



When the Englishman's home was no longer his castle

With patients in the parlour and potatoes in the parterre, the role country houses played in the Second World War was so significant that it was joked SOE stood for the Stately 'Omes of England. Deborah Nicholls-Lee discovers more



Facing page: A setting for a midnight feast *nonpareil*: boys from Malvern College, Worcestershire, were billeted in the long library at Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire. *Above:* The Duke of Bedford welcomed 20 East End evacuees to Sarratt Mill in Hertfordshire

IN 1941, six weeks after the death of her husband, Lady Braybrooke was evicted from her palatial Jacobean home, Audley End, together with her daughter and most of her staff. The government had requisitioned the Essex property to train Polish soldiers in espionage, sabotage and reconnaissance as part of the top-secret

Special Operations Executive (SOE). She would never live there again.

Decades later, when the historian Judith Lewis visited the property and saw the memorial to Poles who had perished in the war, she wondered why the family's own sacrifices had not also been memorialised. Her new book, *The Country House at War: A Story*

of Loss, Reinvention and the Birth of a New Britain, published by Yale University Press (Books, August 19), hopes to make amends. In it, she explores how the aristocracy, particularly women, experienced the war and the role their homes played in defeating Hitler. She draws heavily on COUNTRY LIFE, which she spent a summer reading at the British Library. ➔



Fine surroundings in which to recuperate: soldiers play a spot of croquet at Preston Hall, Kent, which became a British Legion hospital

The part country houses played in the war, Dr Lewis notes, was ‘very significant’ and the scale of requisition ‘tremendous’. Audley End was only one of hundreds of country houses repurposed by the government, sometimes until the late 1940s. So great was their contribution to the war effort that it was joked that SOE actually stood for the Stately ‘Omes of England.

On the whole, the upper classes were ‘extremely patriotic, highly mobilised and eager to do their bit,’ asserts Dr Lewis. Yet the notion that this was a ‘people’s war’ has tended to underplay their contribution in giving up their properties, which were regarded as facilities, rather than family homes full of memories and precious sites of British heritage. As *COUNTRY LIFE* observed in September

‘The situation had to be accepted and, picking up my suitcase, I left,’

1939: ‘We have got to realise that the Englishman’s home is no longer his castle.’

Isolated, gated and with vast accommodation and grounds, the country house seemed ideally suited to assembling large groups or rehearsing secret operations. Some safeguarded the nation’s treasures. The cellars of Penrhyn Castle in North Wales, for example, hid the masterpieces of the National Gallery

and the Wallace Collection was rehomed at West Wycombe Park in Buckinghamshire.

Other properties were assigned caring roles. The Rothschilds, also in Buckinghamshire, hosted evacuated children in Waddesdon Manor and Kindertransport refugees in The Cedars. Meanwhile, in West Sussex, Goodwood House was converted into a war hospital: the ballroom, with its gold-gilt ceiling, was a surgical ward. By contrast, Trent Park in Hertfordshire—now a museum—became a prisoner-of-war camp. Here, the luxurious surroundings lulled the senior German officers detained there into a false sense of security and hidden microphones harvested the secrets that spilled from their loose lips.

Sir Winston Churchill’s own birthplace, Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire, was given

over to MI5 (a serious upgrade on Wormwood Scrubs) and also housed pupils from Malvern College, Worcestershire, for the duration of the war, but some owners were less amenable. In *Our Uninvited Guests*, social historian Julie Summers references 'a lady owner of a property in Sussex' who refused to give up her home. 'In this case,' she writes, 'the only way to deal with her was to take the house forcibly, locking the lady in the kitchen.'

Others made the first move, hoping to retain some control. For seven years, Chatsworth House in Derbyshire housed 250 school-girls and their teachers, their beds sardined into passages and drawing rooms. As Deborah, Duchess of Devonshire, recalled in *The House: Living at Chatsworth*: 'The Duke made the arrangement... when he thought war was inevitable, realising that a girls' school would make far better tenants than soldiers.'

For many, requisition came as a shock. In 1939, Ralph Dutton, later the 8th and last

Baron Sherborne, had just finished renovating Hinton Ampner, a Georgian house in Hampshire, when a telegram informed him that he had 48 hours to make room for Portsmouth Day School for Girls. 'I found it difficult to comprehend that I was being turned out of my own house,' he wrote in his 1968 memoir *A Hampshire Manor*. 'However, the situation had to be accepted and, picking up my suitcase, I left.'

In Buckinghamshire, The Firs was being prepared for sale when the butler mistook requisitioners for prospective buyers. The property would become known as 'Winston Churchill's Toyshop' for the part it played in weapons research and development.

Suddenly, appointed commandants had more authority than the houses' owners, who were stopped at the gates and chaperoned around their own homes. 'Given the →

Right: Inside the House of Secrets: captured German officers spoke freely and incriminatingly at Trent Park in Hertfordshire. Below: Evacuees explore Lowther Castle, Cumbria, which was later requisitioned for tank regiments that concreted the lawns and tested secret weapons



circumstances of requisition, owners were remarkably gracious and accommodating,' notes Dr Lewis. This was more than *noblesse oblige*, she suggests, rather a feeling of duty that cut across class; although rent was paid to owners for their requisitioned properties, some only accepted the bare minimum.

Old hierarchies fell away as servants were conscripted, together with their masters, women went to work and that British stalwart the country house was turned upside down. 'Downstairs' mingled with 'upstairs' and, as Dr Lewis writes, 'the imperative of national survival overrode any fears the gentry may have had of continued class decline'. At Audley End, for safety, the maids' accommodation was moved from the turrets to the ground-floor state rooms; at Gorhamby House, St Albans, Hertfordshire, the Earl of Verulam and his family dined in the housekeeper's room.

‘Commandants had more authority than the houses’ owners, who were chaperoned around their homes’

In December 1941, women's conscription was introduced, further depleting the households of large country houses, and remaining owners became increasingly hands-on. At Chatsworth, Mary Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire, helped organise the food and care of the children. 'We have been treated with the greatest kindness by the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire who have most graciously interested themselves in our welfare,' headteacher Ms Smith reassured parents. At Barnwell Manor in Northamptonshire, Princess Alice, Duchess of Gloucester, even read evacuees billeted there stories as she tucked them in at bedtime.

The country house's transformation was drastic. At Audley End, grounds landscaped by Capability Brown were scored with water ditches used for demolition and sabotage training; the tranquil Elysium Garden, inspired by Greek mythology, acquired a Valentine tank as its focal point. Oxburgh Hall in Norfolk escaped requisition, but the medieval manor house's grounds were repurposed as farmland and even its decorative parterre was planted with potatoes.

When Wilton House, the Wiltshire home of the Earl and Countess of Pembroke, became the headquarters of the Southern Command, the army mounted anti-aircraft guns on the roof of the 400-year-old property



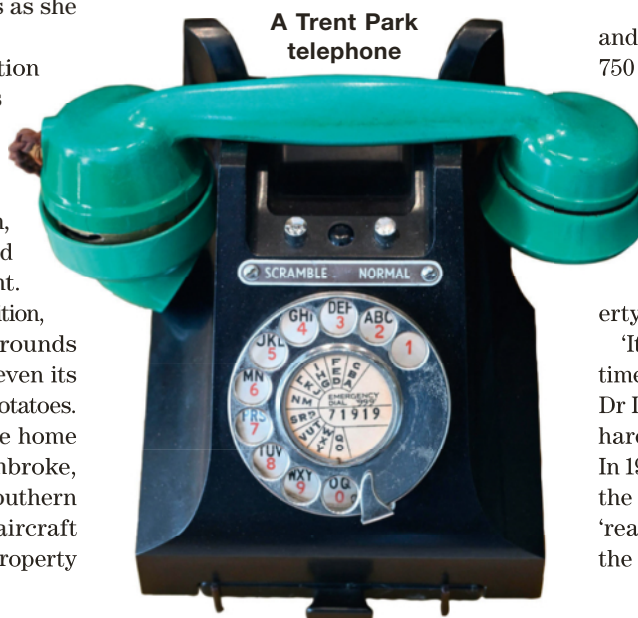
Estate of neglect

In 1942, John Dugdale, MP for West Bromwich, addressed the House of Commons, lamenting 'the destruction of [requisitioned] houses... not by the enemy but by our own troops'. Some of this was due to recklessness. At Dunorlan Park in Kent, troops used the statues in the grounds as target practice and servicemen at Belsay Hall, Northumberland, graffitied the wallpaper and perforated it with their games of darts. Hatfield House in Hertfordshire (*above*), Elizabeth I's childhood home, was pilfered, says Dr Lewis, and items from suits of armour to loo-roll holders disappeared.

Years of neglected maintenance and devastating damage—be it windows shattered by weapons practice or fires caused by carelessness—saw country houses punished rather than rewarded for their contribution to the war. At Wilton in Wiltshire, records John Martin Robinson in his book *Requisitioned*, the new communication cables blocked the gutters, causing extensive dry rot. In one of its famous Cube Rooms, fungi hung from a cornice, observed the 16th Earl, 'like loaves of brown bread'.

Fuel shortages meant that nothing was too precious for firewood. Andrew Lloyd of Rolls Park, Essex—quoted in *No Voice from the Hall* by John Harris—complained that soldiers had 'hacked off chunks of the delectable back Tudor staircase', before moving onto one carved by Grinling Gibbons.

Grossly inadequate government compensation, rationed construction materials and rising taxes often rendered the properties' restoration unviable. Some were brought back from the brink by trusts, but many perished and, by the mid 1950s, historic houses were being demolished on a weekly basis.



and crisscrossed the estate with a reported 750 miles of telephone cables. Nissen huts were thrown up in the garden, where statues and sarcophagi were uncereemoniously dumped. It was an experience that the 16th Earl, an officer in the Royal Artillery, described as 'heartbreaking'. Yet the ordeal had a noble outcome: it was at this property that the D-Day landings were planned.

'It's hard to imagine the British having the time to purpose-build all those facilities new,' Dr Lewis remarks—and, without them, 'it's hard to imagine how they could have won.' In 1943, Lady Pembroke received a letter from the Queen. The Countess's 'hospitality' and 'readiness to serve', it stressed, had 'helped the State in a work of great value'. 🐉