

The Good Life
Experience on the
Hawarden Estate

DUKES, DRUMS & DECIBELS

Catriona Gray charts how the grand ancestral estates of the British aristocracy have played host to legendary musicians, a tradition that continues to this day



Clockwise from right: crowds at the Rolling Stones' 1976 concert at Knebworth House. Wilderness Festival. Three scenes from Port Eliot Festival

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THE SEASON

With its Gothic spires, Tudor interiors and rambling gardens, Knebworth House in Hertfordshire looks like the quintessential country estate, steeped in tradition. Yet for many, its name conjures up memories of some of the past five decades' greatest concerts: Led Zeppelin taking to the stage in 1979, Oasis playing at the height of their fame in 1996 and Robbie Williams performing in front of a record-breaking 375,000 people in 2003. Alongside its five centuries of family history, Knebworth's archives document the evolution of British rock festivals, with old posters, set-lists and a collection of relics belonging to generations of visiting musicians, including a pair of red Y-fronts that Mick Jagger left behind following the Rolling Stones' appearance at the 1976 festival. 'I think Knebworth is the only place I have seen Mick Jagger's underpants kept as a memento in the same way you see Charles I's nightcap preserved elsewhere,' says the architectural historian Jeremy Musson.

There is an undoubted mutual fascination between the aristocracy and the rockocracy, who both appreciate what the other has to offer. Ellie Goulding recently invited Princesses Beatrice and Eugenie – along with their mother, the Duchess of York – to her hen party. Hannah Rothschild's documentary *The Jazz Baroness* chronicles the life of her glamorous great-aunt Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswarter, who had a long-running affair with Thelonious Monk. Even *Downton Abbey* explored the theme, when Lady Rose, played by Lily James, became infatuated with a jazz musician.

Every generation has seen alliances between these two social groups. Adele Astaire, the sister of Fred and one of the biggest celebrities of the 1920s and 1930s in her own right, married the 9th Duke of Devonshire's second son, Charles Cavendish. The society beauty Lucy Helmore wed Roxy Music's Bryan Ferry in 1982, and in 2012, Lady Mary Charteris tied the knot with Robbie Furze of the Big Pink. From the numerous musicians



Oasis playing at Knebworth in 1996
Left: Knebworth House



Linda and Paul McCartney watching the Stones at Knebworth in 1976

who own country estates to the many aristocrats who have spent their youth working in the music industry, there has always been a cross-pollination between these two tribes – one side fascinated by status and history, the other by energy and creativity.

It is this, perhaps, that explains the curious evolution of festivals in this country. Elsewhere in the world, a typical venue might consist of a car park, a stadium or, in the case of Burning Man, a desert. Yet in the UK, an overwhelming proportion of outdoor events are hosted by historic estates, from Houghton Festival in Norfolk to Wilderness at Cornbury Park.

As the 'stately home of rock', Knebworth pioneered this trend. The debut concert was held in 1974, where half a dozen bands, including the Allman Brothers and Van Morrison, performed to an audience of 60,000. It quickly became an annual affair, and that decade saw some of the biggest names in music play in the grounds. 'Apart from missing Pink Floyd in 1975, when I was away at school, I've been to every festival at Knebworth,' says Henry Lytton-Cobbold, the estate's current incumbent. 'I've grown up with it – it's been an extraordinary journey through all of the different musical styles. We showed the Red Hot Chili Peppers around, we've had the Beach Boys for tea and the Rolling Stones basically stayed in the house when they were here. That was quite crazy. The party went on all night – Paul McCartney showed up, as did Jack Nicholson. I was 14 at the time, so I was more interested in watching the television than the Rolling Stones, but that phase passed very quickly.'

There are many such stories to keep visitors entertained, including the time Noel Gallagher came up to the house when Oasis were performing and asked if he could have a



Above: Liam Gallagher on stage at Knebworth in 1996

Ronnie Wood and Mick Jagger performing at Knebworth with the Rolling Stones in 1976



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Port Eliot House
photographed by
Harry Cory Wright

bath. Despite being turned away at first – as no one recognised who he was – Gallagher was eventually shown up to the state bedroom, where Elizabeth I once stayed and which had a four-poster bath. ‘My father [the 2nd Baron Cobbold] brought Noel a bottle of champagne, as it was a special weekend for him,’ recalls Lytton-Cobbold. ‘In subsequent interviews, Noel has talked about being brought champagne by a liveried servant, who was actually my dad.’

Part of the attraction of these locations is that they offer visitors a chance to escape into a different world – an estate is a self-contained entity, and it can feel as if normal rules do not apply. Perhaps the best-known example of this is the Elephant Fayre, a free-spirited festival that was held at Port Eliot in Cornwall for five years during the 1980s. By all accounts, it was the sort of event that would strike fear into the heart of any health and safety officer.

A 55-foot-high wooden elephant was erected in the grounds; in its hollow stomach was a café run by children for children, with no adults allowed. Two entertainers called Boris and Norris dressed as mediaeval serfs, and juggled with livers, hearts and live rats. There was a troupe reenacting battles at whom children were encouraged to shoot using real bows and arrows. A fake security guard patrolled the site, ordering people to put out joints and stop being slovenly, while dragging a dead sniffer dog on a lead. The Elephant Fayre came to an end after an unruly mob, ironically calling themselves the Peace Convoy, ran riot and looted the village chemist.

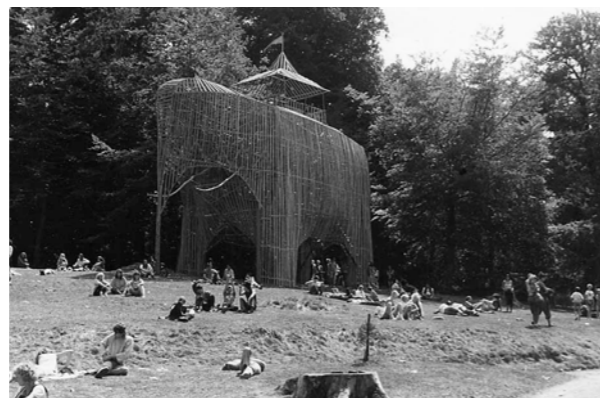
‘I was 13 when the Elephant Fayre started, and it was the highlight of my year,’ recalls Louis Eliot, the second son of the 10th Earl of St Germans, who grew up at the castle. ‘The excitement of the build, of seeing it come together, was a real buzz. You never knew who you might meet.



I remember walking into the kitchen to find Siouxsie Sioux from the Banshees – who I’d only ever seen as this exotic creature on *Top of the Pops* – eating ice-cream at the table.’

The unfortunate demise of the Elephant Fayre put paid to festivals at Port Eliot for a while. Yet 2003 saw the beginning of a new venture – a celebration of books, arts and music. It captured the spirit of the previous event, yet attracted a less volatile crowd, enabling the Eliots to allow the festivalgoers even greater freedom than before. Now, for four days each summer, thousands of people traipse across the parkland, tramp through the Grade I-listed manor’s exquisite John Soane interiors and dance the night away in the woodland. But reminders of the festival’s bohemian history are never far away: Lily Allen, who will make an appearance at the estate this July as part of the stellar line-up, was famously conceived at the Elephant Fayre.

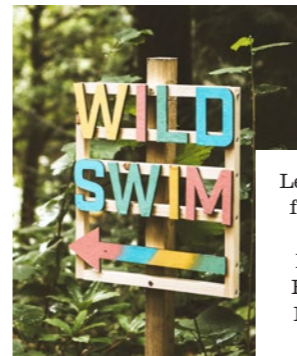
The success of events such as Port Eliot Festival has inspired other estate owners to unlock the commercial potential of their personal passions. The current Duke of Grafton, known to friends as Harry, decided to set up Red Rooster Festival at Suffolk’s Euston Hall in 2014 after starting out in the music industry. Grafton had spent several years living in Nashville, followed by a stint working as a roadie for the Rolling Stones during their world tour promoting *A Bigger Bang*. ‘After my father died, when I was 32, I had to move to Euston and take over the running of the estate,’ he says. ‘It was then that I decided to start



The Port Eliot Festival. Left: the Elephant Fayre at Port Eliot in 1986. Bottom left: a poster for the 1982 festival



PHOTOGRAPHS: HARRY CORY WRIGHT, LOUISE ROBERTS/PORT ELIOT FESTIVAL, HOLLIE HARMSWORTH, AVALON.RED, DEPARTMENT TWO



Left, above and far right: the Good Life Experience. Right: Cerys Matthews at the festival



a festival that celebrated southern roots, bluegrass, country and soul – all the sounds I’d loved in America. I had spent six years working in live music, and wanted to bring some of that to Euston.’

The festival has enabled the Duke to create another source of income for the estate, while pursuing aspects of his previous career. Since its foundation, Red Rooster’s audience has grown from 800 to more than 6,000, most of whom camp in the William Kent parkland. ‘We have an incredibly loyal following – there’s something like an 80 per cent return rate – and a lot of that is to do with the site,’ he says. ‘There’s an intimacy coming into someone’s private grounds. We don’t open for any other events – it’s kept strictly for Red Rooster and I think our guests appreciate that.’

Organising a festival is often as much a labour of love as it is about financial reward. A case in point is the Good Life Experience, which celebrates the great outdoors, crafts, music, and food and drink. Held at the Hawarden Estate in Wales, it is run by Charlie Gladstone – the great-great-grandson of the 19th-century Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone – and his wife Caroline, along with Cerys Matthews and her husband Steve Abbot. Although Gladstone had previously worked for a record company, he was adamant that he did not want to create another music festival. Instead, the event is a celebration of life’s simple pleasures, a chance for attendees to go back to nature. The Gladstones already employ about 120 people in the local area – their many businesses include a pub, farm shop and restaurant – and for them, this is another way of involving the local community. ‘Having such a mix of cultures has to be good for the village,’ says Gladstone. ‘The festival has been a passion project. We know it’s not going to make us rich, but we set out to create something special. It’s been a life-enhancing experience and we’ve met so many interesting people.’



Red Rooster Festival

For centuries, historic houses such as Hawarden Castle have been centres of creativity, and their current occupants are as interested in popular culture as their ancestors were. It is easy to forget how the zeitgeist evolves – in the early 18th century, Handel was as big a celebrity as today’s crop of pop stars. ‘The country house has always been a place for gathering and spectacle, although our taste in music has changed over the centuries,’ says Jeremy Musson. By championing a new wave of artists and musicians, the owners of these estates are continuing a grand tradition. Hosting a festival is an opportunity for them to throw a spectacular shindig that would doubtless have delighted their ancestors. □ *Knebworth* (www.knebworthhouse.com) hosts regular concerts and events. *Red Rooster* (www.redrooster.org.uk) runs from 30 May to 1 June. *Port Eliot Festival* (www.porteliotfestival.com) runs from 25 to 28 July. *The Good Life Experience* (www.thegoodlifeexperience.co.uk) runs from 12 to 15 September.