

Lifestyle|Designer|Specialist

# people



THIS SPAC Audrey Waddington sits in the garden of Waddington Manor with her granddaughter Valentina. OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM Audrey discusses the ongoing restoration with architect Stephen Oliver. Some of the intricate twentieth-century plasterwork survives the fire. A 1956 painting of Waddington Manor, by Felix Kelly. Audrey looks out of the window of her former bedroom

PHOTOGRAPHS RORY CARNEGIE



# Lifestyle

In 2004, Wardington Manor was gutted by fire. Thanks to quick-thinking bystanders, everything movable within it, including an important library, was saved. **Caroline Clifton-Mogg** meets its owner, Lady Wardington, who has overseen the huge restoration project





ABOVE This painting of the fire at Wardington Manor by Nick Bashall records how the villagers worked together with the firemen to save precious books and furniture from the blaze. BELOW LEFT The fire was reported in national newspapers, including this article in *The Sunday Times*.

BELOW RIGHT The postman, Derek Oxley, was the one who spotted the fire and raised the alarm

Wardington Manor, in Oxfordshire, is a rambling, English country house of the nicest kind. Built from the local, golden stone, it is solidly embedded in the landscape in an enduring and comfortable sort of way.

Wardington was constructed in its present form in 1665 by George Chamberlayne, a Royalist, who had started work a few years earlier on what had been a medieval nunnery (still the central part of the house); history intervened, however, and when Charles II went

into exile, Chamberlayne followed, returning to Wardington only after the Restoration.

Like so many country houses of its type and size, Wardington had survived largely untouched for several hundred years; but that all changed early one August morning in 2004. Derek Oxley, the village postman, was making his final deliveries in Upper Wardington when, looking towards the Manor, he was horrified to see a grey plume of smoke pouring from the roof. The owners of the house, Lord and Lady

Wardington, were away on holiday, and only their daughter, Helen, remained at home. The alarm was swiftly raised, the fire brigade summoned, and the word – as it does in a close-knit village – soon spread. Within half an hour, a crowd of villagers had gathered; and before long, as firemen battled the blaze, a human chain took shape that eventually managed to salvage not only the furniture but, most importantly, the collection in the Book Room.

In this instance, the term 'library' does D

## Saved from the flames

When Wardington Hall caught fire a year ago, the £1.5m book collection was saved but the medieval manor is still being rebuilt. [www.sundaytimes.co.uk](http://www.sundaytimes.co.uk)

On a sunny day in the Book Room at Wardington Manor, Oxfordshire, a group of villagers are gathered to help with the salvage work. The room is filled with books, and the villagers are working to move them to safety. The room is a treasure trove of books, and the villagers are working to save them from the flames.

Wardington Manor, a 16th-century house, was built by George Chamberlayne, a Royalist, who had started work a few years earlier on what had been a medieval nunnery. The house was built from local golden stone, and it is solidly embedded in the landscape. The house was built in 1665, and it is a fine example of a country house of the period. The house was built by George Chamberlayne, a Royalist, who had started work a few years earlier on what had been a medieval nunnery.





not do justice to the treasures then housed at Wardington. Bic's (Loed Wardington's) grandfather had been an avid collector of books, and when his son bought Wardington in 1917, he built a library to house what was already an impressive collection of bibles and incunabula. Bic inherited both the library and his grandfather's passion for collecting. 'He collected anything,' says Audrey. 'If he'd been shipwrecked on a desert island, he would soon have had the biggest collection of island stories in the world.' A testament to Bic's discerning eye as a collector, the atlases he added to the original collection are today held in such

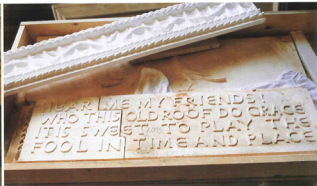
esteem that the name 'Wardington' associated with a particular atlas or bible immediately confers on it a provenance of distinction and increases its market value. The books were sold at Sotheby's last year to help pay for the uninsured losses on the house.

Many heart-warming and extraordinary things happened at Wardington on the day of the fire. When the firemen asked Helen what should be saved, she told them about the Book Room and they let the roof burn while they carried out the precious contents. Bookbinder James Brockman, who had previously done some work on the Wardington library, heard

the news on the radio, and immediately drove to the house with his bookbinder son, Stuart, and Stuart's wife. There, they gathered together the damaged books stacked on the lawn and took them to James's workshop to be repaired and restored. Another family friend, antique-furniture consultant Philip Astley-Jones, also arrived at the scene, to remove the pieces of furniture in need of immediate first aid.

After the fire had been extinguished, one of the helpers suggested to Helen that she contact Michael Gerson, the removal company. An assessor was dispatched to Wardington Manor and, surveying the scene, declared, 'I

Stephen and Audrey look at the outside of the house (top right). The Library as it was before the fire (middle right). Although parts of the staircase survived, some of the lined-oak panelling in the Library did not; useable remnants lie piled on the floor (top left). The plaster mouldings, designed in the Twenties, have had to be recast (below right) and are being slowly and patiently reinstated by Paul Sims and Richard James of Trumplers (below left)





The Book Room before the fire (above left) housed an impressive and important collection of books as Audrey's husband, Bic, added to his grandfather's already extensive collection; luckily, these were saved from the flames. Audrey rows across the lake at Wardington (above right). The gardens (below left), started in 1923 by Audrey's mother-in-law, have been kept in hand during the ongoing restoration of the house (below right)

'I'll do it now,' before commandeering trucks and packers – even transferring workers from other jobs – to remove the contents.

Sandwiches were prepared for the human chain, and a local builder brought round wheelbarrows and polythene sheeting to ferry out and protect the contents. By the end of the day, everything of value had been gathered together on the lawn, with the most precious pieces already removed and in safe keeping. By the time Bic and Audrey arrived back two days later the whole site, miraculously, had been cleared, including Audrey's entire

wardrobe. 'Such a shame that was – most of the clothes weren't even smoke damaged, so didn't need replacing, and, since I lost a stone over the next six weeks, I couldn't even wear most of them, never mind get a chance to buy new ones,' she explains. As she relates the story now, Audrey admits: 'For a long time I couldn't talk about it without crying. What everyone did that day was just so marvellous.'

After the clearance, there began the painfully slow task of restoring the house, which has, like so many similar restorations, taken much longer than was originally envisaged –

more than three years to date. All remaining, undamaged fabric, including the wooden panelling, had to be removed, and it wasn't until March the next year that things began to be replaced. 'It's slow, but some interesting things have come to light, and there were some nice surprises,' Audrey recalls. 'For instance, in a chest, I found a hand-embroidered silk pelmet, which was all that remained of a set of bed hangings sewn by the wife of the architect who had worked on the house in the Twenties.'

After the fire, Bic and Audrey were determined not to let the task of rebuilding >





Audrey has always been active in village life; here, she attends the Flower Festival at the village church (above left). Robert Harwood used to work at the manor, and continues to look after Audrey in her new house in the village (above right). Audrey and (from left) Deborah Page, Malcolm Patterson and Jane Pearson - the committee of the Waddington Garden Club - meet to discuss visits that the club will make next year

their lives distract them from the upkeep of the gardens. 'They were started by my mother-in-law in 1923,' says Audrey. 'If they had been let go, we would never have got them back.' So the family retained the gardeners, and the house is still surrounded by a haven of verdant peace.

Bic died in 2005, and since then, Audrey has continued the restoration of the house on her own, encouraged by her three children (and nine grandchildren), and helped and advised by her friend Norman Hudson, an authority on English historic houses.

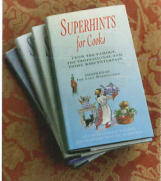
'Although we are restoring and modernising it, we aren't changing the configuration; it's the sort of house you can't really change - so many rooms were panelled, and all that has had to be restored and put back,' Audrey says. 'There was also some fine decorative plaster panelling, designed in the Twenties, which has had to be recast and gradually reinstated.'

Audrey is nothing if not a trouser - as is evident from her remark about the effects of the fire. 'Some people take six weeks to move out of a big house - at least we did it in a day,' she says. Which is one way of looking at it.

Looked at from the perspective of her earlier life, the fact that she seems so undaunted by the task of restoring a barn-out house to its former glory suddenly seems less surprising, for she has always relished a challenge. While working for Elizabeth Arden in London after the war, the 17-year-old Audrey was talent-spotted and photographed for a magazine. The shoot was a success, and Audrey was not slow to realise that earning one-and-a-half guineas an hour to model was rather better than earning £2 a week at Elizabeth Arden.

Her next career move was equally >





serendipitous: at a party in 1955, she met Marcus Morris, who would later become the legendary managing director of The National Magazine Company. He asked Audrey if she knew of anyone who could be the fashion editor of a magazine called *Housewife*. When she suggested herself, he replied, 'Oh, good', and so began career number two. 'Unfortunately, I'd never worked on a magazine, nor indeed in an office,' remembers Audrey, 'so it was a bit of a steep learning curve, but I managed to do it for about six years.'

By this time she was married to Bic, who was working as a stockbroker, and later, in the Eighties, Audrey began a series of courses designed to teach women about money management.

'I wanted to know, and thought other women might like to know, how money worked,' she explains. The courses were a success, and she continued with them until her assistant became ill with cancer. 'I saw what wonderful work the local hospice was doing, and I wanted to do something to raise money for them, so I came up with the wheeze of doing a hints book.'

Thus was born *Superhints*, 'compiled by The Lady Wardington'. Published in 1991, it proved popular, and was followed in quick succession by *Superhints for Gardeners* (1993), *Superhints for Cooks* (1995), and finally *Superhints for Life* (1997).

'I just wrote to everyone I knew, and asked everyone I met to give me the contents of their address book – the grander the better,' says

Audrey. 'I received hints from everyone from the Queen Mother to Mrs Thatcher – interestingly, the better known the name, the worse the advice.'

When the restoration is finished, Wardington Manor is to be sold. Audrey is now, from her house in the village, helping with the plans for a new village hall in Wardington. 'It is a family thank you from us to the village for saving the contents of our house; either the existing building is going to be renovated or a new one built,' she says. 'This being a village, everyone has a different idea and there are lots of discussions.' But what is absolutely certain is that it will happen – because that is what The Lady Wardington does □

A game of indoor bowls takes place in the village hall (above left), which is soon to be given a makeover. In the Nineties, Audrey compiled the *Superhints* books (above right), a popular series containing tips from the rich and famous, to raise money for the local hospice. Audrey walks across the village green with two of her grandchildren, Poppy and Charlie, and Primrose the Jack Russell (below)

