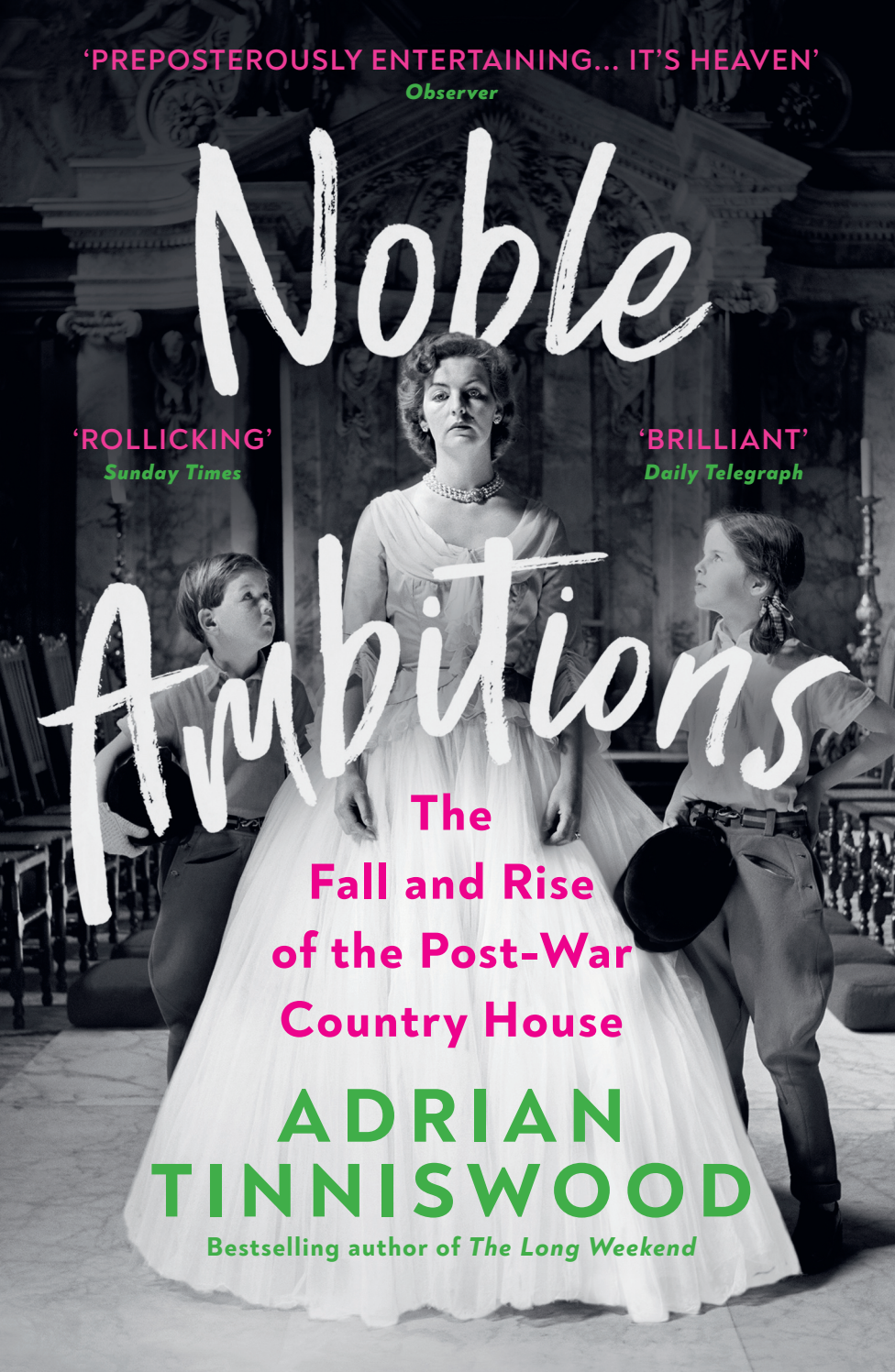
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The Fall and Rise of the Post-War Country House
ADRIAN TINNISWOOD
Bestselling author of The Long Weekend

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Noble Ambitions

The Fall and Rise of the Post-War Country House

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For Felicity Bryan
1945–2020

Grandeur must be abandoned to be appreciated.

Blaise Pascal

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FOREWORD

In my beginning is my end. In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored . . .

– T. S. Eliot, 'East Coker' (1940)

By the outbreak of the Second World War many of Britain's country houses – whether ornate baroque palaces or picturesque Tudor manor houses, vast neoclassical mansions or battlemented Victorian follies – had been tottering for years under the weight of rising taxes, a dwindling supply of domestic help, and an uncomfortable sense that as a class their owners were surplus to requirements, as anachronistic in twentieth-century Britain as the rusting suits of armour that decorated their dusty halls. In 1939 the golden age of the country house, with its lavish entertaining and its armies of servants, was a distant memory – and, in truth, a memory that had been burnished by the passage of time until it shone more brightly than it ever had in real life. But on one thing, truth and memory were in agreement: the years since the end of the First World War had been a disaster for the country house. Estates had been broken up. Mansions had been emptied of their

contents and demolished. Families who had been at the heart of rural communities for generations had been forced to sell up and move away. The country house was in crisis.

It is hard to pinpoint just when the rot set in. Was it with the agricultural depressions of the 1870s and 1880s, or the advent of death duties in the 1890s? Was it due to the shortage of domestic servants after the First World War, the increase in land taxes, and the decline in land values? Or, less tangible but perhaps most significant of all, the growing sense in the 1920s and 1930s that the country house was a monument to an undemocratic past and a way of life that was neither viable nor socially desirable? Whatever the cause, by 1939 hundreds of estates had been broken up and the mansions which stood at the heart of those estates had been sold. In a single county, Northamptonshire, thirty of the seventy-two principal country houses standing in 1919 were sold over the next twenty years, several of them more than once.[1] And all too often, houses that couldn't find a buyer were simply demolished: in England alone, nearly 420 mansions were destroyed in the years between the wars. No wonder that in 1944, when Evelyn Waugh wrote *Brideshead Revisited*, that classic novel of loss, he was convinced, as he said later, 'that the ancestral seats which were our chief national artistic achievement were doomed to decay and spoliation'.[2]

They weren't alone in suffering hardships, of course. For most people in Britain, victory over the Axis powers was a bitter pill, bringing with it years of austerity. Around 750,000 new homes were needed in England and Wales alone in 1945, simply to house the existing population. Food shortages became so severe that the new Labour government which came to power in the summer of 1945 had to introduce temporary bread rationing and potato controls. The wartime rationing of many goods remained in force for years: petrol rationing only came to an end in 1950, and controls on meat and bacon would continue for another four years. Britain was poor and, with a per-person average daily intake of only 2,700

calories, it was hungry: there was a boom in the sale of weighing machines, and at golf's Open Championships at St Andrews in 1946 England's Henry Cotton blamed his poor performance on a lack of stamina caused by food rationing.

But whereas during the war an 'all in it together' attitude had prevailed (on the surface, at least), the peace brought a renewal of class conflict, and faced with a future that didn't want them and a past that cost too much, country house owners grappled with difficult choices: Sell off a few farms, or that dusty little medieval book of hours in the library that no one had opened for centuries, or the Reynolds of Great-Great-Grandmother hanging on the stairs? Shut up the house for a while, move to somewhere more manageable on the edge of the estate and hope things would improve, or give up an ancestral seat which had been in the family for generations and bring in the demolition contractors to salvage what they could from a white elephant that no one wanted? In other words, stay or go?

Nevertheless, alongside this narrative of destruction and despair, the death duties and the dispersal of collections, and the demolition of country houses, there runs another, more complex story, and it is this alternative narrative that *Noble Ambitions* tries to unravel. Some great and less-great houses were abandoned by their owners, yes – but most were not. Some were demolished, yes; although again, most were not. Some became schools, or institutions, or National Trust showplaces. Most did not: they remained homes. For every impoverished country squire watching in horror as the taxman chipped away at the foundations of his ancestral seat, there was another who managed to carry on, writing angry letters to *The Times* about financial ruin and then ringing for his butler to take them to the post. And when country houses did come on the market, as they did in increasing numbers, there were new people ready to step in and buy themselves a piece of the past, ready to take their place in the community and able to compensate for the lack of a fat entry in *Debrett's* with a fat bank balance.

The English country house – like its comrades in Wales, Scotland and Ireland, which put in occasional appearances in these pages – is a remarkably resilient beast. Predictions of its death came thick and fast in the twenty-nine years between the end of the war and the famous and enormously influential 1974 exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum which both proclaimed its destruction and ensured its survival and which ends my story, for the time being at least. Yet, even when the demolitions were at their height in the dark days of the 1950s, dozens of new country houses were going up, old ones were being reinvented, and old families were continuing to live in them. When new families took over old houses, they loved and cherished them every bit as much as their predecessors had. Life in the country house in the 1950s and 1960s was complicated. It was uncertain at times. But it was dynamic and exciting, and in spite of protestations to the contrary, it made an important contribution to British culture.

Noble Ambitions is my attempt to reconstruct and understand a way of life that was sometimes comic, sometimes fraught with anxiety and self-doubt, sometimes outrageous and glamorous. I have tried to understand a forgotten moment in the history of the English country house, a curiously intimate collaboration between members of the crumbling old order and of the rising new, as a rakish, raffish, yet aristocratic Swinging London came to interact with traditional rural values in the stately homes of Britain.

1

THIS IS WHY

THE ANNUAL FLOWER show was an important event in the life of the little Wiltshire village of Corsley. Every August on Bank Holiday Monday people poured into Corsley to admire the floral displays and elaborate table decorations, the Madeira cakes and sultana scones and strawberry jams. Villagers vied with one another to win a prize in one of the 121 different categories, which ranged from best begonia in a pot and finest vegetable marrow to best boiled beetroot, best embroidered linen tray cloth, and the marvellously vague 'something new from something old'. A silver rose bowl was presented to the owner of the best flower exhibit, and there were egg-and-spoon races, a tug-of-war, and all kinds of sideshows, from darts and a bran tub to a coconut shy and a shooting gallery. The day ended with dancing in the village reading room to music from a local band. It was a very English affair.

The show was in hibernation during the Second World War, but it was revived again in August 1945 on the day when the *Enola Gay* loosed its load of 141 pounds of uranium-235 over Hiroshima. Proceeds from the fete went to the local Welcome Home Fund for returning servicemen and women. There weren't many entrants, but the organising committee nevertheless felt they had made 'a most encouraging start towards a resumption of activities'.[1]

The 6th Marquess and Marchioness of Bath, 1949

They were right: the following year, 1946, saw interest return to pre-war levels, with nearly five hundred entries assembled for the show on Monday, 5 August. Corsley had been part of the Longleat estate for generations, and villagers were particularly keen to hear from their new landlord, Henry Thynne, who had succeeded his father as 6th Marquess of Bath two months earlier and who, as president of the Sports and Horticultural Society, was there to open the festivities. In his early forties, Lord Bath was 'a handsome and youthful man with eyes like coals and little white teeth neatly arranged', according to one contemporary.[2] 'Racily articulate, worldly-wise, quick to laughter,' said another.[3]

There was no laughter this afternoon. Lord Bath stood up to speak at 3 p.m., and after offering the kind of congratulatory platitudes which were usually trotted out on these occasions – a thank-you to the organising committee, praise for the high standard of entries – he suddenly became very serious. 'I should like to touch

on a far more intimate and personal matter,' he told the silent crowd. 'For many years now we have been hearing of the changing face of Britain, and I regret to say that Corsley is about to play its part in this respect.'[4] As he went on, the nature of the 'intimate and personal matter' slowly dawned on his audience.

Lord Bath was selling their village.

As Viscount Weymouth (a traditional courtesy title for the Marquess of Bath's eldest son), Henry Thynne had been running the extensive family estates in Wiltshire, Somerset, Northamptonshire and Shropshire since 1928. They were centred on Longleat House, the magnificent mansion which had been in his family since it was built by his ancestor, the entrepreneurial Sir John Thynne, back in the sixteenth century. Henry and his socialite wife, Daphne, didn't live at Longleat, however; they preferred Sturford Mead, a light and airy Regency villa just outside Corsley. There they gave libations of wine to a statue of Bacchus, originally intended for Longleat, which they had found in an outhouse. They entertained their bohemian friends, drank a lot (when they weren't pouring the drink over the marble feet of the god), and played jazz until all hours, safely out of earshot of Henry's widowed father, who remained in residence at Longleat House, kept company by his Great Dane, Stephen.

The old marquess had once lived in some style, keeping more than twenty indoor servants at Longleat and insisting that his footmen wear silk stockings, patent leather pumps and cockade hats. But rising taxes and falling rents had taken their toll: he had been forced to sell off 8,600 acres of the Longleat estate between 1919 and 1921, and after his son took over the management of the estate there were further sales, the most significant of which came in 1939, when nearly 5,000 acres in Somerset went under the hammer, including dozens of farms and smallholdings. The sales largely involved land which the 5th Marquess had made over to Henry some years before. Death duties, introduced in 1894, two

years before the old marquess succeeded to the title, had risen steadily until by the Second World War Henry was facing the prospect of having to pay 65 per cent of the value of his taxable estate when his father died; but gifts made more than three years before the death of the donor were exempt, and it was common practice for owners to hand over at least part of an estate during their lifetime.

But the Marquess of Bath held on to too much of his capital, and when he died at Longleat in June 1946, a few weeks before his eighty-fourth birthday, his son Henry found himself facing a bill from the Inland Revenue for more than £700,000 – something in the region of £100 million in today's money. What was all the more galling to the new Lord Bath was that the Labour budget of April that year had raised estate duties from 65 per cent to 75 per cent: if his father had had the grace to die just before the budget, rather than just after it, Henry would have been £150,000 better off.

Now he felt he had no choice but to sell Corsley, along with other parts of the Longleat estate and the family's holdings in Northamptonshire and Shropshire, even though, he told his tenants, 'to sell part of the Longleat estate is more than I can bear.'[5]

In his speech to the stunned villagers of Corsley on that Bank Holiday Monday afternoon in 1946, Henry put the blame for his decision squarely on Clement Attlee's Labour government, which had come to power in a surprise election victory the previous year, and which was not only pushing through a programme of nationalising sectors of the British economy but also using taxation as a way of ironing out social inequalities, raising the rate of income tax to 97.5 per cent for the highest earners. 'The days of the large estates are over,' he said. 'Tradition and inheritance are a thing of the past, and today it is the State – and the State only – that matters.'[6] Personal initiative counted for nothing anymore; 'the more money you earn, the more money is taken away from you.' He had planned to modernise their homes, putting bathrooms, lavatories

and electric lights into every cottage and farmhouse, he told the villagers; now all that money must go towards death duties. 'I hope you will bear me no malice in that which I have been forced to do.'[7]

Henry offered Cley Hill, a local landmark in Corsley parish, to the National Trust, which, from its founding in 1895 as a smallholding charity dedicated to promoting 'the permanent preservation for the benefit of the nation of lands and tenements (including buildings) of beauty or historic interest', had evolved into an articulate and sometimes strident advocate for the cause of the country house.[8] With a membership of 7,850 it was, however, still far from being the significant force in British culture that it would become by the end of the twentieth century. The trust accepted Cley in 1954. Henry may also have had informal discussions with the Trust over the future of Longleat House itself; pre-war legislation had altered the Trust's charitable status so that if it accepted a house, the owner and his or her descendants would be allowed to stay on as tenants. 'The advantage to the owner combines freedom from responsibility with the assurance that the connexion of his family with the family seat shall not be sharply and completely broken,' an approving *Times* editorial declared.[9]

By 1946 the Trust had been given eighteen country houses, and between 1946 and 1961 it would acquire another sixty. This represented a fraction of the whole but included many which are rightly regarded as among the very finest stately homes that Britain has to offer – Knole, Petworth, Stourhead. True, they tended to be presented as shrines at which only the cognoscenti were qualified to worship rather than as homes, making few concessions to the unlearned until well into the 1970s. 'The classical columns supporting the entablature, carved by the mason William Griffin, are in the Renaissance vocabulary of Serlio's architectural treatises,' declared the guidebook to Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire, while at Charlecote Park in Warwickshire, visitors were told that 'the doorway, flanked by pairs of Ionic pilasters, carries on bold projecting consoles a superimposed order of coupled Corinthian columns'.[10]

Criticised in 1966 for a failure to cater to holiday makers and casual visitors, the National Trust's chairman, the Earl of Antrim, famously declared that the 'trust's job is not to involve itself in the entertainment industry'.[11]

The trust required a hefty capital sum from an owner as an endowment to pay for the future maintenance of a mansion, and anyway, Lord Bath was not prepared to give away a house which had been his family's home since the sixteenth century. He chose instead to sell off parts of the estate, and over the twelve months after the Corsley flower show, around 9,000 acres of land were put onto the market. First to go, in December 1946, was a farm at Church Stretton in Shropshire: at 280 acres it wasn't economically important, but it had some sentimental value because Sir John Thynne, founder of the family fortune and builder of Longleat, was born there in 1512. More significant was the 2,240-acre Norton Hall estate in Northamptonshire, 'comprising practically the whole of the village of Norton and including the stately Gothic-style mansion and finely wooded park with lakes'.[12] The stately Gothic-style mansion was stripped of its interior fittings by its new owner and blown up in 1952 by a unit of military engineers. The sale of 'a large portion of the famous Longleat estate', including Corsley and several other villages and hamlets, 5,400 acres in all, took place at the Grand Cinema in Frome over two days in July 1947.[13] The cinema was crowded, and a cheer went up whenever existing tenants managed to buy their farms or homes. A village committee at Corsley acquired a piece of land for a war memorial playing field.

Henry wasn't asked to open the flower show that year.

Although Longleat House and its grounds were not for sale, he and Daphne had no intention of living there. The house was in any case still occupied by staff and pupils from the Royal School for Daughters of Officers of the Army, who had been evacuated there from Bath at the beginning of the war and had cohabited happily with Henry's father, who'd kept three rooms for himself and

pottered around in a battered felt hat and a balding overcoat, followed always by his faithful Great Dane. Gradually he'd become part of school life. 'In his room there would be a row of plates containing slices of the schoolgirls' birthday cakes,' remembered Daphne.[14]

The idea of actually using Longleat as a home seemed absurd. There could be no return to its Edwardian heyday when Henry's grandmother had her loose change washed every day and the morning papers were toasted and ironed before appearing on the breakfast table. Henry hadn't lived at Longleat since his marriage to Daphne in 1927.

And he never would again.

2

THE TERRORS THAT HAD BROKEN LOOSE

The war brought new freedoms. Henry Thynne's viscountess, Daphne, enjoyed a simple life at Sturford Mead, unencumbered by responsibilities and attended by only a cook, Mrs Sims, and a housemaid. And a governess. And a nanny for her four children. (The family butler, Marks, had gone with Henry as his batman when Henry had joined the Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry.) She made her own decisions for the first time in her life, so that she 'was never again able to feel as dependent on other people as I had been before the war'.[1] She took in five evacuees from London, a fireman's wife and her four children, whom she put in the servants' quarters in the basement. She tried her hand at cheese making, armed with a pamphlet from the Ministry of Agriculture. She hunted with the Mendip Farmers Hunt. She went on holiday with the children, driving them down to Cornwall herself: 'We lived on the beach, picking mussels off the rocks to cook for supper [and] riding the huge waves on surf-boards.'[2]

But her war wasn't all sunshine and surf. When an American military hospital was set up in the park at Longleat, she worked there first as a telephone operator and then as the hospital librarian. And when she wasn't working at Longleat, she entertained

the troops. Nearby Warminster had become an important military centre, and old friends from before the war took to dropping in at Sturford Mead for an hour, a day, or a weekend. A cousin, Robin Wilson, who was stationed at Warminster with the Leicestershire Yeomanry, stabled his horse at Sturford Mead. The artist Rex Whistler, now a lieutenant in the Welsh Guards, played drawing games with Daphne's children in the schoolroom. Another regular visitor was Daphne's old friend the irascible Evelyn Waugh, who was stationed nearby, making a nuisance of himself with his superiors in the Special Service Brigade.

Sturford Mead remained what it had been before the war – a country house retreat, a home, a venue for weekend house parties. When the Guards Armoured Division was stationed at Warminster and various officers' wives played at camp followers, Daphne had them to stay. One weekend she played hostess to Debo Cavendish, Debo's two greyhounds, her husband, Andrew, and Andrew's older brother Billy, who were both in the Guards. One night, after everyone had gone to bed, a fire broke out in the drawing room, the result of carelessness rather than enemy action. Everyone woke, and what could have been a tragedy quickly degenerated into farce. Daphne ran to one telephone to call the fire brigade, and Andrew Cavendish picked up the other at the same time: both found themselves shouting not at the Warminster fire brigade but at each other. Then Daphne grabbed a fire extinguisher, lost control of it, and squirted Andrew full in the face, while Billy went outside and broke the drawing room window with a golf club, causing the fire to burn even more fiercely. Andrew crawled under the smoke on his stomach to rescue Daphne's most treasured possessions: her collection of dance records. The only one he managed to save was Irving Berlin's *I'm Playing with Fire*. 'Meanwhile Debo collected her two greyhounds, calmly packed all her belongings, brought her suitcase down into the hall, and sat on top of it like Patience on a monument smiling at grief.'[3]

In the midst of this, the police rang up to complain about the faulty blackout. 'Do you realise you're showing a light?'[4]

LIFE WENT ON in the stately homes of England, war or no war. Maud Russell, one of London's most distinguished pre-war society hostesses, welcomed an assortment of young evacuees to her Hampshire country house, Mottisfont Abbey, along with British, Canadian and American soldiers and, in the lead-up to the Normandy landings, an entire military hospital. However, she also kept up weekend house parties throughout the war. Guests might include old friends like the collector and litterateur Eddie Marsh, the decorator and hostess Sibyl Colefax, political figures like Duff Cooper and Violet Bonham Carter, and figures from the world of the arts – the photographer and designer Cecil Beaton, the ballet dancer and choreographer Frederick Ashton, even the elderly novelist A. E. W. Mason, whose famous 1902 novel about courage and soldiering, *The Four Feathers*, held a particular resonance in the darkest days of the war.

People came and went at Mottisfont just as they had before the war. If the weather was good, they lay about in the gardens, reading and talking, or went walking in the woods. They came together for dinner and afterwards talked some more or played word games. Maud sometimes persuaded someone to read aloud to the company, although judging from the critical comments in her diary, she rarely chose well. 'I made the mistake of asking Sibyl [Colefax] to read aloud forgetting one can never hear what she says when she talks,' she wrote on one occasion.[5] On another, Duff Cooper read Tennyson's 'Vision of Sin' 'so badly and so indistinctly that it was grotesque and embarrassing'.[6]

The Mottisfont household was a motley one in the war years. On a single weekend in June 1941, guests included Sibyl Colefax, Frederick Ashton and the American socialite Alice Astor, who after having an affair in the late 1930s with Ashton (who was gay) was currently married to another gay Englishman. At the same

time, five evacuee children, 'a negro refugee from Southampton', and eight officers were living in the house.[7] In the stables there were two more evacuee children, another Southampton refugee, and eight batmen, who were presumably there to attend to the needs of the eight officers in the house. The Russells also kept an indoor staff of twelve during the war: Maud's lady's maid, Adele; Reeve, the butler, who lived with his wife over the stables; three housemaids, a cook and three kitchen maids, two footmen and an odd-job man. 'It was a strange feeling staying in this luxuriously appointed house,' wrote Cecil Beaton, 'so far and yet so near to all the terrors that had broken loose.'[8]

THE DEBATE ABOUT the role of the country house after the war was already beginning while Cecil Beaton lazed in the sun and sketched the Mottisfont primroses, and it was a more complex debate than one might imagine. People like Maud Russell, whose considerable wealth came from investments rather than from the land and who wasn't encumbered with a large estate, hordes of dependent tenants, or centuries of tradition, saw no reason why their leisurely lifestyle shouldn't be prolonged indefinitely. Others hoped the war would boost the agricultural economy on which their fortunes rested, as the last war had – while all the time remembering that the aftermath of that boom had been a catastrophic collapse in land values.

Ever since its appearance in 1897, *Country Life* magazine had not only championed the cause of the country house but constructed a vision of country house life as an elegant, arcadian paradise, and throughout the Second World War it not only continued its influential series of weekly articles on individual homes but also published some intriguing speculative articles on the prospects for the post-war future of the country house, never doubting for a moment that it had one. In October 1940, for example, the architectural critic and historian John Summerson wrote what purported to be a review of recent country house design but was in fact a plea

for a new generation of architects to move away from 'white walls, flat roofs and that air of sandal-clad priggishness which it is so deplorably easy for the new architecture to achieve'.[9] When the time came to begin building again after the war, he wrote, there would be no room for experiments. Instead, we must have traditional design and traditional materials – good English bricks and sensible window openings. (Oddly enough, one of the houses chosen to illustrate his article was Raymond McGrath's modernist masterpiece of 1936, the Round House in Surrey, which with its white walls, flat roofs and banks of curving windows seemed calculated to arouse the admiration of every sandal-clad prig in the country.) Summerson's article was followed over the next four years by a series in which *Country Life* occasionally invited architects to produce designs for country houses 'which they feel will fit a world in which there are no longer any Hitlers, in which construction at last steals the headlines from destruction' – 'castles-in-the-post-war-air', in fact.[10]

For the most part, the designs in the series were fairly modest, although they all contained provisions for servants, and one, by the team of Anthony Minoprio and Hugh Spenceley, was more substantial, with a domestic wing, a thirty-feet-by-seventeen-feet drawing room and an impressive oval dining room. Minoprio and Spenceley took the optimistic view that after the war, 'there will still be many people who can afford a country house and a small estate, just as there will still be women who prefer domestic service to work in a shop or factory.'[11] Clough Williams-Ellis offered a project on the Welsh coast for a woman who planned to downsize from her current home to 'a big sort of bungalow with some upstairs to it and two rooms large enough to take just the best pictures and furniture from the old house'.[12] The idea was to start building the moment the war was over, and Williams-Ellis claimed he had already arranged to recycle squared granite from nearby military roadblocks. Frederick Gibberd, fresh from designing air-raid shelters in Hampstead, declared, 'I am a modern

architect' and proposed a small country house which looked rather like a garden shed. 'This design may startle some who love the countryside and our architectural heritage,' warned an uncertain *Country Life*.[13]

The most interesting contribution to the series came in July 1944, with a discussion between *Country Life*'s architectural editor, Christopher Hussey, and forty-three-year-old designer Robert Lutyens, whose father, Sir Edwin, doyen of twentieth-century country house architects, had died earlier that year. Asked by Hussey what would be wanted from a country house after the war, Wing Commander Lutyens showed he was his father's son by rejecting modernism as little more than a reflection of 'a nervous instability in our social and economic life'.[14] He suggested that a business executive just turned thirty, thinking of marrying and set on having a place in the country, should look for a site of around ten acres with paddocks for the children's ponies, an orchard, and perhaps a spinney and a stream. Essentials for a house to be built on that site included plenty of storage space, since 'a family of any cultural pretentions accumulates vast quantities of papers, trunks, old clothes, linen, china, books, toys and whatnot.' There must be day and night nurseries, a large living room with a windowed recess 'for writing in', and proper domestic offices.[15]

In other ways, though, Robert Lutyens' post-war country house was less traditional. It had fewer rooms. Was there really any need for a dining room? Why not eat in the drawing room, or even the kitchen? (This was a step too far for Hussey, who complained that if this were the case, we should all spend the rest of our lives in 'a perpetual picnic'.[16]) Lutyens' point was that 'if a house [was] designed in conformity with smug middle-class standards it [could] only approximate in miniature to the great houses, with their range of apartments, from which it [was] derived. But a multiplicity of rooms, all too small for satisfactory occupation, [were] a vexation of spirit and a waste of space.'[17]

The starting point for all of these articles was the assumption that country houses would continue to be built after the war – in a modified form, perhaps, and on a smaller scale than the Longleats or even the Mottisfonts of this world. But the contributors had no doubt that there would still be a demand for Robert Lutyens' spacious place in the country with its orchard and paddocks for the children's ponies.

Others were less confident. 'What country houses of any size,' wondered Osbert Sitwell before the war, 'can hope to survive the next fifty years?'[18] And Lord Lothian, proposing in 1934 that the National Trust should take on the running of the nation's more important country houses, predicted that within a generation, hardly any of those historic homes would be lived in by the families who had created them. That raised the question of whether a change of ownership might signal a change in fortunes for the better, of course; but by the early 1940s, with death duties running at 65 per cent, estates being broken up and sold to tenants or speculators, and the country houses which had once been the headquarters of those estates being abandoned, there were plenty of people who believed the stately homes of England were on the brink of catastrophe. The National Trust might be able to save a few of the more important ones, but what about the rest?

One answer seemed to be to find new uses for old buildings, as had happened after the First World War, when the public school system had stepped in to rescue Stowe, Prior Park and a hundred less-distinguished mansions. In 1941 Viscount Esher, who chaired the National Trust's Historic Buildings Committee, suggested the future lay with the country club. Members could use the big house and its grounds for tennis, bathing, dancing and the entertainment of weekend guests. 'By such a plan the country house, and possibly its pictures and furniture, could finance itself, escape the slow but certain strangulation of taxation, and fill a different but not undignified place in the new life.'[19]

A related idea was to turn mansions into maisonettes or service flats, with the main ground-floor state rooms used in common and the upstairs rooms converted into small apartments, each with a sitting room, three or four bedrooms, and a 'small electrically equipped kitchenette, containing a refrigerator'.[20] Christopher Hussey, who was an advocate of the idea, gave several examples of houses which had been successfully converted, including Lord Armstrong's Bamburgh Castle, on the Northumberland coast, and Escrick Park, an imposing Georgian house just outside York which was remodelled by John Carr of York in the 1760s and converted into eleven self-contained suites in 1930. Meals were served in the dining room, although tenants could choose to take them in their flat; other communal spaces included a ballroom and a fine library. There were attractive gardens, a hard tennis court and a squash court on the site. The Escrick stables had been turned into heated garages with a 'large car-wash with automatic washing-plant', and a riding stable on the grounds had become a laundry that served not only the flats but also the surrounding neighbourhood.[21]

The search for alternative uses for the country house continued throughout the war. The artist Hesketh Hubbard suggested that a large country mansion might be turned into homes for forty or fifty impoverished bachelors and widowers, with a manager and matron-housekeeper on-site. (What about the spinsters and widows, one wonders?) Another suggestion was to convert country houses into apartments for distinguished men *and* women who had served their country. 'This would be a democratic and happy ending of the now out-of-date system of colossal houses for single families.'[22] Others proposed similarly institutional uses: secondary schools or government offices. A country house in the Lake District was acquired by Liverpool Seamen's Welfare Centre as a rehabilitation centre for merchant sailors; Mottram Hall, near Macclesfield, was turned into a holiday home for employees of a big engineering firm in Manchester.

While these potential solutions were being bandied about, hundreds if not thousands of country houses were already functioning in a variety of non-traditional ways. In the lead-up to war, big companies had begun to buy or rent country houses as out-of-London accommodation in case worse came to worst and, as most people believed at the time, the capital was completely destroyed by German bombs within weeks of war breaking out. The Georgian Milton Hill House in Oxfordshire was transformed into Esso House; Chesterton Lodge, an enormous Italianate mansion outside Bicester, was bought by the Royal Exchange Assurance Corporation; and Lord Bearsted's Upton House in Warwickshire became the offices of his family bank, M. Samuel & Co., while Lord Bearsted himself became a colonel in the Intelligence Corps and helped to organise a British Resistance movement in case of invasion. Lord Astor offered part of the Cliveden estate in Buckinghamshire at a rent of a shilling a year to the Canadian Red Cross, which had been based there in the First World War. The Astors stored the contents of their St James's Square house in the stables at Cliveden for safety, which was just as well, because the London mansion was hit by incendiary bombs in October 1940.

Before war broke out, the Committee of Imperial Defence, a government body set up to coordinate defence strategy, had already tasked the Office of Works with drawing up a secret register of buildings that could be requisitioned for use in wartime. They included hotels, large schools, commercial premises – and country houses, which were meant to be reserved for the military or for evacuees and other refugees from the big cities. When war broke out, however, the canny owners of country houses did their best to forestall requisitioning by the military by offering their homes to boarding schools. The Duke of Devonshire invited the girls of Penrhos College in North Wales, whose buildings had been commandeered by the Ministry of Food, to take up residence at Chatsworth, reasoning that 'if the house is full of schoolgirls the authorities will not allow soldiers anywhere near the place.'[23] As

we've seen, the aged Marquess of Bath made Longleat House available to the Royal School for Daughters of Officers of the Army, after *their* premises in Bath were taken over by the Admiralty. The Duke of Marlborough and his family moved into the east wing of Blenheim Palace in September 1939 to accommodate the arrival of 400 boys and a hundred staff from Malvern College. The floors of the state rooms were hastily covered with linoleum, the damask curtains were protected with canvas covers, and the pictures and tapestries were covered with battens and boards. Brocket Hall in Hertfordshire, whose owner's enthusiasm for the Nazis was so great that one of the bedrooms was named after Joachim von Ribbentrop, was requisitioned as a maternity home.

By their nature – walled, gated and usually at a discreet distance from other households – country houses also lent themselves to use by the various secret services which proliferated in wartime. So much so, in fact, that the Special Operations Executive, the SOE, was nicknamed 'Stately 'Omes of England'. Coleshill in the Vale of White Horse, an exquisite seventeenth-century house designed by Sir Roger Pratt, became the training headquarters for the so-called Auxiliary Units, saboteurs who were to form the core of the Resistance if the Germans invaded. The man in charge at Coleshill at one point was Lord Glanusk, a much-decorated war hero who arrived to take up his command in his Rolls-Royce accompanied by a new wife, a posse of Guards officers 'with public school accents and double-barrelled names', and a string of racehorses.[24] He immediately placed his private wine cellar at the disposal of the officers' mess. Polish agents were trained at Audley End before being dropped behind enemy lines: one in three didn't come back.

As the war went on, some of the larger houses acquired a parade of tenants. Malvern College moved out of Blenheim Palace after only a year, and its place was taken by MI5, whose top-secret presence there was heralded by conductors on the bus route from Oxford to Woodstock, who used to call out as they reached the

gates of Blenheim, 'Anyone for MI5?'[25] And while the daughters of army officers were having lessons inside Longleat House, the American army was building a ninety-acre hospital in the park and the RAF was erecting what the 6th Lord Bath described as 'lots of ugly corrugated iron sheds'.[26] The neighbouring Stourhead estate fared a little better, but it was a close thing. The Air Ministry announced that, having acquired five thousand acres of land in Wiltshire, it intended to acquire one thousand more – including part of the Stourhead estate, which was to become a military aerodrome. 'But is this not to be National Trust property?' asked one enraged MP, referring to Sir Henry Hoare's plan to hand over the house and half the estate to the Trust. He was told by Sir Kingsley Wood, secretary of state for air, that in times like these the government had to put the needs of national defence first.[27] A few days later Sir Henry Hoare sent a stiff letter to Sir Kingsley: 'If you compel me to sell you 300 acres of my estate so that you can build a training aerodrome, I shall immediately withdraw my offer to present the mansion house and 2,700 acres of the estate to the nation through the National Trust.'[28] The Air Ministry backed down.

There were financial compensations for the upheaval caused by military occupation: the Compensation (Defence) Act of 1 September, 1939, stated that an owner was entitled to 'a sum equal to the rent which might reasonably be expected to be payable by a tenant in occupation of the land, during the period for which possession of the land is retained in the exercise of emergency powers'. However, valuations, given by a district valuer or the military's own people, tended to be on the low side (or so country house owners maintained). The War Office, which used Bignor Manor in Sussex as a staging post for members of the Resistance before they were parachuted into France, paid its owner five pounds a week in rent and another two pounds a week in salary for looking after the agents. When the British government moved exiled Czechoslovakian president Edvard Beneš and his family (including his dog, an Alsatian named Toga) into Aston Abbotts

Abbey in Buckinghamshire, his staff were housed in neighbouring Wingrave Manor, whose owner, the Countess of Essex, received twenty pounds a week in rent.

The wanton vandalism carried out by soldiers, sailors and airmen while they were billeted in country houses is the stuff of legend. Tales abound of jeeps driven down grand staircases, garden ornaments used for target practice by drunken troops and family portraits turned into makeshift dartboards. James Lees-Milne, the gaunt, bisexual secretary of the National Trust's Country Houses Committee, whose passion for country houses and occasionally their owners made him a pioneering figure in the embryonic conservationist movement, was constantly remarking on the destruction he saw as he toured England on the Trust's business. At Culverthorpe in Lincolnshire he found windows smashed and a great crack in the painted ceiling of the staircase hall. Castle Bromwich Hall, recently vacated by troops, was 'in a filthy mess'.[29] At Netley Park in Surrey he found that the 'licentious soldiery' had smashed gilt-framed mirrors in the drawing room.[30]

Worse was the officially sanctioned destruction – the tank traps on the drive, the acres of Nissen huts in the park. And worst of all was the neglect. Leaking roofs were left unattended. Broken windows weren't repaired. At Castle Bromwich, Lees-Milne noted, dry rot was rampant; by the time Woburn Abbey was derequisitioned in 1946, the Georgian riding school, which had been used by a top-secret propaganda unit, was so badly decayed that it had to be demolished.

Sidney Herbert, eldest son of the 15th Earl of Pembroke, recorded in meticulous and heartrending detail the consequences of having his family seat, Wilton House, occupied by the army. After a brief period at the beginning of the war when Wilton played host to forty young evacuees from London, it was taken over as the headquarters of Southern Command, placing it at the heart of a huge complex of a vast military organisation. As some three million troops assembled in southern England in preparation for the

Normandy landings of 1944, it was Southern Command which had the responsibility of training and accommodating them, and it was Wilton which was the centre of operations.

Sidney's parents continued to use Wilton during the war, keeping four bedrooms for their own use and for family and guests, and living in the library on the west front. In the rest of the house the constant comings and goings of soldiers left their mark: the stone treads of a staircase installed by James Wyatt in the early years of the nineteenth century were chipped when an iron safe rolled down them and, more dramatically, the ceiling of the Wyatt staircase collapsed one morning 'with a roar and a crash'.[31]

But much more serious than the hard use was the neglect. Southern Command didn't leave Wilton until 1949, and one day in November 1947 the Countess of Pembroke mentioned to her son that paint was flaking off the ceiling in the Single Cube Room, part of the suite of state rooms designed in the mid-seventeenth century by Inigo Jones and John Webb.

The room was empty at the time, and Sidney went to take a look. He found that the ceiling was discoloured and large sections of brown fungus were growing through the carved cornice. He immediately fetched his father, and together they discovered that panelling in the Single Cube had split; when they touched it, large pieces crumbled into dust. 'Yet none of the soldiers or civilians using this room for the past eight years had noticed anything wrong,' he wrote.[32] On Monday morning he informed the camp commandant and telephoned the Ministry of Works and the War Office, both of which sent down officials to inspect the damage. It emerged that when the post office had installed telephones for the army in 1940, they had run the cables over the roof and down inside the rainwater gutters, blocking them: this had led to outbreaks of fungus and dry rot in the Single Cube Room, which had spread into the neighbouring Double Cube Room and affected stone and brick in other parts of the house. Whole sections of panelling and painted ceiling had to be cut away, and the walls

were treated with fungicide. 'Every brick and stone and piece of mortar [affected was] subjected to blow-lamps twice over, so that no infection could remain.'[33]

The War Office, which had refused to allow the Earl of Pembroke's men to carry out any routine inspections of the structure while it was under military occupation, admitted responsibility for the damage. As Sidney said, 'They could not do otherwise as the state rooms were still used by them.'[34]

The repairs took years, and it was nearly half a century before the disruption caused by the War Office's carelessness was finally and completely made good. Other owners of country houses requisitioned by the military were less tenacious, or less fortunate. Their homes were never fit to live in again.

THE WAR AFFECTED the country house in ways more profound than smashed statues on the terrace or dry rot in the stables. In 1947 Debrett's published its 'Final Roll of Honour', listing all the members of families in the *Peerage and Baronetage* who had been killed in action or had died of wounds while on active service in the Second World War. There were some 1,400 names on the list, from Sub-Lieutenant Michael Acheson, Royal Navy, nephew of the Earl of Gosford, to Captain William Young of the Royal Army Medical Corps, who died in Egypt in 1942, leaving behind a one-year-old son to inherit the family baronetcy. Mark Howard of Castle Howard was killed in Normandy in July 1944, aged twenty-six; his brother Christopher, a bomber pilot, was killed a few months later in a daylight raid over the Rhine. Castle Howard went to the sole surviving brother, George, who had himself been wounded in Burma in 1940. Sir Michael Gore-Booth of Lissadell, County Sligo, lost both of his brothers: Hugh died in Greece in 1943, and Brian drowned when his ship, HMS *Exmouth*, was torpedoed in the North Sea in 1940. Croome Park's 10th Earl of Coventry was lost at Dunkirk; his servants cried when they heard the news.

In September 1944 the 10th Duke of Devonshire's eldest son and heir, Billy, was walking ahead of his company outside the Belgian village of Heppen when he was shot through the heart by a German sniper. (One of his men wrote to the duke, saying how angry they had been: 'We took no prisoners that day.'[35]) The duke swore never to set foot in Chatsworth again. He wandered round the garden from time to time, but never the house. 'The spirit of the place had gone,' his daughter-in-law Deborah remembered. 'Only an incurable optimist could guess it would ever return.'[36]

The Howards' cousin Eric died in a Japanese prison camp in 1943. Alastair Windsor, 2nd Duke of Connaught and Strathearn, fell out of a window in Ottawa while he was drunk and died of hypothermia. Five peers were killed in air raids. The 1st Baron Stamp was killed when his house in Beckenham was hit by a bomb in 1941. His wife died with him, as did his oldest son and heir, who thus went into the record books as the man who held a peerage for the shortest length of time, since British law at the time held that when two persons died in circumstances in which it was uncertain which of them survived the other, such deaths should be presumed to have occurred in order of seniority. So when the 1st Baron Stamp's surviving son inherited the title, as 3rd Baron Stamp, he had to pay two sets of death duties on top of having lost his father, his mother and his older brother.

As Viscount Weymouth, the 6th Marquess of Bath served as a major in the Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry during the war. He was wounded in the throat by a piece of shrapnel at El Alamein – not leading a tank charge, as his *Times* obituary later had it, but wandering around the battlefield on foot. 'I was bored,' he said later. 'I had lost my tank and I had nothing to do.'[37] Survivors like Bath were left with a sense of relief tempered with guilt. The Baths lost close friends: the writer Robert Byron, drowned when his ship was torpedoed off the Western Isles in 1941; the artist Rex Whistler, killed by a shell burst during his first battle in Normandy in 1944. Should they carry on trying to maintain a white elephant of

a house like Longleat, people like the Baths asked themselves, in a world of rationing and housing shortages, a world which had no use for peers and palaces?

The troubled aesthete Brian Howard, an old friend of Henry and Daphne from the 1920s when they were all Bright Young Things together, and the prototype for the effete and affected Anthony Blanche in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, provided them with the answer in a poem he addressed to Daphne as she and her husband worried over how on earth they could keep Longleat:

Twenty years. The curtains drawn,
Windows sleeping, doors shut;
Here, the wasted, noble lawn,
There, trees cut.

Hymns to murder have been sung,
Robert, Rex have gone away.
Wandering these woods among,
Have we any right to May?

Yes. Remembering well these things;
What it was they cherished,
Why they met the torture kings,
Fought and won and perished.

Come, then. Stand on Heaven's Gate,
Lakes below and leaves above –
This, is why they found their fate.
Here, is where we feel their love.[38]

This was why they should carry on – not because of a debt to the ancient past, but because of a debt owed to dead friends. Because of why they died.

3

'I DON'T WANT TO BE THE ONE TO LET IT GO'

In 1950 the *Illustrated London News* ran a feature on a dozen 'stately homes of England that have passed to other hands'.[1] It showed that the change-of-use ideas which *Country Life* had advocated during the war were now a reality. Houses were being turned into boarding schools and blocks of flats and youth hostels. Oxford University had bought Wroxton Abbey near Banbury, 'a Tudor mansion on the foundations of an Augustinian priory'. Madingley Hall, the sixteenth-century country house that Queen Victoria had rented for the Prince of Wales when he was a reluctant undergraduate at Cambridge in 1861, now belonged to that university, along with its village and 1,200 acres. Kingston Maurward, a particularly lovely Georgian mansion, had been acquired by Dorset County Council and was now a 'farm institute'; Bradbourne in Kent, built in 1713 on the site of a Tudor house, was now used by a research institute for horticultural experiments. (It still is.)

'The private market for these many-roomed houses has long since vanished,' claimed the anonymous author of the article, 'and it is not unusual to find one of these old mansions in the hands of the demolition squad before the interested societies have had the opportunity of taking steps to preserve it.'[2] In 1959

the *Birmingham Daily Post* ran a profile of John Riley, a forty-nine-year-old Irish widower who for the past fifteen years had led a demolition team specialising in castles and country houses, and who was currently reducing to rubble Garnstone Castle in Herefordshire. Installed in one of the best rooms in the west wing, with a resident cook, Riley would live in state while the work was going on, hanging on until the last possible minute and then going into lodgings before moving on to the next stately home. 'I do feel very sorry for some of the old family servants,' he said. 'For years the house and all it means has been their life. Then one day it all vanishes.'[3]

An ignominious end for the stately homes of England had been predicted for decades, and the number of demolitions had been growing ever since the agricultural depressions of the 1870s and 1880s had been followed by the arrival of death duties in 1894, although at that stage fire, flood and fortune's wheel were ruining more houses than taxation and a depressed rural economy. But after the end of the First World War the pace of demolitions picked up as estate taxes rose and rentals fell: more than 180 houses came down in the 1920s, and around 220 in the 1930s. Some were undistinguished; others were of national importance, like Thomas Wright's Nuthall Temple in Nottinghamshire, an exquisite little Palladian house filled with rococo plasterwork which was bought by a demolition contractor in 1928 and, once stripped of everything of value, deliberately burned down. Or the seventeenth-century Hamilton Palace in Lanarkshire, demolished in 1922 in what has been called 'an act of vandalism that Scotland can never live down'.[4] The solution that was usually rolled out was 'Let the National Trust save it.' But the Trust was never going to be able to help more than a tiny minority of the thousands of country house owners who were struggling with an uncertain future.

THE LABOUR LANDSLIDE victory in the general election of July 1945 was, an appalled Evelyn Waugh recorded in his diary, 'a prodigious

surprise . . . Practically all my friends are out.'[5] At a post-election party held by press baron Lord Rothermere at the Dorchester, he found 'a large, despondent crowd' which included a gaggle of society figures such as Sibyl Colefax, Emerald Cunard and Nancy Mitford, who had all turned up to celebrate Churchill's victory only to be disappointed.

Maud Russell was there too. She had come up from her Hampshire country house, Mottisfont Abbey, to spend the night with her lover, the writer Ian Fleming, who was also sleeping with their host's wife, Ann Rothermere. Never one to take life too seriously, Maud thought the Conservative collapse was hilarious: 'I couldn't resist laughing a good deal at the results and some of the long, foolish faces,' she wrote at the time.[6] She proceeded to drown other people's sorrows in vodka, 'real good vodka', leaving the predatory Fleming to wander round on his own, 'but he kept on coming back to me'.[7]

Others viewed the arrival of a socialist government with fear and loathing. 'I am permanently depressed,' wrote Osbert Sitwell. 'The Government, I loathe. Even more than Winston.'[8] The Labour Party's manifesto, *Let Us Face the Future*, promised to nationalise the fuel and power industries, iron and steel, transport – and land. 'If a landlord cannot or will not provide proper facilities for his tenant farmers, the State should take over his land at a fair valuation.'[9] The manifesto also argued for rent controls and for taxation 'which bears less heavily on the lower-income groups'.[10]

The prospect of a socialist utopia sent shivers through the more traditional country house-owning classes and reignited the wartime debate about the role of country houses in a world which seemed to have no more use for them. In November 1945 *Country Life* began another series of articles, 'The Future of Great Country Houses', and declared that 'without some form of relief or subvention, many of the more artistically and historically important [stately homes] cannot be maintained much longer, if at all, for their original purpose of a family home.'[11]

The opening salvo in this latest campaign was fired by the Marchioness of Exeter, whose own country house, Burghley, was one of the greatest. After acknowledging that there were moves afoot to prevent arbitrary demolitions (the 1944 Town and Country Planning Act had given a measure of protection to buildings of special architectural merit or historic interest), the marchioness asked what the nation wanted from its historic houses. Should they be preserved 'as national institutions, or museums, or public schools and hospitals; or as living, warm, family homes in which every picture, or tapestry or piece of furniture has a story to tell'? (There are no prizes for guessing on which side of the argument she came down.) The problem was, she couldn't find the staff, and 'neither the Ministry of Labour nor the Employment Exchanges are willing to help'.[12]

As we shall see, the notion that country houses, especially the larger ones with important collections, could only fulfil their true purpose if they continued to function as homes, was regularly trotted out as an argument for some form of state aid to private owners, in spite of the fact that the Baths and the Devonshires of the world chose *not* to live in their ancestral seats. Perhaps the most famous statement of the way in which life in the country house breathed life *into* the country house came from Vita Sackville-West in 1941:

> Museums? A museum is a dead thing; a house which is still the home of men and women is a living thing which has not lost its soul. The soul of a house, the atmosphere of a house, are as much part of the house as the architecture of that house or as the furnishings within it. Divorced from life, it dies. But if it keeps its life it means that the kitchen still provides food for the inhabitants: makes jam, puts fruit into bottles, stores the honey, dries the herbs, and carries on in the same tradition as has always obtained in the country. Useful things, practical things, keeping a number of people going throughout the year.[13]

The problem was to establish exactly what kind of life was appropriate, or even possible, for the country house in the post-war world. When the Marchioness of Exeter went to live at Burghley as a young bride before the First World War, she found herself reigning as chatelaine over a small army of domestic servants – thirty-four, to be exact. She had a lady's maid to dress her and a sewing maid to help; two chauffeurs to drive her around; a butler, underbutler and two footmen to wait on her at table. As her family grew, she employed a governess, nurse, undernurse and schoolroom maid to look after her three children. Her husband's private secretary was a baronet. Now, she complained, 'the modern generation fight shy of any form of domestic employment'. If the nation wanted its treasure houses to be maintained 'by their traditional and rightful guardians, not as museums but as homes with a soul and atmosphere', then the nation must provide the staff.[14]

The second of four articles in the series came from the 4th Baron Methuen, owner of Corsham Court in Wiltshire. Starting, as the Marchioness of Exeter had, from the assumption that the country house required some form of state aid if it was to survive in post-war Britain, Methuen gave a more measured (and more farsighted) series of proposals, which boiled down to the suggestion that Parliament might provide enough money to cover perhaps 50 per cent of the maintenance costs of historic houses which had been placed on a Ministry of Works schedule. Owners could choose to opt in, and in return, 'if the whole of the house, including the interior and possibly the grounds, is included in the schedule, the owner should agree to giving the public access, say during thirty-six days in the year' – a solution which was to be adopted, albeit in a less generous form, with the advent of Historic Buildings Councils in the 1950s.[15]

In the third article H. D. Walston, an expert on farming and agricultural reform (he became director of agriculture in the British Zone of Germany in 1946), airily dismissed the problems faced by the Methuens and Exeters of this world – if the National Trust

wouldn't take their stately mansions, they could hand them over to become 'schools, research institutes, or something of that sort'.[16] Walston, the owner of a modest country house in Somerset, was concerned with the plight of smaller places like his own, 'those of no great history and even of no great architectural merit'.[17] He claimed that their problems were more pressing just because there were so many more of them – they made up the vast majority of country houses – and his solution was for owners to take over the management of house and estate themselves rather than relying on agents and managers:

> Some part of the house should be devoted entirely to the running of the estate: the stableyard and some of the garages – almost always too big for modern needs – could become a small estate yard. One or two of the downstairs rooms in the house would be the offices, and some of the surplus bedrooms could house the office staff and perhaps some of the unmarried estate workers. There might also be some pupils, as there always seems to be a large number of young men who want to spend a year on a small estate to learn the practical problems of management at first hand.[18]

One of the larger rooms in the house could be turned over to the villagers for their meetings, dances and whist drives; the kitchen garden could replace the village allotments while the pleasure gardens could be used as communal tennis courts and for 'outdoor meetings of the Women's Institute on summer evenings'.[19]

The final article in the series was by Christopher Hussey, and he had quite a radical proposal: that the state should take over the running of the larger country houses with significant collections and open them to the public. The owner would retain what he called 'titular possession' and would keep a reasonable portion of the house and grounds for his or her private use. The owner would also have the right to use the state rooms when