buys Hanham, which the Bannermans have finally decided to sell, is privileged indeed. But of course – and this is the pathos of selling up – what they do with it is anybody's guess.

"The sort of buyer I have in mind is someone abroad who is dreaming of England," says Julian. "But who knows what will happen to the place? There is no point in trying to keep it the way it is."

Julian turns 60 this year, and he and his wife will soon be empty-nesters. The last of their three sons is in his final year at school. It seems the right time to move on. They have already bought a smaller property in Norfolk, which will be their base for the immediate future.

But they will be leaving a wealth of memories behind, with the life of the family inseparable from the life of the property. On the very day they moved into Hanham, Isabel was rushed into hospital to give birth to their second son. "This was our sons' childhood," she says. "They have loved Hanham as much as we have."

If the garden is the *pièce de résistance*, the house is not too shabby either. This sense, of a grand old country home blending perfectly



into its surroundings, gives Hanham its enduring appeal.

The earliest part of the building is the chapel, which dates back to the 13th century and is now incorporated into the main house, a large Tudor property with many later additions, such as Palladian windows, Victorian turrets and gargoyles.

For 200 years, Hanham belonged to the Creswicke family, prosperous local gentry, before



a period of decline in the 20th century.

When the Bannermans moved in the place was a wreck, with plastic cornices and other modern excrescences, which had to be weeded out if the property was to be restored to its former glory.

For years, it was a work in progress, all higgledy-piggledy, rather than a candidate for the Ideal Home Exhibition.

"Many of our friends found the borstal-cum-bed-and-breakfast

aspect of Hanham daunting," says Julian. But though the plumbing and central heating were erratic, there was no getting away from the romantic charm of the property, with its wood-panelled halls, quirkily shaped bedrooms and Tudor spiral staircases. It is a place of magic and adventure, for adults and children alike.

Julian says that the two things he will miss most about the property are the wisteria and the Elizabethan fireplace.

"I've never known a fireplace that both looks so good and functions so perfectly," he says. Leaving will be a wrench, one way and another.

The Bannermans are unusual in that they are not under financial pressure to move. But for many, the upkeep of such a home can be prohibitive: roofs

and windows have to be replaced, and the heating bills read like bad jokes in Christmas crackers. The trouble is that "sensible" options for balancing the books tend to get muddled by sentimental considerations.

"We all know in life what we should be doing, but that doesn't mean we do it," says Ruth Watson, the presenter of Channel 4's *Country House Rescue*. The show's cavalcade of aristos with moneymaking wheezes, such as butterfly farms, has made the programme compelling viewing for lovers of English social comedy.

Luckily, not all cash-strapped owners of country houses are so eccentric. Some bring a welcome pragmatism to the task of staying put, come hell or high water, in the home of their ancestors.

A hundred miles to the east of Hanham Court, in West Sussex, the Fifth Viscount Mersey – Ned Bingham to his friends – has no intention of selling up.

Bignor Park, the family seat for generations, is a magnificent Georgian property set in 1,200 acres overlooking the North Downs. It is still a family home – Lord Mersey lives there with his wife and children, while his mother has a cottage in the grounds. But it is also a commercial business.

"I had to do some serious number-crunching when I inherited the title in 2006," he says. "My father was a lovely man who took his responsibilities to the estate and its staff seriously. He was a bit like the Earl of Grantham in *Downton Abbey*. But he was not always very practical. His passion was forestry and he



**Family fortunes:** Julian and Isabel Bannerman, left, are selling Hanham Court, main photo and above; but Viscount Mersey, top – with his wife, Clare, and children Flora and Polly – is staying put at Bignor Park

planted many new trees on the estate. But forestry is a long-term investment: you have to wait years before it produces revenue. I needed money for extras such as graveling the drive and maintaining the garden, neither of which is cheap.

There is more money in weddings than trees, and it is to weddings that Lord Mersey is looking to boost his family income. Bignor Park is the only property in West Sussex licensed to hold outdoor weddings and, for £3,000 a pop, you can rent the Greek loggia and surrounding land to hold a ceremony.

It used to be just family and friends who got hitched at Bignor, but the venue is now open to all-comers. "We don't want the whole thing to turn into a conveyor belt," says Lord Mersey. "We're not offering cut-price deals if

### Ten ways to make a profit from your pile

- 1 Why not convert the stables or outhouses into holiday cottages?
- 2 Are your gardens sufficiently splendid to charge admission? Don't be coy about exploiting that fact.
- 3 If you are going to have paying visitors, install a tea room and earn a few more quid from Earl Grey and freshly made scones. Then add a souvenir shop.
- 4 Consider using the property as a venue for weddings. There's gold in them thar brides.
- 5 Tap into the market with conferences and seminars. Hosting 30-odd middle-managers from the City on an away-day in the country can be surprisingly lucrative.
- 6 Your house may not be grand enough to film *Downton Abbey*, but it might work as a setting in *Midsomer Murders*. Another nice little earner.
- 7 Haunted-house tours are booming. Do you have a Jacobean ghost on the premises? If not, you could always invent one.
- 8 If you have the right kind of farm animals, it could be worth exploring setting up a petting farm for children.
- 9 Having b&b guests is an obvious possible revenue stream, although it can turn into a full-time job if you are not careful.
- 10 Do you have woodland suitable for a pheasant shoot? Explore that option.

you get married on a Tuesday in February or anything like that, but we are taking the operation seriously. I have a first-class events manager and have cherry-picked the catering companies, so the quality is guaranteed."

If weddings are the big new attraction, they are not the only source of income. The golf course option was considered by the Fourth Viscount but rejected. Yet there are five cottages in the grounds, let out commercially, which are nice little earners. A recent fashion-shoot with Emma Watson suggests that it could have a future being used as a dramatic set.

Lord Mersey works in the music industry and, although turning Bignor into a recording studio is not viable, he likes the idea of staging concerts on the estate. "I'm not thinking of gigs attracting 20,000 fans," he says. "They already hold big concerts at Petworth and Cowdray Park. But it would be nice to host the odd boutique event."

Scraping every last penny out of the estate is not the objective. Nor are hare-brained schemes or aristocratic follies. "We just want to do sensible businesslike things," says Lord Mersey. "That is the best way to guarantee the future of Bignor."

He is following a different course from the Bannermans, but he is certainly following it with gusto.

### Country life

**For sale**

• **Cogdells Farm** in the Chilterns near Amersham, sits in 12 secluded acres with stunning views. It is ideal for raising horses, micro-farming or maybe a vineyard. Less than an hour from London, it could double as a b&b for escapists. **£1,795,000** with Knight Frank (01442 861610; www.knightfrank.co.uk).

• **Ashley House** West Yorkshire, is within easy walking distance of the centre of Boston Spa, a thriving village. It is a mile from the A1, 11 miles from Harrogate and 12 miles from Leeds. This five bedroom Georgian house is also Grade II listed. **£1.4m** with Savills (01904 617820; www.savills.co.uk).

• **Holme Hall** Another stunning Grade II listed Georgian property, the seven-bedroomed house with annexe is set in the peaceful village of Holme in Nottinghamshire. Lord Byron is said to have been a regular visitor. The property is available through Savills at **£975,000** (01522 508900; www.savills.co.uk).

• **Noseley** historic Leicestershire estate extending over 938 acres and consisting of a Grade II listed hall, a private chapel, a walled garden, fishing lakes, a pheasant shoot, parkland and 10 cottages. **£12m** with Knight Frank (020 7629 8171; www.knightfrank.co.uk).

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• Hanham Court is on the market for £2.5 million through Savills (01225 474500; www.savills.co.uk)  
 • Bignor Park (07798 807403; www.bignorpark.co.uk)