

FANCY A TASTE OF THE CROWN?

By Tim Saunders, Travel Correspondent

When we visit Wrest Park in Bedfordshire we feel like we are at a grand French palace such as Versailles. This magnificent stately home has been designed to emulate the best French and Italian design. It is such a significant British property that production companies regularly use this as a location for series like *The Crown* as well as programmes like *Strictly Come Dancing* and *Flog It*.

Extravagantly built by British Tory statesman and First Lord of the Admiralty Thomas de Grey in the 1830s, this is the second house to stand on the site; the first one, where the pond is now, was 700 years older but was demolished. The Earl had inherited the 90-acre estate and wanted to make his mark. His design drew its admirers because on the founding of the Institute of British Architects in 1834, he was invited to become its first president, remaining so until his death in 1859.

The property needed to be so large to accommodate Grey's twelve children. You can imagine the wonderful parties that must have been held in the rooms with their high ceilings and huge windows that look out onto the stunning gardens. 'Oh have you seen my latest Chinese wallpaper?' the Earl might ask a guest. He had to hire an artist to cover up a little patch but it was so difficult to get just right they had to put something in front of it to hide the blemish. On a dreary Saturday afternoon the children would have been able to put on a production on a raised floor that would come out of the wall of the drawing room by the push of a lever.

On another occasion the Earl might have hinted at his latest investment; a coal-fired boiler to power the central heating. Quite ahead of its time.

We are given a potted history on our arrival and discover that the house became the base for an insurance company, and English Heritage acquired it in 2006 at which point it started preserving the estate. Today, the house is home to 30 fortunate local businesses with offices upstairs while the ground floor is open to the public. A sensible move, and what a privilege for these businesses to be based in such fantastic surroundings looking out over the 90 acres of Capability-Brown-designed gardens. Two hundred volunteers look after the grounds throughout the year and the Italian garden is replanted twice a year to ensure that the visual display is the best possible.

The house is large enough for us to enjoy a brief visit but not spend too long, which is ideal for the children who love running up the staircase and down the other side while admiring the various portraits of Grey's first and second wives as well as other relatives. The conservatory is quite something, too, with a variety of exotic plants, some quite tall.

We thoroughly enjoy strolling around the gardens, admiring the many different blooms.

For more information, visit:

www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/wrest-park

Watch the videos at www.travelwriter.biz

