



Aynhoe Park

Northamptonshire

The home of Mr James Perkins

MARCUS BINNEY tells the surprising tale of a grand country house revived by its new owner's unusual collections

AYNHOE Park stands like a French *château* resplendently on show to the passing road (Fig 2). Matching wings are set in perfect symmetry around a formal courtyard. Yet for all its serene and timeless grandeur, this is a house that has been repeatedly and dramatically reinvented, first by Thomas Archer in 1707–11 and then by John Soane in 1800–1, but never more theatrically than now.

Aynhoe's reinvention is all the more poignant given the tragedy that struck the house when Richard Cartwright and his son were killed in a car crash in 1954. *COUNTRY LIFE* had only just devoted three splendid articles to the glory of the house, celebrating its recent opening by the Cartwrights to the public. The taxman had no mercy. Double death duties were imposed, and the family was forced to sell after 300 years. The house was bought by the Country Houses Association (long better known as the Mutual Householders Association) and divided up into retirement flats.

Aynhoe's present owner, James Perkins, acquired the house in the fire sale of eight great country houses that followed the collapse of the Country Houses Association in 2004. He has achieved what, even recently, would have seemed the impossible dream of transforming Aynhoe back from 28 apartments into a single family house, once more intended, as it was in centuries

past, for grand and splendid entertainments.

Mr Perkins' career as country-house impresario began at the age of 18, when he initiated a highly successful series of black-tie balls at big houses. Earning a positive reputation with local authorities and the police, he was invited by Peter de Savary to organise a New Year's Eve ball for 16,000 people at Littlecote in 1992. The event fulfilled expectations. Mr Perkins thus had money to spend, which, over the next five years, he invested in restoring a series of mainly Regency houses in and around Cheltenham, where his parents lived. Meanwhile, Mr de Savary invited him to Skibo Castle, inspiring him with a taste for still-grandier houses.

The parties also led him to start a music business. 'I found that Sony was asking my advice on the latest music. Aged 23, I did a dance-music album for the company, finding all the musicians myself. Sales totalled more than three million copies. That was before Oasis,' he adds.

Still earlier, aged 16, the young Mr Perkins had acquired another taste when taken by his mother to visit Mike Aston, a restorer who worked for Lyon Oliver in Pimlico Road. Other boys would have been overwhelmed with tedium, but Mr Perkins watched in fascination as a head of Apollo was pulled from a mould. Immediately, he started saving his pocket money to buy a bust for himself. 'I was the only ➤

(Left) 1—The splendid north front of Aynhoe Park, flanked on either side by the stable and office wings designed by Thomas Archer. Soane connected these to the main front using a pair of triumphal arches. The turning circle has been relaid in a bonded brown gravel and cars diverted to a new car park out of sight. **(Below) 2—**A view of the house from the south, with the parish church behind it. The core of the present building dates back to the 17th century





3—The Dining Room with its set of blue chairs and pair of swans. On the wall is a portrait of the king of Sweden, a close friend of the Cartwright family who owned the property for more than 300 years. The huge Gothic brass candlesticks are after Pugin designs

16 year old in the world collecting plaster casts,' he recalls. Now, he has 4,000.

For more than two decades, leading museums around the world have been de-accessioning their cast collections, feeling they were no more than outmoded and embarrassing copies. Mr Perkins, having seen Mr Aston at work, thought differently, and observed over time that many of these casts were works of skill by leading Victorian sculptors such as Domenico Brucciani.

Inspired by visits to the Soane Museum, he saw how plaster casts of both architectural and sculptural elements could be grouped on walls and pedestals to create grandly romantic interiors. He did this for the first time at Dowdeswell near Cheltenham, a Regency house he rescued from a bad mauling during a spell as a nursing home.

For him, Aynhoe had the double appeal

(Below) 4—The Entertainments Room is dominated by a five-fold Venetian mirror that was commissioned for the room to reflect James Perkins' collection of contemporary, striking black-and-white photographs by leading figures, such as Bob Carlos Clarke





5—Soane's entrance hall, painted in Farrow & Ball Stony Ground. Mr Perkins says: 'I added a twist of my own by painting the ceiling the same colour as the walls. I don't highlight architectural trim such as cornices, dados, skirtings or door surrounds.' The centaur comes from a cast of the west pediment of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, a carving of the Battle of Lapiths and Centaurs. On either side of the hall fireplace are a pair of 8ft-high candelabra columns from the Met and a set of klismos chairs. Above the fireplace is a cast from the V&A of a plaque on the base of Trajan's column

of an early-18th-century Baroque house by Thomas Archer, which had been remodelled by Soane in the early 1800s, offering an opportunity to create a Soanian ensemble in an authentic set of Soane interiors.

The transformation is now apparent to everyone who drives through the village. For years, numerous cars were parked in the asphalt turning circle, but it now stands elegantly void (Fig 1). The stucco and stone façades were washed down from a cherry picker in just four days. Outsize pots from Italy now flank the entrance, planted with pompoms of box and fragrant mint, and still larger pots containing lollipop trees flank the triumphal arch screens added by Soane.

Entering Soane's hall, you are immediately struck by the full-scale centaurs set between the screens of columns on either side (Fig 5). Mr Perkins' most recent cast acquisitions have come from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, four

container loads in all. Shortly before that, he acquired a collection of 450 pieces de-accessioned from the V&A (which has, of course, its own magnificent cast courts).

Now, with his own plaster-cast restoration workshop in the stables at Aynhoe, he has taken a world lead in this field of collecting. During a recent convention at the Ashmolean, he entertained assembled curators from around the world. The latest additions are a series of 18th-century anatomical casts used not only for medical training, but by sculptors and students at the RA to show muscle contours and suggest shadowing.

A tour of the house takes one along a corridor to the top-lit staircase (Fig 6). In the centre stands a 12ft-tall 19th-century cast of a statue of Athena, its placing evidently inspired by the giant statue of Napoleon that overwhelms the stair hall at Apsley House in London.

The staircase opens into a model room,

which might be in the Soane Museum but for the Bengal cat (one of six) that promptly springs up to display itself in the model of the ancient Roman Arch of Augustus in Aosta in northern Italy. Next to it is a model of the Ara Pacis, the altar of peace built in 13BC to celebrate the triumphal return of Augustus from the wars in Spain and Gaul, covered in exquisite relief ornament. 'I've been told I should call this the Tribune Room, where one keeps one's choicest pieces.'

In the Library (Fig 8), Mr Perkins sits in a columned recess at a large desk. The tall, red-leather armchair bearing the initials EIIR is a judge's chair from the crown court in the castle at Exeter that Mr Perkins and several partners recently acquired from the Lord Chancellor's Department. Their intention is to make Exeter Castle once again a place of resort in an 18th-century sense, brimming with places to eat and shop. The chair is aptly matched by two scarlet tele- ➤



6—The top-lit staircase dominated by a cast of Athena. Halfway up the stairs, a group of capitals pays particular homage to Soane, with an Ionic capital from a bank in the City of London, cast in bronze, and a startlingly white Corinthian capital, newly cast as a prototype for a house in Scotland. On the next wall is a series of casts of cornices from Robert Adam houses, reused in a host of different buildings, including one labelled the House of Lords

hotels. ‘When furnishing houses, I seek to create an appropriate scale and a theatrical twist reflecting the personality of the owner. The symmetry of large rooms often requires furniture to be in pairs. We provide chairs, tables and mirrors.’ He foresees a surge in business now that the era of Minimalist boutique hotels is peaking.

‘I keep persuading friends to see beauty in listed buildings. They are wonderful to live in and offer a way of life where you can entertain at home, work there and be surrounded by your family.’ Current jobs include the restoration of Howsham Hall in North Yorkshire as a house for a private client.

He also enjoys the close relationship of house and village. With a friend, he has bought the pub, which will shortly reopen, and takes a lively part in the village festival, last year laying on aerial acrobatics above the park. Soon, he hopes to acquire more land and restock the park with deer. The only question is whether another still larger house could suddenly tempt him to move. 🐾

Photographs: Paul Barker.

(Below) 7—The cast gallery in the Orangery. More pieces from the temple at Olympia are arranged to match the original composition. (Facing page) 8—Skulls in the library: a hippopotamus and a cast of a sabre-tooth tiger

phones, one a Bakelite model of the hotline at 10, Downing Street, the other a version of the Batman phone. Above one of the bookcases is a cast of a bust by Houdon of Admiral John Paul Jones, renowned for his daring raids on the British coast during the War of Independence.

The Dining Room has a long table surrounded by set of blue leather chairs (Fig 3). Atop the table, swans nestle together as if they were talking in a scene from *Dr Doolittle*. ‘We all become quite vocal with a few drinks inside us,’ laughs Mr Perkins. ‘The taxidermy in the Trois Garçons restaurant in the East End is another influence.’

Soane’s apse-ended drawing room contains a richly gilded George III sofa acquired in the Sotheby’s sale of the collection of Prince Ernst August von Hanover. Beyond is the Entertainments Room, with its striking collection of modern art (Fig 4). Steps lead from it up to a grand cast gallery installed

in the Orangery (Fig 7), now named the Aston Orangery in honour of Mike. Among the casts Mr Perkins has recently obtained is a scaled down, 7ft-long version of the pediment from the Berlin Museum, newly made from a cast of 1936. ‘I’m the second person in the world to have a copy. It tells a story with all the pieces intact.’ There is also a giraffe, bought at auction 18 months ago from a museum in Edinburgh.

Mr Perkins is a firm believer that country houses should earn their keep. He does this by letting out the house for photography shoots and lays on celebrity parties—the most recent theme was heroes and villains, recalled by a sign announcing heroines on the door to the ladies’ loo.

Mr Perkins named his property company GL50 after his post code in Cheltenham. Now, he has started a sister company GL50 Interiors, intended to provided a range of eye-catching furniture for houses and



