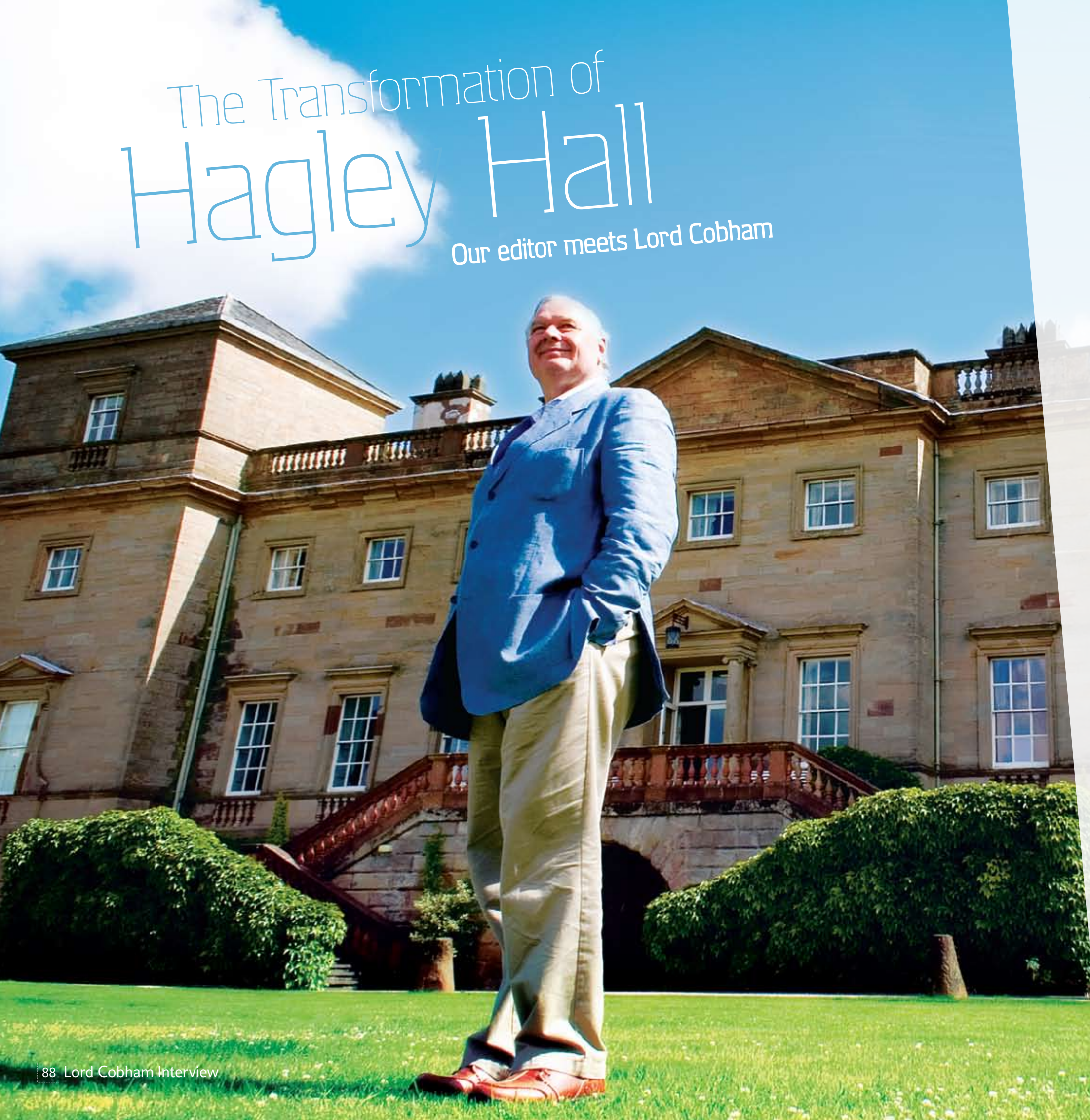


The Transformation of Hagley Hall

Our editor meets Lord Cobham



HAGLEY HALL DATES BACK TO THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AND IS A PERFECT EXAMPLE OF THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE PERIOD, OUR EDITOR KAREN JONES WENT TO MEET LORD COBHAM TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THIS STATELY HOME AND ITS PICTURESQUE PARKLAND

You've been running Hagley Hall for over a year now. What changes have you made?

Driven by the cost of its upkeep, we realised we needed to go back to running Hagley Hall as a business. This dictated that we had to get it into a state that you could actually run a business from. As we're asking people to pay a fee for their weddings and events, then the least we can do is provide a superb facility in every respect. We've updated and upgraded our facilities to ensure that all our events organisers find all facilities consistent with the quality of the house.

What work has been required in the grounds?

Our gardener is working on the park. Heavy work has been required to return it to a more natural Georgian landscape. This will continue, providing continuous improvements to the grounds.

We understand that, in 1925, a fire swept through Hagley Hall, destroying many valuables and causing boiling lead to pour from the roof. Are any of the effects of this blaze still evident, or did the owner at the time, 9th Viscount Cobham, manage to fully restore the house?

He restored the house magnificently but there's still one small scar on the roof that's never been replaced. As soon as we're able to financially, we'll get this repaired, but for the moment, so many other things take priority.

Hagley is a close-knit community. Generations of Cobhams have remained at the centre of this, with Lady Cobham recently opening the village fête. Is Hagley Hall still a focal point of village life, and do you have plans to develop this?

The village has maintained its community spirit for over 100 years. Its church and cricket club are a big part of that, and we're raising money for the church and the new toilet development that is needed for events. If business at the Hall is thriving then it's a good thing for the community, particularly as we can then provide local employment.

It seems Birmingham has a special place in your family's affections, including your sister-in-law, the Dowager Viscountess Lisa Lyttelton, who was the first British woman to sail single-handedly around the world in a 38ft yacht, named 'The Spirit of Birmingham.' Has there always been this loyalty towards the city?

Of course, but you must remember that we were here before the city. In the 14th century Birmingham didn't exist. Bromsgrove was the old city, the industrial revolution put Birmingham on the map. Our loyalty does lie with the city, but it also lies with the surrounding area, the County of Worcester and the whole of the Black Country.

Do you miss London or are you excited by the challenge of transforming the Hall?

It was an inevitable decision to move from London and give it our best shot, to keep the Hall in our family.



I was working in London for 'Smith and Williamson', the eighth largest firm of accountants, but I'm enjoying the challenge the Hall has become.

Do you hope Hagley Hall becomes the perfect place for weddings and corporate events?

Lots of people can afford to live this life for one day, investing in the experience of belonging in a stately home. Hagley Hall has a quality all of its own and we've created a venue with very high standards.

How many people can you accommodate at the Hall for an event?

For a sit-down dinner, we can accommodate 120 in one room, or 220 if we use two rooms; and for a reception in the marquee outside, we can accommodate up to 1,000.

You've attracted some impressive clients, including 'Selfridges' and 'Land Rover'...

Natalie, at 'Big Cat', has helped us re-launch, working alongside our organiser, Kate Oliver, who's a local Hagley girl. 'Land Rover' was a product launch and 'Selfridges' was a fashion shoot. It does create the ideal setting for such things. →

Hagley Cricket Club was formed in 1834, while your Grandfather, 10th Viscount Cobham, played for Worcestershire. Are there any celebrations planned for the club's 175th anniversary next year, and do you fancy yourself as a batsman or bowler?

Indeed – the cricket club has one or two things in the diary for this event. Nowadays I don't play cricket but do enjoy watching, when I'm not gliding, which is my other hobby. I had enjoyed playing as a fast bowler but a spectacular gliding accident put paid to that.

Have there been any ghostly sightings at Hagley Hall?

I'm convinced there are no ghosts, as I've never seen any. My younger brother, when he was small, used to follow something, which we described as a dog that had lived there once, but he was obviously harmless, as he never left a puddle.

Hagley Hall's creator, George Lyttelton, was a well-known patron of the arts, with a vast collection of artistic masterpieces. Do you still have these treasures, and which rooms are you most fond of?

After my father's death, some items did go, in lieu of tax, and are now in Birmingham Museum to be enjoyed by the public. I love the Library, as this has always been the heart of Hagley Hall for the family. My other favourite is the white room, which holds many wonderful memories, because this is where the family always entertained.

The parkland has provided an excellent filming location for 'Antiques Fair', 'King Ralf', Clive Owen's 'Chance' and 'Doctors'. Are there any others lined up?

Filming is something we can develop here more. The house and parkland do so often create the setting required for TV.



Lady Hertford, of Ragley Hall, described the upkeep of her stately home as the 'ultimate labour of love', admitting, 'if you don't love where you are and what you do, it becomes a life sentence.' Is this a sentiment you can empathise with?

Completely, and you would find that echoed in many of the country houses. My wife and I find it a privilege to do this together; I have to say it's great fun working with one's wife, and our marriage has taken on a whole new aspect.

Finally, what's your vision for 20 years time?

My dream would be to return the park to something as close to the original concept as I can. I need to stabilise the finances and try to achieve capital injection. We have five listed buildings in the park, but much has been vandalised, so we need to get the community to take ownership. Like all big houses, they have to be run profitably; I don't think it's fair to hand a debt to my son. We have to open sixty days a year at £10 per head, plus, in order to break even, we need 130 events per year. We're lucky, we have great staff; many have been here over forty years and are passionate about what they do. We are the newcomers, and we, with the staff, will do our best to ensure the success of this wonderful stately home. 🏡

