



House of hospitality

Words and Photographs:

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When Ruth Lowe kindly invited me to visit her at her 'holiday cottage' near Spilsby in the Lincolnshire Wolds, whatever I had imagined certainly did not prepare me for my first sighting of Skendleby Hall – a splendid red brick grade two listed eighteenth century country house.

At the time Queen Elizabeth 1st was a guest at Skendleby Hall it was owned by Richard Decoutier, a member of the Brackenbury family, and gentleman usher to the Queen. The house was passed down through the family until the eighteenth century when Sir Edward Brackenbury, the fourth son of Richard of Aswardby, inherited it from his uncle the Revd Edward Brackenbury.

An L-shaped Georgian building was added to the Elizabethan west wing and the house was further extended by the Gainsford family, who purchased the house from Sir Edward's son who added a Victorian wing and further embellishments. The

famous Victorian architect, Samuel Sanders Teulon, noted for his Gothic style of churches, and whose clients included the Duke of Marlborough and Prince Albert, designed the clock tower, the chapel, the porches and the fancy Dutch gabling. The plans for these were exhibited at the Royal Academy.

Now restored, the house is truly an impressive sight. Ruth's modest description of her beautiful home is true in the sense that she stays there whenever she takes a break from her busy work schedule. She has been the proud

owner of Skendleby Hall for eighteen months, during which time she has carried out extensive repairs and renovation.

The Hall is let out during the week and at weekends to groups of people who want to experience grand country house living at its best.

On my arrival, I was nearly licked to death by Jet, one of Ruth's two Labradors. If this was an indication of the welcome that awaited visitors, then they would not be disappointed.

Ruth introduced me to Gillian, her daughter, who manages Skendleby Hall and Ruth's other property, Pine Lodge in Tetford, and her team Micky, Mel, and Jack Broadbent who look after the housekeeping and gardening and Elaine Olivant. They all live locally and the Broadbent family have been with Ruth since November. Gillian, Ruth and I entered the house through the white stone porch, guarded by two small stone hounds, into a large hallway with a very high ceiling, through to the beautiful main drawing room. The diffused sunlight, streaming in through three tall elegant, Georgian windows, accentuated the rich gold coloured furnishings and 'swagged' silk drapes.

The focal point is the splendid carved mahogany fireplace. The original panelling and painted cornices are decorated with Masonic emblems. Ruth explained that many of the pictures, hung round the

The stunning Skendleby Hall has been further improved by its new owners who are sharing their home with a wider public

Below: The splendid oak cabinet in the long hall

Opposite clockwise from top: Skendelby Hall

Skendleby Hall enjoys unspoiled views in all directions

A water feature in the garden







HOMES & GARDENS

room, were by the former owner, Brian Chapman, a renowned local artist who specialised in painting people, horses and dogs.

The drawing room, although very grand in size and style, is nevertheless meant for relaxing in as indicated by the cushioned window seats and comfortable sofas. In here, as through the rest of the house, are fine pieces of antique furniture and stunning floral displays. It is immediately apparent that a lot of love, money and hard work had gone into creating the luxurious interior.

Below: The snooker room

Bottom: A paved barbecue area is covered by a wooden pergola



Ruth acknowledges that Carol and Brian Chapman, the former owners, had brought the house to a high standard themselves and had saved Skendleby Hall from becoming a 'block of flats'. Her aim was to turn it back into one big house again.

From the library, which also has original oak panelling, we went into a charming sitting room with arched alcoves and Victorian coving. The tall Georgian windows look out onto the garden and open countryside. Three small stone lions guard the hearth of a grey marble fireplace. From here Ruth took me to the stately dining room which can seat twenty-four people. The dark green painted walls enhance a rectangular and a circular polished mahogany table with matching carved chairs.

Original batik pictures hang on one wall. The curved end of the room is part of the extension that includes the chapel. Ruth is sure that the original dining room was very much larger as Sir Edward and his second wife Eleanor were lavish entertainers.

She said: "Sir Edward was a distinguished soldier who became a magistrate and deputy Lieutenant for Lincolnshire. Among the many notable guests to stay at Skendleby Hall in his time were Trollope, the Thackerays and Alfred Lord Tennyson. A literary salon was established here and Robert Smith Surtees, a novelist and sports writer, and brother-in-law to Sir Edward, inspired Dickens to serialise *The Pickwick Papers*."

Unfortunately Sir Edward's son, Edward Fenwick Brackenbury, who inherited the Hall on Sir Edward's death in 1864, although a charming eccentric man was also a spendthrift. On his death an order to his shirtmaker for a new shirt every day had to be cancelled immediately. The hall was sold to the Gainsford family, thus depriving Edward Brackenbury's sons and daughter of their inheritance.

"The house has a chequered history, having been owned in turn, after the Gainsfords by a cattle farmer, a strict religious sect and a builder who, having converted part of the house into flats, redeemed himself by repairing the roof," said Ruth.

Next to the dining room is a sauna and shower room which leads onto a secluded patio with a large hot tub. I remarked that they have thought of everything to ensure their guests have a pampered stay.

Gillian tells me: "We also have a snooker room, two huge fully fitted kitchens and a colourful children's room full of toys and a DVD player. Teenagers can escape to a flat with the latest games and its own kitchen. We can provide caterers however most people bring their own provisions. I think we are the only country house that can accommodate large parties who have the whole

house to themselves. As well as ideal for family gatherings and special occasions it is great for corporate events and we have recently converted a sitting room into a meeting room with a projector. Of course it is the perfect romantic setting for wedding receptions.

"A lot of the bookings come from London so it would be good to have some from Lincolnshire and other parts of the country. We have installed central heating so we are able to open all year round. There is a website, and we can be contacted by email. The house is so roomy that everyone can have some privacy if they want it."

Gillian is well qualified to run the business as she has a degree in hospitality management and tourism and ran a pub and wine bar in Malaysia. It is evident that she and her team ensure the highest standards for their guests. Recently Ruth has opened a small beauty salon run by Sarah where stressed out visitors can experience everything from an Indian head massage to a spray tan – not surprisingly it is very popular.

Throughout Skendleby Hall Ruth has used stunning silk curtains and soft furnishings. The fine brass light fittings in every room were bought from the Chapmans. Ruth said that rather than travelling to London she purchased, or had everything made locally in Spilsby, and uses the many talents of the local trades people wherever possible.

A wonderful polished oak staircase, installed by the Gainsfords and one of three staircases leads up to the twenty-two bedrooms all with their own bathrooms, the majority en suite. Many of the spacious main bedrooms are furnished with beautiful antique furniture, some of it French. One bedroom, which overlooks the wooded area of the garden and gravelled carriage circle, has side views of the striking clock tower with its wooden bell turret and fish-scale slates. Another lovely bedroom has walls papered with extravagant peach and jade roses. The two double brass beds and the delicate mahogany furniture suit the elegant Georgian room perfectly.

Ruth explains: "Unfortunately a lot of work had to be done on the clock tower replacing tiles and part of the staircase, which collapsed from dry rot, at a cost of £20,000. Gillian and I must enjoy a challenge. When we moved into the Hall in April it was like a building site and covered in dust due to the four attic flats being reconverted. We had two months to get everything ready for our first guests, in June. We didn't stop, and I shopped and shopped."

The interior decoration and finish are impeccable and although Ruth had no for-

mal interior design training she said she had learned from furnishing many different homes. I was impressed by the attention to detail, the clever colour co-ordination and the charming quilted bedspreads which are a feature in all the bedrooms.

The unique chapel bedroom, which is a favourite with guests, has a sumptuous four-poster pine bed. The beautiful white flower sprigged silk drapes are intertwined with deep red silk. Ruth has completed the look with matching curtains, bed cushions and pine furniture. A unique stained glass window now has pride of place on the wall. Brian Chapman, the former owner, used this room as his artist's studio. The chapel was built specially for the Roman Catholic wife of Mr Gainsford as there were only Wesleyan churches in the area.

The long hall downstairs is decorated in pale green, with darker green accents. Near the door is a splendid carved oak cabinet. The whole house is luxuriously furnished, fresh and bright.

Skendleby Hall is set in two acres and there are wonderful uninterrupted views of the surrounding countryside from the front of the Hall and the remains of a medieval village at the back with a Norman church in the distance. The village itself is steeped in history, and none of the surrounding land can be touched as it is of high archaeological value. Ruth has a keen young gardener named Jack, who is currently maintaining the flower beds and lawns. One of the talented villagers, he is an up and coming singer and song writer and is currently recording his first album. He took me through a wrought-iron rose arch to the ornamental octagonal pond with wood and wrought-iron benches placed round it. Further on is a paved barbecue area with a wooden pergola. This is a good place in which to unwind on summer evenings.

Jack tells me a rose bed will be planted in front of the small wood which contains many different species of trees. Ruth is sad that a 400-year-old Beech tree will have to be cut down due to a honey fungus infection but new trees will be added and the wood developed. It is hard to imagine that the fabulous view of the Lincolnshire Wolds was once obscured by a row of twenty foot high conifers. "They had to go," Ruth told me. They may have gone but Ruth's ownership has kept the Hall from appearing on the list of 'lost Lincolnshire houses'.

Skendleby Hall, in addition to its grandeur, exudes a cordial presence personified by Ruth and Gillian themselves. During the Brackenbury era the Hall gained a reputation of renowned hospitality. This continues to this day.

Below: The relaxing drawing room

Bottom: The dining room can seat twenty-four people

