

RETURN TO ALBION

The 19th Earl of Devon left behind a Californian life of sunshine and surfing to take over the family estate, bringing his television-star American wife and two children to live with the ghosts of Powderham Castle
By Catriona Gray

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HARRY CORY WRIGHT
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Powderham Castle,
seen from the banks
of the River Exe



The castle at sunrise. Above: the rose garden



At first glimpse, the dramatic silhouette of Powderham Castle looks like something out of a fairy tale. Its grey stone walls, imposing with their turrets and towers, rear up against the picturesque backdrop of Devon's sweeping Exe estuary and acres of ancient parkland, where fallow deer graze contentedly in the dappled sunlight. Visitors must pass through a fortified gate lodge – crowned with a crest and a flagpole – to reach the castle courtyard, while the formal gardens are filled with colourful roses, which flower exuberantly in the borders and climb up the ramparts. If it wasn't for the little sign announcing the gift shop, or the scattering of parasols and picnic tables, you might imagine that you had stepped back in time. Such is the romance of the setting, you almost expect to see a beautiful maiden gazing from the battlements or a mediaeval knight galloping across the lawns.

As it happens, the owners are every bit as intriguing as the location. The Earl and Countess of Devon – more informally known as Charlie and AJ – are a thoroughly modern couple. Tall, dark-haired and affable, the 19th Earl studied law and started his career working as a barrister in London. Meanwhile, AJ grew up in California and became an actress at an early age, starring in the popular 1990s television show *My So-Called Life* alongside a teenage Claire Danes. (Her other roles include appearances in *Baywatch* and *Seinfeld*.) Having come from very different worlds, the couple met completely by chance in a bar in Las Vegas. 'Neither of us knew anything about each other's backgrounds at first, but we shared a similar feeling of not quite knowing where we fit in,' says Charlie, 'I was a bit shy about this place and all that it entailed, while AJ never felt that comfortable with the "star" aspect of her job.'

Despite both initially thinking that their relationship was a fling, they found themselves irresistibly drawn together. After a year of long-distance dating, AJ spent three months in the UK, on a break between filming, and subsequently, Charlie made the decision to follow her back to LA – 'her career prospects were much better than mine,' he jokes – studying for the Californian bar, while living at AJ's home in Topanga Canyon. 'He was my pool boy for a year,' says AJ, laughing. 'It was fabulous.'

Charlie threw himself into his new life, even proposing to AJ while they were on surfboards. 'We lived in California

The Earl and Countess of Devon, photographed in the Marble Hall. The Earl wears wool cardigan, £395, Dunhill. Jeans and shoes, his own. The Countess wears silk and chiffon dress, £605, Paul & Joe. All jewellery throughout, her own



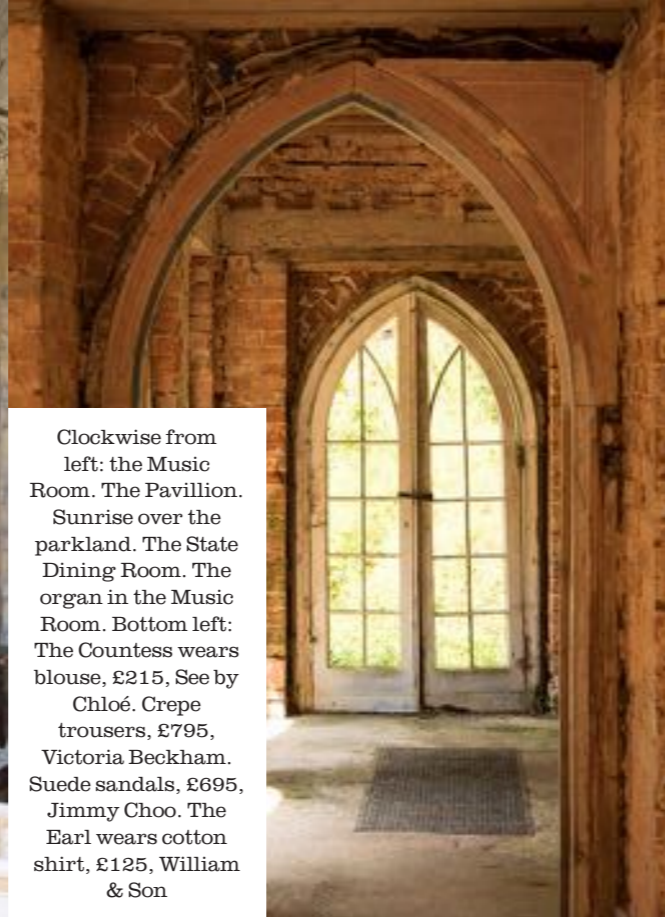


The Countess, on Dobbin the horse in the State Bedroom, wearing silk dress, £695, Vilshenko. Suede flats, £575, Jimmy Choo. Opposite: the Staircase Hall





Clockwise from left: the Music Room. The Pavillion. Sunrise over the parkland. The State Dining Room. The organ in the Music Room. Bottom left: The Countess wears blouse, £215, See by Chloé. Crepe trousers, £795, Victoria Beckham. Suede sandals, £695, Jimmy Choo. The Earl wears cotton shirt, £125, William & Son



for 10 years, got married, had two kids, and were part of a really wonderful community,' says Charlie. Then in 2015, everything changed, when Charlie's father, the 18th Earl, died unexpectedly and the family found themselves back in England, trying to work out how to run the 3,500-acre estate, particularly as the estate manager had also just left. 'There was a moment of walking upstairs and seeing my dad's office on the left and the manager's office on the right and not knowing which of them to go into, because suddenly you're doing all the jobs at once,' recalls Charlie. 'It was quite a baptism of fire.'

'To start with, it was overwhelming, particularly as we were a family that was grieving,' agrees AJ. 'We were grieving for Charlie's father, Charlie's old life, and the fact that we were leaving California and not going back. It was crazy to go through all of that while taking on what's essentially about 12 businesses.'

But swiftly, the couple began to introduce a West Coast freshness to the estate – throwing open its doors to visiting students, creating an initiative to encourage and mentor young musicians, as well as regularly inviting the local primary school to experience history first-hand, from exploring the Victorian kitchens to lighting wood fires in the grand Georgian grates. 'It's not a museum,' insists AJ. 'People should come to Powderham and feel comfortable. Instead of always imagining what it was like in the past, they're simply enjoying the present moment. I want it to be in its heyday right now.'

One of the couple's earliest projects was to host BBC Radio One's Big Weekend festival in the grounds, which featured Mumford & Sons and Coldplay – the latter's frontman, Chris Martin, is from the neighbouring village. 'It had been raining almost constantly in the weeks leading up to it, and then miraculously we had the most wonderful blue skies,' recalls AJ. 'I've never lived in a place where the sun brings such incredible euphoria.'

Another particularly popular move was allowing staff to bring their dogs to work. 'There are probably more dogs than people at this stage,' says Rosy Painter, who works for the estate office and shows me around the spectacular castle in between the steady stream of guided tours. Powderham is one of the few major stately homes in the country that is still privately owned, enabling a greater degree of freedom in how its treasures are displayed – as well as a greater pressure to ensure that the estate pays its way.

The interiors are spectacular – a wonderful mix of styles and periods ranging from the 17th century to the 1930s. There is a soaring entrance hall, painted a vivid peacock

blue and embellished with ornate neoclassical carvings. In the drawing-room and library, secret passageways and hidden rooms are cleverly concealed behind false bookcases. At first, the panels seem to swing open as if by magic, but after some practice, I begin to spot the telltale lines in the skirting boards that denote an almost-invisible door. An entire wing, with furnishings dating from the inter-war period, is closed off until the estate can acquire the funds to restore it. It is earmarked to be the family quarters eventually, but for now the Earl and Countess – along with their two children (12-year-old Joscelyn and 10-year-old Jack) and Rubi the terrier – have decamped to the old stable yard, as the former family rooms in the castle have been turned into wedding accommodation. Powderham is a popular place to get married – there is plenty of room in the gardens for the most capacious of marquees, while staying in the castle itself must make for a truly memorable event.

As befits such a historic property, Powderham is also in possession of a coterie of ghosts. 'We moved in here in that summer when my dad died, and my kids obviously got a bit freaked out by living in a castle – especially after they heard all the old stories,' says Charlie. 'But there's one wonderful tale of the grey lady, who walks across the top of the big staircase whenever a member of the family is particularly ill – she's always introduced as the caring one, who's there to look out for us. Jack always used to come into our room to get into bed, and one night he didn't. And when we asked him why not, he said, "The grey lady put me into bed last night and tucked me in." He was never scared of ghosts again.' Although the current Earl describes himself as 'not the supernatural type', he seems to have a fairly benign attitude towards the castle's unearthly

'THE GREY LADY WALKS ACROSS THE TOP OF THE BIG STAIRCASE WHENEVER A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY IS ILL'

occupants, recounting the tale of an unsuspecting visitor-attraction manager who was shoved in the back by the resident 'pushing ghost' with much merriment. Whether you believe in such tales or not, you get the feeling that Powderham is fundamentally a happy place, with the well-loved atmosphere of a building that has been home to the same family for more than 600 years.

'The actress and the lawyer?' quips AJ. 'I'm not sure if we'd have been hired if we'd applied for the job.' But really, it's hard to imagine a couple better suited to navigating the challenges of running an estate in the 21st century: her openness and charisma is teamed with his incisive thinking and historical knowledge. If anyone can lay the foundations for Powderham to thrive for centuries to come, surely it's this pair. □

For details of opening times, wedding hire and events, visit www.powderham.co.uk.

HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY AMY BRANDON, USING AVEDA AND BOBBI BROWN COSMETICS