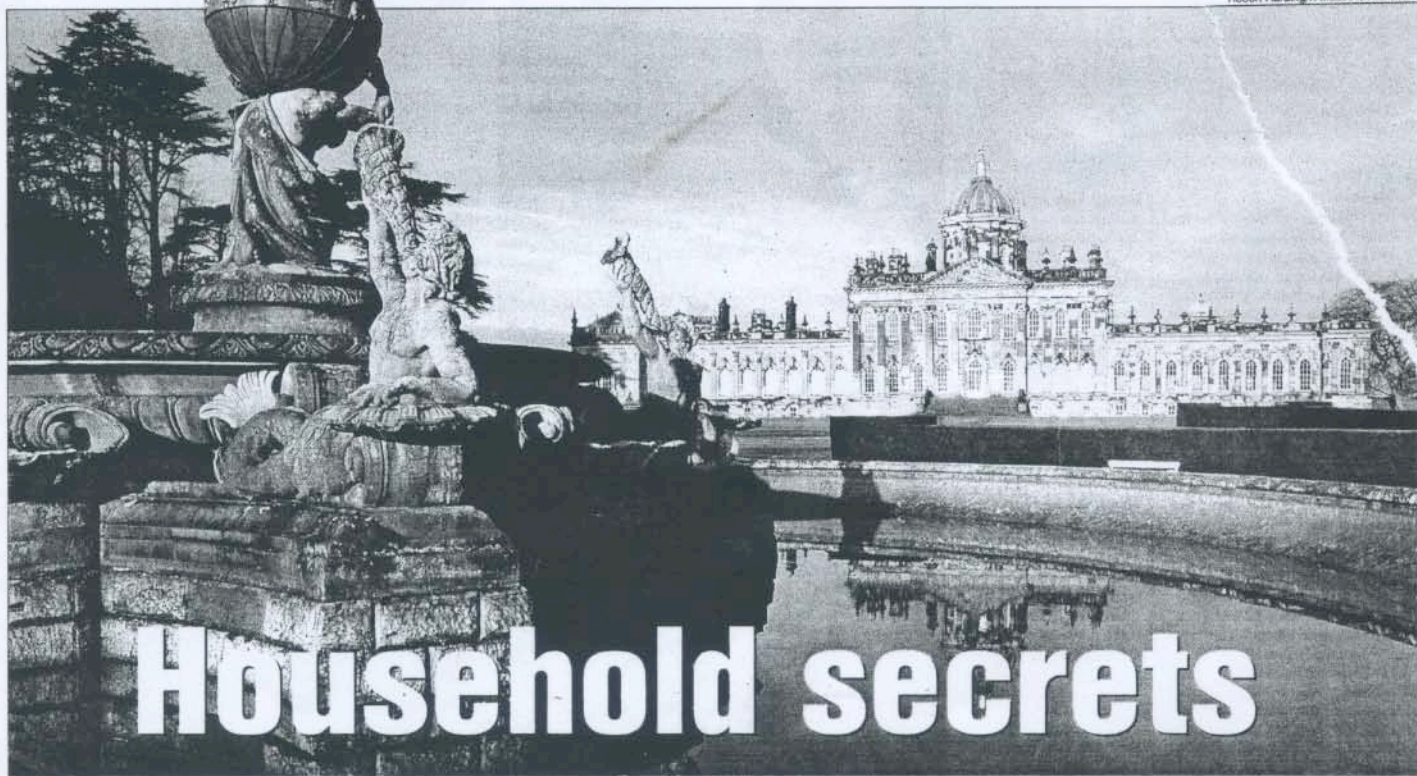


Robert Harding/© McLeod/Bob Collier



Household secrets

How do they keep the roof on Castle Howard? It requires a 100-strong army of estate workers, discovers **Jane Hughes**

Like many homeowners, Simon Howard knows a bit about DIY. He has struggled with overflowing guttering and had his arm down the U-bend of a toilet. He's even ventured onto his roof during a downpour to locate a leak. Unlike most people, however, Howard, 45, lives in a stately home in North Yorkshire with more than 100 rooms under his 1.5-acre roof, 500 windows and 47 downpipes.

Castle Howard, designed by Sir John Vanbrugh, is one of England's largest and finest stately piles. Keeping the house (star of the 1980s television adaptation of *Brideshead Revisited*) standing and ensuring the smooth running of the 10,000-acre estate requires Howard and his staff of 100 to work "flat out".

Howard's office is on the vaulted ground floor of the east wing, where he lives with his second wife, Rebecca Sieff, 34, whose family founded Marks & Spencer, and the couple's baby twins, Octavia and Merlin. A short crunch across the gravel, the estate office buzzes with walkie-talkies as workers call in from around the grounds.

A wide range of skills is needed among the staff. Six masons repair and rebuild stonework. Three joiners carry out a five-year rolling programme of repair and replacement and two to four contract painters work on a rolling three-year programme. One electrician is responsible for the intricate wiring systems and spends a day a week checking and replacing lightbulbs. It takes three men on a scaffolding

tower three hours to change the batteries in the smoke alarm hidden in a chandelier 40ft above the floor in the Long Gallery.

Ray Rushworth, a joiner who, at 73, is about to retire, has been around long enough to see Howard and his brothers grow up and the house transformed. It was, he recalls, in a sorry state when Howard's father, Lord Howard of Henderskelfe, took it over after the war. Years of neglect had been followed by a devastating fire that swept through the building in 1940.

In 1965, Rushworth remembers replacing 41 windowsills. Now that there is a rolling repair programme,

only a small number of sills and rails need replacing each year. However, this can still be a huge undertaking. The sash windows are hung on chains that have seized up, and the joiners must stand on scaffolding platforms to carry out repairs in situ.

Preventing water damage or seepage by regularly maintaining gutters, downpipes and drains is important to any home, but Castle Howard requires more than the usual care. For a start, the roof has valley gutters tucked down behind the parapets so that downpipes drain internally. Sudden downpours used to wash silt, pigeon droppings and moss into the pipes, causing instant blockages. Eventually, the head of building services, Chris Metcalfe, devised a solution: perforated dome covers to trap waste at the head of the pipes.

These covers have made the jobs of the maintenance supervisor, Peter Ashton, and his team even more



Light duties: the castle's caretaker, Vic Fox; below left, Simon Howard

important. They regularly have to strap themselves into safety harnesses and venture over the roof to clear the covers, check for leaks and pull out weeds growing in the mortar.

In 1995, the central block of the house was reroofed in lead sheeting at a cost of £80,000. Unfortunately the 150-year-old section over the east wing is becoming increasingly susceptible to splits which, says Ashton, recently caused a leak in Howard's new bathroom.

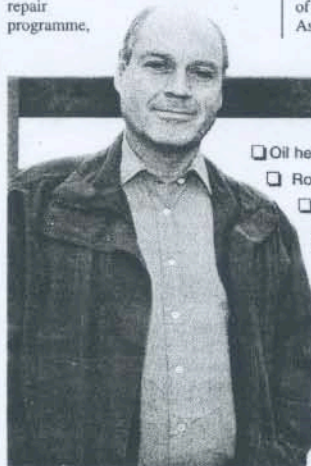
Turning on 83 light switches each morning is a task that the caretaker, Vic Fox, 46, takes very seriously. Like Rushworth, whose son works at Castle Howard as a bricklayer, Fox has connections with the estate that span generations. His father was a tradesman who helped rebuild the 70ft-high central dome.

Recently, 10,000sq ft of redundant agricultural buildings were turned into offices for telebusinesses, including an IT firm and a corporate-experience company. With new opportunities in tourism, the estate is turning over a healthy £5m, but it needs all that and more. Before

any serious new restoration or conversion can be considered, even the basic maintenance is a huge programme.

A manual touch-and-tap inspection of buildings is carried out each spring to detect loose stonework, which is removed before the house opens to the public. Roofs, drains and gutters are checked fortnightly for blockages or leaks. Weeds are cleared from eaves and mortar two or three times a year and, when it snows, staff are immediately called in to clear the gutters.

"We have broken the back of the restoration work," says Howard, whose grandfather was a founding member of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB). He hopes the days of selling family treasures, including a Michelangelo, to pay bills are over.
 Castle Howard opens to visitors on February 14, 01653 648 333, www.castlehoward.co.uk
 Details of National Maintenance Week, November 22-29, from SPAB, 020 7377 1644, www.maintainyourbuilding.org.uk



The costs

- Oil heating: £20,000 per annum
- Roof maintenance: £10,000 pa
- Cleaning products: £10,000 pa (£1,000 on floor polish alone)
- Cleaning the windows (500 of them): £5,000 pa
- Lightbulbs: £3,000 pa
- House electricity bill: £27,000 pa
- Replacing a big sash window: £2,500
- Replacement of a windowsill: £300