

A STATELY HOME



Miranda Rock (inset) is the latest in a long line to take on the running of one of Britain's most important houses. *George Dryden* and photographer *Paul Winch-Furness* went to meet her at Burghley House, in Lincolnshire, which they discover is still a vibrant family home.

The Bow Room, originally planned as the State Dining Room, is a lofty and imposing room, and was decorated for the Fifth Earl by Louis Laguerre in 1697.



WHEN A HOUSE spends 32 years under construction, its status as a testament to British architecture comes as little surprise. But the enduring dual function of Burghley House as a much-loved family home and a visitor hotspot is a scenario which its creator, William Cecil, the First Lord Burghley, could never have predicted as the last piece of Northamptonshire stone was eased into place in 1587. Located majestically on the outskirts of Stamford, in Lincolnshire, Registered Charity number 258489 is a fine example of an Elizabethan country house, which has seen many changes over the years.

In the 1950s, the Sixth Marquess of Exeter, David Cecil, was faced with a series of punishing tax bills to settle his deceased father's estate. It was then, for the first time, that the security of the

claim that the Cecil family had enjoyed for 14 generations came under threat. Key elements of the estate's collection had to be sold and it was at this point that the Marquess decided to ensure this particular element of Burghley history would never be repeated. The entire Burghley Estate became The Burghley House Preservation Trust, and in 1982 the Marquess's daughter, Lady Victoria Leatham, moved into the house as its first trust director, following her father's death.

The legacy continues today with Lady Victoria's daughter, Miranda Rock, taking up the conservational mantle since July 2007. Not only is the estate in safe, professional hands, but it remains happily under the custodial wing of a direct descendant of its original occupant, William Cecil, close intellectual and political

confidant and Lord Treasurer to Queen Elizabeth I. With four young children in tow, Miranda certainly has her work cut out, both personally and professionally. She not only comes fore-armed with a degree in history of art, a masters in heritage management and the insightful experience of growing up on the estate, she also has her very own 'secret weapon', her husband, Orlando.

A specialist at Christie's, Orlando is an expert in English furniture, his expertise proving to be conservational gold. 'There are a lot of chairs he won't let us sit on for fear of ruining them, but the children are used to that,' laughs Miranda. 'And he also spotted an 18th-century desk that was unknowingly being used as a day-to-day workstation by a member of staff!' The rescued table has since undergone restoration, but it remains a fine example of the practical 'use it or lose it' approach prevalent here. It's an attitude that does staff and family credit and which gives the house a lived-in aura like no other British stately home.

'Burghley gives people a very different feel to what they're expecting because it is still used just as William Cecil intended – as a family home,' says Jo Tinker, assistant house manager. 'One of the things that surprises people is that we don't have a massive team here.' The house is run on a staff of nine full-time, with 31 additional staff at peak times. Perhaps most remarkable of all are the house's resident cleaners, forming a surprisingly

Far left **The State Rooms** are entered through the **Chestnut Courtyard**, around which the main buildings are arranged.

Top right **The Old Kitchen** still has its **original Tudor stone floor** and a **magnificent fan-vaulted roof**. The ceilings were vaulted to channel smoke and fumes from cooking through the open lantern in the roof.

Below right **The Brown Drawing Room** contains the **small travelling bed** used by **Princess Victoria** in 1836.

Bottom **Burghley** is still imposing 500 years after it was built.

formidable dust-busting duo, six days a week, from 9am to 3pm. From the closely-guarded secret of removing deer muck from carpets to showing the house's ceramics collection off to its best advantage, Jane Atkinson and Jackie Collins provide the answer and the elbow grease. Not only do they clean the public parts of the house, but they also keep the family silver gleaming in the 17th-century, ground-floor apartments. This is a living, breathing house which, for many, flies in the face of its rare Grade I status.

Curator Jon Culverhouse sees this as a strength. Having been on the Burghley payroll for more than 20 years ('I've lost count,' he says), Jon has never lost his sense of awe over his working environment, which he oversees with his inseparable workmate, his golden retriever, Toffee. 'I love every aspect of my job – I wake up every morning and I look forward to going to work. I'm surrounded by great things. There is nothing dull about that,' he says.

House guide Pat Williams, a part-time employee at Burghley for the last 18 years, agrees. 'It's not an old, boring





Left Antonio Verrio's undisputed masterpiece, the frescoes on the walls and ceiling of the Heaven Room, which he painted between 1688 and 1698.

Below Verrio's last commission in the house was the frescoes on the Hell Staircase which depict souls in torment.

Opposite, top left Personal touches abound as in the Pagoda Room, where the bathroom and dressing room are set out with articles from the Fifth Marquess's time.

Opposite, top right The Old Kitchen is decorated with a huge collection of copper utensils as well as a moose shot by Miranda's grandmother in Norway.

Opposite, bottom The ornate 18th-century state bed has pride of place in the Black and Yellow Bedroom.



house stuck in history,' she says. 'There is always something happening.'

Indeed, just from taking a look at the house's visitor calendar for the year, it's easy to see how Burghley attracts as diverse a following as it does – from North American tourists to locals looking for somewhere to exercise the family dog.

There's no doubting Burghley's popularity. From the local viewpoint, it is well-known for its craft fairs and its concerts in the park, as well as providing the long-standing setting for Stamford Boys' School cross country run. On a wider scale, Burghley has kept its foot in the tourism door through its popularity as a film venue, its willingness to accommodate touring rock stars and, of course, through its signature event, the globally-revered Horse Trials, held over the first weekend in September. It's also the location of choice for business conferences and corporate events. And most recently, Burghley won the title of Best Venue at the first national wedding awards.

But it's not just paying customers who benefit from the many delights

of this 1,300-acre parkland. 'You can spend the day at Burghley in the park and the orangery and it won't cost you a penny,' says Jo.

Proof that the house is continuing in its role as a fully-functioning family home is seen in its youngest inhabitants – Matilda, aged eight, Cosmo, four, Jemima, three, and Lila,

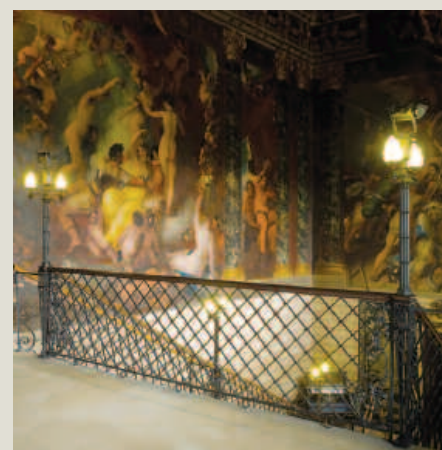
born just two months ago. Pedal cars and battered trikes lay strewn around a multi-paned doorway leading into the main courtyard, where it is just as easy to visualize prominent members of Elizabeth I's trusted inner circle taking the morning air in centuries past. 'It's the best playpen ever invented,' smiles Miranda. 'I can see the children from

Heaven and Hell

When anyone encounters Burghley for the first time, of its 80 rooms, there are usually two elements of the house which stand out – the Heaven Room and the Hell Staircase (right).

The two spaces showcase the intricate work of the flamboyant Italian painter, Antonio Verrio, whose fiery passion for seemingly three-dimensional murals and painted ceilings was matched by an equally fiery temperament – rumour has it that he stormed out before completing the staircase, never to return. He had only finished as far as the ceilings so, 90 years later, Thomas Stoddart completed what he'd started.

The Heaven Room is generally considered Verrio's masterpiece and many film directors



have used it for their films, including Keira Knightley's piano scene in the recent adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*.





my office window, so it means I can always keep my eye on them,' she says with a twinkle. 'I have so many fond memories of growing up here myself. It gives you such a sense of freedom,' she says.

'I grew up here and I already had a deep affection for the house. I see my role now as an amazing opportunity to get more involved in the collection and to carry on the work that my

parents and grandparents started.' Changes are already taking shape, such as the Gardens of Surprise, based on an Elizabethan garden at another former Cecil house, Theobald's, which was destroyed during the Civil War. The established Sculpture Garden, expanding year on year, provides yet another excuse for visitors to return regularly.

There is no 'upstairs, downstairs' mentality here. In fact, on her arrival, Miranda announced that she wanted every member of staff on the estate to be on first name terms with her. She does employ a nanny – but, then again, how many career women with four children to look after wouldn't?

The only slight nod to the Cecil family's historical privileged status is the existence of two butlers, but, as Miranda is quick to point out, they don't wander around in coat tails with a silver tray, ready to indulge their mistress's every whim. And Miranda certainly prefers it that way. 'They oversee security, cleaning and general maintenance and are the first port of call for visitors,' explains Miranda. 'I don't think I would like it if they did ask me what I would like for tea,' she says earnestly.

'I do the cooking for the family on a day-to-day basis. I open up the fridge at seven o'clock and look in

Left and below **The Garden of Surprises, opened in 2007 and already a favourite with children, is the latest addition to the gardens and is proof of Burghley's determination to move with the times.**

hopefully. I do the shopping on the internet, though – when we knew we were coming here one of the first things I did was check they would deliver here!'

A perfect balance between family life and Burghley life is often hard for Miranda to achieve – but most of her staff feel the same way too: a career at Burghley is far more than a means to a salary. 'Working at Burghley brings with it a huge responsibility,' agrees Jo, 'but everyone who works here has a passion for history. And because of its trust status, Burghley will always be looked after by someone in the family who cares for the ancestral home.'

Miranda concludes: 'It's the kind of place that really gets under your skin.' And that's a sentiment which every one of Burghley's visitors shares. For the foreseeable future, Burghley remains in the safest of hands. **BB**

For more information on opening times and forthcoming events, telephone 01780 752451 or visit www.burghley.co.uk

