



RINGING OUT THE CHANGES

Hilary Porter discovers the delights of Pylewell Park, home of the Curious Arts Festival

Pylewell Park, in the heart of the Forest, is a 17th-century estate that is adapting gradually and gracefully to modern-day life.

It's current occupants call it "kicking and screaming into the 21st century", but after launching the magical annual Curious Arts Festival there five years ago it seems the transformation is underway, with plans to launch a complete wedding service at the historic home later this year. A hidden treasure, Pylewell is positioned east of Lymington and south of the village of Baddesley in Hampshire and belongs to the 20th Baron Teynham.

Since 2010, Pylewell House has been home to Lord Teynham's eldest son, the Hon David Roper-Curzon and his wife, Melanie. The dower house and outlying

cottages are occupied by Lord Teynham and his wife, and David's nine siblings with their children. With its large agricultural and sporting estate, the house sits majestically surrounded by traditionally laid out parkland with unrivalled panoramic views over the Solent along the South coast. The sea serves as a stunning backdrop to the grounds, which include 20 acres of gardens and a 15-acre lake.

The family is particularly talented and successful in the arts. Most famously, David's niece is the pop star Birdy – real name Jasmine van den Bogaerde – who grew up on the estate. The singer-songwriter has 140 million YouTube hits and at just 17, received a nomination for British Female Solo Artist at the 2014 Brit Awards.

David himself is a sculptor, specialising in figurative work and portraiture and two of David's siblings are concert pianists: Peter Roper Curzon was a National Keyboard Finalist in the BBC Young Musician of the year competition. Another, William Roper Curzon, is an artist who creates dynamic figurative and landscape drawings and paintings.

But David and Melanie, an art graduate, have needed good business brains since taking over the reins of Pylewell eight years ago. They live in the house with their 13-year-old twins, Archie and Katrina. David also has two older boys and a daughter from his first marriage.

As with many country estates, it has been necessary to look at other means of sustainability to see them evolve.



There has been no gilding of the lily at Pylewell, which is quite refreshingly apparent from the moment I knock on its front door and step inside. Despite having the potential to look like a museum with its many artefacts, this is a family home, not open to the general public. David was partly inspired to become a sculptor by being surrounded by lovely sculpture at Pylewell, and in the entrance hall a copy of Bellini's Apollo and Diana sits easily with some of David's bronze busts and Japanese vases brought back when his grandfather did "one of those grand tours".

David and Melanie show me around. There is quite an eclectic mix of art on show. In the dining room a painting of the Battle of Trafalgar hangs above a framed letter from Lord Nelson to a member of David's great-grandmother's family, who was First Sea Lord in 1805. In the drawing room, an oval portrait of a dashing 18th-century French grondee overshadows a dour Scots ancestress immortalised by Raeburn.

There are many more of David's sculptures of his family and amid the 18th and 19th century paintings are portraits of nuns that were all in the family. In the understated kitchen there hangs a Jubilee commemorative portrait of Queen Victoria.

The original 17th-century property was absorbed into a larger 18th-century house, which was then extended at the end of the 19th century. But following wartime occupation by British and US forces, David's great-uncle demolished two wings, involving the loss of the original dining room and ballroom. The dining room today features the chimney piece and wall carvings, including elements by Grinling Gibbons, from the former ballroom. The current kitchen was also created to replace the downstairs Victorian domestic spaces. In David's childhood, this was out of bounds on his summer visits, being the exclusive domain of his great-uncle's butler and cook.

He recalls: "My father inherited Pylewell from his

uncle and when my great uncle lived here I would come here in the summer and work on the estate and learn to sail. My great uncle was a bachelor and his sister lived on the top floor. "My father moved here, bringing 10 children. Apparently my mother had 12 dolls as a child and so wanted 12 babies! She ended up with ten, five of each. My parents now have 38 grandchildren and three great grandchildren. There were always packs of children here – there still are!"

David explains that his main job is as a sculptor. He works from home or travels to do commissions. Melanie's artistic talents have had a more practical use in the house: "I have an art degree but now all I paint are walls."

So is it a burden living in and maintaining such a big property and estate?

"It's like a monster that needs constant feeding," David declares and Melanie says: "It can feel like a big weight: bigger house, bigger problems."





David adds: "Hence we need to develop different sources of income. We had the food and drink festival after our first year here in 2011 and a lot of local people came. Many of them never realised Pylewell existed. It was always a sleepy place with traditional estate management. It was a good time to make the decision for my parents to move out and for us to move in."

The house isn't open to the public, but occasionally historical groups come to look round as do some charities.

For 30 years the annual church fete has been held in the grounds.

"The dog show particularly seems to bring lots of people in," laughs Melanie. "It is so popular we are thinking about having a dog festival next year. Since David has been living here the emphasis has been on developing the events business and The Curious Arts Festival has become the flagship event and is incredibly popular.

"To the rear of the house we are about to erect a semi-permanent marquee structure as we develop the wedding business. We've done it on a small scale before, but now we want to create the whole package for people wanting to get married."

They now employ an events co-ordinator, Mel Bright. With a beautiful gazebo on the front lawn for the ceremony and a permanent marquee adjacent to the house there will be capacity for up to 150 guests. The marquee will have spectacular views across the Solent and grounds of Pylewell. Melanie has refurbished a number of bedrooms within the main house and Pylewell now boasts a beautiful bridal suite with two additional bedrooms perfect for wedding accommodation. The gardens and lake are also available for engagement photography.

Despite the pressure to keep the estate running smoothly, they say they have not been tempted to do what Highclere Castle did and open up their home for a major TV drama like *Downton Abbey*.

They revealed TV producers for *Country House Rescue* approached them: "A bossy woman comes on and gets all the family round the table but that wasn't for us," said Melanie. "Neither was the reality TV show about a bunch of children in a house that is falling down!"

They have allowed it to be used for photo shoots such as Dunhill Clothing.

Times have certainly changed at Pylewell, as David explains: "We still have our own church school on the estate that my great, great-grandfather set up, but in the year 1900 the payroll at Pylewell had about 200 staff. There were 40 servants in the house and 40 working in the garden – just like *Downton Abbey*."

Melanie chips in: "Now I have one cleaner who comes for two or three hours a week."

David adds: "It's extraordinary how people used to lead their lives in this house. It really all changed after the First World War. Up until 1914 90 per cent of people were employed in service on farms and in houses and after the horrors of the trenches men came back and wanted things to be different.

"Then when the Second World War came and a socialist government came in in 1947 with a high rate of tax of 90 per cent there was mass panic. People who



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had big houses couldn't get staff because they couldn't pay them. Owners of houses like this blew their houses up. They were like white elephants. Then about 1955 the National Trust began to dig its teeth in, listing came in and you couldn't pull them down. You have to preserve the house. It's a huge responsibility but we are trying to bring it screaming and kicking into the 21st century."

"I would love to see the house restored," says Melanie, "and we are now looking forward to launching the wedding business."

David adds: "The neighbours love the Curious Arts

Festival. It's just one weekend and most people locally come to it."

The Curious Arts Festival takes place July 20 to 22 when chart topping singer-songwriter John Newman will headline Saturday's music line up. The literary programme features Adam Kay, Lemn Sissay, and Russell Norman, and a comedy line-up of the UK's leading stand-up and sketch show talents from TV and radio.

W: www.curiousartsfestival.com.

