

GOODNESTONE PARK REBORN

An evolution has taken place at Goodnestone Park, where the 22nd Baron FitzWalter is determined to both preserve the past and embrace the future

Words Kaz Russell-Graham

Benjamin Franklin declared that the only certainties were death and taxes. With the addition of general running costs it is no surprise that the custodians of stately homes must be financially innovative.

Goodnestone Park, with its uninterrupted views across classic Kent countryside, is no stranger to adaptation. It opened its gardens to the public during the 1970s and the late Lady FitzWalter, largely responsible for creating the garden as it is today, could often be found happily selling tickets and informing visitors about plants. But the maintenance of a large building is a different matter, and although designed as a family home, Goodnestone is about to start a new lease of life where many will share its renovated splendour.

Goodnestone was at its peak in the late Georgian/early Victorian period. Sadly, it has since received rather a battering. Requisitioned and wrecked by the army during World War Two, and suffering a fire in 1959, it had begun to fall into decay. Today, after a £2.5 million renovation, it is ready to earn its keep as an exclusive rental, a move that will enable its fabric to be preserved well into the future.

Lord FitzWalter grew up in the house with four younger brothers, but he and his wife, Sally, have never lived there as adults. He is fiercely appreciative of the property, but calm about the new phase: "I think Goodnestone is one of the most stunning small to medium stately homes, and quintessentially English," he says emphatically. "Just as my parents did, we need to make money to keep the property going, and for people who come to visit, it will be a haven of tranquillity."

Uninterested in a simple re-vamp, the FitzWalter family wanted to imprint a stamp of character. Fully involved they have worked with a local architect, Richard George, and taken advice from Mulberry Cottages and interior designers.

Out with the old...

The five-year project has not been without emotion. "It was painful to see the house taken back to the bare bones," admits Lord FitzWalter. "Almost every floorboard has been lifted and put back again, but luckily not too many ceilings!"

The house now boasts 12 bedrooms – perfect for very special family celebrations, weddings or select conferences. Electricity

and plumbing have been replaced, with the addition of 11 new bathrooms and 105 new radiators to make bathing a more warming experience than the freezing bathroom of his childhood. A new system of heating was required, and keen on green energy he carried out thorough research before settling on an eco-method that uses wood pellets.

Gardens @ Goodnestone

The 15 acres of Goodnestone gardens are green, plentiful and quintessentially English. Spreading cedar and imposing chestnuts have witnessed 300 years of history, winding pathways, bright summer flowers and woodland walkways usher you in whilst overhead fly turtle doves, kestrels, buzzards and even red kites.

The head gardener took over from the previous incumbent, who had held the post for an impressive 49 years, in 2008. He is drawn to whatever is at its best depending on the time of year – starting with the woodland in spring and moving to the walled garden in summer.

The spectacular walled garden, with its original lime-mortared walls, was once

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an enclosed orchard – and even more recently (and prosaically), a chicken run and Christmas tree nursery; now its three sections entice you forwards, each section revealing delightful surprises.


English roses give their striking best, lavender soothes, a water feature reflects the distant church, colour-themed borders blend and match as elsewhere cornflowers, poppies, delphiniums and salvia explode in bursts of colour. Even the vegetable areas look beautiful, with ripening produce that may even be cooked in the superbly appointed kitchen with its catering standard ovens.

The gardeners strive to keep the balance between maintaining what is original and what can be progressed: you can take the newly finished Serpentine Walk where ladies of yesteryear wandered with parasols to take the air – or admire the just planted avenue of London plane trees along the drive.

Modern caretakers

After answering an advert in *The Lady* magazine, Sally Anne Eathorne and partner Paul Robertson are the new caretakers at Goodnestone Park. About to welcome the first guests in Goodnestone's new era they are excited about the role.

"When we first arrived it was bedlam – plaster walls and 100 builders," recalls Sally. "But Julian (Lord FitzWalter) and Sally, were just delightful. The dust has been settling and there are countless last details, but working as a team flat out has made it happen. We've been getting to know the house; it's fantastic, with such a warm atmosphere, and we just want to get started."

• For more information on Goodnestone Park Gardens (CT3 1PL), visit www.goodnestoneparkgardens.co.uk. 

JANE AUSTEN

The prolific author's connection with the house came through her brother, Edward Knight, who married Elizabeth Bridges, daughter of Sir Brook and Fanny Bridges, and who subsequently lived two miles from the mansion at Rowling House.

Jane would have been a frequent visitor to Goodnestone, likely dancing in the dining room or taking the air with the ladies along the many walks – such as the Serpentine Walk. There is evidence that her visits influenced the creation of *Pride and Prejudice* – not least a double marriage that took place in the local church.