

The National Trust in England : conserving historic houses and gardens

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The National Trust in England Conserving Historic Houses and Gardens

by JEREMY PEARSON

The National Trust was founded in 1895 to preserve places of natural beauty and historic interest for the nation to enjoy for ever. It now owns 244 000 hectares of land, 350 kilometres of the coast, over 200 historic houses and gardens and 50 industrial sites. It is an independent charity, largely financed by its two million members; by admission monies and profits from rents, shops and restaurants. Many of the people who work for the National Trust are volunteers and receive no payment.

The National Trust is unique in that everything it owns cannot be sold. It is an organisation to preserve and protect land and buildings for everybody to enjoy, for ever.

In the early days of the Trust small houses, such as the 14th century Old Post Office in Tintagel (fig. 1) were acquired, but as rich owners became less wealthy, or their families died out, bigger houses, such as Lanhydrock were given to the charity. This house was rebuilt after a fire in 1881 and now has 180 000 visitors a year. Cotehele, a fragile medieval house with splendid tapestries is also much visited.

Other sites to be considered include St. Michael's Mount, a castle on an island which has seven visitors a minute when it is open in August. The conflict between access and conservation will be discussed. Are the visitors destroying what they are coming to see? If they wish to see a family home they must go to Antony, an 18th century house with limited opening, where descendants of the former owners still live as tenants of the National Trust.

Our gardens are also very busy places and the different ways in which their maintenance and design has changed as visitor numbers increase will be considered. In addition, measures to try and encourage visitors at quieter times of year to spread the impact will also be discussed.

The first property that the infant National Trust acquired in Cornwall was a piece of coastline near Tintagel on the north coast. This area was becoming increasingly popular with early visitors, who were largely drawn to the area by its associations with King Arthur. These myths and legends have been popularised by poets such as Lord Tennyson, which were avidly read by our great grandparents. As the number of visitors increased many of the smaller buildings in the area were threatened by demolition, which caused concern to those who loved the area. As a consequence a number of local artists, led by Miss Catherine Johns, decided in 1896 to purchase one of the most picturesque buildings in the village of Tintagel, which was then called

The Old Post Office. It was a 14th century manor house, which had become a postal receiving station about 50 years before. They bought and restored this building, and then presented it to the National Trust in 1903. Many of the buildings that came to the Trust in the first two or three decades of its existence were small vernacular buildings, which were fast disappearing from the English countryside at this time.

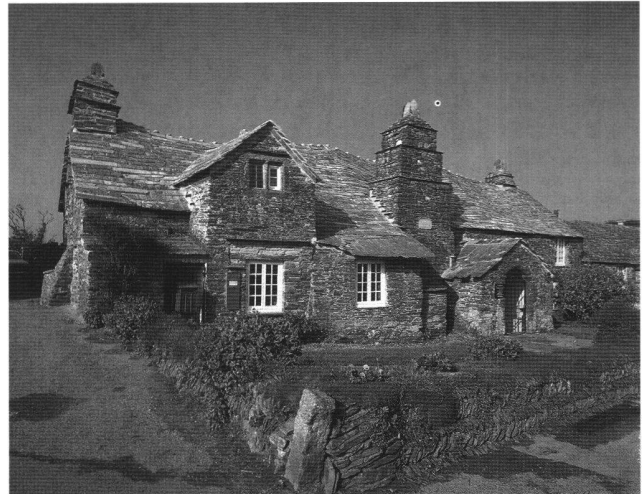


Fig. 1 Tintagel, Old Post Office.

The Old Post Office (fig. 1) is now visited by about 50 000 visitors each year; it is on the main street in a busy village which has 2 000 000 visitors a year. It is open from April to October, seven days a week. The building came to the Trust without any contents, so over the last 30 or 40 years it has been furnished with old oak chairs and tables, and the walls decorated with textiles, pictures and portraits.

After 1945 when we had a socialist government taxation became more of a burden to the large land owner. Conse-

quently in the 1950s a number of larger country houses and estates came to the Trust. One of these was Lanhydrock, near Bodmin. This had been the home of the Robartes family since 1620 when the house was built overlooking a large deer park. It passed through many generations until 1881 when there was fire in the kitchen which destroyed most of the building. It was quickly rebuilt in a very fashionable and comfortable way; it was the first house in the area to have central heating and electricity. The family which grew up in this new house was large; there were ten brothers and sisters, but they all came to adulthood at the time of the First World War. As a consequence, of these ten children only two got married and only one had a child. Therefore, the surviving owner of the property the 7th Viscount Clifden, decided to give the house and estate to the National Trust in 1953. At that time the house was only 70 years old, and was considered to be uninteresting. The only room worth visiting was the 1620s 120-foot long gallery which had survived the great fire.

However, by the 1970s there was a new interest in the houses created 80 or 90 years before. Gradually over five or six years the then Regional Director for the National Trust in Cornwall, Michael Trinick, began to furnish the empty rooms with appropriate old furniture. Most of this was given to the National Trust by people in the area. He had a wide range of photographs taken between 1885 and 1920 to look at, and he tried to acquire furniture, paintings, china and other items that were similar to things that he could see in the archives. He was very successful. Today when the visitors come to Lanhydrock in large numbers they imagine that they are seeing a great Victorian country house from which the family have just departed. In many rooms there are pens lying by papers or spectacles resting on books, as if the family have just left the room for a short stroll in the beautiful garden.

As well as furnishing the great state rooms of the house Michael Trinick paid attention to the many domestic apartments. Lanhydrock was the first house owned by the National Trust in which the visitor could visit the kitchens. At Lanhydrock they are very spacious; there is a large kitchen where meat and vegetables were cooked, a scullery for washing-up and preparing vegetables, a bakehouse, a dry larder, a meat larder, a fish larder, a dairy, a cool room, a still room and further storage pantries. In about 1900 when the house was at its most flourishing, there were 25 servants employed in the house, of whom ten worked in this kitchen area. They were providing meals for about 90–100 people everyday. It was like feeding a small village.

Today's visitors are particularly fascinated by this insight into the domestic past. More comments are made in this area than in any other part of the house. One frequently hears "Oh, I remember something like that", or "Granny had one just like that...", or "did they really cook meat on that great spit?". Everybody today has to cook; so they relate very well to these type of rooms. In contrast the great Drawing Room with its impressive oil paintings and furni-

ture is outside most people's experience, and they find it more difficult to relate to it.

However, many of our visitors are greatly interested and intrigued by the male wing, a suite of three rooms which was the male domain. Ladies seldom entered this area, particularly as one of these rooms was for smoking, a pastime which ladies did not then enjoy. The other two rooms are the Estate Office and the Billiard Room. This still has its magnificent original billiard table, with six lights set above it. Many long winter evenings must have been spent by the Agar Robartes gentlemen and their guests in this room.

Currently there are 50 rooms on display at Lanhydrock. This makes it one of the longest tours of any National Trust property. The minimum length of tour is about one hour, but many people spend three or four hours. To help them enjoy this visit we have provided a cloakroom where they can leave their heavy bags and in each room there is a knowledgeable guide who can tell them more about the items in the room. However, these guides are asked not to speak, unless spoken to by the visitor. In this way we hope that the visitor will not feel intimidated or ill at ease when they enter the room. Because of the large number of people visiting the house they now walk upon wool carpets which help to protect the original floors or original carpets. Without these druggets, as they are called, the original furnishings would suffer very badly. Also to prevent theft, or damage caused by people touching objects many of the rooms have ropes to keep the visitor away from the contents of the room. Inevitably this means that the rooms are no longer as they once were; careful rearrangement has to take place to ensure that the more important pieces of furniture, porcelain etc. are protected during opening hours.

Lanhydrock in common with all our other properties has very sophisticated burglar alarms, and resident house staff to help guard the contents. The burglar alarms also extend out into the gardens where interesting pieces of sculpture or urns are to be found.

Over recent years the staff have spent a lot of time trying to contact either distant members of the family who once lived there, or servants who were employed by them. We now have a fascinating archive of oral recordings of the memories of many of these people. As this gracious way of life fast disappears it is important to capture their memories before it is too late. Much of the information gleaned from these people is now incorporated into the displays in a large room called the Family Museum. Here we have many of the small objects used by the family and their servants, which bring the past alive very vividly.

Lanhydrock is also famous for its garden. Near the house is a large formal area laid out in 1857, which has rose beds and old yew trees. Behind the house and the little church that nestles beside it are very extensive woodland gardens. Also close to the house there are many beautiful magnolia trees which flower in February. Later in the year camellias, rhododendrons and azaleas are plentiful in this very mild

part of the country. About one third of the visitors who come to Lanhydrock do not go into the house. They only visit the garden and like to see it as the seasons change. Visitor surveys evidence suggests that more repeat visits are paid to the gardens than to the houses. This is not surprising, the rooms of the house are perceived to be static, whereas the gardens are always dynamic. Because the gardens are so busy we have introduced various measures to reduce wear and tear; many of the paths have metal edges and a fine rubber granule is spread on the grass to help prevent the impact of many pairs of feet.

Many of the visitors who come to the garden patronise the shop or the four different restaurants at the property. A visit to such enterprises are all part of the visitor experience; we hope that they will enjoy their food and have pleasure in purchasing gifts and souvenirs. All profits from these items stay at the property, and help to further our conservation and preservation work.

Currently the Property Manager is helped by about ten members of staff who are responsible for the house. There are a further six in the garden, five in the shop and about thirty (largely part time) in the restaurant. To help cope with the many visitors there are an additional two seasonal staff. Some of these have a particular responsibility for helping the disabled in wheelchairs as they come around the property. A further small team of about ten volunteers help to conduct the many school parties that come to the property. Finally about 160 volunteers come one day a week to help guard the different rooms. Without their help it would not be possible to open this magnificent late 19th century family home.

In contrast Cotehele, which is in the east of the county has evolved more as a show place than a residence for the Edgcumbe family who owned it for almost 500 years. Begun about 1485 the rambling fortified manor at Cotehele has a great hall, a chapel and many bedrooms and other chambers. However in the 17th century the family, who had become increasingly rich through their agricultural interests, and in the service of the King decided to build a larger house nearer the port of Plymouth. Once this had been completed they lived almost entirely at the new house, but still kept on Cotehele as it was at the centre of one of their larger estates.

By the 18th century the antiquarian 2nd Baron Edgcumbe realised the importance of his largely unaltered medieval house. Over two or three decades he began to acquire furniture and other items that he thought were antique to further enhance the ancientness of the place. Many of the rooms are now hung with tapestries or armour, and much of the oak furniture is elaborately carved and very quaint.

Because the windows are small and the light is dim the tapestries are in exceptionally good condition, as are the different sets of wall bed hangings in the three main bed chambers. Cotehele is now renowned for its textiles and embroideries. Having been kept in dark conditions, and very well looked after for a long time the house is of excep-

tional interest to the textile scholar. In several of the rooms the tapestries are in layers, one upon another. Although now we think of them having great iconographic and historic importance at the time they were put up they were seem more as draught excluders and pictures!

There is still no electricity in the house at Cotehele so the rooms are dark, and in October, when the light fades the house has to close early. But on those quieter autumn days it is very easy to imagine that you are back in the 1600s; the 60 000 or 70 000 visitors we receive each year all leave with very strong impressions of a romantic, very richly coloured treasure house.

The house continued to be owned by the Edgcumbe family until 1947. At that time the 6th Earl of Mount Edgcumbe persuaded His Majesty's Government to take the house, its contents and the surrounding 526 hectares (1300 acres) to the National Trust. In those early days the property was open everyday of the year and the small numbers of visitors were taken around by an aged housekeeper. Today it is very different; the house is open from April to October, six days a week, from 1100 to 1700. Because of the small rooms and the steep staircases the number of visitors admitted at any one time is limited, and this is done in a very simple way. Everyone has to enter and leave by the same door and as soon as there are 80 people in the house these grills are closed. Then as two people leave the property, two people can enter. This does not result in long delays, and generally our visitors are very happy to wait. Apart from the conservation aspect of trying to regulate the visitor it also increases their enjoyment of the very special atmosphere of these rooms if they are not overcrowded.

In recent years, the National Trust, with the very generous support of English Heritage have spent a very considerable amount upon the restoration and conservation of many of the tapestries. This is a nationally important collection, and there is an ongoing programme for all of them to be cleaned and repaired. Otherwise much of the preventive conservation work in the house is done by our own staff. There are four people employed in the house (two of them full time, two part time) to clean and conserve the furniture, pottery, textiles etc., and to help regulate the environment. There are now dehumidification machines to help regulate the moisture in the air, the windows are covered with ultra-violet film to prevent this harmful light from entering the rooms, and there is a rigorous regime of drawing curtains if the light should become too bright. It is only in these way that we can ensure that future generations will be able to enjoy the collection at Cotehele in the state in which our generation have found it.

The family no longer live at Cotehele, or anywhere near by. However at Antony, which lies some ten miles to the south of Cotehele descendants of the people who have lived in the house, again since the medieval period, still have full run of the whole house. It is not easy for them to sleep in rooms which the public see only a few hours later. It is not easy to try and finish your lunch before the visitors come to your dining room. However, on the three after-

noons of each week from April to October when the house is open our many visitors greatly enjoy this insight into a real family home.

Antony is occupied by the Carew Pole family; descendants of two great local dynasties, the Carews and the Poles. The house is now overfull of the many portraits of members of these two families, some of which are by very famous artists. There are also magnificent pieces of furniture, mirrors, chandeliers, tapestries and porcelain. The vast majority of these items which have been in the house for many years are still owned by the Carew Poles or a charitable trust. They are now generously lent to the National Trust, who are partly responsible for their insurance, so that our visitors can see the rooms as they have been for many generations. For here at Antony the National Trust only own the fabric of the building and the immediately surrounding garden.

The grounds at Antony were laid out by Humphrey Repton in the late 18th century, and now have many magnificent trees and views. The gardens stretch down towards the river, where another charitable trust owns very extensive woodland glades and walks in which there are many rare magnolias, rhododendrons, camellias and azaleas. In the spring these walks are full of wild flowers beneath these old trees and shrubs and every prospect is very beautiful. Our garden staff maintain both parts of the garden, with a compensatory payment being made by the charitable trust that owns the woodland garden.

This close collaboration between the National Trust, a resident tenant and different charitable trusts is unusual. However, here it works extremely well and the restrictions placed upon opening and other arrangements at the property by the residents adds greatly to its character and charm. Because of the limited access arrangements only about 20,000 visit the property; but all go away delighted with their glimpse of a real family home.

Another family home is St. Michael's Mount, in the far west of the county which has been a place of pilgrimage for over 1000 years, the church is balanced on the top of a rocky island set in Mount's Bay, near Penzance but is accessible by foot at some times of the day when the tide goes out (fig. 2).

During the mediaeval period it was part church and part fortress against the many marauders who came up the Western Approaches into the English Channel. It was a small outpost of royal authority in a distant part of the country and saw many battles.

The church was dedicated to St. Michael as it was situated on a high place. Pilgrims still come to the church, and regular services are held here on Sundays. Since the 1640s the Castle has been owned by members of the St. Aubyn family, and they gradually converted it into their principal family home. A major wing was built in the 1870s, and the present Lord St. Levan still lives in this area of this large house. It was his father, the 3rd Baron St. Levan who gave the property to the National Trust. He was anxious to pre-

serve this major monument for the country and to ensure that his family could go on living there. Negotiations were successfully completed in the early 1950s, since when many thousands of National Trust members and other visitors have come to the Castle. Today over quarter of a million visitors each year go into the twelve or so rooms in the Castle and enjoy splendid views from the terraces outside. But perhaps three times that number visit the small harbour at the bottom of the island and enjoy the shops and restaurant in this area. In a busy period as many as seven or eight people a minute go through the Castle's front door

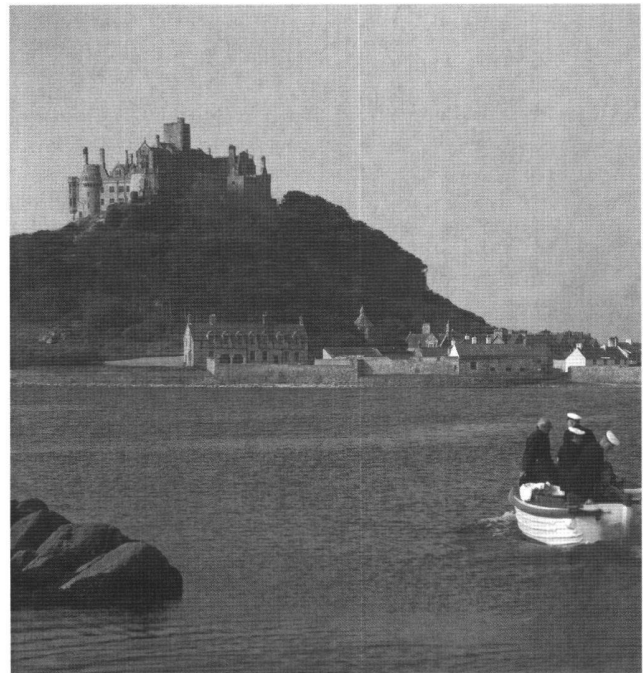


Fig. 2 St. Michael's Mount. View across Channel from Jetty.

which does cause some congestion. However visitors seem to accept this and we get very few complaints. It is a magical place and even on the busiest day the visitor cannot fail to be impressed by the special quality of this ancient castle.

Being an island and in a very exposed position this is a very costly place to maintain. Every year a comprehensive building programme has to take place; particularly to the sea defences and harbour walls. The income generated by the visitors is invaluable in this work, but we are also fortunate to have a very large endowment provided by the St. Levan family to help maintain this precious historic monument.

The income gained from visitors to our gardens at Trelissick and Glendurgan have also helped to conserve these magical places. Both gardens are on the south coast of Cornwall and have favoured climates. As a consequence many rare and tender trees and shrubs grow within their boundaries, and they are particularly colourful in the spring. Magnolias, rhododendrons and camellias all flourish in the mild and wet climate of Cornwall, and we get many visitors in March, April and May who come especially to see these plants, which do not grow so well in other parts of England. Obviously this is potentially a wet time of year, so we have gradually introduced hard surfaced paths into the gardens, so that the grassed paths provided by our predecessors, when the gardens were in private occupation, no longer exist. Although this change may be regretted it is inevitable; as has been the provision of metal edges to some of the paths so that they do not become too wide. At the much visited Trelissick Garden paths which were once two metres wide grew to six metres, because the edges of the

paths were unprotected and many visitors walked 5/6 abreast.

As part of any garden visit our customers wish to have a cup of tea and the National Trust in Cornwall is renowned for the quality of its restaurants. At both places we also have shops, and the income from both sources help to maintain the grounds. Each are approximately four hectares in area and are maintained by three or four permanent members of staff. They are aided by a large amount of volunteers; gardening is a very popular hobby in England and we get many offers of help from local people or students wanting to follow a career in horticulture. In recent years we have also benefited from students coming from Japan where English style gardening has become very popular.

So the influence of Cornwall travels across the globe; it is a wonderful and special place with many historic and beautiful places for the public to enjoy, I hope you will come and see them for yourselves.

PHOTOS

Fig. 1 Jon Hicks, 1993.

Fig. 2 P.A. Studio.

SUMMARY

The National Trust was founded in 1895 to preserve places of natural beauty and historic interest for the nation. It now owns 244,000 hectares of land, 350 kilometres of the coast, over 200 historic houses and gardens and 50 industrial sites. It is an independent charity, largely financed by its 2 million members, by admission monies and profits from rents, shops and restaurants. The way in which the charity acquired these properties is discussed, as are the many challenges which are faced when the number of visitors greatly increase. St. Michael's Mount e.g., a castle on an island in very exposed situation is a very costly place to maintain. In a busy period as many as seven or eight people a minute go through the castle's front door. Much help is given by volunteers who contribute to our hope to preserve these special places for everybody to enjoy for ever.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der National Trust wurde 1895 gegründet mit dem Ziel, Natur- und Kulturdenkmäler von nationaler Bedeutung für die Nachwelt zu erhalten. Heute ist die Stiftung im Besitz von 244 000 Hektaren Land, 350 km Küste, über 200 historischen Gebäuden und Gärten sowie 50 Industriebauten. Der Trust ist eine gemeinnützige Institution, finanziert vor allem mit den Beiträgen der 2 Millionen Mitglieder, mit Eintrittsgeldern, Mieteinkünften und den Gewinnen aus Shops und Restaurants. Der Autor erläutert, auf welche Art und Weise die Objekte in den Besitz der Stiftung kamen und welche Schwierigkeiten sich aus den stets steigenden Besucherzahlen ergeben. Der Unterhalt von St. Michael's Mount beispielsweise, eines Schlossbaus in exponierter Lage auf einer Insel am Ärmelkanal, ist sehr kostspielig; in der Hochsaison betreten etwa sieben oder acht Personen pro Minute das Schloss. Eine grosse Hilfe leisten freiwillige Mitarbeitende, die dazu beitragen, dass diese Sehenswürdigkeiten immer allen offen stehen.

RÉSUMÉ

L'institution anglaise National Trust fut fondée en 1895. En tant qu'organisme indépendant qui assure son autofinancement, le National Trust compte aujourd'hui deux millions de membres environ. Tous les biens en sa possession – souvent le fruit de donations – sont exclus de l'aliénation. Parmi ses propriétés – à savoir 244 000 hectares de terrain, 350 kilomètres de côtes, plus de deux cents bâtiments et jardins historiques, cinquante sites industriels – la plus importante est sans doute le Saint Michael's Mount, un château édifié sur une île et visité durant l'été par sept personnes la minute.

RIASSUNTO

Il National Trust istituzione inglese fu fondata nel 1895. Organismo indipendente, che si autofinanzia, conta oggi circa due milioni di soci. Tutti i beni posseduti – spesso frutto di donazioni – non possono essere alienati. Tra i possedimenti – 244 000 ettari di terra, 350 chilometri di coste, più di duecento edifici e giardini storici, cinquanta siti industriali – i più importanti è senza dubbio il Saint Michael's Mount, un castello posto su un'isola e visitato durante l'estate da ca. sette persone al minuto.