

Woodchester Mansion

the house that was never a home

by Clive Fewins



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Outside, grotesque gargoyles leer down on visitors, while inside doors lead nowhere and corridors end in startling views.



In a list of England's weirdest country houses, Woodchester Mansion would have to come near the top. Hidden in its deep, wooded Gloucestershire valley the crumbling Gothic Revival 80-roomed mansion was abandoned 150 years ago, when its Victorian builders suddenly downed tools, leaving their work half completed. Since then, it has never been properly lived in and it is said to be one of the most haunted houses in the country.

On a sunny day the mansion, approached by a ¾ mile long bumpy single track road off the B4066, two miles south of Stroud, looks romantic and inviting. However, for most of the year the house is in deep shadow and the valley feels damp and sinister. Outside, grotesque gargoyles leer down on visitors, while inside doors lead nowhere and corridors end in startling views. Fireplaces hang suspended at a great height, waiting for the floors to be built to meet them. Victorian ladders remain propped up against exposed walls, and the house is home to Britain's largest colony of rare horseshoe bats, which start to circle the walls as soon as darkness falls.

The mansion is a popular site for what its explanatory literature calls "paranormal investigations" and many who come to the mansion for this purpose use the cellars as a principal site for their research.

Custodian and site services manager Max Raven, who for four years has lived in a flat in the mansion carved out of one of the upper storey bedrooms, reports numerous sightings of ghostly goings-on, notably conversations in the middle of the night in the chapel beneath his flat. There have also been many sightings of a 7ft tall hooded figure in the chapel and other areas of the house.

"The house is most definitely haunted," he said. "It is also, extremely cold in winter and we quite often get cut off by snow. It is an amazing place to live, but not to everybody's taste."

The policy of the trust that has cared for the mansion for the past 20 years is to carry out essential repairs, while restoring the building to the condition it had reached on the death of its visionary begetter William Leigh in 1873. The great crumbling Grade I listed mansion declined into oblivion for many years after the team that had been building it for 16 years left, leaving their work half completed. Tools, ladders and scaffolding were left in situ, and some still remain. Nobody has been able to find out precisely why it was abandoned.



This model gives a clear picture to visitors on their arrival and is in the entrance hall, where refreshments are also available



The mansion as it is today. The splendid south elevation that fronts the main public rooms is heavily buttressed in the manner of a church. The chapel projects beyond the eastern end

The outside walls on the south frontage resemble those of a late medieval church, with tall buttresses and equally high tracery windows

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This magnificent unfinished room is the dining room, famous for its curved wooden framework (known as a "former") left in position by the builders and used to support the huge arches when under construction

The house possesses two of these Victorian wooden formers – the only ones of this age known to exist in this country. A 30 foot wooden ladder remains in position propped up against the wall



In the 1920s a farmer kept cattle in the dining room and hall, and in the 1930s the building was used as an outdoor and field studies centre by local schools.

But the structure continued to decline, even when it was used in World War II for training the Home Guard and also American and Canadian troops preparing for D-Day. At this time during World War II, Woodchester Mansion became a base for US troops. Later some of its rooms served as a school.

In the 1950s, the house was taken over by a local bat enthusiast, who set up a field study centre at the house and single-handedly carried out essential maintenance until well into the 1970s.

After many further years of uncertainty the Woodchester Mansion Trust was formed in 1989, but the future of the house was by no means assured.

Since then much has been done to make the house watertight and to solve massive problems caused by leaking gutters. The public can visit the mansion three days a week in summer and in winter the house is much in demand as a film set – much of the 2006 *Dracula* and more recently parts of *The Crown* were filmed here. The house has also been used for some reality TV programmes. In addition the house is used for running courses in stone masonry and other building conservation projects.

The interior is unfinished, and that is the way it is planned to remain. But much stabilisation work is still needed. The chapel – it is at present shored up by scaffolding in two sections – is next in line for major work. It will be a great challenge and it is estimated the work needed will cost well over £2m.

The history of Woodchester Mansion began in the 1840s, when Leigh, the wealthy son of a Liverpool trader and a devout Roman Catholic convert, purchased a large Georgian manor house, known as Spring Park. It stood in 400 acres of attractive grounds.

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This shot of the corridor leading to the servants' rooms at the top of the house shows the magnificence of the stone supporting this part of the roof. It is thought that when work on the house was abandoned around 100 workers were engaged on the project



Students of stone masonry practise their carving skills in the mansion's teaching area

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Left: The largest cellar room is thought to have been the wine store and has a fine (but unnecessary!) stone vaulted ceiling. This is the part of the mansion most in demand for “paranormal investigations” and many who come to the mansion for this purpose use the cellars as a principal site for their research

Right: The bathroom. It is noted for its stone fittings. The bath itself is hewn out of a solid piece of Cotswold limestone and the ornate taps are also carved from stone



Left: Fireplaces are left hanging in space in this photo of the west wall of the unfinished library

Right: Even the stone vaulted ceiling of the room the trust keeps the tools in is magnificently executed

The estate has been landscaped by Capability Brown and Humphrey Repton. However the house’s position, at the base of the valley, was unhealthy and uninspired. Undeterred by these drawbacks, Leigh gave orders for Spring Park to be demolished, and began to make plans to build himself a new house on the same spot.

Leigh’s religious faith was the driving force in his life and he dreamed of creating a house inspired by the Gothic churches and monasteries he loved. He consulted some of the leading architects of his day, but in the end the house was designed in the Gothic revival style by an enthusiastic novice. Benjamin Bucknall was just 21 when he started work on his plans for Woodchester. Brilliantly inventive and passionate about Cotswold stone, he nevertheless lacked any practical experience. This was to count greatly in future years.

Looking at Woodchester Mansion today, it is hard to imagine how it could ever have functioned as a family home. Constructed around a cloister-courtyard, with a large

chapel, brewery, bakery, and laundry room, it seems more like a monastic institution than a private house. Plumbing is almost non-existent (the whole mansion has only two WCs) and the kitchen is sited a long way from the dining room. The most exquisite part of the mansion is the chapel, with its delicate vaulted ceiling and rose window. However, it stands directly next door to the game larder, from where the smell of ripe meat would have wafted through to people at prayer.

But while the Mansion’s layout was poorly thought out, no expense was spared on its stonework. The house is constructed almost entirely from Cotswold limestone, sometimes showing remarkable ingenuity. Inside and out, the carved decorations are of the highest quality. One fireplace has an exquisite scene of the Garden of Eden and in the bathroom the taps of the stone bath are also made of stone, as are the gargoyle-headed shower spouts in the adjoining shower room. In other parts of the building ceiling bosses feature ferns and vines, alongside mysterious faces of green men framed by leaves.

By 1852 work on the new mansion was under way, with a team of around 100 men busy on the site. Meanwhile, William Leigh and his family settled into a large house on the estate. They were apparently in no hurry to move, and an intriguing rumour spread that the house was intended not as a family home, but as an English refuge for an unpopular Pope. Soon there were other rumours. It was said that workmen were falling to mysterious deaths. Ghosts were sighted and the locals whispered that the project was doomed. In 1868 work on the house came to a sudden end, as the workmen moved out, leaving behind them a litter of tools that can still be seen in the house today.

It is still a mystery why work on the mansion was abandoned, but it is thought

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diminishing funds had a great deal to do with it and that William Leigh realised that although the house is considered by many to be a masterpiece, it was a flawed one, likely to need much remedial work even before it could be inhabited.

On contemplating living in the house he may also have realised that it would have been uncomfortable as a family home. Except in the chapel and corridors there was to have been no form of central heating – only open fireplaces to warm the high-ceilinged rooms.

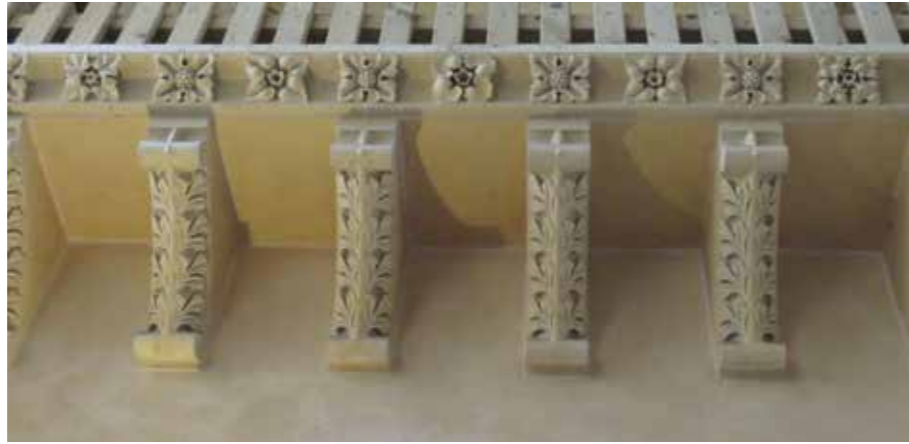
Perhaps it was an impossible dream and Leigh realised this. But that does not explain why the workers suddenly walked out and the house remained a roofed, but half-finished shell. Leigh's only surviving son did not share his father's taste for monastic living and left the house untouched. Later, Leigh's grandson lived for a short while in the servants' quarters before the family decided to sell up.

Today the bats for whom the mansion provides a breeding place in the attics are the subject of a carefully monitored study programme, thought to be the longest running study of any mammal in the world. "When I took the job of custodian and site services manager I certainly was not aware of the level of bat activity," said Max Raven. "To be buzzed by a Greater horseshoe bats with a wingspan of up to 40cm on the stairs late at night is an experience you don't forget in a hurry. It is all part of the bizarre nature of life here!

"We had some 15,000 visitors last year and the Trust is always treading a fine line trying to retain the magic of the house while stopping it from becoming too commercial. I think it is probably fair to say that in recent years its unique unfinished state has become a positive asset, helping to guarantee the continued existence of this extraordinary mansion."

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The house is open to the public on Fridays Saturdays and Sundays until 3 November. Hours 11-5. Tea, coffee and hot and cold snacks are available. The adjoining park is owned by the National Trust, which has a separate entrance and car park a few hundred yards away from the entrance to the mansion on the B4066. Waymarked trails lead through picturesque scenery and pass the mansion.



There are two elevated galleries in the chapel. This shows the exquisite carving on the underside of the south one, planned to be used by the master of the house to attend devotions using the gallery as a private vantage point



Custodian and site services manager Max Raven points out some of the detailing in one of the carved stone fireplaces



The exquisitely carved chapel ceiling with its magnificent stone roof bosses, most of them carvings of plants found in the valley. Modern experts consider some of the carving here at least as good as any in medieval buildings



Volunteers are always required. They are vital to the work of the trust and some have given their time willingly for more than 25 years

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