

Mark Whitley explores Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire to discover how country houses and stately homes are thriving in the twenty-first century

The popular TV programme *Down-ton Abbey* portrays the lives of an aristocratic family and their servants in a fictional country house in the post-Edwardian era. In reality, those days of stately homes as luxurious domestic residences are in many cases no more. Large houses and country estates have had to find new roles in order to thrive in the twenty-first century.

The National Trust (NT) is responsible for more than 300 historic houses and gardens. The third most visited NT property and its most visited house is Waddesdon Manor, west of Aylesbury, with around 370,000 visitors per year.

When in the 1870s Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild wanted to display his outstanding collection of art treasures and entertain the fashionable Victorian elite, he had the vision (and the money) to undertake something truly spectacular: build a French chateau in the heart of rural Buckinghamshire. Being open to the public while also being responsible for the conservation of a historic building and its art treasures presents challenges for a stately home like Waddesdon, as marketing assistant Kathryn Hobbs reveals:

“The pluses of having so many visitors are that we are providing an enjoyable experience, and the revenue



this generates helps to preserve the property for future visitors to enjoy.

“The drawback is that there can be an impact on the house, gardens and art collections. We place a limit on the number of ‘light hours’ to which the collections are exposed, and we have an on-site conservation team who



monitor and conserve our fragile textile collection. Also we have recently relocated the visitor car park to limit the impact of vehicles moving around the property.”

A few miles north of Waddesdon is the NT property acknowledged as one of the great gardens of Europe: Stowe.

Blenheim Palace, a Baroque masterpiece.

Behind the seamless creation of these gardens is the design genius of landscape architects Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown, James Gibbs, Sir John Vanbrugh, William Kent and Charles Bridgman. The appeal of Stowe to its



The National Trust's most visited stately home is Waddesdon Manor in Buckinghamshire. Photos © Waddesdon Manor.

“At Stowe we wouldn’t be able to maintain and restore the gardens without the public’s support. Conservation and restoration take place a lot of the time when we’re open; it’s nice for our visitors to see conservation in action and to know that their support goes directly back to our work.”

Other stately homes have remained in private ownership while negotiating the transition from family homes to visitor attractions, and foremost amongst these is Blenheim Palace.

This English Baroque masterpiece (now a World Heritage Site) was built between 1705 and 1722 by John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough.

180,000 visitors a year lies in its stunning vistas and monumental temples, and the beauty of the gardens as they change through the seasons.

“Visitor experience has changed in recent years in order to bring National Trust properties to life and share the great stories we have to tell,” marketing officer Melanie Whitrow explains.



One of Europe's great gardens, NT Stowe attracts around 180,000 visitors a year. Photos © NTPL/John Millar.

Here is ambitious architecture on the grandest scale. The house contains a dazzling array of paintings and furniture, surrounded by 2,000 acres of formal gardens and ‘Capability’ Brown landscaped parkland.

Blenheim Palace was opened to the public on 1st April 1950 by the 10th



Duke, though it was the 11th Duke who really established it as a visitor attraction, as head of marketing Stephanie Hendley (pictured left) explains:



“Blenheim Palace is a privately owned estate, which costs an enormous amount to maintain and preserve, and it receives virtually no outside funding. The 11th Duke realised that developing the Blenheim Palace visitor experience as a viable and sustainable business was vital to generate much-needed income.”

Still the family home of the Marlborough family and the present 12th Duke, Blenheim Palace now attracts around 750,000 visitors per year, and is a major employer in the region, with between 100 and 200 staff depending on the season.

“It is vital we keep attracting day visitors to generate the income needed for the upkeep of Blenheim Palace, but in recent years that is not our only source of revenue,” Stephanie says. “We now have a range of different events, offer the venue for weddings and corporate banqueting, host film productions, and we source and bottle our own mineral water.”

Some country houses allow people to sample the ‘Downton experience’ for themselves. Historic House Hotels (HHH) was founded in 1979 to rescue run-down country houses and convert

them to luxury hotels while retaining their historic ambience. In 2008, its properties were leased to the National Trust, to ensure their long-term security. One HHH property enjoying a new phase in its illustrious history is Hartwell House & Spa, in the Vale of Aylesbury. This eighteenth-century stately home has elegant rooms and fine furnishings fit for a king — indeed, its most famous guest was Louis XVIII, the exiled king of France, who lived here with his court between 1809 and 1814.

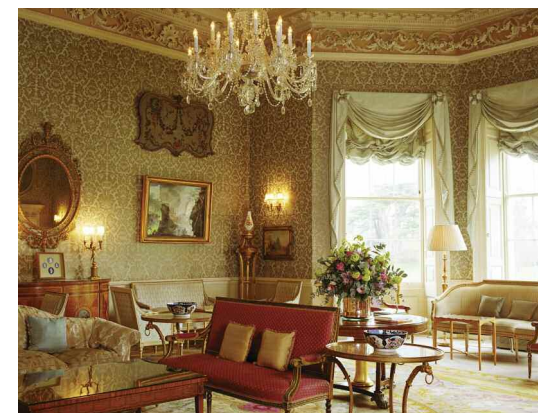
“People like to come here because of the heritage,” deputy manager Shaun Batty (*pictured right*) says. “The ‘Downton factor’ has been a



Live like a king at eighteenth-century Hartwell House in the Vale of Aylesbury.

major draw, particularly for the Americans (who are fifty per cent of our customer base) because they love old country houses. They’ve only got 400-odd years of history, whereas Hartwell House itself dates back to the 1600s and the estate is mentioned in the Domesday Book, so for guests we have the ‘wow factor’ like Downton.”

It’s apparent that stately homes can still serve a purpose in the twenty-first century, however different that might be from their original role, and the future looks bright for their continued existence. ■

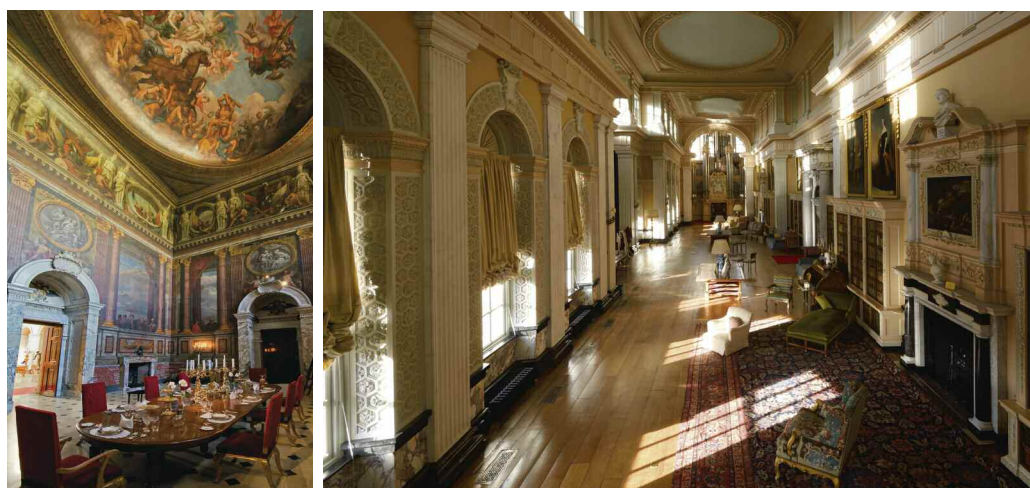


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Enjoy the splendour of English Baroque in the Saloon and Long Library at Blenheim Palace.