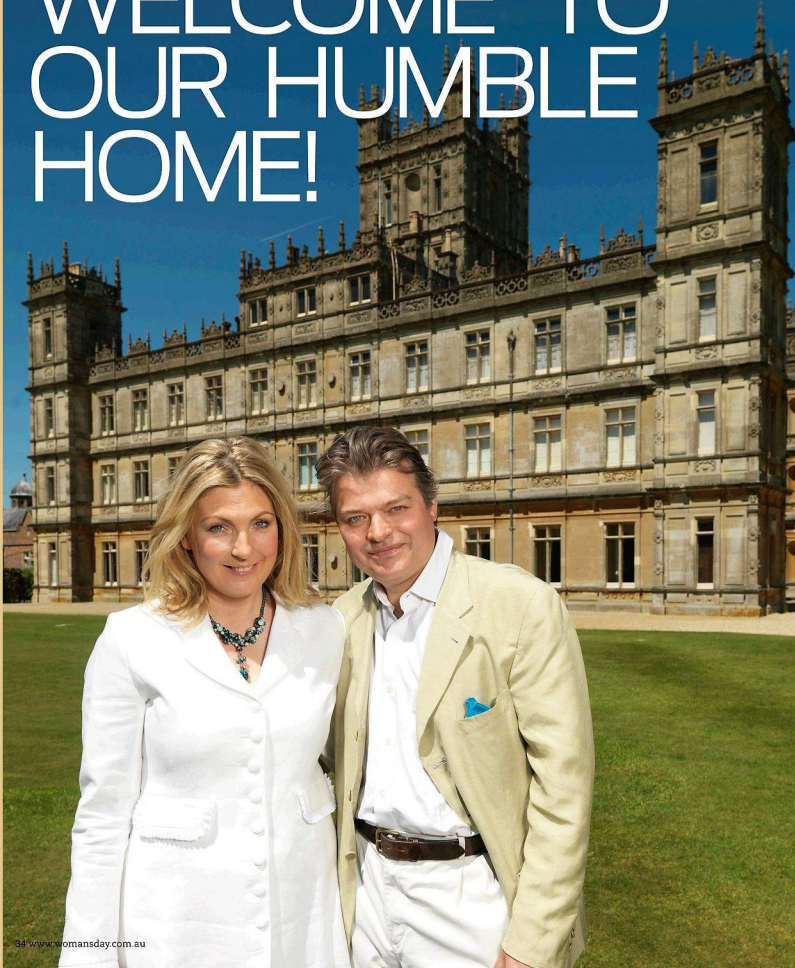


Downton Abbey's real owners

# WELCOME TO OUR HUMBLE HOME!



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Geordie and Fiona and, top right, their butler Colin, who has walked on Princes William and Harry



'We're not a dusty, preserved museum at Highclere. We're a basket of businesses.'



The past, headed by Hugh Bonneville

## For one couple, sitting down to *Downton Abbey* is just like watching a home video!

**T**his time last year, Highclere Castle was just another struggling English family home with the usual 2000-hectare estate, 50-plus bedrooms, towers, tapestries, priceless portraits, an attached museum of Egyptian artefacts... and the usual collapsing roofs and millions of dollars' worth of debt.

What a difference a popular prime-time period drama series can make. Thanks to *Downton Abbey*, this is now the most famous stately home in the world, with a future perhaps more secure than at any time in its history.

The seat of the Carnarvon family since the 1670s, you might think the current owners of the 450-year-old castle would be slightly miffed that all this tradition has been upstaged by some newfangled TV upstart. But Fiona, eighth Countess of Carnarvon, has no time for such petty snobbery.

Having the UK's most expensive drama series filmed in your family home – it costs around \$1.6 million to produce each one-hour episode – is "enormously, hugely, greatly disruptive", but it can also help save your bacon.

Before *Downton Abbey*, the recession-hit Highclere, located in Newbury, west of London, was in such trouble that Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber (who lives nearby) cheekily offered to buy the place as a home for his art collection.

However, thanks to the success of the Seven series, Highclere is heading back into the black.

Last year, the castle took 100 coach party bookings. This year, that figure has risen to 600. With tickets at \$23 a pop, this will give Highclere its biggest financial boost since 1895, when the fifth Earl of Carnarvon landed a cool \$40 million by marrying into the de Rothschild clan.

"We hoped we would increase our profile and we have succeeded quite brilliantly," Fiona says. "We're not a dusty, preserved museum at Highclere. We're a basket of businesses. Nothing ever looks after itself."

Fiona and her husband Geordie, the eighth Earl, see themselves as "stewards" of the estate. "We look after the land and the gardens, planting trees for future generations to enjoy,"



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The estate requires \$17 million for repairs, so the Carnarvons do not live decadently.



*'We look after the land and plant trees for future generations. It's about continuity, about passing the estate on in better condition than when we inherited it.'*

she says. "It's about continuity, about passing the estate on in even better condition than when we inherited it."

If that line sounds familiar, it's because you'll have heard the Earl of Grantham (Hugh Bonneville) saying something remarkably similar in *Downton Abbey*. The reason for this is that the show's creator, Julian Fellowes, and his wife Emma are great friends of the Earl and Countess and are regular guests at Highclere.

It's not hard to see what inspired the series. The history of the Carnarvons and Highclere is as racy and eventful as anything on TV.

The first Earl died in 1643 fighting in the English Civil War. The fifth Earl sponsored the Howard Carter expedition to Egypt that discovered King Tutankhamun's tomb. He was famously "cursed" by the pharaoh and died in 1923, not long after the discovery, from an infected mosquito bite that spookily appeared in the same spot where the gold in King Tut's death mask is thinnest.

At the same moment, back at Highclere, the Earl's beloved fox terrier Susie howled then dropped dead. The two are buried together on ground overlooking the castle.

The fifth Earl belonged to the last generation that could properly enjoy the old, aristocratic lifestyle of endless house parties and shooting weekends attended by 25 domestic servants.

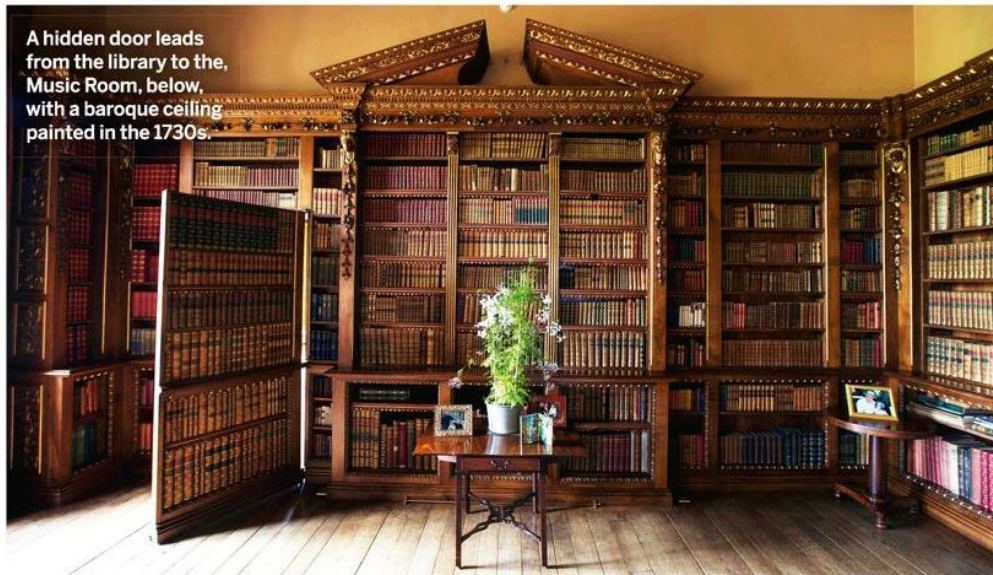
For the current Earl and Countess, this kind of decadence is out of the question.

"I would love a lady's maid," Fiona says. "But I suspect the only people who can afford one of those these days are Russian oligarchs."

These days, there's a skeleton staff of seven – a manager, a butler, two chefs, a kitchen porter, a housekeeper and deputy housekeeper.

Butler Colin Edwards does everything from shifting furniture to serving lunch in his white gloves and lending a touch of class to events.

A hidden door leads from the library to the Music Room, below, with a baroque ceiling painted in the 1730s.



He has waited on princes William and Harry, as well as looked after glamour model Katie Price (aka Jordan) on the day of her ill-fated wedding to Peter Andre.

"The role has changed," says Colin. "In the old days, the butler was the head of the downstairs staff, so grand that about the only physical work he'd do was pour the master's wine. These days, it's much more hands-on."

No one, least of all the Carnarvons, is under any illusion that the great days of Edwardian aristocracy can ever be revived.

As Lady Carnarvon says, "More and more of the big houses are being bought up by people who are not British, who come in by helicopter, and aren't very much interested in opening the church fete."

***Downton Abbey* airs Sundays at 8.30pm on Seven.**



Words: James Delingpole