



Easton Grey Manor House

By Joan Bamford

A few years ago a young couple motoring through the Westcountry came across a sadly dilapidated but still beautiful country house. From the lodge gates, swaying slightly in the summer breeze, hung an almost equally dilapidated “To Be Sold” notice. Curiosity compelled Mr and Mrs Saunders, to examine the house, and both were so enchanted by what they saw that they bought, repaired and restored the old manor, and instilled into it the energy and vitality of both a home and the premises of a successful business.

Romantic stories that are true are all too rare in this modern age, so it is heartwarming to know what is taking place at Easton Grey, near Malmesbury, where the historic Manor House has been saved from destruction and is now living a vital new life as the home of a happy young family, combined with being a thriving corner of the fashion world. The present Manor House is a beautiful and elegant stone house of the Queen Anne period, surrounded by a terraced garden with sweeping lawns and flower beds, ending in water meadows that carry the eye down to the sparkling water of the River Avon below. Roses and wisteria climb the house to the bedroom windows, through which sunshine pours, as all the main rooms face south and west and look down the valley to the tiny hamlet of Easton Grey, where the river ripples serenely under a seventeenth century stone bridge. The clear water reflects the old cottages clustered round the bridge, together with their gay little gardens alight with flowers. In the magical shadows below, trout dart between the emerald green reeds and water flowers that grow in the stream. Leaning on the bridge one is at peace with the world – a place to look back at history and forward to the future of this truly lovely spot which holds the refreshing stability and timeless peace of the past. The ever moving pattern of the river acts as a reminder of the stream of life that flows through Easton Grey as it has done for hundreds of years.

The Manor was first mentioned in the Domesday Book, and the archives in the possession of the Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society state that in 1324 the Manor of Easton Grey was held with that of Eton in Buckinghamshire and that the rent due to the King from the two Manors was paid by “the service of mewing and keeping one of the King’s falcons till the time of flight”. Historical records of this beautiful property and, its many distinguished owners can be traced from these early beginnings to the present day—and indeed this has been done, as a short history of the property has been compiled and is in the present owner’s possession.

TO BE SOLD

Peter Saunders and his accomplished American wife Didi, were motoring in the Westcountry about ten years ago, and through fairy tale circumstances that belong elsewhere, saw a “To be Sold” board at the lodge gates of Easton Grey House. They decided to go up the drive and there they beheld their dream house—alas, sadly neglected, as it had been empty some time. They stood on the semi-circular steps by the front door and both instantly the sense of belonging to the place. The impression was almost overwhelming but they said little or nothing to each other until after they had looked over the house, shabby with neglect and seemingly abandoned to the fate of so many lovely country homes, too large for present day living.

Comparing notes after they left, they were startled to find how both had felt the same sense of compulsion, although on the face of it, the whole thing seemed too big to tackle for this young couple. Peter had by then a small but flourishing tweed and woollen business which he began with his R.A.F. gratuity in 1948, when permits were hard to get and there was a waiting list of five years for a loom ! This business was housed in an old coach house in Aberdeen but it had grown and flourished. His wife and two little girls were living in a flat in London, so the young Saunders took an important decision; they would consider moving business and family into Easton Grey House. They looked at it again with that idea in mind and found that everything fell into place like a divine decree, which indeed it seems to have been.

BOUTIQUE IN THE COURTYARD

Repairs and restoration had to be undertaken on practical footing but the energy and drive that Peter had shown from his early Gordonstoun days, where he was educated, swept away obstacles, while Didi's excellent taste and gift for housemaking transformed the large empty rooms into an elegant home with fine nurseries for the family and gracious entertaining rooms that are now filled with gay family life and hospitality.

The old kitchen wing of the house has been made into an ideal block of modern offices, packing and despatch sections, and a delightful Boutique in the courtyard where all are welcome to call. Orders can be given here and measurements taken, if required. There is also a complete range of sample garments to be seen in addition to a collection of gay and matching accessories of all kinds. At the entrance to this courtyard a coat of arms will be seen displayed on one wall under which is inscribed "By Appointment to His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh, Makers of Peter Saunders Tweeds".

The business is nearly all mail order, and parcels are sent out from Easton Grey to private individuals all over the country and indeed to many other parts of the world. They have built their clientele on wonderful catalogues sent out complete with "feeler" patterns of the tweeds and matching knitwear in fabulous colours. In each of these catalogues (or "dress shows at home", as Peter calls them), a tape measure and helpful measurement chart are included so that all garments can be made to measure. Classic styles in matching tweeds and knitwear are clothes for everyone and the business is a brilliant success with a fine reputation.

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Life in the big house today is a modern concept of home where the children, Christine, Vicki and Michael Saunders, together with numerous puppies and ponies, enjoy growing up in ideal surroundings. Gone are the days when the entire village supplied the needs of the big home and depended for their living on doing so. The tiny hamlet shows earlier signs of occupation than even the present big house; one cottage was obviously the laundry, another a

butcher's and a baker's and so on. Now they are much sought after separate properties and lovingly preserved by their proud owners. A red telephone kiosk near the bridge is the only outward sign of the jet age in which we now live, but Easton Grey is far from a sleepy village. It has an inner strength that is felt more than seen. The village church within the north lodge gates of the big house (known as the Tulip Gates) has a Norman tower and font but the architecture is considerably later. Its windows are diamond-paned in plain glass, filling it with light. The blue sky and billowing clouds are more than a substitute for stained glass windows, and the simplicity of this tiny church is full of reverence. It has a coat of arms dated 1818, old high pews, and the only decorations are a large brass cross of simple



Christie and Vicki Saunders find country life very different from their previous environment—a flat in London.

design, and always some garden flowers. Like the feeling on the stone bridge, one senses timeless peace in this simple church.

Standing in the church porch, the meadows spread out before one and up the drive to the house flowers are everywhere. The beautiful gardens are listed as open to the public twice a year under the National Gardens Scheme and are well worth a visit.

The young Saunders are busy happy people. They hunt with the Beaufort, travel a good deal in Europe and America, take part in a gay social life in the county and in London (where they have a tiny flat), search for pictures, furniture and bijouterie in various parts of the world to make their home even lovelier, and when they entertain, as they do very often, their happiness is infectious. One can be thankful indeed that Easton Grey is now in such good hands and that its beauty remains, a legacy from the past but also a joy for the present.



The peaceful river Avon passes slowly by under the ever-watchful gaze of Easton Grey.

Original source not recorded