

House & Home

FTWeekend



Repulse attraction China's oligarchs find a seaside spot — HONG KONG PROPERTY PAGE 6

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Blonde, groomed, glamorous, the woman in dark, full-length silk at a rain-battered party on a Friday evening on the endless lawns of a country house was ebullient.

She has just secured a B-17 second world war bomber along with a fleet of other vintage aircraft for a fly-past at a charity event at her home, she tells me with a spreading smile. She has just sold out a series of 300-seat public talks in her saloon. And she has just started work on a book, her fifth, on her home and her predecessors as chatelaine.

She has not always been so cheerful. Far from it. "I would wake at 4am every night and wonder what we would do," says Fiona Carnarvon, wife of Geordie, the 8th Earl of Carnarvon, recalling her early years at Highclere Castle in Hampshire, her voice and eyes falling.

I sought out Carnarvon because I am on a mission to learn what it truly takes to keep the show on the road at a country house. What effort? What investment? And, after all, why do it?

If any great house in England speaks of aristocratic grandeur and serene permanence, it is Highclere, best known to the world as Downton Abbey, with its cliff-like Bath stone walls, 300 rooms and 60-odd bedrooms.

When Carnarvon moved here on her marriage to the earl nearly 20 years ago, the state rooms were open to the public, but the bedrooms, galleries and hallways were unfurnished. Every wall shone with utilitarian gloss cream paint. "Masses of the rooms were unused. The house was no longer a home. It had lost its way," she remembers. But Carnarvon, a chartered accountant, was used to tough performance metrics. For

The real Downton Abbeys

Even with healthy revenue from weddings, tours or film productions, big country houses devour cash, so how and why do owners do it? Much of the task revolves around a sense of history, of community, of belonging, writes *Sandy Mitchell*



A storage room at Doddington Hall
Christopher Nunn for the FT



James Birch at Doddington Hall, Lincolnshire — Christopher Nunn for the FT

several years after she moved to Highclere she set herself targets, including to get four new lampshades made each week and little by little to soften the spartan interiors. She worked through a couple of hundred lampshades every 12 months. She also became foreman of works, overseeing repairs to roofs and cottages. Meanwhile, her husband focused on the farm and finances.

Nowadays, there is scarcely a day without a film or photo shoot at the castle, a wedding, a garden tour, a shooting party, a concert in the park — or a charity extravaganza such as the one set for September with the fly-past when the castle will be converted into a hospital for the wounded to recreate its role during the first world war.

The couple employ 180 staff to keep it all going in summer. "We have poured money into the castle and grounds whenever it has come in. There isn't an end to it," says Carnarvon, seemingly inexhaustible. Visitors to the castle produce a key revenue stream, paying £16-£23 each (more for private tours). Last year some 80,000 came and another 30,000 poured in to events in the park. All this to feed the monster.

So what does Highclere mean to its owners and why do they so willingly bind themselves to it? "Belonging," says Carnarvon quite simply.

Now for some sobering figures. "The house loses £100,000 to £200,000 a year." This is James Birch speaking about his Grade-I listed



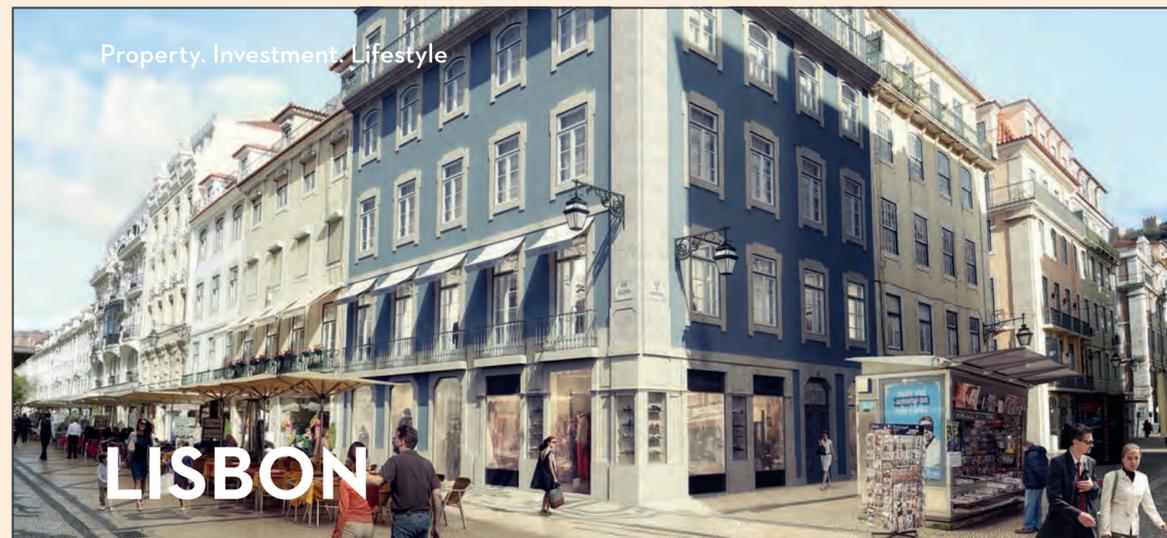
The Earl and Countess of Carnarvon at Highclere Castle in Hampshire
Highclere Castle

17th-century home, Doddington Hall, in Lincolnshire to which he moved 10 years ago with his wife Claire and their children after she inherited the estate.

"Most owners of country houses are looking after them on the back of other income streams," continues Birch. "It is not surprising. They were built by very rich people and weren't built to break even." He is as clear-eyed about the expense of running a great country house as you would expect him to be as a former Gurkha officer, Goldman Sachs managing director and current president of Historic Houses, the country house owners' association.

Merely opening Doddington to paying

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The real Downtowns

Continued from page 1

visitors would not keep the roof on. The Birches had to become entrepreneurs, so they set up an award-winning farm food hall, a chic coffee shop and a separate café and formal restaurant in the stableyard; they opened a homeware store, country-clothing emporium, Farrow & Ball paint outlet and a large bike shop. All this is on top of hosting weddings and diversifying the estate. "All of those make money – or enough to offset the loss," says Birch. "In reality, you spend your cash flow on improving the site as a whole."

Last year the house and gardens of Doddington Hall drew 32,000 paying visitors at £11 per adult; the shops and cafés pulled in 250,000. "We used to have a sign by the house pointing to the shops and cafés. Now we have a sign by the cafés and shops pointing to the house," notes Birch wryly. We take 20 times as much in the cafés and shops as we do at the house gate, although the margins are much lower in the former."

Dressed in their smartest frocks and suits, the audience at last year's Edinburgh Festival finale were swept along at the premiere of a symphony performed by a 90-piece orchestra as screens showed drone footage of the rocky Scottish isle of Staffa, after which the music was named. The composer, Ned Bigham, was there, too. But if his



Wolterton Hall — Christopher Horwood for the FT

'People don't want complicated lives and complicated houses. They don't want acres and acres'

mind drifted at moments that night – to rare insects or the price of carrots – he could have been forgiven.

Bigham lives with his wife and two teenage daughters at Bignor Park in West Sussex, a delicious rose-hued Regency mansion set in 400 acres of parkland, with nearly 10 acres of garden, an organic farm and views over one of England's most perfect stretches of downland and ancient wood.

"Thankfully it is not on the scale of a large stately home. Built in the 1820s, it has seven bedrooms in the main wing and three more in the west wing which

we let out," explains Bigham – known more formally as the 5th Viscount Mersey and the only peer of the realm to have drummed in Neneh Cherry's band and written songs for Amy Winehouse.

Soon after he inherited the 1,100-acre estate from his father and moved to the house in 2010, he began reviewing the cost of various enterprises, including the house's large walled vegetable garden tended by a brace of gardeners to feed the house. "We worked out it was costing us £50 a carrot."

He cut the carrots then looked at sources of new revenue. Glamping was one, woodland burials were another, but Bigham was put off by the extent of land the paid-for graves would require. It was a dull brown insect – the endangered European field cricket *Gryllus campestris* breeding quietly on the estate's heathland – that sprang to the rescue.

Environmental grants arrived to enlarge the insect's habitat, along with others for planting hedgerow and restoring meadows and wetland as a breeding ground for lapwings. (Post-Brexit, grants are expected to be weighted still more towards land management that benefits wildlife, and away from pure crop production – news that should keep Bignor's crickets feeling chirpy).

Meanwhile, Bigham and his wife Clare restored the Georgian stables to host wedding parties for couples marrying in the Greek loggia.

All revenue helps. However, for a professional devoted to pursuing a career in the outside world, the sharpest challenge is finding enough time and head space to focus on the house and estate alongside the "real work".

"It is quite a juggling act, made easier



by having commissions with deadlines to produce music," says Bigham, from his recording studio, surrounded by drums, keyboards and a mixing desk, in another converted section of the stables. "However many leaks there are in the house, or dramas around the place, I still have to deliver a piece by a certain date or it won't get performed."

Peter Sheppard and Keith Day in the Walpole portrait room of their home Wolterton Hall
Christopher Horwood for the FT

When I ask Bigham to describe in a word the allure and significance for him of Bignor Park, he replies: "Heritage."

While it has never been a secret that country houses devour cash, awareness seems to have grown among wealthy would-be owners of the mental bandwidth they require to run. "People don't want complicated lives and complicated



Rear view of Doddington Hall, Lincolnshire — Christopher Nunn for the FT



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KINGS CROSS





Sandy Mitchell's manor house in Berkshire — Leo Goddard for the FT

(Right) Sandy Mitchell at his manor home in Berkshire
Leo Goddard for the FT

houses. They don't want acres and acres of bedrooms, or to manage a lot of staff any more," says Lindsay Cuthill, head of estate agents Savills' prime residential and country house department.

Even so, the finest house with the best estate remains extraordinarily sought-after — a trophy conferring status similar to owning the rarest of paintings or

(Above) Wedding teepees at Bignor Park
New Forest Studio/Beautiful World Tents

jewels. A leading property-search agent tells me there are three would-be buyers in the market at the moment each able to afford up to £100m for the perfect rural property in the south of England, yet who have been unable to secure one after a year or more of looking.

Wolterton Hall was not what many would have termed the perfect house in

the perfect place — because it is in north Norfolk and was uninhabited for decades. Its 40,000 sq ft of pedimented splendour, dressed in red brick, was déshabillé, to put it delicately. Not so much a trophy as atrophy.

It took Peter Sheppard and his partner Keith Day to see its promise. Successful designers and entrepreneurs,

who sold their company Sheppard Day to Conran, they bought Wolterton Park in 2016 with its 500 acres, swoop of long lake and 20 cottages and lodges, then set about the restoration with practised skill, having previously restored and sold five large listed houses.

Their project will surely absorb several million pounds, but their attitude to cost is robust. "If I had really put a price to the cost of restoring it per square foot, I would have been mad to take it on," says Sheppard.

It helps that their goal was never to give the house a gilded Belgravia makeover. "The heating works on an old ship's boiler from 1947 and, provided the oil tanker arrives once a week, we don't freeze," adds Sheppard, who plans

'If I had really put a price to the cost of restoring it per square foot, I would have been mad to take it on'

to replace the boiler but is resisting temptation to install a hugely expensive biomass alternative.

The pair never stop working on the house, even at weekends. The main body of the house is already furnished and richly restored while the estate cottages, refurbished to "five-star" standard, are available for holidaymakers.

It was a love of projects and old houses that drew Sheppard and Day to Wolterton — but not just that. They knew a country house has a strange magnetic force, one that has blessed, and dogged, owners of significant houses for centuries. "You become the focus of the community," explains Sheppard. "And you have to take your responsibility seriously as an important part of it. If you think you are going to get a house like this and put a fence around it and cut yourself off . . ."

For Sheppard and Day this has meant throwing open their doors to a stream of charity events, concerts, weddings, parties and much more. Sheppard looks forward to doing this "until death".

When he adds his touchstone-word to those others — belonging and heritage — it is easy to guess. His is "hospitality". They make a powerful blend, and suggest to me that the country house is in no kind of jeopardy for all the costs and extravagant demands on owners.

I can tag a last word of my own on to this list as I too live in a listed country

Money box

How much does it cost to run a country house?

"A rule of thumb is to double the cost of wages for the staff," says Philip Eddell, director of Savills' country and London house consultancy. So, if the wage bill for a gardener, groundsman and housekeeper/cook is £100,000 a year, heating the house, insurance, maintenance and so on is likely to add another £100,000.

What does it cost to build a new country house?

Costs vary, but around £400 per square foot for good-quality materials, so a house of 10,000 sq ft will cost £4m to build. Add 20 per cent to cover VAT (unless the house replaces one being knocked down), plus another 20 per cent for fees and he total comes to more than £5.5m, before furnishing.

What does it cost to buy a period country house of 10,000 sq ft within an hour of London?

On average, £5m-plus. Just under half of buyers at this level are from overseas. The average cost of a house like this is half as much in the Midlands and north of England.

house, one that served as a manor when it was built in 1205, although it is a doll's house compared with Wolterton. When my wife and I stumbled on the place 15 years ago it was a ruin jumping with rats yet, seen from far enough away, was break-your-heart lovely.

It took us three years, all our cash and far too much of our working lives to rebuild. Now, as I write, I look out over the trim croquet lawn and ha-ha we built, and beyond that to the oaks and beeches we planted in the fields. Black lambs bleat and butt their mother's udders mercilessly for milk — the only sound. London, 60 miles away, and all the world's hectic madness seem unimagnably distant.

My own word is "sanctuary". Nothing ever will ever feel more precious or worth investing in than that.

Sandy Mitchell is founder of the RedBook Agency, helping clients select architects, interior designers and other professionals to launch their property projects

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