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**OFF WITH
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The Duke of Devonshire on the
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The estate of things to come

His baroque stately home, Chatsworth, is undergoing its biggest restoration for nearly 200 years. So why does the 12th Duke of Devonshire believe that the aristocracy is ripe for demolition? Camilla Long meets a dissident nobleman. Photographs: Simon Norfolk



There is a man in a tweed jacket and too-short trousers scrabbling at a side door when I arrive at Chatsworth — an unassuming, White Rabbitish figure who I immediately take to be the assistant to the under-butler's assistant. But of course he is not; he is Peregrine Andrew Mornay Cavendish, KCVO, CBE, chancellor of the University of Derby, and the 12th Duke of Devonshire.

"Hello, hello," he says, with a brisk handshake, "come in, come in," and he dumps a hard hat on my head, and off he trots, powder-blue socks flashing, on a breakneck tour of the house. The duke is an obsessive timekeeper — "I don't like being late at all" — so we skid through the main foyer. "That's the Duchess!" he says as we pass a pleasant-looking woman in a blue-and-white striped outfit and sprint up to the first gallery, a

aristocrat, who is worth £500m. Ever since he inherited the title nearly six years ago, and moved into Chatsworth — a creamy Derbyshire pile that has 297 rooms, 35,000 acres, 500 staff, and works by Raphael, Van Dyck, Rembrandt — he has been living in a building site. The project started as "rewiring", but typically mutated into a £14m refurbishment (as it does), the house's biggest facelift since the 1830s.

"I do not find the task a burden," he says, blowing his nose into a violet monogrammed hankie. "Brrrr. It's a constant pleasure."

Which comes as no surprise, because the "Palace of the Peaks", a ravishing baroque masterpiece, is probably our most evocative stately home. Next month it reopens with an extensively restored exterior ("Look at that stone, look at that stooooone," coos the duke, waving out



Above: the 12th duke, nicknamed Stoker, and Amanda, his duchess

Above left: the bed in the State Bedroom belonged to George II, who died in it

married in 1967 and with whom he has three children, including his heir, Bill, the Marquess of Hartington — was probably the Tudor battle-axe Bess of Hardwick. She married four times, kept the cash from each marriage, and built the original house in the 1550s with the proceeds. The current house was built just after the Glorious Revolution; a few decades later, another woman, Charlotte Boyle, an heiress who married the future 4th duke, brought a further eight properties to the title, including Lismore Castle in Ireland, Bolton Abbey in Yorkshire, the Palladian mansion Chiswick House in London, and Burlington House on Piccadilly, now the Royal Academy of Arts. Gallingly, she never became duchess, dying at the age of 25 in 1754, but her son, Lord Burlington, got the houses, and now, with the refurb, he gets a gallery, too.

The duke's mother, Debo, the dowager duchess, also gets her own little corner, an exhibition to celebrate her 90th birthday next month. A lilac relic from a bygone age, Debo was another spirited Chatsworth bride when she married the 11th duke in 1941. He nearly didn't get the title: his older brother, who married Kathleen "Kick" Kennedy, JFK's older sister, was killed in the war, so it passed to Andrew and Deborah, the youngest of the six controversial, aristocratic Mitford sisters.

Still, the Kennedy-Devonshire link endured: Debo and Andrew went to Washington several times, and in 1961, for example, Nancy Mitford wrote to Debo about JFK's sex life: "They say... that if the First Lord [a nickname for JFK] —>

HIS PET PASSIONS INCLUDE GILDING AND MODERN ART. 'LOOK AT THE BLING ON THAT,' THE DUKE SAYS PROUDLY OF THE GILDED WINDOWS

new one, and then it's straight through two more new ones, past the state rooms, down a staircase, up a staircase, past more builders and scaffolding and radios blaring rap ("Hello, Kevin", "Hello, Duke") and a newly restored Victorian dome, before, suddenly, he swishes behind a curtain into a quiet study. He stops and looks closely at the wallpaper, a bizarre, peeling leather variety.

"The 6th duke," he says, referring to the Bachelor Duke, a keen horticulturalist who had a banana named after him in the 1830s, "thought this wallpaper was absolutely mustard. But we think it's... rather disappointing."

The duke has really got into wallpaper recently, as well as carpets, silks and blinds. "Amanda [the duchess] took 18 months to choose blinds, ones that are not dark from the outside or stark white, but inside you can see out; I'd have gone nuts," says the 65-year-old

of the window) and three new galleries, one of which will have "bomb-proof" cabinets to show off the family rocks, including the Devonshire Parure, a seven-piece set that was worn at the coronation of Tsar Alexander II in 1856.

A whole gallery will be devoted to Georgiana (pronounced George-ay-na), wife of the 5th duke, the drinking, gambling *volsuptuense* portrayed by Keira Knightley in *The Duchess*. "That was a terrific romp," says the duke, as a butler brings coffee into the study. It's not the duke's study, he says, it's a random one. Still, the books on the shelves seem typically dual: *The Bloody Game: Anthology of War*; *Albert Speer*; *The Third Reich*. "But what is surprising to some about George-ay-na," he continues, "is that she was actually a keen collector of minerals..."

The duke's own favourite duchess — apart from the current one, obviously, whom he



Above: woodwork in the State Drawing Room being vacuumed

Left: four Mitford girls (clockwise from top left), Unity, Debo (the future duchess), Diana, Nancy

doesn't screw every day, he has a headache."

Debo's exhibition will include couture dresses, dance cards, portraits by Lucian Freud (who largely owes his success to her early patronage) and an Elvis Presley telephone. Famous for her eccentricities — she once milked a goat in the first-class waiting room of Stirling station, "and I wasn't even allowed to, because I had a third-class ticket" — Debo brought a bit of Mitford magnetism to Chatsworth when the couple moved in in 1959. Her husband would later moan that having the Mitfords for sisters-in-law "inevitably imposed a certain Denis Thatcher element onto my life", but the current duke is less bothered. He liked Nancy best. "I got on very well with her; she was pretty influential on me when I was a student [Eton and Oxford]. I knew Diana

Prince Charles, a pal since boyhood, in this bracket, too). He remembers that renovation as "endless." "My mother did it herself and incredibly thoroughly, standing for an hour deciding on a shade of grey. No 13-year-old child is going to enjoy that. I was cold and I was bored, but it was worth it, because now I know where all the light switches are."

There were hiccups: in 1977 the duchess was instantly branded vulgar when she opened the Chatsworth farm shop (not helped, perhaps, by her insistence that she had learnt all her retailing skills from Beatrix Potter's *Ginger and Pickles*). Today, however, the shop is a mecca for tourists ("I'd buy a *pair au chocolat*, mmm, chocolate, and all the things I shouldn't eat," waffles the duke), as is the house, of course, which attracts

— he will give up the title, "Because then it would be clear-cut what the people wanted, and it would be confusing to maintain hereditary titles. So, finish that, go back to being called Cavendish." He thinks the system is confusing enough already: "My son, Lord Burlington, is a lord but not a peer." Meanwhile, he explains, a life peer gets to be part of government, "a person who decides what happens in this country".

He sighs. "Look, I'm only here by pure chance. I haven't earned any of this..." And it would be so easy to drop it, too: "Just the stroke of a pen, or not even that — just a new passport."

The duke's passport reads Peregrine Andrew Cavendish, Duke of Devonshire, but obviously he is too smart to be called plain old Peregrine, so he has an inexplicable nickname instead: Stoker. "I honestly don't know why I'm called Stoker. I wish I had an ordinary Christian name. My parents didn't like Perry — Peregrine is in no way an ordinary Christian name, either — and I've just always been Stoker." He is horrified at the idea of being addressed as Your Grace ("It's what you'd call a bishop"), so it's Duke for the time being, with all the attendant "laughing and pointing at the Ryanair check-in desk".

Anyway, when he succeeded there was "a real nervousness that new people had arrived — that they would spoil everything my parents had done for the past 50 years, coming in without any knowledge of the traditions of Chatsworth". And of course the couple did make the odd mistake. "They didn't like it when we →



Left: major works in progress in the courtyard

Below: former first ladies of Chatsworth, Bess of Hardwick (left) and Georgiana, wife of the 5th duke, played by Keira Knightley in *The Duchess*

changed the Carriage House restaurant. We had hundreds of letters." But generally the duke, a quiet, slightly bashful character who flicks his wrist energetically when a complicated question arises, is quite humble about the visitors.

Still, they don't come between him and his pet passions, such as gilding and modern art. "Look at the bling on that!" he says of the gilded windows. I think he is quite disappointed that he can't literally cover Chatsworth, and probably himself, too, in gold leaf. A director of *Sotheby's*, he has turned the gardens into a sculpture park and once put Damien Hirst's *The Virgin Mother*, a massive statue of a pregnant woman with the inside of her belly exposed, just by the entrance. "Lots of people thought it was hideous, and lots of people thought it was extraordinary," he says. "We had only one letter of complaint, from a retired priest." "Well, how controversial would he go at Chatsworth?" Obviously, if Jeff Koons insisted on using the state rooms, we would definitely be very happy to do that." So he'd hang Fiona's *Asshole* 1991 in the state rooms?

AS CHAIRMAN OF ASCOT, HE TOLD FEMALE RACEGOERS: 'KNICKERS! A DEFINITE YES — BUT NOT ON SHOW, PLEASE, LADIES.' OH, NAUGHTY DUKE!

The duke pauses. "I think that would be difficult... I would never put anything out just to shock. But we'd be a bit more robust now than we were to start with." He says he is "open-minded" about pornographic art.

"We want people who come to Chatsworth to be as varied as possible. But it's not a toy. It's not an ego trip. Chatsworth is the point now, not the people living in it." Admittedly, with a personal fortune of half a billion, the duke can afford to play around a bit, and actually he's taken risks before. An immensely powerful figure in British horseracing, he oversaw a reform of the sport by the Jockey Club. More recently, as



chairman of Ascot, he razed the place to the ground and rebuilt it, "which wasn't easy", he says. He also ran into quite an amusing tangle about the dress code. Urging female racegoers to think twice about fake tans and flashy jewellery in 2008, he ended his announcement: "Knickers! A definite yes — but not on show, please, ladies." Oh, naughty duke! He looks a bit flirty. "We just drew people's attention to it," he says, "and everyone got very excited. We had to accept the existence of fascinators, which I think are lovely, but were not included in our dress code."

When told that fascinators — lacy, insect-like headpieces favoured by inveterate Sloanes such as Kate Middleton — are actually quite hideous, he laughs. "Well, I'd rather that than nothing! I think they look very glamorous. People who come to Ascot take a lot of trouble, and that's why we have the dress code. The perception is that we are a lot of old men in grey suits imposing. But it's entirely driven by what they want. Same as here. We don't want people eating sandwiches as they go round, partly because it will get on the furniture, but partly because other people don't want it. Harrods has incredibly strict dress codes, much stricter than us. I mean, I would never go

into Harrods, but if you did..." Still, there are limitations on his power. The house, gardens, park and "essential contents" were leased to a charitable trust in 1981. The family sit in a minority on the trust's board, and the duke can neither sell nor benefit from any sale of the assets. The rooms the family live in — the same as Georgiana did — are rented.

If a large house is to survive for the next 50 years, he understands that sacrifices have to be made, and he's here most of the time. But tough life is not. He goes to America five times a year for *Sotheby's*, but mostly he's at Chatsworth, or in Ireland, or occasionally in London, where he also owns the gentlemen's club Pratt's and a majority shareholding in the bookshop Heywood Hill.

Does he ever just wake up in the morning and think "joy"? "Yes, absolutely, yes," he laughs. He loves a brisk stride around the gardens in the early, early morning. The people who come to Chatsworth are fun, too. Anthony Hopkins recently came to make *The Wolfman*. "We tried to tempt him to come and have a drink several times," says the duke, "but he was very busy getting into the role."

The duke still misses his father. "Often I would like to have been able to ask him things. But he was quite a complicated man." This might be a veiled reference to an incident in 1985 in which three blank cheques were stolen from the 11th duke's house in Mayfair. Two were cashed, but the bank became suspicious of the third, for tens of thousands, and got the police involved. The butler testified about a string of women being entertained by the duke at the house. The duke protested that he was accustomed to helping ladies of slender means. The judge asked him: "What sort of age were these ladies — middle-aged or elderly?" The duke admitted that they tended to be young, and that he had in fact been on holiday with one of them. According to him, the duchess, wasn't fussed: they had no secrets. The current duke sighs again. "He was incredibly proud of this place. Chatsworth then was all about the duke, and that's changed," he says, then gives an energetic little chorle.

His aim for Chatsworth is to renovate it to the point where it can sustain itself, which sounds a bit yawn-somely sensible. But for all his business-speak, this duke is still half-Mitford, believing, he quite suddenly announces, in things like ghosts. "Of course I do. It would be ridiculous not to." And with that he vanishes ■

'THE ARISTOCRACY'S NOT DYING. IT'S DEAD! THE COFFIN IS NAILED DOWN. IT DOESN'T EXIST EXCEPT THAT PEOPLE HAVE TITLES'

less. She was in Holloway Prison (Diana and her husband, Sir Oswald Mosley, were jailed during the war for their fascist views). It was difficult for my father, because his brother-in-law, his brother and his best friends were killed in the war. But he was very loyal: he asked Oswald and Diana to stay quite soon after the war, which was very brave, very correct." Does he remember Oswald Mosley? "Yes, vaguely," he replies. "He was quite old. Polite. Rather distant. He had a very nice smile, but his politics were obviously awful."

The new duke and duchess were crippled by death duties. They quickly realised that, in order to survive, Chatsworth had to make money, so over the next 20 years, they turned it into a huge commercial enterprise. The scale of the house was not lost on the young heir, either — he realised quite quickly that most of his friends lived, by contrast, in "ordinary-sized houses" (although he is too polite to say if he includes

50,000 visitors a month in peak season.

Debo, who moved out of Chatsworth after her husband died in 2004, now lives in the nearby village of Edensor. Despite her *Lady Bountiful* idiosyncrasies — her Chatsworth cookery book began with the statement "I haven't cooked since the war" — she is massively popular with the locals, and has been a hard act to follow.

That the current duke would take on the house was without question; the title, however, was another matter. He thought long and hard before he took it on. "The aristocracy is not dying," he says. "It's dead! Coffin's nailed down, it's in the ground. It doesn't exist, except that people have titles." Eventually, he decided that it would be "illogical" not to become the duke: it "might have been disrespectful to Chatsworth", although he admits he might live to regret his decision. If the House of Lords gets rid of hereditary peerages — a Labour election pledge