



## GRACIOUS LIVING

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One of the most popular holiday attractions in Britain is the stately home. Six million people a year visit National Trust (NT) properties alone, and that accounts for only about half the whole stately homes' trade. We troop around, gawk at the portraits, wish we could touch the carefully-railed-off-brocade-bedsread, wonder if those hydrangeas would look as good in our back garden and, best of all, have tea, scones and cream, Victoria sponges, chocolate cakes and date and walnut loaf. A harmless leisure time pursuit, gorgeous on a sunny day, relaxing anytime? Yes, but still, nothing we do is really so innocent, so untouched by the attitudes and values of the society we live in as words like harmless, leisure and relaxing suggest.

When we go round a stately home, we are imbibing a world of privilege. Some of the non-NT properties, like Alton Towers or even Chatsworth, have a certain vulgarity at times, with their fairgrounds and mini zoos, trays of tea, ice cream and candyfloss, evoking the rich, teeming vitality of the seaside as we've been taught to imagine it once was. But most stately homes are, well, stately. Habits of orderliness and quiet are instilled the moment we step over the threshold. The guides, guide-

books and labels on things all speak in reverent tones of the well-to-do who once lived in the house, in a way that draws us into a cosy acceptance of privilege, never questioning how they got to be well-to-do or who really maintained their well-being. We are asked to admire exquisite lace, delicate porcelain, intricately wrought ivory, and if occasionally we are told who actually did all this beautiful work, nonetheless the overriding emphasis is upon who owned it - the exquisiteness, delicacy and intricacy, we are asked to feel, reflect those who possessed the objects not those who produced them. And there is sometimes too a tone in the guides' voice, which tells you you're lucky to be there and perhaps regrets that this house is now only available to the public instead of being private and special.

It's not that these houses were the property of the privileged that matters, so much as the feelings we are invited to have about that privilege, the respect and deference that we are called upon to show. But you don't have to respond that way; and besides, things are changing.

You can visit stately houses and appreciate them against the grain of the way they are so often set up. To begin with, one can attend to the fact that the architecture and

furnishings are often wonderfully beautiful. The problem with what the rich and bourgeois have is not so much that they have them at all as that *only* they have them. We should rejoice in their becoming available in a public, shared form, more especially when it is through an organisation like the National Trust. There is no denying a certain middle-class feel to the Trust, but it is non profit-making and, unlike many largely middle-class cultural pursuits (such as opera), it does not draw on state funding to give middle-class people at public expense what previously they would have paid for. Its income is from its members and people visiting the properties. It is private, in the sense of not being state funded; but it is public, being open to all on a non-exploitative basis.

The beauty of many stately homes can be enjoyed, for those qualities of life it bespeaks. To walk up a splendidly curved drive towards a perfectly proportioned Georgian house is to indulge in a little gracious living. To look long and hard at rich hangings, sumptuous tableware, extravagantly painted ceilings is to sink in the lush luxury of a life that is both sensuously heady and wonderfully comfortable. Graciousness, lushness, comfort - these are delicious feelings that in a good society anyone could feel, which would not only be possible for those with money and power. To enjoy a stately home like this is to feel something of what it would be like to live in a good society.

That is to think forward to Utopia. One can also look at the past that stately homes offer in a way different from how it is usually packaged. This can be hard work. In one house I visited, which you were obliged to be shown round, we were asked what we'd like to know about. I said it was interesting to know about the ordinary life of the ordinary (well-off, bourgeois) people who'd lived there (I knew there would be no point asking to hear about the staffs lives). But the guide clearly didn't consider this of interest, and proceeded to tell us of some king who'd spent all of one night there. Still, you can pick up a sense of the lifestyle of the ladies and gentlemen who inhabited the place, often by looking at the details of the books, toys and objects laid out. One can also pay particular attention to what information is given, however limited, about the makers of these things, and ask questions about them (if only to show that *you* think this matters).

Then there are the kitchens, stables, out-houses. More and more of these are

being opened up, and you can begin to get a feel of the labour that underpinned gracious living in a society based on privilege. I find the kitchens the most revealing. The sheer amount of work that had to be done to maintain a large household is incredible; and the enormous variety of skills called on is conveyed by the array of cooking utensils and cleaning equipment. What these bring home to you especially is the way that they had to produce the whole means of subsistence. Animals had to be slaughtered, butchered, cured and prepared even before what we now would call

cooking would begin; just as the oven had to be cleaned and got ready much in advance of the ten minutes or so we need to warm an oven. The kitchens reveal a total process of producing the means of life; and we know who did all that production, and for whom.

This emphasis on the life below stairs is one that the National Trust is developing. One of its most popular properties is Quarry Bank Mill at Styal in Cheshire, where one can see not only how a group of working class people worked in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but some-

thing of how they lived besides working, where they slept, shopped and worshipped. Few stately homes get beyond showing the working conditions below stairs - they need to open up the living quarters as well. We need to appreciate the *whole* nation's heritage.

A visit to a stately home is both an indulgence in the fantasy of gracious living and a chance to think about how such living has been produced in the past. It is both a pleasure and an education. But I must admit that I am loth to go to one that doesn't have a tea room.



Quarry Bank Mill, Styal, Cheshire- well worth a visit. Open March-June and September-November: Tuesday-Sunday; July and August: everyday; winter months: Saturday and only.