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Home from Home

Oare Manor sits at the heart of the Exmoor National Park and has a heritage to enthral any historian. Words and photos by Peter Booton

Oare Manor is famous as the home of the Exmoor Hunt foxhounds from 1880 to 1939, and for its association with Parson 'Jack' Russell (1795-1883) who introduced the breed of long-legged hunting dogs which now bear his name.

Dating in part from the early 11th century, but mostly built between 1830 and 1890, the historic Victorian manor house is picturesquely situated at the heart of Exmoor National Park in Oare valley. Next to the house is the Church

of St Mary, where Lorna Doone was shot on her wedding day in RD Blackmore's classic tragic tale of the warring local Doone and Rydd families. A wooden chair said to be John Rydd's favourite has long been a feature of the manor house, where it remains today.

Famous past guests at the manor include the Prince of Wales, Queen Victoria's son. The renowned artist and sculptor Michael Haseltine lived at Oare Manor from 1990 until his death. The property was subsequently purchased in

2008 by Tony and Jane Robinson. Mr Robinson is the founder of UKIP Media and Events, an international publishing and exhibitions company that specialises in transportation technology.

The Robinsons, who live mostly at their home in West Sussex, had been looking for a second home in Devon or Cornwall, but after hearing about Oare Manor they fell in love with the property at first sight. "It was one of those places – location, location, location," recalls Tony. "I hadn't been to Exmoor for 30

years and I'd forgotten just how beautiful it is. The scenery is incredible. I got out of the car, saw these amazing panoramic views and this lovely old house that hadn't been 'got at'. We'd seen so many houses that had been mutilated and had all their character taken out, but this house was unruined."

However, the interior of the manor house was extremely tired and so the Robinsons decided to totally refurbish the property, but without spoiling its immense character. As they would only

be living there for a few weeks every year, they also decided that when it was finished they would rent it out as an exclusive holiday residence offering five-star standard accommodation.

After stripping out its interior, the house was then re-

wired, re-plumbed and re-decorated, with all the work carried out by local contractors. Tony and Jane styled the interior themselves. "We've learnt how to work harmoniously and that's proved very productive," explains Tony. "I have very strong feelings about colour and Jane has decided that I don't do too bad a job and so she lets me do the colour. She does all the furniture and curtains because that's what she's good at."

Jane adds, "My passion was always country house and hotel interiors, and managing luxury products is something I've enjoyed doing for most of my career. I like to create an ambience and this is something we've done here, really. From the point of view of guests it's like coming to a country house hotel, although it is still a home. It has a nice mix of both, from the lovely Egyptian cotton linen to the fragrant bath salts."

The colour scheme is certainly distinctive and Tony clearly favours strong colours, even including black. In one of the eight luxurious bedroom suites the ceiling has been painted black and teamed to good effect with black and silver patterned wallpaper. "I believe that if you want to make a small room look bigger, the trick is to make it dramatic," advises Tony. "In this house all the ceilings are painted to match the colour of the walls, because that way you don't accentuate the ceiling."

Jane points out that it isn't easy to find an accurate colour match for wallpaper and so they have hundreds of colour tester pots. She adds, "There are about 40 different shades of black and



Tony and Jane Robinson with their two adorable Jack Russells, Polly and Sally, which Tony has taught to sing but not sit!



The comfortable and elegantly furnished drawing room



Above Stag-patterned cushions and RD Blackmore's *Lorna Doone*
Below The comfortably furnished reception hall

finding the right one to match the black paper on the walls was really hard." Oare Manor's elegant Victorian interior contains a wealth of art and antiques with an eclectic yet harmonious mix of old-fashioned, traditional and contemporary furnishings, sourced mostly by Tony and Jane from London shops and large auction houses, such as Bonhams and Christie's, as well as smaller individual shops nationwide. On

occasion they even visited suppliers by helicopter and recall how surprised one stockist of antique beds was when they flew in to his South Somerset premises and chose an ornate, gilt 'Josephine' bed. One of only three replicas in the UK of the original that Napoleon had designed for Josephine, the bed now has pride of place in their master bedroom.

Rather than spend a lot of money on expensive fabrics for curtains that would



Potentially John Rydd's favourite chair

rarely be closed in such a secluded location, Jane found most of her curtain materials on the internet at a fraction of the cost and then had them made up and embellished with tasselled fringes and headers.

Tony loves cooking and he 'engineered' the kitchen, equipping it with two wall-mounted Britannia ovens and a double oven Everhot cooker with an induction hob, which he believes is even better than an Aga. "I'm really into healthy eating," he admits. "We've got chickens here and you can't beat picking up your own eggs in the morning and popping them into the pan. You know the quality is going to be fantastic." Jane adds, "And we've just redesigned the whole vegetable plot so we're going to be growing a lot of our own vegetables in future."

Taking very good care of guests and the Robinsons when they come to stay are live-in members of staff, Rod, the butler, and his wife, Karen, who is the housekeeper. Having previously been employed in a London royal residence, their credentials are, of course,



The dining room



The comfortable and elegantly furnished drawing room



The luxury kitchen 'engineered' by Tony and equipped with two wall-mounted Britannia ovens, an Everhot cooker and an inset wall-mounted log-burning stove



impeccable! As well as always being on hand to perform a host of daily tasks, Rod and Karen provide a full room service for visitors, light a cheery log fire every morning and prepare breakfast. Guests may cook their own evening meals, if they wish, or arrangements can be made for a chef to visit.

Oare Manor can accommodate up to 16 people, which makes it an ideal venue

for house parties, shooting weekends and private celebrations. Practically every possible luxury and facility has been thought of for discerning guests. There is a state-of-the-art sound system, plasma TVs in every suite, WiFi throughout and a library stocked with books, CDs and DVDs, as well as a helicopter landing area and an outdoor Jacuzzi with superb views of the surrounding countryside. And for dogs there is even a dedicated shower and hair dryer in the old stables!

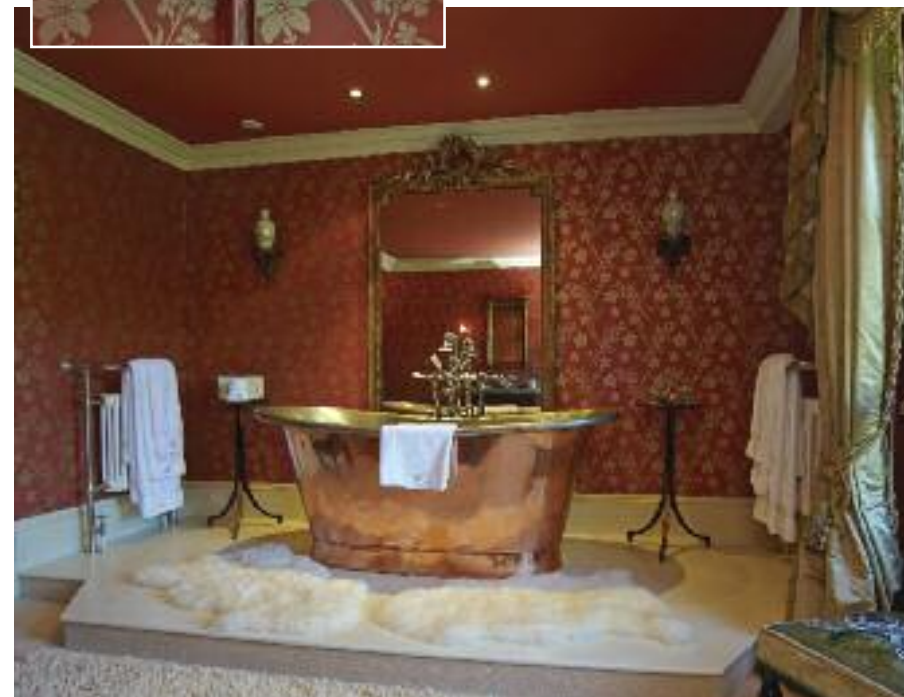
Time spent at Oare Manor can be active or leisurely. Field sports, clay pigeon shooting and horse riding are all available. Less energetic pursuits include croquet on the lawn, a guided Exmoor safari or a gentle stroll around the 30-acre grounds. And as dusk falls, what could be more pleasant than curling up in front of a glowing log fire and reading *Lorna Doone*? □

For details of the facilities at Oare Manor, tel: 01598 741300/01403 711844, or visit oaremanor.com

Above The master bedroom with antique 'Josephine' bed

Above left The copper cisterns were made especially for Oare Manor

Left Bathroom with deep copper bath, which Tony says is very comfortable



Above A guest bedroom with black and silver theme
Left Stylish circular shower
Below En-suite bathroom for the black-themed bedroom
Bottom The dog shower and dryer

