

National Trust Properties

Philipps House

GOODMANORS

PRIDE AND PLEASURE

**With its Jane Austen feel, Philipps House is perfect for a party,
says Marcus Binney**

At first sight Philipps House has it all, a breathtakingly beautiful classical exterior surveying a rolling park descending to a large ornamental lake. From the park the spire of Salisbury Cathedral is visible in the distance, and the nearby village of Dinton is quiet and pleasant with a handsome medieval church containing monuments to generations of Wyndhams who live at the hall.

If it all seems too good to be true, including the price of £1.5 million, it is because the estate belongs to the National Trust, which in the dark days of the Second World War acquired four historic houses in the village. What is now on offer is 32 years of a 40-year lease negotiated by Andrew and Christina George, the present occupants. As one of their friends remarked when they left their two-bedroom flat in London: "You used to live in the smallest house of anyone we knew, now you live in the largest."

Depending on how you count, there are 18 bedrooms, plus a further six in a wing which the Georges have prepared as granny flats for their parents. Even now there are maids' rooms still in the attic waiting to be modernised.

One obvious boon of living in a National Trust house is that the structure is in good order. The roof has been magnificently reroofed and is fit to last at least a century without the need for an overhaul. Better still, the house is entirely faced in a crisp, pale stone from the nearby village of Chilmark – also used for Salisbury Cathedral. The large sash windows all have the exquisitely thin "astragals" or glazing bars, which are the hallmark of the best Regency architecture. "Buy a shipload of mahogany to make all ye sashes & doors & skirting boards," an uncle advised William Wyndham when he was planning the house.

One son founded the Wyndham Vineyard in the Hunter Valley

The new hall, then called Dinton House, was designed by Sir Jeffry Wyattville, who, as James Lees-Milne cryptically remarked, was best known for cardboard castle creations (George IV employed him at Windsor Castle). Wyattville's first designs date from 1813 and the house was completed five years later at a cost of £10,869. William Wyndham had married Laetitia, the daughter of a Master of Chancery (a surer road to riches in Georgian times), and they lived in Jane Austen-like contentment, raising a family of six boys and six girls. One of them, George, went to Australia and founded the Wyndham Vineyard in the Hunter Valley. Four generations of Wyndhams lived here until 1917, when the mortgage foreclosed and they were forced to move.

Dinton was acquired by Bertram Philipps. Until then carriages had driven up in a grand sweep through the park to the four-columned portico and continued on to the stable yard at the back of the house. In

the new age of the motor car, Mr Philipps did not want parking in front of his main view, and so created a new entrance on the east.

During the Second World War, American forces took over the property and filled the park in best *Brideshead Revisited* style with roads, huts and parade ground. In despair perhaps, Mr Philipps gave the house and 200 acres of park to the National Trust in 1943 on condition that it was renamed Philipps House, With it came fine furniture, painting and books, which remain in the principal rooms. Two years later it was leased to the Young Women's Christian Association as a holiday home. When the YWCA left in 1995 the trust set about restoring the main rooms, returning Wyatville's bookcases (and Wyndham book) to the library and removing every last vestige of wartime concrete from the park.

In winter the Georges live principally in the library with a blazing log fire. In summer they move across to the former ladies' drawing room, where you walk out into the west garden through a sash window with little shutter doors.

The centre of the house is filled by a magnificent imperial stair, overlooked by balconies on both sides where musicians can play and children watch the assembly below. Thanks to the large, round central lantern in the roof it is at its most beautiful by moonlight, say Mrs George. It is not even impossible to heat; in 1830 Laetitia Wyndham wrote to her son: "We have made the house delightfully warm and comfortable by a judicious alteration in the hot-air stove in the cellar...it is like living in the South of France."

The front of the house is filled by pairs of mahogany doors. First is the drawing room, which comes with a fine group of Venetian landscape paintings, then the central hall dutifully painted in authentic, if boring stone colour by the Trust with a delicious frieze of cornucopias and scallop shells. Beyond, the dining room retains a Regency dining table perfect for family celebrations and seating 18 in comfort.

The house rests on an extensive vaulted cellar, which in the past has been prone to flooding, though the problem has been solved, I was assured. When the Georges arrived, many of the first-floor rooms were still portioned from YWCA days. They have restored Georgian proportions and furnished them with attractive simplicity. En suite bathrooms can be created only by using bedrooms – luxuriantly large, but just the fashion. In the attic are still more spacious rooms, though suffering from parapets built to stop servants looking into the garden.

The big question, of course, is how to use all this space. The carriage houses at the back are very suitable for anyone wanting to run a business from home. The Georges have turned it all to advantage by building up a very successful wedding and event venue – when I visited, the dining room was being prepared for a dinner cooked by Michel Roux.

The agreement with the National Trust is that the house is open two half-days a week. There are also public footpaths across the park. However, neither house nor park is ever overwhelmed with visitors. Remarkably, the other half-dozen houses in the valley are still in private hands, so if you can establish yourself in fine style you may soon be invited to some very enjoyable parties near by.

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