

The greatest of escapes

It's being brought back to life in dramatic style – which is nothing less than Apethorpe Hall deserves, explains Project Director Nick Hill

Apethorpe Hall is no stranger to superlatives. It houses some of the finest Jacobean rooms you could possibly find; it boasts one of the richest histories of any private home in the country; and it can claim to be one of the most extraordinary amalgams of all time. But, until recently, it was also the most severely at-risk country house in England.

Hidden away in the quiet countryside of Northamptonshire, Apethorpe Hall had been sadly abused and neglected since the early 1980s and was then the subject of lengthy legal battles as English Heritage set in motion a complicated rescue plan. Today, that plan amounts to one of the largest English Heritage has ever undertaken. On completion of this repair programme in 2008, English Heritage will seek a new buyer who will carry out the rest of the repairs and restore the hall for use as a country house, with rights of the public to visit. And the next chapter of the Apethorpe story will have begun.

It's an arresting tale. Standing in the principal courtyard, nearly every period of English architectural history is displayed around the



Above Project Director Nick Hill on site

Below and right

After sitting empty and neglected, Apethorpe Hall was compulsorily purchased by English Heritage in 2004. Since then a repair project costing £4 million has been undertaken to preserve the building

walls. Sir Guy Wolston, constable of nearby Fotheringhay Castle, built the original house in around 1470 for King Edward IV. Wolston's ambitions grew rapidly and, by 1500, the buildings extended around two courtyards, centred on the Great Hall. In 1551, the estate passed to Sir Walter Mildmay, who became Chancellor of the Exchequer. He built the South Range as a state apartment, in which Queen Elizabeth I was entertained on her royal progress of 1566.

The grandest period of the house belongs to the early seventeenth century. It had become a favourite venue of King James I, who was attracted particularly by the hunting in Rockingham Forest. He made a total of 11 visits – more than to any other country house. In 1622, King James I commanded Sir Francis Fane, who had married Sir Mildmay's granddaughter, to enlarge the house for His Majesty's 'more commodious entertainment... and princely recreation'.

Fane, soon to be first Earl of Westmorland, rapidly rebuilt the South Range and added the East Range, forming an impressive series of state rooms. The new East Range, with its grand symmetrical front, is a classic piece of Jacobean design, a veritable entertainment palace. On the ground floor were double arcades, one opening towards the courtyard, the other to the gardens. The 110ft Long Gallery takes up most of the first floor and above is a lead-covered roof walk, which provided extensive views over the beautiful gardens and parkland and no doubt enabled spectators to watch the dramatic progress of the royal hunt. Inside – despite all the misfortunes of recent decades – the state apartment still has one of the finest surviving sequences of Jacobean interiors, with decorative plaster ceilings, ornate sculpted fireplaces and oak panelling.

The Earls of Westmorland continued in ownership of the hall until the twentieth century. Among many later alterations, the most striking is the addition of the grandiose Palladian façades to the courtyard in the 1740s.

In 1904, the property was sold to Leonard Brassey, who carried out further restoration and alteration works. But World War II and its aftermath brought difficult times for England's ►







The plaster ceilings have been redecorated in traditional soft white distemper made with animal glue size and powdered chalk

country houses, and Lord Brassey was forced to sell in 1949.

From 1949 until 1982, Apethorpe served as an approved school. Then a Libyan businessman bought it but never occupied the house. Roof leaks threatened the Jacobean ceilings, dry rot spread unchecked and one of the fireplaces was vandalised. Only the continuing efforts of the school's caretaker and gardener, George Kelley, saved the house from a much worse fate.

From the late 1990s, English Heritage and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport pursued a determined process of statutory action against the recalcitrant owners to preserve the building, leading to the unprecedented step of compulsory purchase in 2004. Between 2004 and 2008, a phase 1 programme of targeted major repairs is being undertaken, costing £4 million.

The main focus of this repair programme are the South and East Ranges, containing

the Jacobean state rooms. A giant scaffolding and temporary roof – with 20 miles of scaffold tubing – was quickly erected to protect these areas. Under the cover of the temporary roof, the whole East Range roof was stripped off. The main beams, supporting both the roof and the Jacobean ceilings, were sagging and badly decayed. Intricate repairs were needed, with the insertion of steel plating into all 18 beams.

This was no easy task. The contractors burnt out two chain morticers, special tools used to cut slots for the steelwork. But with the structure repaired, re-slagging with local stone slates from Collyweston got under way. This is a beautiful local material, now in short supply, that takes great skill to lay. The stonemasonry of Apethorpe Hall is also of exceptional quality – again, using local material. Extensive stonework repairs have been necessary, under the watchful eye of architects Rodney Melville and Partners. Particular care is needed in repointing the fine stonework joints to avoid damage and smearing. Analysis showed that the secret ingredient of the mortar was crushed stone dust, which blends perfectly with the masonry. Incredibly, more than 17 tonnes of stone dust have been hand-sieved to ensure correct grading of the mix.

In the Long Gallery the oak panelling had to be removed from the walls in sections. Instead of cutting in new timber, the fragile areas have been reinforced with stainless-steel plating, fixed on the unseen rear face, preserving the original fabric. The research team discovered evidence that the original Jacobean panelling housed a series of 16 full-size family portraits, making it one of the most ambitious schemes of its period.

The decorative plaster ceilings have also been a challenge. A two-man team of specialist craftsmen have spent nearly 12 months on painstaking repairs, carefully re-securing the ceilings to the structure above and reinstating damaged areas. They are being redecorated in traditional soft white distemper, made with animal glue size and powdered chalk.

As the current repairs project nears completion, the state apartment ranges can now be properly appreciated for the first time since the 1940s. Further major repairs still lie ahead but the survival of this great house, so nearly lost, is now secured. **EH**

For further details please visit www.english-heritage.org.uk/apethorpehall. Apethorpe Hall is open to members for pre-booked guided tours on weekends throughout September. Please call 0870 333 1181 for details and bookings. Price £5.





Far left, top Plasterer Philip Gaches repairs one of the ceilings **Far left, bottom** Twenty miles of scaffolding was used to protect the roof **Above** Repairing the Jacobean panelling in the Long Gallery **Top right** An original staircase **Right** Rear view of Apethorpe **Below** The roof was re-slatted with local stone slates from Collyweston

