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## Hall of Memories

Paul Trow delves into the colorful history of an ancestral home where an impeccable political pedigree went hand in hand with more than a whiff of scandal. Now the place is reinventing itself as a luxurious 21st century golfing, gastronomic and cultural retreat



One of England's most historic stately homes has been busily celebrating its 250th anniversary with a series of activities ranging from weekend house parties to falconry displays.

Indeed, it's been very much a case of 'what the butler saw' during 2010 on the Brocket Hall estate in the county of Hertfordshire, some 20 miles north of London and within easy reach of the city's international airports.

The cornerstone of the property is a neoclassical redbrick structure overlooking 543 acres of mature, rolling parkland complete with a Palladian bridge traversing the River Lea that curls its way across the tree-lined landscape.

The present Brocket Hall was built around 1760 for Sir Matthew Lamb, the first Baronet, by renowned architect James Paine, while its grounds were laid out by Richard Woods, a contemporary of 'Capability' Brown.

From that point on, it swiftly became an epicenter for many of the political and social events, not to mention scandals, that shaped the course of British history throughout the 19th century.

Two manor houses previously stood on the site, the first of which, dating from 1239, was called Watershyppes. It was owned by Simon Fitz Ade, whose daughter married Sir Thomas Brocket, originally from Yorkshire in the north of England. The Brockets duly established themselves as one of Hertfordshire's leading families and in 1440 the house was rebuilt.

During the 16th century, Sir John Brocket provided a haven for the young Princess Elizabeth as respite from the confinement under which her sister, Queen Mary I, had placed her at nearby Hatfield House. Indeed, 25-year-old Elizabeth was reportedly reading a book under the shelter of

her favorite oak tree at Bocket Hall when news reached her in November 1558 that Mary had died and she was now Queen of England.

The Bocket family's ability to fund their ancestral home collapsed when they ran out of male heirs in 1746, and shortly afterwards Sir Matthew, a long established Member of Parliament who was eager for a country seat, bought the estate.



No expense was spared by the new owner, who, among other things, commissioned the construction of a grand interior staircase, furniture from Thomas Chippendale, a magnificent painting of the Zodiac on the ballroom ceiling by Francis Wheatley, and a dazzling chandelier from one of the leading glasshouses of the day.

Shortly after Sir Matthew's death in 1768, his son, Peniston, was ennobled as the first Lord Melbourne as a reward for his generosity in allowing the Prince Regent (later to become King George IV) to conduct an affair with his wife during frequent visits to Bocket Hall. Other benefits of this dalliance included the laying out of a racecourse on the land surrounding Bocket Hall (the Prince Regent was an aficionado of the 'sport of kings') and the presentation of a near-priceless portrait of the future monarch, painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds, that still hangs in the ballroom today.

The next owner was Peniston's son William, the second Viscount Melbourne. In 1805, William had married Caroline Ponsonby, an earl's daughter who is better known to posterity as the infamous Lady Caroline Lamb.

Her ladyship introduced the Waltz to England in the ballroom at Bocket Hall, but she also scandalized society by conducting a wild and tempestuous relationship – in front of the servants, no less – with Lord Byron. At the impassioned height of their affair she described the Romantic poet as "mad, bad and dangerous to know", yet when Byron tired of her she burned his effigy on a bonfire along with all his gifts to her.

By then, William's political career was curving inexorably upwards and could realistically only be sabotaged by his wife's erratic behavior, so he decided to separate from Lady Caroline in 1825, the year after Byron's death in Greece. Still grieving, she begged her husband to be allowed to stay at her beloved Bocket Hall and he relented, but her continued residency was short-lived as her health declined and she died in January 1828. However, echoing the plot of her own novel *Glenarvon*, in which the heroine comes back to haunt an exiled poet, it is rumored Lady Caroline occupies the building to this day in the form of a ghost – during the summer of 1997 workmen claim to have 'seen an apparition and felt a presence.'

When the Whig party came to power in November 1830, William was named Home Secretary by the new Prime Minister, Earl Grey, after whom the famous aromatic blend of tea was named. In

anticipation of his eventual elevation to the highest office in the land, William installed a state banqueting table at Bocket Hall in 1832 that to this date remains the second longest in Britain.



William first became Prime Minister in July 1834 but was dismissed by King William IV after only four months. The Tory party under Sir Robert Peel took over briefly but after an election in early 1835 William resumed the reins for the next six years, during which time he formed a close relationship with the young Queen Victoria, who ascended to the throne in 1837 (aged 18 years and one month) and was subsequently a regular visitor to Bocket Hall.

On William's death in 1848, the house passed to his sister, Emily, who had married his Foreign Secretary, the Irish peer Lord Palmerston, in 1839. Palmerston also became Prime Minister, governing for nine years in total during the decade from 1855-65 and dying at Bocket Hall while still in office, two days before his 81st birthday. This bulldog figure had seemed in rude health at the time, having reportedly barked to his doctor: "Die? Why that's the last thing I'll do!"

The official history of Bocket Hall postulates an alternative explanation for Palmerston's abrupt demise. "There has long been a tradition at Bocket Hall that Palmerston's death was precipitated by a fumbled liaison with a maid on the billiard table," it says. "He had a reputation for vigorous exercise but none of his biographers mention the episode and the story might be the last remnant of below-stairs gossip to survive into the modern era."

In 1923, the estate was purchased by Sir Charles Nall-Cain, the scion of a Liverpool brewing family. Despite struggling to be accepted as a member of the landed gentry, he persisted in claiming to be descended from a King of Ulster and eventually received a peerage, thus becoming Lord Bocket, in 1933.

Even though the first Lord Bocket's sport of choice was shooting (the Duke of York, later to become King George VI, was one of his guests), the estate's first association with golf was established through his son, Ronald, who captained the Oxford University team in the mid-1920s. Ronald married clergyman's daughter Angela Pennyman in 1927 – David Bowes Lyon, brother of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother (married to George VI) was best man – and became the second Lord Bocket upon his father's death in 1935.

His main contribution to the Second World War effort was to turn Bocket Hall into a maternity hospital run by the Red Cross for expectant mothers evacuated from London, and from 1939-49 a total of 8,338 babies were born there. Lord Melbourne's Suite was the main birth center and the

recovering mothers would then be moved to the Prince Regent Suite where many were startled by the quirky, hand-painted, Chinese-style wallpaper that greeted them as the effects of their anesthesia wore off.

The third Lord Brocket, Charles Nall-Cain, inherited the title and a semi-derelict Brocket Hall at the age of 15 from his grandfather in 1967, his father having died six years earlier. At the time he was a pupil at Eton, England's most exclusive public school for boys. On leaving school, he served in the 14th/20th King's Hussars as a Lieutenant in Cyprus and Northern Ireland, and then became known as a playboy and collector of classic cars, at one point owning 42 Ferraris.

Turning his entrepreneurial instincts to the family seat, 'Charlie' converted Brocket Hall into a hotel and conference center for high-profile corporate events and even senior government meetings – indeed, former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher regularly visited while she was writing her memoirs.

His next project was even more ambitious, commissioning Peter Alliss and Clive Clark to design the 18-hole Melbourne course that opened in 1992, zigzagging back and forth across the river. Before his plans to create a second, 'outer' golf course in the woodland of Brocket Hall could get beyond the drawing board, though, he was fingered for an insurance fraud that landed him in jail for two and a half years.

The story is a cracker, even by the sometimes far-fetched standards of the British aristocracy. As a result of the cost of developing Brocket Hall, Charlie found himself saddled with mounting debts. When his bank called in a \$7 million loan, he hatched a plot to pretend that three of his Ferraris and one Maserati had been stolen when in fact they'd been dismantled and buried on the estate. With perfect symmetry, the size of his insurance claim exactly matched the outstanding loan. He would have got away with it as well had it not been for a bizarre turn of events.

His first wife, the Puerto Rican model Isabell Maria Lorenzo by whom he has three children, had developed an addiction to painkillers and was caught forging a prescription by the police. Under questioning, she revealed the details of Charlie's scam, reportedly in revenge for his marital infidelities. The upshot was a prison term for Charlie totaling seven and a half years, though he was released after serving only a third of his sentence in August 1998, and dramatically speeded away from the scene of his detention on a gleaming Harley-Davidson in a black leather biker's jacket and jeans.

The level of Charlie's debt upon leaving prison meant it was impossible for him to stay on at Brocket Hall. He still owns the property, but it has been leased through a trust to a German company, CCA International, that has already spent approaching \$40 million on further developing the estate. The lease still has around 50 years to run before it reverts to Charlie's descendants, in effect terminating his involvement for the rest of his natural life.

But Charlie, now in his late fifties, is nothing if not resourceful – he has since carved out a niche for himself as a likeable but roguish minor television celebrity, and he also remarried in 2006, to photographer Harriet Warren with whom he has a daughter.

He might be persona non grata at Brocket Hall, but he is far from forgotten as dozens of framed pictures of him posing with political and show business stars of the 1980s and '90s can still be found on the house's corridor walls, though admittedly not in the more ornately and formally decorated morning room, drawing room, ballroom, entrance hall and staircase.

Today, like the bridge across the River Lea, Brocket Hall is a conduit between its illustrious past and its thriving present. Since CCA International took control, many of the loose ends on the estate have been tied up.





The refurbished redbrick Melbourne Lodge now has 16 en-suite bedrooms – all named after famous racehorses, in keeping with its former status as the estate’s stables. A further 30 guest bedrooms can be found in the main hall, mostly fitted (as you would expect) with four-poster beds; and weddings are now also conducted on the premises.

The second golf course, the Palmerston, was laid out by Donald Steel in 2000 amidst an impressive array of established hornbeam, pine and beach trees, some as old as 300 years. Both 18-hole layouts not only enjoy a stunning setting but are also maintained in impeccable condition.

The pro shop is stocked with all the latest apparel and equipment, and golfers also flock from far and wide to use the Palmerston Golf Academy that was originally named after Sir Nick Faldo who was born less than two miles away in Welwyn Garden City.

This elaborate, state-of-the-art practice and instructional facility includes an indoor teaching school, a long-game zone, a short-game zone, a chipping and bunker zone, a putting zone and a par-3, six-hole approach-play zone. As an additional enhancement this winter, former LPGA Tour professionals (and twins), Johanna and Samantha Head, are providing group clinics at the academy.

After a game, a lesson or even just a practice session, the perfect 19th hole to unwind can be found in the Watershyppes Clubhouse with its warren of bars, lounges and dining rooms overlooking the Broadwater – a bulging stretch of the River Lea that protects the green at the par-5 18th on the Melbourne course and can only be crossed by golfers on a cable-powered ferry.

Another significant player on the estate is the Michelin-starred Auberge du Lac restaurant in a tree-lined hollow on the edge of the Broadwater. Initially launched by celebrity chef Jean-Christophe Novelli, it has been run since 2005 by executive chef Phil Thompson, formerly of several leading London West End venues including L’Escargot restaurant and the Lanesborough Hotel, and sommelier Laurent Tavernier.

The Auberge du Lac, which serves an eclectic mix of French and English cuisine, is housed in a three-storey, 18th-century hunting lodge with five private dining rooms in addition to the main restaurant. One corner is carved from the old cellar of the building, but most of the tables are in a modern extension.

Brocket Hall has certainly moved with the times (as the arrival of the Auberge du Lac and golf courses demonstrate), but in essence its charm lies in its tradition, its glorious and often indiscreet history, and above all else in its timeless elegance. If you’re still in doubt, just ask the butler what he sees!