

# Delighting in the detail – the Attingham experience 2008

Eight weeks' exposure to architectural gems of the English country house and some urban equivalents left **Priscilla Pitts** with much to reflect on when considering the presentation and conservation of historic properties in New Zealand.

## A FINE ROMANCE

Imagine being served the quintessential English afternoon tea – dainty sandwiches, a lavish assortment of delicious cakes, elderflower cordial, fragrant tea – in an elegant entrance hall on a perfect English summer's afternoon. Outside, cows graze on the far side of the ha-ha, an abundance of roses is just past its gloriously scented prime and fruit is starting to form on the espaliered fruit trees. The house itself is beautiful and fragile, its beguiling rooms furnished with an idiosyncratic accumulation of grand pieces and quirky family treasures; its outstanding features are the double-height library and, leading off it, an exquisite conservatory complete with fountain, arum lily light fittings and filigree ironwork. This is Flintham Hall and I've fallen in love with it in a heartbeat.

My visit to Flintham in Nottinghamshire – which included a stroll past the reed-fringed village pond, complete with a moorhen and her chicks, to the tiny but perfectly formed Flintham Museum – was part of the 2008 Attingham Summer School programme, which forms the core of the Clark Collection/Creative New Zealand Scholarship. The summer school centred around visits to 25 country houses, five museums and two clusters of historic buildings (the Weald and Downland Museum, where a variety of vernacular rural buildings rescued from demolition or decay had been relocated and restored; and unbelievably picturesque Blaise Hamlet, now a National Trust property). These visits were complemented by some 20 brilliantly informative and stimulating lectures and seminars by a range of experts.

## MODESTY AND MUNIFICENCE

The houses we visited had been selected to give us a wide range of experiences in terms of scale, period and current ownership. At the other end of the scale from the tiny cottages at Blaise Hamlet were the extensive estates and grand houses of Badminton and Chatsworth; while privately owned houses like Flintham Hall and Broughton Castle offered a strong contrast to properties owned by English Heritage and the National Trust. For instance, at Broughton Castle in Oxfordshire, the charming and hospitable Lord and Lady Saye and Sele had made sensitive contemporary modifications and commissioned some very striking furniture for their fourteenth-century



Figure 1: The imposing facade of Flintham Hall, with the famous conservatory on the right. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: PRISCILLA PITTS.



Figure 2: The exquisite conservatory at Flintham Hall. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: PRISCILLA PITTS.

home; while at Arundel Castle in Sussex, the new garden designed by Isabel and Julian Bannerman, which nods to history while being unashamedly contemporary, is more adventurous than the National Trust or English Heritage would dare to attempt.

Many houses had been extensively added to and altered over the centuries, with a resulting complexity and richness (and occasionally confusion) of styles. In those open to the public, this created seemingly endless difficulties in respect of conservation and presentation, and the merits (or otherwise) of the various approaches we were exposed to were hotly debated by the Attingham students. By the end of the course, the only agreement we could come to was that every site was different in terms of its condition, history and aesthetic qualities and required a customised approach. I learned a huge amount from my fellow students, who included museum and historic house directors and curators, conservators, conservation architects and art historians, from Britain, Europe and the US with a tiny sprinkling from Australasia.

## THE BUSINESS OF HERITAGE

The Attingham course is so rich and varied it is impossible to detail all the highlights. However, one of these had to be the two days we spent at Chatsworth, the seat of the Duke of Devonshire. The property is run as a complex and successful business, much of it open to visitors and offering a variety of activities, a range of very seductive shops, several food outlets and venues for hire. It has been used for many film shoots – the famous sculpture gallery featured in the latest film version of *Pride and Prejudice* – but the house is also used by the Duke and Duchess for private entertaining, which constrains the kind of interpretation that the staff can offer to visitors. Contemporary art works are bought and commissioned for the house and this gives vitality to what is a very grand and at times overwhelming property. We were incredibly fortunate to be given special access to the Chatsworth collections of drawings, silver and ceramics and to the connoisseurship of the knowledgeable and very friendly Chatsworth staff and visiting experts.

I had been looking forward to visiting Hardwick Hall, built by the indomitable and ambitious Elizabeth Shrewsbury, Bess of Hardwick, one of the most powerful women of Elizabethan times. The house – built of stone from Bess's own quarry, with an unprecedented expanse of window glass from her own glassworks – offers a powerful sensory experience with a rich melding of innovative architecture, glorious textiles, fascinating portraits and



Figure 3: The tiny Flintham Museum is housed in the former village shop.  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: PRISCILLA PITTS

elaborate plasterwork. Bess's initials and her personal symbol, the stag, crown the façade and the house remains imbued with her inimitable personality.

### A FOSSILISED FICTION

Another potent – but very different – experience was offered by Calke Abbey. When it was acquired by the National Trust in the early 1980s, this largely eighteenth-century house had been in a state of decay for many years. The Trust decided to 'preserve' it very much as they found it – disintegrating and cluttered, with many of the rooms turned into dumping grounds for unused furniture, toys and other items as poverty reduced the ability of the eccentric Harpur Crewe family to maintain the house or even keep most of it in use. As we learned, a great deal of conservation and cleaning go into keeping Calke Abbey looking as the National Trust received it. What visitors see is a fiction of decay – but also a graphic example of what happened to so many English country houses following the introduction of death duties and other taxes. I found Calke Abbey quite disturbing and the kitchen, with its rusted utensils and peeling walls, was just too much for me, so I fled past the stacked glass cases full of stuffed birds and animals and the crocodile skull on the billiard table into the fresh air of the garden.

### DOMESTIC BLISS?

Speaking of kitchens, one marked trend in the interpretation of English historic houses is the opening up of 'below stairs', which is proving very popular with

visitors. Peter Brears, who delivered an entertaining Attingham lecture on 'The Architecture of Country House Services', has been a consultant for many of these projects and was on hand at Petworth – another wonderful house in Sussex – to explain the workings of the service areas and kitchen equipment, which was fascinating. As we later discovered, the famous kitchen, with its palm tree pillars, at the Brighton Pavilion makes a splendid cocktail party venue and the cool, tiled dairies at Dyrham Park and Uppark were utterly charming.



Figure 4: The new garden at Arundel Castle, designed by Isabel and Julian Bannerman. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: PRISCILLA PITTS

Another trend is the recreation of elaborate table settings, often for the dessert service, which is both pretty and easier to recreate than hot dinner courses. However, I became increasingly unconvinced by the artificial food that was displayed on dining tables and in kitchens; with the exception of wax fruit and some alarmingly realistic looking raw meat at Petworth (yes, I'm afraid I did surreptitiously poke it to check!), most of it looked all too fake. The real vegetables piled in baskets in the vast kitchen at Hampton Court Palace (which also had a wood fire blazing in the enormous fireplace) were far more appealing though probably beyond the resources of most properties to achieve on a daily basis.

## INTERNSHIPS

As well as the Attingham Summer School, the Clark Collection/Creative New Zealand Scholarship offers a number of short internships. For me, having recently moved into the built heritage sector, the time I spent with English Heritage (the equivalent of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust) and the National Trust was incredibly useful as well as hugely enjoyable. The main focus of my time with English Heritage, in the company of Head Curator of Collections, Martin Allfrey, was a two-day visit to Down House, Charles Darwin's house and garden in the beautiful Kentish countryside. To mark the anniversaries of Darwin's birth and the publication of *Origin of Species*, a major new interpretation project was being planned for the first floor and I was asked to prepare a report on how to improve the presentation of the ground floor rooms. This is a delightful property that graphically illustrates Darwin's happy integration of his studies and family life and where



Figure 5: The Great Hall at Hardwick Hall, with its elaborate plasterwork frieze and lavish textiles. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: PRISCILLA PITTS.



Figure 6: The kitchen at Calke Abbey - a huge amount of work goes into maintaining the existing sense of decay while preventing further deterioration. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: PRISCILLA PITTS

his original glasshouses and attractive garden are used to explain his theories of evolution.

Two visits in particular stand out from my week with the National Trust. I chose to visit Corfe Castle because New Zealand's own Frances Hodgkins had lived in the village in the later part of her life; several of her paintings show the silhouette of the ruined castle and her letters contain numerous references to places and people in the village. Mary Willis of the Corfe Castle Town Hall Trust kindly provided me with copies of old photographs and information relating to places where Hodgkins had lived or worked and I was able to photograph most of these in their present-day state. The restaurant where I dined was, coincidentally, converted from one of the houses where Hodgkins lived for a time.

What I had not appreciated before my visit is that Corfe Castle – built by William the Conqueror and blown up by the Parliamentarians after they took it by treachery in the Civil War – is one of the National Trust's most successful properties, attracting 160,000 visitors a year. Nor was I prepared for the castle's powerful presence, which was in no way diminished by the large number of visitors enjoying the site and its commanding views of the surrounding Dorset countryside.

## OPEN TO INNOVATION

I also elected to spend time at Tyntesfield, an extraordinary Victorian Gothic Revival 'pile'. After its owner died in 2001 the National Trust stepped in to save the house and its contents. Over £20 million was raised

in less than two months, much of it from members of the public, but it was the conditions of the endowment grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund that turned Tyntesfield into a site for experimentation. Those conditions demanded an unusually high level of access for people from communities that do not traditionally visit heritage sites. This has been achieved in large measure through Tyntesfield's volunteer programme and by offering education and work training programmes for people from nearby depressed areas in Bristol and Nailsea.

In keeping with its aim to 'spearhead new ways of managing the historic environment in a more open, participative and ultimately more meaningful way for people today' (1.), Tyntesfield has also adopted a more flexible approach to visitors than most other National Trust houses. It has experimented with unobtrusive ways of protecting objects and surfaces, and room stewards and other volunteers explain not only the history of the house but also conservation practices to visitors.

## CAPITAL TIMES

As part of the scholarship programme, I also spent several days behind the scenes at the Victoria and Albert Museum and Kensington Palace and enjoyed a personal guided tour of the Hampton Court Palace gardens with gardens advisor, Todd Longstaffe-Gowan. And I filled every spare minute with visits to other museums, historic houses and gardens in London. Particularly memorable were Marble Hill House for its immaculate restoration by English Heritage, Ernö Goldfinger's art-filled modernist house on the fringe of Hampstead Heath

and the enchanting garden at nearby Fenton House. In central London, the Cabinet War Rooms' series of unpromising underground spaces were made engaging by the fascinating stories associated with them (though I found the Winston Churchill Museum, which is part of the experience, confusing and over-designed).

The final high point of my trip was provided by Tim Knox, director of Sir John Soane's Museum. This historic London house with its ingenious use of space and extraordinary collection of paintings, sculpture and architectural fragments has long been on my 'to visit' list and proved to be even more fascinating than I could have imagined. Tim gave me a guided tour and also outlined the museum's extensive and exciting development programme. Earlier that day, I had visited Tim's own eighteenth-century home, Malplaquet House, which is crammed with all manner of intriguing personal collections (including religious pictures, embossed Victorian memorial pictures in the bathroom, and an array of stuffed animals and skeletons – shades of Calke Abbey!) and still sports remnants of its original decorative schemes. Salvaging this house from the depredations of its recent history has involved a significant investment of thought, time and funds by Tim and his partner Todd Longstaffe-Gowan; and made me realise how much more we could cherish our own architectural and interior design history. In the tiny, luxuriant back garden a stand of ponga reminded me that, although I'd been on an extraordinary and utterly memorable journey, it really was time to come home.

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Figure 7: The kitchen at Hampton Court Palace, with fresh vegetables and eggs on display. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: PRISCILLA PITTS.

1. The National Trust, application to Lottery Heritage Fund, 2002.