

HARTLAND ABBEY NEWSLETTER

Summer/Autumn 2007

Dear Visitors,

Although this is our summer newsletter it is nearly winter! We have been so busy that I haven't had time to do my usual newsletter in July. At least the weather has perked up now, whereas in the summer we were permanently flooded and all our visitors had to wear blue plastic sort of bath hats on their feet as the house was turning into a ploughed field! Cars and coaches were stuck in the car park and the peacocks were utterly miserable and walked around gloomily with their heads bowed in a funereal pose! The roof leaked constantly and plastic washing up bowls were in most bedrooms!

In the spring, when the weather was so marvellous and the pundits were all forecasting a record hot summer, my husband was gloomily forecasting the opposite, and how right he was. My father-in-law, Sir Dennis Stucley, always said that if there was no sand on the beach at Blackpool Mill by May, we would be in for a bad summer; this year the beach has looked like the surface of the moon. We have always used this as a long range forecast and it seems to be entirely accurate!

It was a very busy spring and early summer here. We had our first Civil Weddings and receptions and the couples who married early on were blessed with wonderful weather. We have even had two weddings in the Gazebo, overlooking the sea; luckily it was beautiful weather for both! We have another wedding in the Gazebo later on in the summer; it is such a spectacular and unique venue. Weddings are such happy occasions and whether they are the civil ceremony alone or a reception on the lawn, the Abbey seems to be the perfect setting and is fast becoming a popular venue.

During May it was very exciting as the BBC came to film part of 'Sense and Sensibility' here. After filming in some stately homes further up country they chose Blackpool Mill as the location for the cottage in which Mrs Dashwood took her daughters to live on the death of her husband. The weather had been glorious up until then and for the week the Art Department were setting up it was lovely; as soon as the actors and actresses arrived the heavens opened! Apparently they are thrilled with the filming and it is due to be shown on BBC 1 in the autumn. The stars included Janet McTeer (Mrs Dashwood), Mark Williams, who played Arthur Weasley in Harry Potter, Hattie Morahan and Charity Wakefield (Elinor and Marianne) and the youngest sister was played by the little girl who played the young Beatrix Potter. Some very dashing young

men played Colonel Brandon (David Morrissey) and Willoughby (Dominic Cooper). We are all longing to see the results on television! Coincidentally, Hattie Morahan, who played Elinor, is the daughter of Christopher Morahan, the film director, who was evacuated here in the war with Highgate Junior School! He also directed a film here called 'An Element of Doubt' with Nigel Havers.

The film 'circus' arrived and all the vehicles were parked on the car park which was full to bursting with lorries for make-up, catering, offices, costume etc. It was great fun seeing people in period costume wandering about and our visitors had the added bonus of bumping into famous people rehearsing their lines! Magnificent horses and carriages drove through the grounds and it was a regular sight to see coachmen in full costume queuing up for ice creams! The Art Department transformed Blackpool Mill into the most beautiful, idyllic cottage surrounded by a beautiful garden; of course, it was all false and is now a distant memory! We were even reported to English Heritage for altering the cottage without permission; we didn't let on to the complainant that it was all false and would be back to normal in a fortnight! Hopefully it will all look wonderful on screen.

We have been very busy with functions here during the summer. Perhaps the happiest was our Highgate School Reunion for the evacuees from 1939, held in June. I have written about Highgate Reunions in previous newsletters as we were celebrating our 6th this summer. It is always a joy to see so many 'boys' returning to their 'home' where they lived for 2 years at the beginning of the War. So many had life changing experiences here; they had all come from London and many were in the country for the first time. They had left their parents behind and some were as young as six. They learned to tickle trout, brew up tea from bayleaves, pull tailfeathers out of unsuspecting peacocks and all the other sort of things that little boys get up to! My mother-in-law eventually sacked the headmaster, Mr Dumericq, and the school for allowing ink pellets and flaming darts to be thrown at the pictures! Their main dormitory was in the Dining Room, renamed Puffing Billy to make it sound more exciting for boys.

We have held functions for The Art Fund, Hilliers Garden Club, The Historic Houses Association, Torridge Tourist Association and two groups from Jenny Curtis Beard Walking Holidays. Some have stayed in the house and it has all been great fun but hard work with all the catering etc.

But the highlight of the summer for us has been the marriage of our youngest daughter, Lucinda, to Ranald Morgan from Dumfriesshire. They were married on a very wet day in August but absolutely nothing could dampen the spirits of the 370 people who came to celebrate with them! They had a wonderful

wedding service in St Nectan's Church overlooking the Abbey, taken by the (now retired) vicar, Colin Hodgetts and Father Edward Corbould from Ampleforth. Father Edward was Ranald's housemaster at Ampleforth and a truly inspiring man. We were so lucky to have had two very special men to take the service in our beautiful church. Incidentally, if you have time, do visit the church as it is very special, especially the Screen. It features in Simon Jenkins' book 'Englands Thousand Best Churches.

The reception that followed was held on the lawn with a delicious hog roast followed by some incredibly good music. The band, who we have used before, are local but were noticed by guests to a previous event here and were asked to play for The Duchess of Cornwall at her recent party for her 60th birthday. Luckily we had booked them long before otherwise I am sure that their prices would have reflected it! It was a wonderfully happy day which finished with us turning off the lights at 4am! Our daughter was trained in Florence as a portrait painter but now specialises in horses and dogs and also works for Buffy Shirley-Bevan in her thoroughbred horse vets practice in Gloucestershire. Ranald has just set up an office for The Buying Solution, an offshoot of Knight Frank.

We have just celebrated the first birthday of Isla Stucley, our first granddaughter, and Margot, our second granddaughter, has her birthday next week. We now have five grandchildren with no more on the horizon just yet!

Joanna Mitchell, our head (and nearly only) gardener has done an amazing job this summer and has smiled through the monsoon conditions. Dave, our groundsman, has managed to keep the grass looking good even after marquee after marquee on the car park. He and Joanna, with the help of Nigel, part time, really have worked hard and even now, in September, the gardens are looking fantastic. Don't miss the hydrangeas in The Shrubbery, they are a wonderful sight and The Walled Gardens as I write are looking so lovely and autumny with the sunflowers in full face! These sunflowers are the ones that weren't in flower for Lucinda's wedding; she had huge vases of them in their wedding tent which looked stunning.

It has been a busy but fulfilling summer. All our stewards, led by Mary, helpers and staff have worked incredibly hard through very difficult weather to try and ensure that our visitors have a lovely time. We have opened in time for lunch for the first time and this has been very successful, increasing our visitor numbers by nearly 30%; we were always told that if we opened earlier more people would come, and they have! Thank you all, without you this house would not survive.

Angela Stucley September 6th 2007