



‘Me and my listed house’

Clive Fewins talks to Virginia Grant, the enterprising owner of Kingston Bagpuize House, Oxfordshire, about her battle to ensure it enjoys a healthy future.

The châtelaine’s story

I often think that when I was a small girl if I had known that I would end up as the widowed châtelaine of a grade Grade II* 1660s mansion, extensively remodelled early the following century, I would think I had either been dreaming or reading a bad Gothic novel.

It has certainly been an extraordinary life, and there is very little that I would willingly change, apart from the sudden death of my husband Francis 14 years ago at the age of 48.

Running Kingston Bagpuize House here in Oxfordshire and opening it to the public and for functions is hard work. At the age of 62 and with no paid full-time staff, I usually find there are not enough hours in the day.

And yet I love it. When I put my mind to it I think the only part of it all that I dislike is paying the bills!

I hope to stay here until I die, but the perennial question is – will I be able to afford to?

Sometimes I just can’t put into words the feeling when I wake up on a glorious early summer morning in my large bedroom on the first floor, and open the shutters to take a look over the eight acres of gardens and grounds.



Top: The house from the east, showing some of the park and the four giant Wellingtonia trees

Bottom left: The roof from the air. A reroofing and repair programme costing almost £250,000 was completed this spring

Bottom right: The oak-panelled dining room is, like all the rooms in the house, used by the family. Unlike in some of the other rooms the panelling in here is thought never to have been painted

I never feel lonely or afraid. In any case I have neighbours very close.

It is also the challenge of keeping the place viable that keeps me going. Fortunately I am in fairly robust health. I have always been a busy person. I trained as a nurse, worked as a midwife in Oxford and Australasia, then decided to take a law degree, and eventually qualified as a barrister: I never practised, but my legal training helps me with tenancy agreements.

This doesn’t stop me using the services of a solicitor when I need to. Likewise if I need financial advice or a land agent, or more often a carpenter, plumber, lead worker or stone specialist. There are good local tradespeople round here, and they willingly help out.

I am very grateful for this because, in addition to maintaining the big house, I manage six rented properties on the estate, plus a flat and three business lettings in the outbuildings and stables.

If we were still in the days when the estate was 1,000 acres we could gain an income off the farmland, but since the last big sell-off in the 1930s the total has remained under 100 acres.

I came to live here when I married Francis in 1993. For the first two years we lived in one of the courtyard properties, moving into the big house in 1995, when Francis’s mother, Lady Tweedsmuir, gave it to him. Our daughter Elizabeth was just a year old at the time.

Francis had been a stockbroker in London, but latterly he managed the estate and wrote books. When he died in 2003 it was tragic for Elizabeth and her younger brother Alexander, who was six, as well as for myself.

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The entrance hall showing the cantilevered staircase. Until 1875 this was the rear of the building. This explains the rather unusual means of entry beneath the main staircase

Bottom: The house and long border seen from the woodland garden through the 18th century wrought iron gates



Alex is away at university now and Elizabeth works as an artist, but they are often here. I don't really know if they worry about me living here alone or not, but I have already established that it is possible to fit a stair lift on the back stairs!

With no business training I like to think I have adapted well to running what amounts to a business with a rental turnover in excess of £100,000. I was certainly very satisfied this April when, after three years doing it in sections, work on renewing the last part of our huge lead roof was completed. The total job cost almost £250,000.

One thing that does rather get to me is when people make the assumption that because I live in a very handsome Baroque mansion that has a long listing in Pevsner's Buildings of Berkshire and was considered by Simon Jenkins, in his book of that name, to be one of England's Thousand Best Houses, that I possess unlimited funds. Like many people in my position I am asset rich and cash poor.

Whilst I should be very comfortable if I were to sell, I have been quite certain since the day Francis died that I do not wish to do so. I think I have proved that a house like this can earn its keep.

A piece of great good fortune was when the location manager for Downton Abbey spotted the house when he was driving to nearby Bampton, otherwise known as Downton village. The house appeared in series five and six, in April 2014 and in June and July 2015, as well as the final Christmas Special the same year. It was Cavenham Park, the home of Lord Merton.

It would be nice if we could attract a few more lavish film and TV productions, but for the present I enjoy the wedding business – the ceremony usually takes place in the drawing room and we have a marquee outside – and all the other events that take place here. These range from large-scale

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private and corporate functions to the Rare Plant Fairs, which take place every year at 14 or so venues around the country that have gardens of interest.

The huge garden requires a massive amount of maintenance. I have the equivalent of one-and-a-third people working full-time on them, plus a lovely volunteer.

The 40 or so public open days we hold every year are largely staffed by volunteers. Nowadays we don't do tours as such, unless private parties ask for this. Visitors usually arrive at around 2pm, buy their tickets, often from me, at the ticket office and walk around the six ground floor rooms with guidance sheets, asking questions of the guides whenever they wish. I suppose the main attraction is the magnificent cantilevered pine and oak staircase. It is thought to be from the 1720s remodelling. It certainly did not predate the present house.

Kingston Bagpuize House has a distinguished pedigree. William the Conqueror granted half the manor to Henry de Ferrers, who in turn leased it to Ralf de Bachepuis. The Bachepuis family remained in Kingston for more than 200 years, and by the time of their departure the manor was known as Kingston Bachepuis, since anglicised to Kingston Bagpuize.

The original moated house was demolished by 1709 and it is thought the brick and stone was reused in the building of the courtyard stables, coach house and outbuildings.

In the early 18th century the house was largely rebuilt, probably by the Townesend family of builders from Oxford. Edmund Fettiplace, a member of the well-known family of Thames Valley grandees, bought the house in 1670. In 1711 the house was inherited by the Blandy family, who remained owners until 1917. Since then the house has passed through many hands, belonging latterly to Lady Tweedsmuir.

This house is no ivory tower and I like to meet members of the public viewing it and explain to them how we keep it going.

I get very excited when I return here having been away, and see the magnificent trees, then get my first glimpse of home.

The gardens are also very special. To the keen eye there are traces of previous gardens, but the greatest influence on the present garden was Miss Marlie Raphael, Francis's great aunt, who lived here from 1939 until her death in 1976. She planned and planted the garden and park, which contains many unusual rare plants and trees. There are many oaks and planes of majestic size, one of which is thought to be some 275 years old

During World War II, when much of the park became part of Kingston Bagpuize Airfield, the earlier avenue was felled, but happily the four Wellingtonias (giant redwood trees), then some 80 years old, were saved, and remain to this day. The beech avenue seen today was planted in 1951.



Downton Abbey filming. Dame Penelope Wilton being filmed in a scene shot at Kingston Bagpuize House, which was Cavenham Park, the home of Lord Merton



The garden pavilion dates from the early 18th century and, like the main house, is built of brick.

Virginia Grant in the garden. It comprises about eight acres and contains many rare trees and shrubs

Now the roof is sound I like to think the house's future is secured. But this isn't my only source of satisfaction; my tenants tend to stay here a long time. One has been here for 30 years: longer than me.

All-in-all, with its park, gardens and outbuildings it is a wonderful place to live, but also a bit of a poisoned chalice! ☹️

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