

England

The real Downton Abbey

Highclere Castle, setting of the blockbuster TV series 'Downton Abbey', is a short drive from London and very accessible for diehard fans, writes **Sheila Ryan**

THE TV series *Downton Abbey* has left our screens for the second time. Millions of devotees of the phenomenally successful costume drama are anxiously awaiting the promised Christmas special and wondering how to fill the hole in their lives until the third series next autumn.

The good news is that the house where the award-winning series was filmed is within striking distance of London, and is open to visitors.

A flight to Heathrow and a drive to Hampshire was all it took to bring me to the gates of Highclere Castle. The long drive wends through fields of sheep and horses until the familiar Victorian tower appears over the top of the trees.

Highclere has been home to the Carnarvon family since 1679, although the building we know so well was built in the 19th century.

Walking through the vaulted saloon to the drawing room gives a curious mixture of the familiar and unfamiliar. The setting is unmistakably Downton, but the tables and mantelpieces are crowded with framed photographs of the Carnarvon family, with the occasional royal included.

While delighted with the "warm band of admirers" garnered by the series, the current earl and countess are anxious to give visitors an insight into the real history of the house.

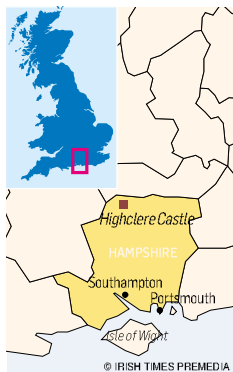
"*Downton Abbey* has given us a huge magic carpet ride but I don't want to be completely submerged by it," says Lady Carnarvon, who has just written a book about one of her predecessors. *Lady Almina and the Real Downton Abbey* tells the story of how Highclere Castle was made a military hospital during the first World War.

Sound familiar? Lady Carnarvon is friends with the creator of *Downton Abbey* Julian Fellowes, and the stories she has



Get there

Highclere Castle is close to Newbury, which is around 64km from Heathrow airport and 96km from Gatwick. The most flexible option is to fly to Heathrow and hire a car. BritMovieTours (britmovietours.com) offers one-day tours of *Downton Abbey* locations by mini-coach or private car departing from Gloucester Road Tube station and priced at £55 (€64).



told him over supper may have provided inspiration for some of the second series.

In the dining room you can recall the momentous events in the Grantham family that played out there, but the huge



Van Dyck portrait of Charles I tells the story of the Carnarvon family's part in the English civil war.

According to Lady Carnarvon, the portrait was taken down as events turned, and was found rolled up in an outhouse before being reinstated. "It was no good being intransigent in those days," she says, a line that might have come straight from the pragmatic Dowager Countess, played by Maggie Smith, in *Downton Abbey*.

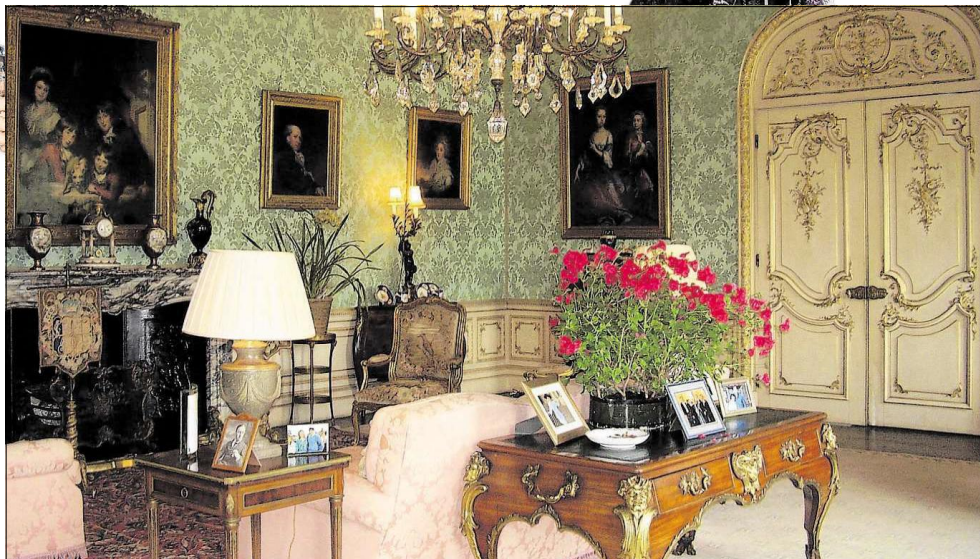
Where the real life of Highclere Castle meets the fantasy of *Downton Abbey* is the existence of the house as a force in the lives of its owners. "This house saved people's lives," says Lady Carnarvon, of its role in the first World War. Now she is dedicated to



the house's upkeep, and the popularity of *Downton Abbey* has turned the spotlight on Highclere.

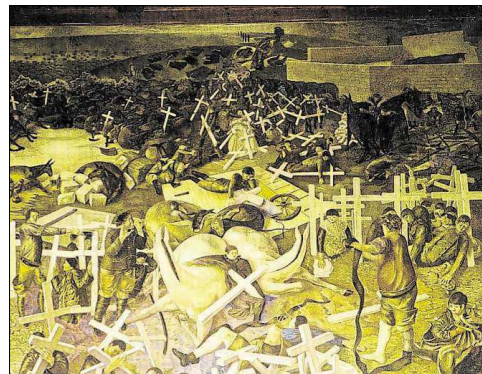
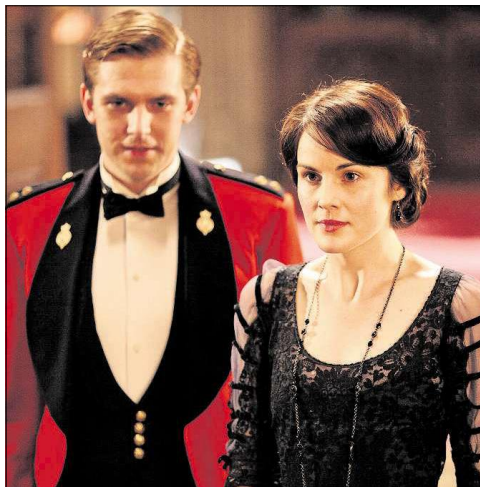
"It means everybody has heard of us, and that's very lucky in very different economic times," she says. "We know we're going to be full."

"Full" means 1,000 visitors on a typical day while





Cooking up a storm at the Hilton: P11



Paintings of the first World War by Stanley Spencer at Sandham Memorial Chapel

Highclere Castle where to . . .

Stay

■ **The Carnarvon Arms**, Newbury. 00-44-8433575526, bespokehotels.com. You cannot get much closer to Highclere Castle than this old coaching inn that used to offer refreshments to travellers to and from the castle. Recently renovated to more modern tastes, it is a popular spot, so book early. Rooms start at around £60 (€70).

■ **The Vineyard**, Stockcross, Newbury. 00-44-1635528770, the-vineyard.co.uk. For five-star treatment with four-poster beds and a spa, this hotel close to Newbury is the place. All the suites and rooms are named after wines, but the obsession with the grape does not end there. The hotel boasts an extensive cellar and guests can participate in tastings every Saturday or a seven-course wine-tasting menu in a dedicated dining room. Double rooms from around £180 (€210).

Eat

■ **The Yew Tree Inn**, Hollington Cross, Highclere. 00-44-1635 253360, theyewtree.net. Just outside the village of Highclere this 17th century eating house has everything you would expect, from the whitewashed walls and

black-beamed ceilings to the roast venison and Eton mess. The Yew Tree Inn also offers seven guest bedrooms. Three course Sunday lunch is priced at £25 (€30).

Shop

The village of Hungerford is home to numerous antique shops where you could kit out your stately home many times over. The Hungerford Arcade (hungerfordarcade.co.uk) is an indoor street crammed with more than 100 small antique stalls selling everything from tiny silver animals to butter churns.

Visit

■ **Whitchurch Silk Mill** (whitchurchsilkmill.org.uk) is a working silk mill from the Regency period where the water wheel still turns and visitors can try their hands at a pedal loom. Silks from Whitchurch have been used in period films including *Pride and Prejudice* and *Titanic*.

■ **Sandham Memorial Chapel** (nationaltrust.org.uk) is a small chapel housing a series of large-scale paintings of the first World War by Stanley Spencer.

Website
highclerecastle.co.uk

1,200 "is a bit of a squeeze". All the available tour bus slots have been sold for 2012 and more visitors are travelling long distances just to see the house.

HIGHCLERE CASTLE'S winter opening is limited, but it will be open to visitors for two days in early December and during the annual Christmas market on December 6th and 7th.

The market is a charitable event with stalls set up in the house, a choir and bell-ringers.

Period drama (clockwise from above): Highclere Castle; Dan Stevens as Matthew Crawley and Michelle Dockery as Mary in a scene from Downton Abbey; inside the castle; Maggie Smith as the Dowager Countess in the show; castle interior; and Lady Carnarvon. Photographs: Chris Jackson/Getty Images and Eamonn McCormack/Getty Images

The events team also accommodates weddings, private parties and corporate events.

Clearly, the life of a modern countess is not a leisurely one. However, while the rest of us have been wallowing in nostalgia for a fictional past, Lady Carnarvon does not pine for the glory days when the house had an army of servants to help run it.

"Almina had huge amounts of money, but she also worked hard," says Lady Carnarvon.

"What matters to me is family and community."

The house keeps local people employed, from the young girls who work in the tea-room to the oldest staff member, who is 88.

The countess is growing a wildflower meadow to feed the bees kept by the house painter in exchange for honey to sell in the gift shop. "It's a way of life based on more old-fashioned values," she says, "and if you get it, you're lucky."

park that looked like a *Star Wars* landscape, La Orotava village with amazing architecture and a picturesque mountain village called Masca.

If budget or work were not a restriction, what would be your dream holiday?

I'd travel through France and take my time. I love France in every way. I've had a love affair with it

since I was a child and I've had a thing about Paris for years. At the moment I'm in love with Nice. It's not the glamorous south of France but rough around the edges. I love the quality of the

light in the city, the promenade and the rocky beach. Nearby is a lovely walled town called Saint-Paul-de-Vence with a beautiful modern art museum called Fondation Maeght.

If you had your pick, who would you bring on holiday with you?

My fella, but I'd also bring any of my girl friends so he would not have the stress of trying to go here and there. He tends to want to flop on holidays or go on ridiculous expeditions.

What's your favourite place in Ireland?

The Forty Foot, Sandycove. When I lived in Dublin I would be a year-round swimmer and there is such a magic atmosphere there, like a community. There is a beautiful lake near me - called Lough Lene, Co Westmeath - but in summer it gets so littered despite the best efforts of locals.

Your recommended holiday reading?

I love my Nordic thrillers. Years ago in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, I read *Perfume* by Patrick Süskind about a serial killer set in the same part of 18th century France. I was staying in an old hotel and one night on my way to the bathroom I suddenly got a sense of perfume and this awful creature and scuttled back to my room!

Where will you go to next?

I'll save up to go back to Nice if I can. I'd rather spend three days well in a nice hotel than stay a week somewhere that's not comfortable.

■ Actor, author, broadcaster Mary McEvoy was nominated at this year's Bord Gáis Energy Irish Book Awards for *How The Light Gets In* (Hachette)

■ In conversation with Genevieve Carbery

What's your earliest holiday memory?

I remember going to Inchiquin, near Kenmare, Co Kerry where there was a waterfall and a mountaintop lake in a very wild beautiful valley. We didn't have a holiday every year as my dad wasn't always able to leave the farm.

What was your worst holiday?

I went with friends to a resort near Faro, Portugal. It was one of those locked-in tourist resorts that it was really difficult to get out of and where everything was geared towards organised tours. It was also late

July so it was blisteringly hot. I was trying to explore and see some normal local life but the area was so decimated by developers. I enjoyed it but would not ever choose it again.

What was your best holiday?

A trip to Tenerife. We didn't go to the more populous area but went to the north of the island to Garachico village. The hotel was gorgeous and Garachico had a wild rocky sea with natural rock pools for swimming with crystal clear water.

The under-explored side of Tenerife was such a surprise. There was a volcanic national



Mary McEvoy: "I love France in every way." Photograph: Matt Kavanagh