

British Art Talks podcast

Season 1, Episode 6

“Things in their natural surroundings”?: Marketing the British Country House as Home

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Anna Reid: *British Art Talks* from the Paul Mellon Centre, championing new ways of understanding British art, history, and culture.

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“A house is just four walls and a roof, but the word ‘home’ conjures up a large number of moral and psychological associations, all of them positive: Warmth, intimacy, security, domesticity, and last but not least, privacy.” So reads a definition of home by the late historian, Lawrence Stone. I’m Anna Reid, head of research at the Paul Mellon Centre. In this episode of *British Art Talks*, I’m joined by Kate Retford, professor of the history of art at Birkbeck and who’s research on 18th-century British art and the country house art collection has been published widely.

Mediated by membership organisations, including Historic Houses or the National Trust, viewer experiences of the British country house are complex encounters, shaped not least by the likes of preservation initiatives, family businesses, or tax exemption schemes. Yet the singular presentation of the country house as family home is a curiously pervasive marketing strategy.

This episode shines a spotlight on this use of a dominant concept of home, calling routinely accepted values into question. Highlighting their political freight and questioning the functions that these family narratives fulfill. Welcome to Kate Retford.

Kate Retford: Thanks, Anna. We’re all familiar with the rules of the country house guidebook, as well as providing discussions of the history of the architecture and a room by room guide to the collections. We will indubitably be provided with a history of the owners and an accompanying family tree.

Voice-over: Guidebook for Renishaw Hall, 1995. “Renishaw Hall has been the home of the Sitwell family for over 350 years, and in recent decades has become famous through the writings of Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell, the three gifted children of the eccentric Sir George and Lady Ida Sitwell. It is still a family home and not yet a museum.”

Kate Retford: If the house is still in the possession of the family, and all lived in by them to any degree, we will be presented with a foreword. This will typically feature a photograph of the current owner, always with wife, perhaps with children, possibly also with pets, and almost certainly with some view of the house behind.

Voice-over: Guidebook for West Wycombe, 2001, reprinted 2009. "I am delighted to welcome you to West Wycombe Park. West Wycombe comes alive with people. With my wife, Lucinda, and our children, I am delighted to continue welcoming visitors in the summer."

Kate Retford: The family arms will typically be included. A reproduced signature is also common. The text will often include a statement as to how long the family has been connected with the property, usually rounded to the nearest 50 or 100 year period.

My starting point here is that familiar trope, the country house as family home and not a museum. I want to sketch out the origins and development of the idea that such domestic space provides an ideal setting for works of art. Strengthened by the accompanying idea that it's preferable to a museum, routinely characterised in this discourse as 'lifeless' or 'impersonal'.

To attend to Lawrence Stone's checklist, the values of warmth and domesticity are seen to cast a rosy light on the marble busts, the tapestries, the portraits arrayed around the walls of the country house. While the concept of privacy facilitates a prurient curiosity, combined with feelings of privilege at gaining access. How did this idea arise over the long history of the British country house? At what point did it become such a pronounced marketing tool? What work does it do in the country houses we visit today?

Voice-over: Guidebook for Holkham, Norfolk, 1996. "Welcome to Holkham, home of the Earl and Countess of Leicester. The value of Holkham and other such houses lies in their ability to provide unique historical evidence about the time they were built. Holkham is still privately owned and is the centre of an agricultural estate, providing funds and resources which maintain not only the house but also ensuring that the social fabric of rural life remains intact. The house is therefore not a stuffy museum. It is part of an entity in which I, my family, and others all live and work."

Kate Retford: The family home concept is, of course, a mainstay of the presentation of privately owned houses, and Holkham in Norfolk, owned by the Coke family since the mid-18th century provides a good example. The current Earl of Leicester, the eighth, who inherited in 2015 has emphasised the property as his family's home still more strongly than his father in that guidebook quote.

The current descriptions of rooms on the website, for example, provide details of recent family activities. The family has their Christmas tree put up in the saloon and gathers around it on Christmas morning to open their presents. We're told that the important late 17th century tapestries in the green state bedroom were protected by perspex and black polythene sheeting when the Earl used the room for his 21st Birthday disco.

A piece published in The Telegraph in October 2018 quoted the Earl as declaring that this classical mansion, packed with grand tour treasures is actually very warm. The journalist, Jessica Salter agrees. "The house is inviting." She concurs, "You can see the photographs of the family on the sideboard. You can look out of the window and see a football on the grass or an upturned bicycle. Holkham isn't a museum, it's a family home."

It's thus not surprising that this binary framing takes centre stage in the marketing of Historic Houses, the organisation which represents many independent owners. Their tagline sets up the opposition

again. "Nothing tells a national story like its homes. Our houses are not static museums, but personal living examples of Britain's past, present, and future." When the organisation rebranded a couple of years ago, much of the commissioned photography showed casually dressed and informally posed owners.

A number of images focused on the juxtaposition of the grand stately home interior, with some indication of normal family life. A child's twist and lock block wooden toy resting on the hand of a classical statue. A copy of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* nestled in a shelf of antiquarian volumes.

On a pragmatic level, very few of the properties represented by Historic Houses indeed can be technically classed as museums. In 1998, the UK Museums Association specified that museums are institutions which, "make accessible artifacts and specimens which they hold in trust for society." Now, in trust is not here an expressive term, it's a legal one. Currently, a museum cannot be privately owned. Meanwhile the sociologist, Tony Bennett frames a museum as, 'public' in the sense of being outside the sphere of the home, but their status as other than museums runs deeper than this.

As Fiona Candlin has pointed out in her 'Mapping Museums' project, which was recently launched at Birkbeck, we also need to look beyond formal and legal definitions to whether or not a site self-identifies as a museum. These properties emphatically do not. Instead, they conversely position themselves as domestic spaces in which people go and or have gone about their daily lives, raise children, engage in the rituals of birthdays and Christmases.

The issue is not so much whether or not a children's party did indeed take place in the drawing room the previous week. It's rather whether or not one is told about that party by the room guide. Furthermore, the trope of the country house as family home extends beyond these private properties, beyond actual current family homes in which the rugs are merely rolled up for the 28 days a year of access required by the art and heritage tax exemption scheme or even those still connected with the family, but either run by the National Trust or as a business with the owners actually living elsewhere.

West Wycombe Park in Buckinghamshire, for example, came into the portfolio of the National Trust in 1934, but the family continue to reside at the property. As well as the ongoing presence of the Dashwoods flagged in the Trust guidebook, the current website for the property emphasises, "This palladian gem has been home of the Dashwood family for over 300 years." But still more significantly, stories about the family will be told when they're long gone. Many vacated houses run by English Heritage or the Trust, which haven't been inhabited for decades – and indeed are now classed as museums – still structure key narratives around owners and their lives. Anglesey Abbey in Cambridgeshire has been accredited since 2015, but the narrative of the property is centred on Lord Fairhaven, who created a comfortable country home, even though he only lived there for 40 years of the building's nigh-on-900-year history. Last Christmas, as part of a 'Tinsel and Tweed' experience, you could, "Step into the living room to find Lord Fairhaven's tea tables set to welcome guests into his home", or in the oak room, "have a game of cards while sitting by the fire."

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I now want to unpack some of the legacy of the presentation of the country house as family home, not a museum. There's certainly a long history of curiosity in the lives of country house owners from the early days of polite and genteel tourism in the 18th century onwards. When that most dedicated of such tourists, Caroline Lybbe Powys went round Holkham in 1756, the family were from home, but she and her companions could still view the wing which house their rooms.

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Voice-over: Mrs. Powys' *Norfolk Journal* of 1756. In the fourth wing is the eating room, drawing room, library, bed chambers, dressing rooms, constantly used by Lord and Lady Leicester themselves. And in a closet here of her ladyship's, we saw the miniature pictures of the family for a series of years past, done by the best hands. In this little cabinet too, are a thousand curiosities of various kinds. Among the pictures was their daughter-in-law, the beautiful Lady Mary Coke, and their son, Lord Coke, who they had lately lost to their inexpressible grief, being their only child. He and his Lady, I think, were far from being happy."

Kate Retford: But there's a vital point of crystallisation in the long story of the intersection between connoisseurship and domestic snooping in the early to mid-20th century. As is well known, this was the period in which the aristocracy's fortunes took a nosedive. Decline in income from agricultural property, difficulties with securing the necessary staff to keep a country house mobilised and above all, death duties, which had risen to 50% by the 1930s, led to many sales and some demolitions.

On the 19th of July 1934, Philip Kerr, 11th Marquess of Lothian, delivered a famous address to the AGM of the National Trust entitled "England's country houses, the case for their preservation." The Trust had been mostly concerned with the nation's landscape to date, with the exception of a few smaller manor houses. Lothian, who had been hit by death duties on his own inheritance in 1930, made a plea for tax breaks, but he also called on the Trust to take on properties.

He recommended that they should save houses that were at least 100 years old, of definite historical architectural merit, preferably accompanied by a garden or park, but also that any acquired house, "Should be suitably furnished and maintained as a dwelling house." The 1937 National Trust Act thus established that the owner of a property being transferred to the Trust would be able to continue living there subject to certain conditions as at West Wycombe, and the Country House Scheme was born.

As James Lees-Milne, secretary to the Country House Committee recorded, they believed that families not only made the best caretakers but also breathed that ineffable spirit essential to the legendary purpose of country houses. The Country House Scheme would never have got off the ground without the deal whereby the owner could continue to live in the ancestral home, but the tone in all of this is significantly one of merit rather than necessity.

Continued residence of the family, it was asserted, keeps the house alive, it stops it from becoming a museum. It's a point made in the period with striking regularity. Vita Sackville-West wrote in 1944, for example, "If these English houses of ours were all to be turned into institutional buildings, schools, asylums, hotels and the like, something of our national heritage of pride and beauty would be gone." This was not just a point about care and custodianship, it was also about the best conditions in which to view and experience houses and their collections.

Whether the case was being made by the Trust or by private owners seeking tax breaks and exemption opportunities to enable them to retain their properties, the idea that country houses, furnishings and works of art are most effectively seen through the lens of the family's ongoing residence, if not ownership, took up its central position in country house marketing at this point. As private property became national heritage, that key transition explored in detail by Peter Mandler in his 1997 book, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home*, the privateness of that property was enlisted in making the case for the public's interest.

This narrative became still more pronounced in the 1950s. The start of that decade saw the publication of the Gowers Report on houses of outstanding historic or architectural interest. The

committee heard evidence from many interested parties including The National Trust. The Trust's position as presented by Oliver Brett, 3rd Viscount Esher, was that the Trust would be best placed looking after houses still inhabited by their families but supported by the state, as many families should be retained as possible, as it is only they who can maintain the country house atmosphere and who also make the best custodians.

Museum houses like Audley End, meanwhile, could be cared for by the Ministry of Works. The published Gowers Report endorsed the view that owners or, in default, the Trust were the best placed to run these houses. Furthermore, the following decade, Lees-Milne was succeeded as historic building secretary by Roger Feden, who enthusiastically took up the cause. The best curator of a house is normally the donor who knows and cherishes it. The Trust has no wish to create museums in the countryside.

John Fowler meanwhile, as advisor on interiors to the Trust from the 1950s onwards, recommended that vacated Trust properties should still be made to look as if "the family had just gone out for the afternoon." The 1950s was also the era in which the stately home business really got underway. Chatsworth and Blenheim had already been open to visitors, but they reopened in this period and started bringing in very large numbers indeed. Easter Monday, 1952, for example, saw more than four-thousand people visit Blenheim and nearly six-thousand went to Chatsworth. This was also the age of the great country house publicists, such as the 6th Marquess of Bath at Longleat, Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, and John, 13th Duke of Bedford at Woburn Abbey.

Voice-over: "Owner of Woburn Abbey is the enterprising Duke of Bedford. Both he and the Duchess say it gives them real pleasure to open the 17th-century mansion and superb grounds to the thousands who pay for admission every week, and thoroughly well organised it all is. However large might be the income of any Duke nowadays, taxation would leave him too little by far to keep the small army of servants essential to such an establishment as Woburn, and each time the vast estates are passed on, death duties force the heir to sell much of the inheritance. How long will the palace remain a Ducal seat? For Dukes, like lesser folks nowadays feel the pinch. A great historical tradition may disappear."

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Kate Retford: The Duke of Bedford was notably upfront about strategic use of Woburn Abbey as his family's home in his determined marketing of the property as a tourist venue in order to pay off those hefty death duties. In his book, *A Silver-Plated Spoon* published in 1959, he notes that he had quickly become one of the principal attractions of the house and he had made the most of the fact, mingling with the visitors and even spending time in the shop selling guidebooks.

Apparently, sales would go up by between 30% and 50% when he was in there. He records that even though he and his family inhabited rooms tucked away in one wing of the house. His wife, Lydia "succeeded most cleverly in arranging the main staterooms for show while still making them look as if they were lived in." He notes on a number of occasions that he was strenuously opposed to any idea that he should transfer Woburn to the National Trust and he explicitly evokes that binary of family home versus museum, providing my talk with its title: "Look at the outcry that would be caused among people who prefer to see these things in their natural surroundings. The paintings and objet d'art at Woburn would lose much of their atmosphere if displayed along with rows of others in some impersonal museum."

The idea of the benefits of viewing works of art in a family home can then be traced throughout subsequent decades through the Destruction of the Country House exhibition at the V&A in 1974 to

the blockbuster Treasure Houses of Britain exhibition held at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC in 1985, opened by Charles and Diana.

Voice-over: "The very modern National Gallery, they were to open an exhibition of British treasures. To do this, months of work had gone into transforming the staff buildings into a series of English period pieces, with false oak beams and granite lintels, falsely decorated doors, leaded lights and all the rest. The idea, to create the perfect setting for the works of art. It was well worth it. By opening day, the cavernous modern halls had been transformed into elegant English rooms. It's the most important exhibition of its kind ever mounted. So valuable that both governments had to underwrite it. It was a history lesson for the princess."

Kate Retford: The near 700 objects in a wide variety of media in the show were loaned from more than 200 British country houses, a variety of National Trust and privately-owned properties. It was curated by Gervase Jackson-Stops, who noted in the catalogue that the fact that so many of these houses, "remain loved and lived in family homes, is a measure of the fierce and irrational loyalty to the past that they inspire. A loyalty that can only bode well for the future." But what we had here, of course, as David Cannadine pointed out in a long and vituperative review in the *New York Review of Books* was, the country house collection taken out of the family home and installed in a museum.

The best of the best was exerted from the inevitable mixed bag that constitutes the contents of most country houses, and hung in a pristine museum environment. The curators did create spaces intended to evoke the British country house, but as Jonathan Marsden who worked on the exhibition later wrote in *Apollo*, it was still very much a museum display. "Unable" he wrote, "to manage the true atmosphere of the country house." The result was a paradox. Treasure Houses removed objects from houses and showed them in a museum to make the case that they shouldn't be in a museum, but should remain as part of the totality of the country house.

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Shortly before Treasure Houses opened in Washington, Deborah Cavendish, wife of the 11th Duke of Devonshire, published the first of what was to be a number of books about Chatsworth, the house of 1982. She and the Duke had moved into Chatsworth in the 1950s, paid off a notably large death duties bill, and had proceeded to build up the house and estate into the major tourist attraction that it is today.

Deborah Cavendish (archival clip): "I think when people come to see it, they're rather daunted by the size of it. It is enormous. There are 175 rooms, but I think when they've got inside and they get the atmosphere of the place, they begin to feel it is a house where people live and love. I think the great luck of living here is the wonderful place-- To live amongst such beauty, I realise is extremely lucky and very unusual. Secondly, it's the people who run the place that make it all so worthwhile. Perhaps I should say that first. We are supported by an extraordinary staff of people who love the place as much as we do, and that really makes it all worthwhile trying to keep it going."

Kate Retford: In the house, the Duchess developed the trope of the country house as family home, in a fuller and more nuanced fashion than perhaps anyone had to date. The book is full of anecdotes about living at Chatsworth. The pros of children being able to roller skate for miles without going out of doors, of being able to walk inside for hours on a wet day. The cons of putting a bag down and not being able to find it again for months. Of having to trek through corridor after corridor at night to let out a dog being house-trained. Major works of art, a Velázquez, a Zoffany, a Tielemans become familiar things, giving comfort to their owner in her sitting room. Described in a passage evoking a winter evening with the fire lit, the dogs on the floor, alone or with one or two great friends.

When the Duchess's book was refashioned 20 years later as *Chatsworth, The House*, this idiom was magnified. The new blurb proclaimed it to be the inside story of Chatsworth, a real family home by the person who knows it best. Two key changes were made to the earlier text. In the house, the tour of Chatsworth had followed an architecturally logical progression, so that rooms open to the public and private spaces had been intermingled. Their status merely flagged by, respectively, discreet white and black circles.

In the later publication, the two were separated out so that one moves from the description of the public route to an account of the private rooms. Second, a raft of new photography by Simon Upton was commissioned, so that *Chatsworth, The House* is lavishly illustrated with color images. It shows the staircase which leads to the family's private quarters without mediating figures, evoking a granted moment of privileged access into the spaces lying beyond tantalising shadows at the top of the steps. Moving into those private quarters, we're then presented with a view through from the West Hall into the leather room, labeled thus.

The inevitable contents of a hall includes Andrew's bulb planter and engraved spades from ceremonial tree plantings. Yet another Henry VIII hangs in the leather room. That phrase, "Yet another Henry VIII," does significant work, I think. Here, that sense of intimacy and familiarity extends to even an apparent touch of that irritation that can come with long ownership of objects in one's home. The Duchess's books tap into a fascination with the country house as family home, which is powerful enough to require serious engagement and analysis. There's almost always a cluster of visitors around the inevitable display of silver framed photographs on the piano.

Why should this be the case? What work does the framework of the home do for those visitors?

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Anna Reid: Thank you, Kate. Thank you for having laid out for us all of those treasures and for such a wonderful talk. Let's pick up on this point of what the framework of the home does for those visitors to the country house, clustered around photographs. What is this excessive curiosity? Is this a prurient display of private material also?

Kate Retford: Yes, I think there's a definite sense of prurience and you really get it from that photograph I was describing of Chatsworth, of the staircase leading to the family's private quarters. It's such a clear invitation to come and snoop around their rooms. It evokes a curiosity in the private lives of the famous that I think we're very familiar with from things like the TV series, *Through the Keyhole*, or magazines like *Hello Magazine*. The interesting thing is that these people aren't really celebrities as such. The interest in them and their families and their lives is really because they have so much, because they have title, because they have property and that because they own such marvelous things. This does evoke a specter of snobbishness, of a persistent deference to the upper classes. It's the kind of thing that has been really lambasted by heritage studies scholars over the years. I've got a couple of quotes here, Robert Hewison argued in the mid-1980s that country houses preserve hierarchy, sturdy individualism on the part of their owners, privilege tempered by social duty, deference, respect for social order. Then more recently, Laura Jane Smith has done work in this area, really damning these sites as leading to visitors accepting and nostalgically rejoicing in class difference.

Anna Reid: We've had this wonderful unpicking of this mirage of the family home. Is there anything of merit in it? Is there anything for art historians and for historians that is of merit to working within this family home framework?

Kate Retford: Yes, definitely. I think a lot of my concern with the family home framework is about marketing and presentation and the work that that can do. But certainly, the concept of the family home is hugely important for historians and art historians. I think above all, it's important because it helps us to contextualise works of art within the environment for which they were commissioned and purchased and in which they were experienced. Certainly, a lot of my work has been about that. This relates to the in lieu of tax in situ scheme, which means that an object can potentially remain in the property even if it's given to the state.

There's lots and lots of examples of this, but to give you just one, the portraits of the Earl and Countess of Arundel by Daniel Mytens are still in their long-standing location in the drawing room at Arundel castle, even though they were acquired along with a number of other works from the collection by the National Portrait Gallery in 1980. There's a very good point to it at Arundel, when you see those Mytens portraits. You see them alongside other ancestral portraits commemorating other important members of the family establishing that dynasty. You see them amongst furniture, ceramics, silverware, very much as part of a multi-media multi-sensory display. The kind of display that a museum like the V&A has to create in its galleries.

Then I think there's a final point I'd make which is that you will quite often see objects in country houses which, frankly, would be in deep store in a museum. They'd be the kinds of things that would be languishing at the back of a cupboard and in the country house they'll be out because they help the curator to tell part of the historical story or they're relevant for an important individual associated with the house. I think that's very valuable because you get to see a wider range of visual and material culture than you might be in a museum which is going to show the best of what they have.

Anna Reid: Perhaps most excitingly in terms of your research, what are the examples where The Trust or Historic Houses, et cetera have broken out of that interpretive framework of the family house, of the family home? Could you give us any examples?

Kate Retford: Yes, I think the National Trust is making really concerted efforts to revitalize, to rethink the narratives that frame its stately homes, and over the last few years, you've really been able to see it in their national public programs. Their 'Women and Power' programme of 2018, and especially in the 'Prejudice and Pride' programme they ran in 2017, which explored LGBTQ plus history in their houses to mark the 50th anniversary of the Sexual Offences Act.

The curator who had overall responsibility for that program argued that the presentation of the trust stately homes to date had been much too much focused on heteronormative narratives focused on marriages, on children, the kinds of things that I've been talking about.

I'm particularly interested in Mount Stuart on the Isle of Bute, because they've pretty much entirely dispatched the family home framework. I won't forget rummaging through country house guidebooks in the Paul Mellon Centre library and coming across the one for Mount Stuart. Opening it up, expecting the normal foreword and finding instead a photograph of the current owner, styled as just 'Johnny Bute', billed as chairman of the Mount Stuart Trust. He's pictured in a gray suit. There's no wife, no children, no view of the country seat, and the foreword says emphatically that he made a decision to treat Mount Stuart as a business and not as a family home.

It was actually quite an extraordinary moment coming upon that having got so used to the standardised rhetoric of those forewords.

Anna Reid: These examples of new interpretive frameworks, do they help us to think more critically about the framework of the family home?

Kate Retford: Yes, I think they flag the fact that we don't have to see country houses always within that framework. By doing so it does make you think about the framework of the country house as a family home, not a museum, as something that is constructed, and as something that has this legacy that I've talked about over the 20th century. Going back to the 1930s and the case for owners to stay in their houses, even when they were being taken on by the trust, and then the ongoing struggle of owners to maintain their houses often justified by the idea that these are better as lived in family homes, and that's better for the visitor as well as for the owner.

They help us to think about it as a construct, they help us to think about its history, its legacy, its political meaning, its political associations. They therefore push people, push scholars, push curators, push people in the heritage industry towards thinking about new stories they can tell and how to both engage with that past but also to come up with something fresh for new audiences.

Anna Reid: Thank you to Professor Kate Retford. Kate's research querying the marketing of the British country house as home will form the basis of a new project in collaboration with Dr. Oliver Cox at the University of Oxford. The project has arisen out of her work for the Paul Mellon Centre's *Collecting and Display: The British Country House*. Led by Martin Postle, Deputy Director for Grants and Publications, this major research project addresses the formation, character and function of country house art collections, and it's results will be published online later this year.

Listeners might also be interested in [The Inspection of the Curious: The country house guidebook from 1750 to 1990](#), a 2017 drawing room display and pamphlet curated by Dr. Jessica Feather, which is documented online at the Paul Mellon Centre website. Thank you for listening.

Extracts were read by Sebastian Brown and Sherie Houston. The archive is from the program, *England, the Duchess and Chatsworth House*, produced by, On Top of the World. Newsreel of the opening of Treasure Houses is courtesy of Ken Reese's report for ITN. *Marketing the British Country House as Home* is produced by Alexandra Quinn with Freya Hellier. It is a Loftus Media Production.

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