



# 'Every inch of the house was charred by the flames'

## GREAT ESTATES

**Marianna Hunt** meets the couple who had to restore their 200-year-old castle from scratch when it was almost destroyed by an inferno

**T**ina Kennedy grimaces as she recalls the day she, her husband Craig and their three children first moved in to Thornemead Castle 25 years ago. "It was a dreary, rainy day," she says. "The children, who were about 12, nine and three, took one look at the dusty, dirty halls and asked in horror: 'Mum, we don't really have to live here do we?'"

Kennedy, 64, admits questioning what they had done in purchasing a crumbling building by a rugged patch of beach on England's south-west coast.

However, she adds: "Once we modernised the place the children quickly got on board with the benefits of living in a castle. Although I think it was difficult for the girls growing up at times."

"Inviting boyfriends over to meet your parents when you live in a castle must have been very intimidating, so we always tried to be extra welcoming."

Kennedy and her husband, a hotelier by trade, had already renovated a number of pubs and hotels before taking on Thornemead,

which is a few miles from the seaside resort of Weston-super-Mare in Somerset. "This time we wanted something a bit more special, something for ourselves," she explains. "We knew we couldn't afford to simply have it as a house, so we turned the place into a b&b."

She and her husband live in one wing of the 19th-century stately home ("although that in itself has a kitchen that can seat 10 people and is plenty big enough for us"). However, a long restoration was required before the property reached what Kennedy describes as a state "fit for purpose".

"For a long time the only person living in the house was an elderly spinster. It had been in her family for around 150 years, but when she died no one else wanted it. So Thornemead was put up for auction."

The old fort, with its crenellated parapets and stone turrets, has more than 20 rooms, yet at the time had just one bathroom. "The needs of a solitary old lady and a young family running a b&b are quite different," Kennedy says, "and of course there was the leaking roof to deal with."

After years of hard work, she and her husband were devastated when their Grade II\*-listed home caught fire in 2016. "There was an electrical fault while we were away; because of the tall trees around no one noticed the fire for hours," she recalls. "We came rushing back in the middle of the night to

huge flames and loud sirens. There wasn't one inch of the house that didn't suffer." Kennedy still remembers the charred smell and the feeling of horror on re-entering. "Much of the furniture was ruined by the smoke and water and had to be chucked away. Luckily we were well insured."

One of the house's finest features was the wallpaper in the drawing room, designed by the famous Gothic revival architect Augustus Pugin; it is the same as that used in the Palace of Westminster. "This was severely damaged during the fire," Kennedy says. "But we were able to replace it with some from the original block. There's also some gorgeous wall stencilling and ceiling paintings from the 1860s which had to be redone."

However, the fire did not simply bring destruction. During restoration the family discovered an original ingle-nook fireplace and a cellar in the butler's pantry. "One fire found us another fire," she says.

Restoring the 200-year-old castle after the blaze took a further two years, much of which Kennedy and her husband spent living in a caravan in their 18-acre garden. In total the couple has spent £4.5 million on the building and works.

"When we finally got the house back in 2018, we decided to let it out as self-catered accommodation through the website Unique

Home Stays," she says. To celebrate it being brought back to life, they raised a Union Jack on the flagpole: "That was something we'd been wanting to do for 25 years."

Thornemead has all the romance of a mini Gothic palace, with stone arches leading to mahogany-clad smoking and drawing rooms kept cosy by roaring fires in their intricately engraved settings. Overall though, Kennedy says,

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the place is not too difficult to keep in shape.

"The windows are the biggest pain." She pauses to count: "I'd say there are around 65 of them, some huge vaulted ones that are metres high. Falling asleep here you don't need to count sheep: just send yourself off counting windows and fireplaces instead."

The house also has an octagonal tower, which "you're not supposed to go up for health and safety reasons, but the views from the roof are amazing." There are so many staircases that, Kennedy admits, she gets confused over which one leads where.

Her favourite room? "It has to be the library. I love sitting among the carved oak shelves by the fire, but I can only enjoy it at Christmas time if I'm lucky, as the rest of the year it's reserved for guests."

A glass conservatory-cum-indoor jungle, spilling over with plants, leads out to the gardens where pheasants strut and bees hum in their hives. "The local beekeepers bring us honey which we serve to guests."

Kennedy's husband was born in Rhodesia (modern-day Zimbabwe) and the family has installed one or two nods to his African heritage around the estate. "There are flamingo sculptures dotted around the gardens and wooden giraffes greet you as you come in the entrance hall."

Kennedy gets distracted at this



**RIISING FROM THE ASHES**  
Tina and Craig Kennedy, above, in the gardens at Thornemead. Tina loves to sit and read by the fire, left



CHRISTOPHER JONES FOR THE TELEGRAPH

point as a group enters the grounds, looking at the castle. "We often have people wandering around," she explains. As for the manor's history, curious guests can read about it in documents housed within its own library.

Kennedy recounts the colourful tale of one of Thornemead's former owners, Simon Payne, a serial crook who made his money selling properties he didn't own. "He had to flee to Ja-

maica in 1825 to escape prosecution." Having grown up in Weston, Kennedy considers its reputation as "Weston-Super-Mud" not quite fair. "It's beautiful really, particularly this end, which is so empty that sometimes it feels like we have our own private beach."

Thornemead Castle sleeps up to 10 people and is available to rent through [uniquehomestays.com](http://uniquehomestays.com)

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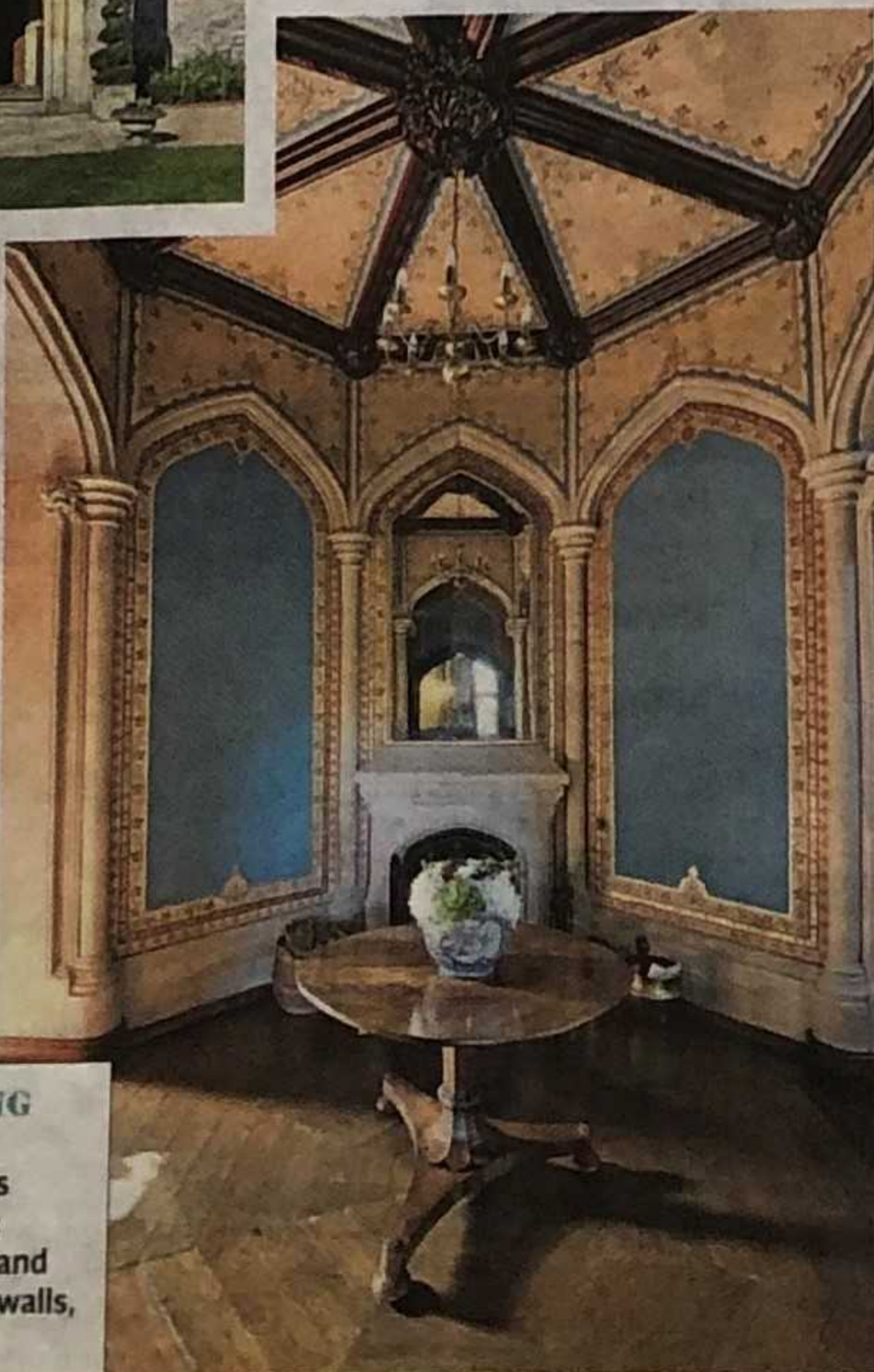
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