

# Hall of fame

As befits one of the nation's supreme achievements in eighteenth century architecture and landscaping, Hagley Hall has enjoyed a distinguished lineage of residents and patrons since it was built by George, the 1st Lord Lyttelton, among 350 acres of Worcestershire's finest parkland. Now a distinctive venue for hire, everyone can share in the glamour of this regal stately home, writes Caroline Sargent.

In the large, sunlit library of the hall, portraits and dedications of poets, writers, politicians and film stars sit alongside royal snapshots and family heirlooms that trace the Lyttelton family all the way back to the estate's creator and his early ancestors. The wall over the hearth is dominated by a painting of the great eighteenth century poet Alexander Pope, who is thought to have been an early advisor on the landscaping of the park. Perhaps more poets should turn their hand to gardening as this is without doubt a powerfully romantic place that over the years has inspired many a scribe to put pen to paper.

A wooden seat high on the hillside is dedicated to Milton and serves as the ultimate spot for quiet contemplation, offering pure and uninterrupted views of the Worcestershire plains boarded by the Malverns, the hills at Abberley and the Cleve hills. Beyond the sweeping lawns there can be found intricate urns, fountains, bridges and follies that moved James Thomson to write his famous four part poem, 'The Seasons'. Following his first visit to what would become the last of the great Palladian houses, the gothic writer Horace Walpole wrote to the 1st Lord Lyttelton exclaiming, 'I wore out my eyes with gazing, my feet with climbing and my tongue and vocabulary with commending.' The historical links stretch as far back as the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 when the old house at Hagley harboured the conspirators Stephen Lyttelton and Robert Wintour, who were subsequently traced and found to be in possession of an unusually large quantity of gunpowder and promptly executed. In more recent times the house has received Rudyard Kipling, Princess Grace of Monaco and, more than likely, the late jazz legend Humphrey Lyttelton, a notoriously modest man who preferred to downplay the fact he was a grandson of the 6th Lord Lyttelton.

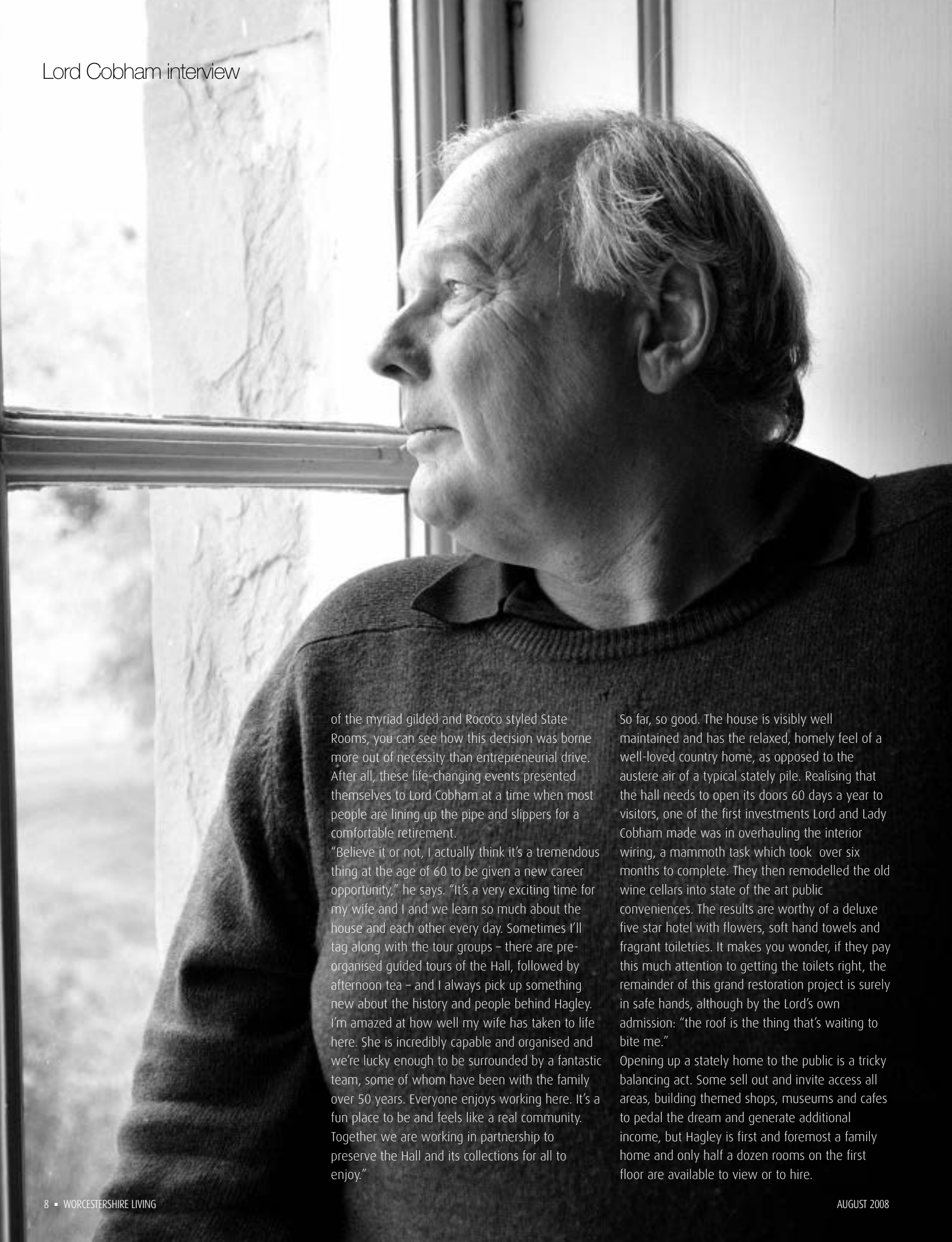
Soon after the present Lord, the 12th Viscount Cobham, took residence at Hagley, television broadcaster Melvyn Bragg came to explore the house and park as part of his series *Travels in Written Britain*, lauding its rich literary connections and publicly celebrating the masterful restoration of the house and the expansive grounds, the upkeep of which is now the sole responsibility of Lord and Lady Cobham.



To some, the prospect of taking over and managing a stately home of this size might have presented an insurmountable challenge but Lord Cobham spent his childhood at Hagley and clearly loves it enough to dedicate all his time and energy into preserving its charms for future generations. Following the death of his elder brother John, the 11th Viscount, in 2006, Lord Cobham uprooted his

family from London to Worcestershire and set about planning a structured business strategy that would help the house to pay for itself. This includes marketing the Hall as a visitor attraction and an exclusive wedding and corporate events venue. When it takes a quarter of a million pounds simply to run the house for 12 months and £70,000 to properly renovate and restore just one





of the myriad gilded and Rococo styled State Rooms, you can see how this decision was borne more out of necessity than entrepreneurial drive. After all, these life-changing events presented themselves to Lord Cobham at a time when most people are lining up the pipe and slippers for a comfortable retirement.

“Believe it or not, I actually think it’s a tremendous thing at the age of 60 to be given a new career opportunity,” he says. “It’s a very exciting time for my wife and I and we learn so much about the house and each other every day. Sometimes I’ll tag along with the tour groups – there are pre-organised guided tours of the Hall, followed by afternoon tea – and I always pick up something new about the history and people behind Hagley. I’m amazed at how well my wife has taken to life here. She is incredibly capable and organised and we’re lucky enough to be surrounded by a fantastic team, some of whom have been with the family over 50 years. Everyone enjoys working here. It’s a fun place to be and feels like a real community. Together we are working in partnership to preserve the Hall and its collections for all to enjoy.”

So far, so good. The house is visibly well maintained and has the relaxed, homely feel of a well-loved country home, as opposed to the austere air of a typical stately pile. Realising that the hall needs to open its doors 60 days a year to visitors, one of the first investments Lord and Lady Cobham made was in overhauling the interior wiring, a mammoth task which took over six months to complete. They then remodelled the old wine cellars into state of the art public conveniences. The results are worthy of a deluxe five star hotel with flowers, soft hand towels and fragrant toiletries. It makes you wonder, if they pay this much attention to getting the toilets right, the remainder of this grand restoration project is surely in safe hands, although by the Lord’s own admission: “the roof is the thing that’s waiting to bite me.”

Opening up a stately home to the public is a tricky balancing act. Some sell out and invite access all areas, building themed shops, museums and cafes to pedal the dream and generate additional income, but Hagley is first and foremost a family home and only half a dozen rooms on the first floor are available to view or to hire.



But these are no ordinary rooms. Heavily influenced by Italianate architecture and plasterwork while touring Europe in 1723, George Lyttelton contracted the services of the talented stuccadore Francesco Vassalli to produce a series of unique wall and ceiling friezes, festoons and bas-relief sculptures for Hagley. The White Hall and Saloon in particular are beautiful examples of his craftsmanship and the canary yellow walls set off the painstakingly cleaned, pearl whiteness of the relief work to perfection. As Lord Cobham notes: “You never really own a house like this, you merely look after it for while. My role is somewhere between that of museum curator and tenant.”

Drifting through the light and airy White Hall, adorned with marble gods and goddesses and filled with the scent of lilies left from the weekend’s wedding festivities, you step through double doors out onto the terrace to take in those views and can imagine, for just a moment, that you are the Lord or Lady of all that you survey. And that has to be the mark of a great venue when, for a limited period, you can truly lose yourself in a place and believe that it is yours and only yours for that day.

After all, can there be any greater faux pas and complete mood killer than to run into another bride and her entourage on your special day? Book Hagley Hall for your wedding or event and you are guaranteed to be lavished with attention and given the run of the whole place, with an option to erect a marquee for 500 out on the manicured lawn. Dinners, receptions and meetings may all be held in the Crimson Dining Room, the Saloon or the Long Gallery, an elegant space on the East side



featuring seventeenth century portraits, Corinthian columns and giant chandeliers. The events team will consider this room for any number of uses but not, alas, indoor cricket, something the Victorian occupiers had a penchant for, to the lasting detriment of the artwork and furniture.

In order to retain the sense of exclusivity Hagley Hall is to limit the number of events to around 150 a year. To ‘test run’ the venue and demonstrate their commitment to supporting the rural community, Lord and Lady Cobham made a point of throwing open the doors to local good causes such as the Sunfield Autistic Children’s Centre and Elizabeth Finn Care, hosting several charity days and evening receptions that raised hundreds of pounds.

Lord Cobham said: “We have a great facility here that is exceptionally well placed being only 11 miles from Birmingham. Hagley lends itself very well to entertaining which, after all is said and done, is not so far removed from the original intention of my ancestor, George Lyttelton.”

Considering all the famous faces that have crossed the threshold over the past 250 years, future guests and party-goers will be mixing in very fine company indeed.



**For all information on weddings and events at Hagley Hall visit [www.hagleyhall.com](http://www.hagleyhall.com)**

**Photography by Vanessa Tombs and Adrian Jones.**