



ALL CHANGE

Two anniversaries celebrate the rescue and transformation of a tumbledown stately home, says Sandra Carter

Walk around a bend in the sweeping driveway, and the view is likely to stop you in your tracks. Just ahead lies an imposing statue of Frederick, Prince of Wales, astride his stallion; to the left, a mile-long avenue of lime trees; ahead, a pretty lake straddled by a historic little bridge; and to your right, the Jacobean and Georgian facades of a very grand mansion.

This is Hartwell House, one of England's historic country houses, and its interior is equally impressive. But just 40 years ago both house and grounds were near-derelict.

Thankfully, a saviour was in the wings. In 1974 Richard Broyd had been moved by a V&A exhibition, *The Destruction of the Country House*, which highlighted the plight of many fine properties. He decided to do what he could, buying Bodysgallen in north Wales and Middlethorpe in York. Then in 1986 he acquired Hartwell House near Stone in Buckinghamshire on a very long lease.

You can spend a fortune restoring a derelict property, but what then? The new owner's vision was to restore each house to its former glory, then let it earn its keep as a very classy hotel to ensure its long-term future. This has proved hugely successful. Once up and running, all three Historic House Hotels were handed to the National Trust in 2008. Hartwell House is this year celebrating its 30th year as a hotel, and its first decade under the umbrella of the National Trust.

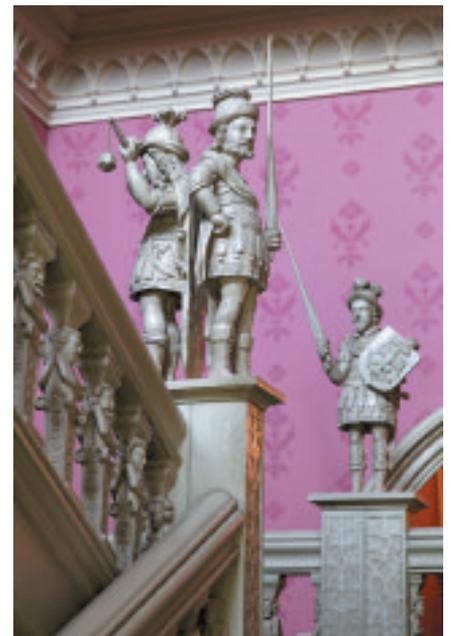
Hartwell director Matthew Johnson emphasises the need for any restoration to be true to the spirit of a place and its history, even when it is to become a public space.





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“Hartwell House was restored and converted to a hotel combining historically accurate standards with the provision of traditional and up-to-date comfort for guests,” he says. “The house is filled with appropriate antique furniture and fine works of art. It is a house with royal history, a Grade I listed stately home of rural Buckinghamshire, and a Historic House Hotel of the National Trust.”

The building was empty when taken over and in need of serious renovation. Today the quality of the interiors and decor is exceptional, and in every room antiques and fine art create a lavish sense of an aristocratic mansion in its heyday.

They even managed to find several paintings and an elegant cabinet that were here in the time of its most famous royal tenant.

King Louis XVIII fled from Paris after the French Revolution and rented Hartwell in 1809 for his court in exile, with some 130 courtiers crowded into rooms and outhouses. Despite a lack of funds the King insisted on regal etiquette from courtiers and hangers-on. A flat roof became a farm with veg grown in pots, fowl and rabbits in cages. Some set up little shops. His Queen Marie Josephine died here in 1810.

When Napoleon’s armies finally fell, Louis had already signed here in the Library his Declaration d’Hartwell, laying out a constitutional monarchy ready for his return to Paris in 1814 to reclaim his throne.

But the King didn’t forget his five-year home in exile. He later sent artists from the Sevres porcelain factory to Hartwell to make sketches for vignettes to be painted on a grand dinner service.

Earlier residents were less colourful. The house was built for the Hampden family in the early 17th century, then passed to their relatives the Lee family who owned it until 1938. The estate was sold to the philanthropist Ernest Cook, but not before Queen Mary and her party famously ate a picnic lunch in the drawing room attended by liveried footmen when attending Sotheby’s sale of the contents of the house.

Cook’s plan to live here was foiled when the estate was used in the Second World War as a military training ground, causing extensive damage. Later use as a finishing school coupled with a serious fire in 1963 brought the house to a sad condition by 1983.

Today thanks to the renovation there is no hint



of Hartwell's down-at-heel days. Eye-catching features are around every corner. The splendour of the Great Hall with its great fireplace and carvings. The fine rococo plasterwork ceiling in the Morning Room with its beautiful decor (a favourite place for elegant afternoon teas). The classic Library, where King Louis held court. The charming semi-circular vestibule, 50ft high, with acoustics ideal for music recitals. The elegant dining room with tall arched windows overlooking the grounds. The intricate drapery on the fabric ceiling of the four-poster bed if you are lucky enough to wake up here. The artwork, busts and fine furniture.

And the staircase. This uniquely quirky extravaganza has 23 carved Jacobean figures on the handrail balusters. Louis' querulous queen hated their shadows cast by her candle on the way up to bed and had the figures removed. A few were later found to be missing, but carved figures of Winston Churchill and G K Chesterton are in their place alongside mythological and historical companions. Overnight guests find them an amusing guard of honour as they retire to the sumptuously furnished bedrooms.

The grounds too have a fascinating history. Garden archaeologists have unearthed details of an extravagant early design – a model set up near the main staircase shows its intricate features. The present landscape was designed by a contemporary of Capability Brown with areas of lawns and natural woodlands. An hour's stroll around the grounds reveals many points of interest: a lovely lake, a stone bridge which was once the centre arch of 18th-century Kew Bridge, statues, a Gothic tower, an early well. St Mary's Church, near the stable block, which is now the spa, is a beautiful example of Gothic Revival style, sadly damaged and now closed but cared for still.

In most National Trust stately homes, you can only admire from behind a rope barrier. Hartwell House is one of the few which are hotels. While it is not open to visitors in the usual National Trust way, those who come as guests to stay or dine can make themselves at home for a while in extravagant surroundings. Visitors to the spa or its pleasant café/bar are welcome to walk around the grounds. Occasional recitals, garden visits and foodie events give further opportunities to visit and enjoy a taste of stately living.