

## MEMBERS MEETING 4<sup>th</sup> NOVEMBER 2008

“Christmas at Chatsworth” talk by Christine Robinson, Head Housekeeper at Chatsworth, illustrated with slides and artefacts

To set the scene for her talk Christine showed some views of Chatsworth in the snow. She explained that the foot and mouth epidemic of 2001 was not a good season for Chatsworth. To make up for the financial losses it was agreed with the Comptroller of Chatsworth that the house would remain open at Christmas in 2001 as an experiment. The event was a great success attracting over 79,000 people so it was decided to open the house at Christmas every year.

In the first year Christine and her housekeeping team started planning the event in August. They went to various garden centres looking for ideas and found figures of creatures like huskies and eskimos. During their research they discovered a company called KD Decorations in an old mill at Huddersfield. This company could supply Christmas trees all year round. They also had every type of display from the tasteful to the gaudy. One of the items chosen for Chatsworth was a kissing bough. This is now used every year and is hung from the stag’s chandelier with fresh greenery.

In 2002 they found a company that supplied artificial Christmas trees to places like Heathrow, P & O line and Meadowhall, they even made fibreglass elephants!

Christine’s team also found a recording studio that produced CD’s for use in some areas of the house.

It was decided that each year there would be a different theme for the Christmas opening. One year the theme was for a Victorian Christmas. In the house a Dutch sleigh was used with a seated doll and a plaster dog which belonged to the then Duchess of Devonshire. In order to make the snow look authentic in the display wadding is used but care has to be taken to ensure it is flame retardant. Christine recalls the hottest day of the year when she was told ““your snow has arrived”!

The employees at Chatsworth are often used to make the displays for Christmas. When the Victorian theme was used the seamstress made the costumes for the figures and the joiners made a fireplace from MDF that Christine had chosen from a picture of a Yorkshire range in a book. The electricians put an artificial light at the back of the fireplace to make it look real.

In 2001 the then Duchess decided she wanted masses of candles to light the house. This could have been a problem as the wax would drip on the carpets and there also could have been a fire risk. Various alternatives were considered and tried, in the end battery operated candles were chosen.

Visitors to the house at Christmas need to be fed and watered. The employees who run the carriage house restaurant have to estimate how much food will be required and have to ensure that they don't have too much over.

The farm shop at Pilsley also plays an important part at Christmas time. The amount of food they sell is enormous; 7,500 sausages, 5 tons of fruit cake, 22,000 mince pies (many more than Betty's at Harrogate) and 3,000 hampers are filled and sent out by mail order to such illustrious customers as Tom Stoppard, Cliff Richard and the Prince of Wales.

Father Christmas plays an important role at Chatsworth. In fact because of the sheer volume of children visiting him there are actually three Father Christmases. An Ice Maiden takes the children to him and gives him information about the child so that he can say things like "it was difficult to get the bicycle down the chimney last year", to make them feel special. On a more materialistic note many children bring an Argos catalogue with them to let Santa know exactly what they want!

Spring cleaning at the house starts in January when the house is cleaned and it continues 7 days a week in order that the house is ready for opening again in March. The state apartments are cleaned and any conservation work done. China, glass and carpets are cleaned. China is never immersed in water as this could damage it. It is washed in soap flakes and wiped dry.

Chandeliers are not taken down from the ceiling in order to be cleaned, as featured in "Only Fools and Horses". They are taken to pieces and cleaned. The biggest chandelier has 2763 pieces so a digital camera records each piece to ensure it is put back correctly. People might be interested to know a housekeeping tip, i.e. that gin is used to clean the glass.

One restoration project concerned a mirror dated 1703 housed in the state bedroom. It had woodworm and an expert from Sussex College undertook this tricky task. Masking tape was placed over the glass whilst the wood was repaired in situ. The original mirror cost £100, the restoration cost £80,000!

The ceiling paintings in the painted hall had developed dusky marks which were due to condensation. Cleaning these was difficult because of the height of the ceilings and special scaffolding had to be erected.

One of the rooms in the house contains 17,500 books and every year each one of these books has to be examined for damage, dusted and put back on the shelf.

Christine Thompson looks after the textiles and tapestries at Chatsworth. She is known as the “Velcro Queen”. This is because she has developed a method of hanging tapestries using “velcro”. This has two advantages, they are easier to take down in the event of fire and also prevent damage that occurs when they were hung by nails. Christine has become an expert in this field and the National Trust often contact her for advice on conservation matters.

Outside the house the wider estate needs maintenance too. The garden, park, woods, farms and tree felling all require attention. The sheep and deer are sold and the current untidy grass in the park is due to the fact that there are no sheep to crop it. The sheep are killed before winter because they would need feeding in the winter. The deer are also culled so that the herd does not become unsustainable. The venison is sold in the farm shop.

Chatsworth generates its own electricity. In 1800 it was the first house to be lit by electricity. In the 1930’s turbines were installed. These were replaced in the 1980’s by a new turbine and generator named appropriately “Andrew” and “Deborah” after the then Duke and Duchess. Any spare capacity is sold back to the National Grid.

Fire is always a constant threat and as the nearest Fire Station is at Bakewell Chatsworth has its own fire team. They practise once a week and train in the use of breathing equipment. They take their role very seriously.

The 8<sup>th</sup> Duke was known as the “bachelor duke” as he was unmarried until he was in his 50’s. He had had an affair with the Duchess of Manchester but did marry her when her husband died. A photograph taken at a Chatsworth shoot shows him entertaining Edward VII and his wife Alexandra. Another old photograph shows a party of 160 guests hosted by the 8<sup>th</sup> Duke on 12<sup>th</sup> night. The entertainment included bobbing for apples, dancing, an 8ft cake and something called “glissade” which involved dragging individuals along the length of the dining table. This was the Edwardian’s idea of fun!

Children of the estate workers are entertained at a Christmas party. The party traditionally was held in the Great Hall but since the opening of the house at Christmas is now held in the Orangery. One of the photographs of the Christmas party includes a small boy of about 5. Christine proudly identified him as her son who is now 24 and 6 foot seven!

One of the reasons why Chatsworth is so successful now is that the late Duke of Devonshire established Chatsworth as a Trust. This was to mitigate the effects of death duties on the estate when his father died. The death duties that he inherited were paid by selling land, works of art and passing Hardwick Hall to the National Trust. The trust now receives income from its investments and the Christmas opening helps pay the running costs.

The current Duke and Duchess now live at Chatsworth. Their son, Lord Burlington, and his wife are expecting their first child in March. Daughter Selina and her husband have 4 children and daughter Jasmine is expecting her second child. Chatsworth is a family home looking forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

A photograph of Elizabeth Frink's statue of a dog shows a stained mark. This is because the Dowager's dog was jealous of it and used to lift his leg on it. The statue now lives at the Dowager's house in Edensor where a notice in her garden reads "Beware big dogs"!

Among the artefacts Christine had brought along were two programmes found in a handkerchief box. One was a theatrical programme dated 5 February 1903 and the other gave details of a firework display held on the 4 February 1903.

A napkin showing the ducal coat of arms, family crest and laundry mark is one of a set of 72 dated 1872 with a table-cloth to match. It is possible that this napkin was used to "glissade" down the table on 12<sup>th</sup> night!

The year before last the theme of the Christmas opening was the 12 days of Christmas. A bay tree was used in lieu of a pear tree and Christine showed the artificial pears that were hung on it. They must have looked authentic because the slugs in the bay tree nibbled them!

Last year the Christmas theme was that of kaleidoscope. The Chatsworth joiner and electrician produced a kaleidoscope on rollers that was hand cranked with a three foot wide mirror and a large quartz crystal.

This year the theme is inspired by the silhouette illustrations in Jan Pienkowski's classic Christmas book, "The First Noel". It features scenes from the book, e.g. Journey to Bethlehem, Birth of baby Jesus and the Visits of the Shepherds.

The preparation for the Christmas opening is exciting but hard work and often involves a thirteen-hour day. Christine concluded her talk by saying that she hoped members would be tempted to go and see "Chatsworth at Christmas".

A vote of thanks was given by Roy Pidcock.

