

**W**HAT has been achieved at Stoneleigh Abbey, Warwickshire, in the past six years by a new charitable trust (founded in 1996) is one of the most remarkable historic-house stories of the past 25 years. It is a story that should be carefully explained, because it is, in many ways, just as interesting as that of the 3rd and 5th Barons' building of the Baroque west range (COUNTRY LIFE, March 14). It has involved imagination and energy, financial ingenuity and technical skill, a broad range of public financial support and private investment—and, above all, strong nerves.

The trust's management of Stoneleigh Abbey divides the site into three interlocking parts. The first includes the structure of the west range, the approach to it from the main entrance on the Coventry-Warwick road—through what can be best described as the west park—and the pleasure grounds close to the river and lake. This is the principal part of the site for which issues of preservation and public access arose—it is also the sole responsibility of the trust.

The second part, closely related to the first, is that in which the preservation of existing buildings is combined with new domestic uses, with limited public access. This new development has been organised by outside specialists working with the same architect as the trust. The third part is the redevelopment with new houses of two parcels of land that already had a variety of structures on them. That has been done by two firms of house builders following a master plan originally prepared by the trust's architect.

# HOW STONELEIGH WAS SAVED

JOHN CORNFORTH tells the remarkable story of how Stoneleigh Abbey's future has been secured. This is the result of an imaginative scheme undertaken in 1996, involving public and private funding, restoration, domestic conversions and public access.



How these elements slot together is a complex story. In order to appreciate the achievement, it is necessary to appreciate what a hard time Stoneleigh had in the years after a fire in 1960 and how much effort was put into finding solutions to its seemingly intractable problems in the years before the present trust was formed.

After the burning of the upper stories of the west range, the house, open to the public since 1946, was closed. It remained unoccupied for 22 years. The 4th Lord Leigh managed to get the range re-roofed and re-glazed, but the repairs were not done to a long-life standard. Nor could the restoration be carried further, because no use could be found for





**1—The undercroft: part of the older east wing at Stoneleigh now converted to a private residence and open by appointment. (Above right) 2—The entrance to the restored stable court. (Right) 3—Stoneleigh Abbey seen from the east. The Baroque west range lies to the right, and the older buildings, now divided into houses, to the left**

the upper storeys. The one major change was to lease (and later sell) part of the park for the permanent showground for the Royal Show.

The introduction of Capital Transfer Tax in 1975 posed a new threat to Stoneleigh, which the family had put into a trust after the introduction of Capital

Gains Tax in 1965. It was decided to set up one of the first charitable trusts in England for a house, and the mechanism was in position by 1976. However, the arrangements to transfer the house, land and contents, which Lord Leigh planned, were not carried through because he became ill. After his death in 1979 the High Court's permission had to be obtained for his will and the original discretionary trust to be varied so that Stoneleigh Abbey, certain endowment land and some contents, could be transferred to the charitable trust, in a way that would not create a CTT liability.

Permission was given, and the 1976 trust took over. In the autumn of 1981 sales of 'sparable' contents were held at Christie's to raise funds to put towards the repair of the west range. These funds were combined with £130,000 offered by the Historic Buildings Council. At the same time, the trust reconstructed the upper stories as basic modern office spaces. Thus by the time the principal rooms were re-opened to the public in 1984 (*COUNTRY LIFE*, December 13 and 20, 1984), it seemed that the problems of Stoneleigh were at last solved. Unfortunately that was not so, because a

tenant was never found for the offices and the essential rental income never came in.

That undermined the 1976 trust, and by the early 1990s, after the failure of a hotel-and-golf-course scheme to materialise, the trust found itself sliding into debt. That scheme however, had introduced the 5th Lord Leigh and the trust to Andrew Brookes of Rodney Melville and Partners in Leamington Spa, who has been a key figure as architect for all three operations since 1996. In 1991 Lord Leigh contacted Kit Martin, who has saved many country houses in dire straits, and met him the following year. Kit Martin worked out how all the building not required by the trust could be used for domestic purposes.

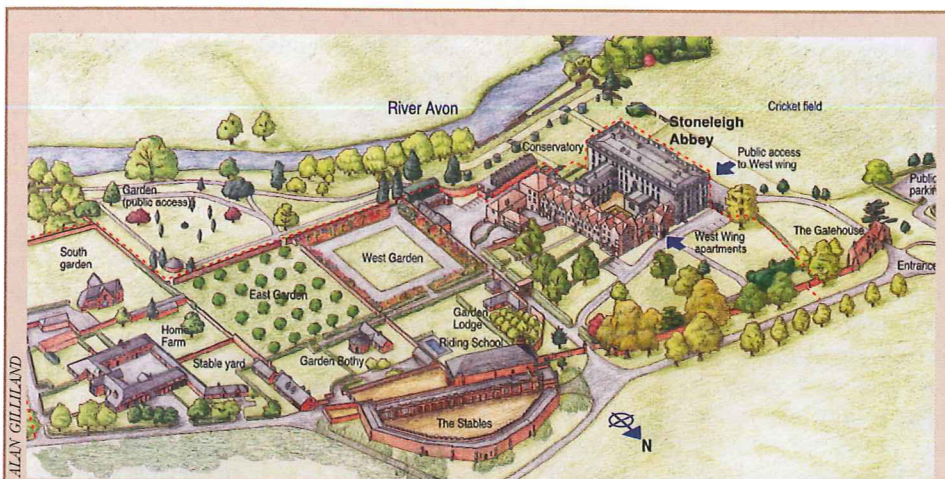
The two also helped the 1976 trust make successful applications to English Heritage, which offered £1,351,696, and the European Development Fund, which offered £1.35m, and then make a first application to the Heritage Lottery Fund. Lord Leigh also invited Anthony Bird, a businessman who lives locally and who was to become the key figure in the saving of Stoneleigh, to join as trustee.

The HLF was not able to support that application, so a new trust ('the 1996 trust') took over, with Mr Bird as chairman and several members recommended by Lord Leigh. Lord Leigh was briefly a trustee but the trust does not have permanent family representation. This trust submitted a revised application that led to a rather different package, with the trust retaining more of the property, including the stables, the gatehouse and more of the pleasure grounds, to provide greater public benefit.

This reduced the amount of building for Mr Martin to convert. It also involved the development, or rather redevelopment, of three sites for mostly new building that would produce more capital for the trust. The three elements involved







**STONELEIGH TODAY:** The Baroque west range can be seen at the top of the picture. Together with the approach from the main entrance, the west park and the pleasure grounds to the south-east, this is the part of the site devoted to public access and preservation, the sole responsibility of the trust formed in 1996. Sixteen houses and apartments have been repaired and converted in the main house; the home farm has been sub-divided into eight houses and apartments and the two cottages in a garden bothy have been renovated. The stables and riding school have been restored for commercial lettings and some public access.

listed-building consent and planning approval and thus required the support of English Heritage and Warwick District Council. At the end of 1996, the HLF offered £7,369,648 to the new trust to go with the existing English Heritage and European grants—the latter being valid until the end of 1998.

The HLF offer included £2,860,000 towards repairs and public access (later increased by £826,000 to meet increased repair costs), £2,640,000 towards the acquisition of the place and contents from the 1976 trust, £1.5m for endowment and £369,648 towards interim running costs, professional fees and contingency. The total was high but possible for the HLF at that time because it had a larger income than it does now and some accumulated reserves.

On the other hand, the endowment was low compared with that offered to

other historic-house trusts and produced too little income. So it was essential for the 1996 trust to hold the early-19th-century Gothic-revival stables (Fig 2) and rescue them from dereliction (Fig 4) so as to convert them into revenue-producing spaces, using part of the endowment to pay for the work. Two sections have been restored as stables for visitors to see (Fig 5), the rest has been made into offices. The last phase, the riding school, is about to be brought into use for functions.

The trust has also forgone a large capital sum by not going ahead with the third development site for which it had obtained planning permission, because it felt that would create too much pressure on the historic core.

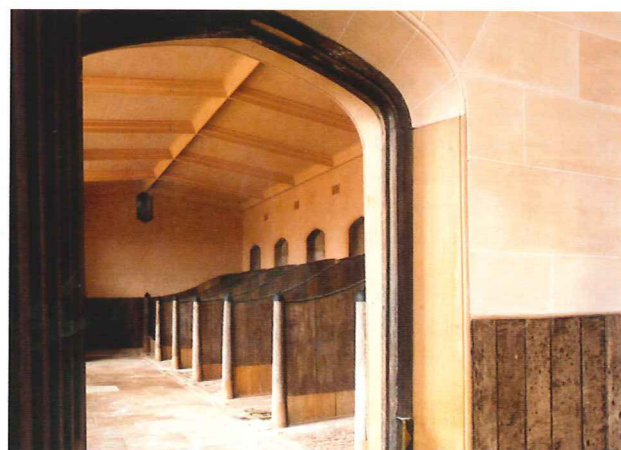
The scale of the repairs carried out since 1996 is staggering both in its extent and speed—necessary because of

the 1998 deadline on the European money. Mr Brookes has completely re-roofed the west range in lead, in place of the 1960s asphalt roof that was starting to fail, and repaired the stone work, where the problems of decay were made worse by 1960s repairs.

The soft buff-grey Bromsgrove stone used by the 3rd Lord Leigh in the 1720s is no longer available and so stone-repairs to the elevations have been carried out in a Grinshill stone from Shropshire, which is finer and slightly paler. The effect is rather piebald at the moment (Fig 6), because the original stone could not stand cleaning and the new stone needs several hard winters for the two to start to come together. However the overall crisp architectural quality of Smith's elevation has been restored.

This was part of a scheme of repairs and conversions carried out by Mr Martin, who approached both the two upper storeys of the west range and the other buildings in an ingenious way. He saw how the upper floors could be converted into five handsome two-storey apartments, to take advantage of what survived of the Georgian interior on the first floor at both ends of the building, with one smaller apartment on the second floor. These are approached from the old north entrance, along the 19th-century long gallery, with a choice of the old service stair or a lift. Thus he cleverly separated the residents' entrance from the public entrance.

The earlier gabled east range suggested a different kind of division into four substantial houses (Fig 3), two with notable interiors (Fig 1), and the south range into three smaller houses. Kit Martin and his co-director, Simon Macfarlane, achieved all that over a period of four years by operating a rolling programme: acquiring leases from the trust, repairing the structures and adapting the interiors before selling them on. In



4 and 5—Part of the early-19th-century stables at Stoneleigh, before and after restoration





**6—The entrance to the west range, showing recent repairs to the stonework carried out using a Grinshill stone from Shropshire**

the end they have produced a range of 26 different houses and apartments. Not only has that provided a use for buildings that the trust could never wish to show to the public, but it has taken care of future liabilities for maintenance and repair. The trust still retains control over alterations.

The limiting of new building to the two sites is crucial. Outside pressure has built up on Stoneleigh over the past 40 years and has been increased within the demesne by the Royal Show's busy showground, even if that is out of sight. When the house first opened to the public in 1946, it was the centre of an agricultural estate in a still rural area. Now it is pinched between Coventry, seven miles to the north, and Warwick and Leamington, six and four miles to the south, with Greater Birmingham advancing from the

north-west. So the 690 acres that the trust now owns is a greatly reduced green lung, but it is remarkable that the west park still provides such a convincing setting for the house. This vulnerable position underlines how vital the support of the HLF was.

Despite the apparently large figures in grant aid, the trust has been run on a very tight budget. Hopefully things will become easier when the riding school is used for meetings and functions and brings a return. Then the hope is to build up the endowment. Also it will become possible to devote more attention to curatorial matters and locate objects with a Stoneleigh Abbey provenance that reappear on the market.

It is encouraging that a set of Gomm chairs that were accepted in lieu of tax and initially placed at Aston Hall have

been returned to the house on loan for display in the library. Another obvious candidate for return is the rare Rococo communion table by Gomm that was bought for the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1990, partly to prevent its disappearance, but has never been shown at South Kensington. Hopefully, these will lead to further successful repatriations by the trust. It deserves to make them because it has achieved an amazing amount in the past six years. Not only should that be recognised and celebrated but lessons learned from the trust's experiences could provide a helpful guide for others in the future.

*For information about Stoneleigh's opening times telephone 01926 858535.*

*Photographs: Tim Imrie-Tait (1–3, 6) and John Wright (4, 5).*