



*Hartwell House
in the snow.*

Hannah Newton takes a walk through the past and into the present in three grand, illustrious Historic House Hotels - ten years after they were handed entirely to the National Trust

What is the weekend?" asked Dame Maggie Smith, in her now infamous role as the Dowager Countess in the much lauded TV series *Downton Abbey*. Indeed, she may well ask, as Edwardian aristocratic life went - weekends in the country were de rigueur, in fact there was little to distinguish between a Tuesday or a Saturday except, perhaps, the number of people at dinner, or the obvious clue of church bells ringing on a Sunday.

History for many, may just be an outmoded past to muse on whilst reading a book, watching a period drama or viewing a painting - yet in some

corners of the country this gentrified and antiquated way of life goes on, albeit in a slightly more modernised fashion - with electricity, telephones and even the internet.

Ten years ago, in 2008, the National Trust was bequeathed one of its single largest donations since World War Two. Hotelier, business man and philanthropist Richard Broyd generously gifted three hotels from his business, Historic House Hotels, after he had rescued these buildings from near collapse and destitution.

The three properties were, Middlethorpe Hall near York racecourse, Hartwell House a Jacobean and Georgian

property set within 95 acres of glorious land near Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire and Bodysgallen Hall, set in 220 acres of wonderful parkland, in North Wales dating back to the 13th century.

Broyd, who made his fortune in the recruitment industry, changed course entirely and moved into the hotel industry, creating Historic House Hotels, after encountering an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in the 1970s, whose theme was: 'the destruction of the country house'. This exhibition set Broyd on a course, which would change the course of English history, preserving some of its most beautiful private country homes in perpetuity, ▶



Top: Hartwell House in the Winter covered in snow, with large lit Christmas trees. Above: The church of St Mary's in the grounds of Hartwell House

whilst concurrently providing a vital income to the National Trust.

Broyd and his business, Historic House Hotels, was an original pioneer of the conservation of empty and oversized houses and their conversion into hotels, whilst emphatically retaining the atmosphere of country-house life.

For Broyd his main intention was to protect these properties and by gifting them to the National Trust, he has honoured his promise: under the National Trust Act of 1907 the charity can declare its properties 'inalienable' which means that they cannot be sold, ever.

HARTWELL HOUSE

History simply cannot get better than the Domesday Book and according to the National Trust, Hartwell House, or an earlier house in its place, was mentioned in this ancient tome.

Today the house, which is Grade I listed and dates from the 17th century, is simply overflowing with historical accounts including its most famous resident, King Louis XVIII the exiled King of France and his court, who spent five years there from 1809, alongside his wife, who sadly died of alcoholism.

Wonderfully, King Louis remained at Hartwell until 1814 when the constitutional document, confirming

his ascension to the throne, was signed in the library. The library where today you can enjoy high tea or a glass of champagne and see and even touch, the desk that King Louis sat at to sign this important document.

One of the unique magical experiences of these buildings is the sheer wealth of genuine antiques present, many of which are originals, which the team at Historic House Hotels have tried to recover over the years. Allowing each guest to touch, breathe and truly take in the authentic history which seeps from every room and artefact, every tree and cornice.

At the front of Hartwell House stands the wonderful equestrian statue of Frederick Prince of Wales who was rescued from an over-grown part of the estate and restored.

Other notable characters in the history of the property include, William Peveral - Hartwell was the seat of William the Conqueror's son, John Earl of Mortaigne - who succeeded his brother as King of England in 1199, Sir Richard Lee - Lord Chief Justice who later served for a time as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Queen Marie Josephine de Savoie - who joined her King at Hartwell around 1810 and Gustavus IV King of Sweden - who also lived here during the time of Louis XVIII.

This is not to mention the 20th and 21st



Left, right and below: The beautiful interiors and exteriors of Hartwell House.



century notables who have stayed here as new life was breathed into it as a hotel.

These include President Clinton, the Emperor and Empress of Japan, many heads of state, and, in 2013 it was chosen by The Chancellor and then Bank of England Governor as the venue for the meeting of G7 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors.

The architecture is also extraordinary - the great hall a masterpiece of English baroque design - most of this room is virtually unchanged since its completion in 1740.

The morning room and library are decorated in the Rococo style, with curvilinear marble chimney pieces. The bookcases in the library are fitted with some of the finest surviving gilt-brass wirework in the country. While the unique staircase at Hartwell House is decorated with carved Jacobean figures and leads to a selection of suites and bedrooms.

Further details reveal that Festivals of Peace and Temperance were held in the grounds of Hartwell between 1829 and 1866.

Today these beautiful grounds boast a stunning collection of 18th century pavilions and monuments. Some of these date from the 1730s when a magnificent topiary garden, planted in 1690, was finally brought to completion.

There is the Gothic Tower, a romantic crenellated turret; the Ionic Temple, an elegant exercise in Italianate classicism, flanked by four terms, figures from classical mythology, now returned to their original position after 200 years in another part of the garden. There is the statue of Hercules, the obelisk in the Park meadow and the statues of Zeus and Juno in the gardens behind the arch.

The present bridge over the lake was erected at the end of the 19th century and is the central span of old Kew Bridge, built in the 18th century by James Paine,

but dismantled in 1898 and divided up into lots and sold at auction. The Old Dairy is a relic of the 18th century, as is the Gothic bridge.

The avenue of trees that crosses the Old Court Garden was planted around 1830, while the estate wall was completed in 1855, encrusted with fossils and rare stones from the grounds.

In 1900 a forecourt was created in front of the entrance, ringed by a ha-ha wall to the north. The Rock Walk and cobbled paths were laid out before 1901 and there are trees and plants dating from the Edwardian period.

The Church was built in 1753-6 and is generally recognised as one of the most important buildings of the Gothic Revival.

Imagine a softly worn jacket, comfortable, but expensive that slips on and fits perfectly - this is the unique atmosphere you will find at Hartwell House, Buckinghamshire.



The glorious Middlethorpe Hall, a beautiful example of a William and Mary House, sat in 20 acres of gardens, parkland and walled kitchen garden



MIDDLETHORPE HALL

Middlethorpe Hall was built for Thomas Barlow, a prosperous master cutler who bought the Middlethorpe estate in 1698 as a bid to establish himself as a real country gentleman. It was once the home of the famous diarist, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who wrote in her diary, 'Tis a very pritty place...I think there is nothing to be done but to send an immediate note to Mr Harrison to let him know I will be at Middlethorpe with my family Tuesday next', sent in August 1713.

Middlethorpe Hall is influenced indirectly by the architecture of Sir

Christopher Wren, especially his Hampton Court of the 1690s with its horizontal skyline and its pattern of red brick, white sash windows and stone quoins and window surrounds - all features taken up at Middlethorpe.

The handsome north entrance front of seven bays and three full storeys plus a basement is surrounded by a proud stone eagle, the Barlow family crest. The pedimented porch over the front door is an early 19th century addition, while the attractive curved railings and gates enclosing the forecourt were added by Historic House Hotels in 1983.



Set in 200 acres of wooded parkland, with views across to Snowdonia, Bodysgallen Hall is wonderfully romantic.

BODYSGALLEN HALL

Bodysgallen Hall is a 17thth century house that has been skillfully and sympathetically restored by Historic House Hotels since 1980. The building is thought to have begun life as a watchtower for Conwy Castle back in the 13th century to warn of surprise attack.

It was not until late in the Elizabethan era, when it was owned by Richard Mostyn, who served as High Sheriff of Caernarvonshire, that it finally became a glorious family estate and home.

Through marriage the house passed on to the Wynn family and a tablet can be seen on the south-west gable bearing the initials of Robert and his wife Katherine Wynn: '1620 R:W:K'.

Today you enter the oldest part of the house, the main hall, above which is the drawing room which features a

magnificent fireplace. Here you will find the coats of arms from the 17th century families of the Mostyns, Wynns and Vaughans, which are also found in the stained glass windows in the dining room and main stairwell. Bodysgallen Hall has gradually evolved over the centuries from modest hamlet lodging to a large and comfortable country house, surrounded by one of the finest Arts and Crafts gardens in Wales.

There is a humility, a gentility in these ancient fabled and very English buildings that is so often lacking in the more obvious experience of modern, so-called deluxe hotels. But, these national treasures shine with graciousness proving that weekends in the country are alive and well.

www.historichousehotels.com

