

# PROPERTY



CHRISTOPHER PLEDGER FOR THE TELEGRAPH

## Our wild adventures in the old family pile

### GREAT ESTATES

*It's back to nature for the eco-minded owners of Knepp Castle, writes Eleanor Doughty*

**I**f you're not careful parking your car outside Knepp Castle, you might come back to find that it has been slobbered on. Not by a roaming guard labrador, but by one of the Burrell family's Exmoor ponies, who are grazing on the front lawn. "Sometimes," says Isabella Burrell, "they come and lick your wing mirrors." Such is life at Knepp, the 3,500-acre wild estate near Shipley in West Sussex, home to the Burrell family for 230 years, and now run by Sir Charles Burrell and his wife, the writer Isabella Tree - Charlie and Issy.

While on some estates the house is the main attraction, at Knepp the estate takes top billing. For years, the Burrells had farmed intensively on the heavy Sussex clay. At the turn of the century, Charlie, who inherited in 1987, was becoming tired of the slog of keeping the

farm going. "For 17 years, he worked on what farmers are supposed to do - making efficiencies and improving the crop varieties in an effort to raise yields," says Issy. While the yields rose, the farm still made a loss. "It looked like this was only going to get worse forever."

In 2000, Charlie came across the Dutch ecologist Frans Vera, whose book *Grazing Ecology and Forest History* had been translated into English. "He was convinced by what Vera was saying - that we have forgotten what our landscape looked like before human intervention. We thought maybe this was something we could do at Knepp."

Almost 20 years on, and Knepp is now an open landscape where animals roam free. The estate is home to 450 deer, 30 Tamworth pigs, 30 Exmoor

ponies, and some turtle doves. Now, instead of losing money through conventional agriculture, the revenue streams have been boosted by organic farming. In addition to receiving Higher Level Stewardship agri-environment funding for the rewilding project, they sell "wild-range" meat from their Old English longhorn cattle, Tamworth pigs and red and fallow deer. They also operate about 80 residential properties.

While the house isn't open to the public - "I don't think it's important enough for it to work," says Issy; "It's not a stately, that's for sure," adds Charlie - they have a glamping area (guests can choose to sleep in a tree-house, shepherd hut, yurt or a bell



**'IN PRETTY GOOD NICK'** Inside and out at Knepp Castle in West Sussex



**'IT'S NOT REALLY THAT BIG'** Charlie and Issy Burrell at home at Knepp Castle, main; the ornate sitting room, left



gade, but he got lost, so the fire brigade wasn't coming, the piano was stuck in the front door, and eight Holbeins went up in smoke in the dining room, with everything under-insured."

The family started again, rebuilding the old Nash house, and adding a wing. In the Fifties, the house passed to Sir Walter Burrell and his wife Judy, Charlie's grandparents. When Issy first visited Knepp for Charlie's 21st birthday party in 1983, "my bedroom still had blackout blinds from the Second World War".

It was very old-fashioned, Charlie explains. "The butler was Mr Pink for me, or Pink for my grandparents, with Mr Crook the underbutler. A woman named Edith Pugh had been my father's nursemaid, and she left after 82 years' service."

Knepp then skipped a generation, and Charlie inherited the estate, his father having moved to Australia. "My grandparents were training me up for years; I came for weekends once or twice a month, spending time with them."

### Their wildlife safaris cover the 'big five': pigs, cows, ponies and red and fallow deer

He married Issy in 1993, and they set about modernising Knepp, which needed extensive work. "There was no central heating, it still had coal fires, with dodderly old retainers going around laying them, and the original electrics from the Fifties," Issy explains. "You'd touch a light switch and be thrown back off your feet." Despite being old-fashioned, the house was "in pretty good nick," says Issy.

The couple insist that their 38,000 sq ft home, which has 13 bedrooms, isn't all that big. "There's only really three main big rooms on the ground floors," Issy says. The dining room table - over which portraits of Burrells hang - seats 22 when it is fully extended. "We've only got one tablecloth that fits 22, and I'm desperate to find another one," she laughs.

The Burrells are now into their 18th year of rewilding, about which Issy has written a book for Picador, *Wilding: The Return of Nature to a British Farm*. Somehow, life is far less stressful now, she says. "Farming was a nightmare, an endless stress. Now our stress is whether the nightingales will arrive on time, because Radio 3 is coming to record them."

tent) and run wildlife safaris. These cover Knepp's "big five" - Tamworth pigs, old English longhorns, Exmoor ponies, red deer and fallow deer - as well as smaller creatures: kingfishers, nightingales, purple emperor butterflies, bats and moths.

But they are exercising some restraint, with just a few tours at a time. "It would end up like a mini Maasai Mara, with six vehicles parked at a pig," says Issy.

The safaris are a chance to see these animals in their natural habitats. "The other day we were walking next to the lake and there was this explosion of bubbles next to us like a kind of Jacuzzi, and a pig's head popped up like a hippo," adds Issy. "It had been diving for swan mussels at the bottom of the lake. Who has ever seen a diving pig?"

Knepp Castle was built in 1806 by the Regency architect John Nash, commissioned by Sir Charles Burrell, the son of Sophia Raymond, a Sussex heiress, and William Burrell, a local lawyer.

The house has been in the family ever since, but only just. In 1904, a fire broke out in the hall fireplace. It was a miracle anyone survived, Issy explains. "Charlie's grandfather had just been born, so there was a nursemaid up tending to the baby, otherwise they'd have all gone up."

A farce ensued. "They were trying to get the furniture out, and got the grand piano stuck in the front door, so nothing else could get in or out. Meanwhile, a new under-footman had been sent to get the fire bri-

