

A PRIVATE VIEW

If you like a good snoop, head to Suffolk this summer. It's open-house season, when owners of some of the county's historic buildings lower the drawbridge and invite strangers in for a personal tour of their home and garden

WORDS BY KATE WORSLEY. PHOTOGRAPHS BY KIM SAYER

"DO COME OVER AND SEE US. I'll show you round the house, and the garden too, if it's fine. Maybe stay for a spot of lunch?"

Who could resist such an invitation? Especially when you've already glimpsed the fine old house from the road many times, and wondered aloud to the dog, "Who lives there?"

Britain is full of handsome, privately owned historic houses, which most of us will never step inside. But now we can snoop around a clutch of these in Suffolk, opening throughout the summer every year as part of a scheme called Invitation to View.

Their owners have been persuaded to show small groups round personally and serve tea and biscuits – perhaps even lunch. The scheme was set up four years ago by Mid Suffolk's tourism officers, with funding from the East of England Development Agency, to capitalise on the

county's hidden strengths: a wealth of priories, halls and manor houses. The tours cost around £12 per visitor, but the organisers' hope is that you'll spend more locally: stay in a B&B, eat at the pub and stop at the farm shop.

Back in the 18th century, country-house owners regularly gave private tours of their homes to their peers (in both senses of the word): fellow gentry and foreign nobility who turned up bearing a letter of introduction. Guests saw the lot, from the art collection to the novel heating system for the stables. A particularly appreciative visitor would be treated to lunch; a well-tipped

housekeeper might whisper the true identity of the mysterious lady in that portrait in the closet.

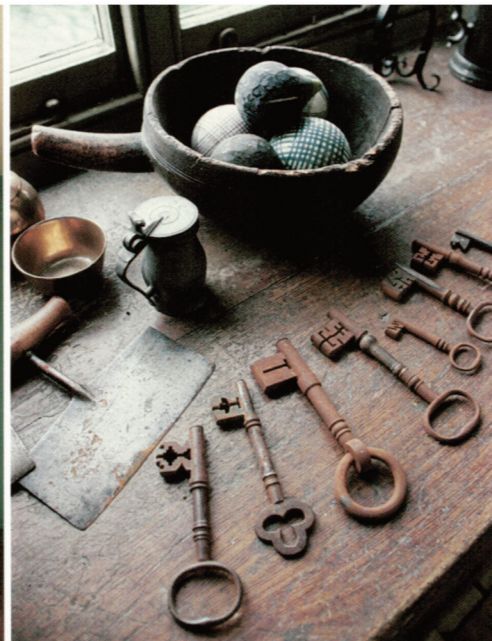
Invitation to View hopes to recapture some of that robust informality. As I choose some likely sounding houses from the well-designed little brochure (a

Jacobean hall, a moated manor and a house full of witch deterrents), I wonder just how much today's hosts will reveal.

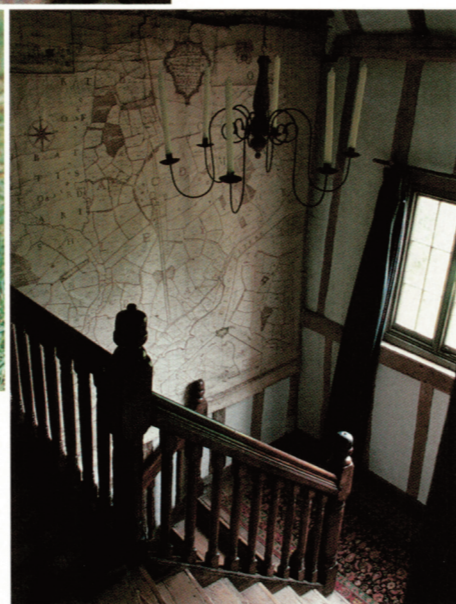
Because the visits are arranged in advance (and your personal details retained for obvious security reasons), when you arrive at the house there is no visible evidence that you're a paying guest. No one waving your car through, no ticket kiosk, >



Owner Timothy Easton (top) welcomes guests to his home – a 15th-century moated manor house – and its many architectural treasures



Within the ancient walls of Columbine Hall, Leslie Geddes-Brown (with her husband Hew Stevenson, bottom) unlocks the secrets of her key collections and old maps



“These houses were always centres of communities, with people coming and going, not so shut off as they are now”

brochure or shop. I park under a tree outside Hemingstone Hall, north of Ipswich, and join the 20 or so other guests on the lawn in staring up at the fine Jacobean gables. Most are couples in late middle age, and many are local people who've known of these houses for years. "My boys always wanted to play football on the lawn here," sighs one. "It's just wonderful to see behind the enticing façade," booms a pointy-bearded architect in motorcycle leathers.

At 11am sharp, owner John Huntingford flings open the doors. His wife Di presses coffee and buttery home-baked biscuits on us. We're made discreetly aware of the lavatory facilities and led to chairs drawn up in rows in a panelled hall lit by Flemish chandeliers.

This is just starting to feel like a cross between school

assembly and a corporate reception, when John stands up and envelops us in bonhomie. He delivers a potted history of the house and his family's connections, then divides the group of 30 or so down the middle and leads half round the ground floor. Seeing everyone's mutely puzzled looks at the weird and wonderful modern artworks everywhere, he declares loudly: "You're all being very polite but if you don't know what it is - it's art."

Di takes the rest of us upstairs. The house is spotlessly clean but still smells like a home - you know that the shampoo bottle was recently recapped, clothes folded away. Oak mullions in her daughter's bedroom are stacked with soft toys. It's easy to imagine their boys racing home from school and up the square oak stair to their attic.

While Di disappears to make lunch, we all meet up

with head gardener, Karen Hunt, in the sunken garden. We've relaxed with each other by now. "I don't know about the art," one man confides, "but the garden is always the best bit." John takes us up the hill to his new gazebo and we look down on the house while the architect interrogates him about the variations in his window frames.

After lunch, John flops onto a sofa in the now deserted drawing room. We've all had a lovely time, but what about him? "It's always a panic getting the house ready," he admits. "You feel you're on show as well as the house." He's jumpy about a couple who have insisted on staying on for a wander in the garden. "And I do find it a bit rude when people lag behind in the bedrooms... But don't get me wrong, it's a great pleasure to do this. There's such an exchange of information." Some visitors, such as today's querulous architect, know as much (if not more) about the house as he does. "Anyway, it'd



John and Di Huntingford (left) are happy to fling open the doors of Hemingstone Hall (above and far left) and welcome curious on-lookers. BELOW Timothy Easton's tour group takes in the garden at Bedfield Hall

huddle in the kitchen, surrounded by bowls of Smarties and giant Kit Kats. The only statistic today is 87 - the number of Marmite jars the previous owner tossed into the moat. Leslie Geddes-Brown gestures energetically at three Italian paintings of volcanos: "The gouache really gets the heat, doesn't it?" There is a deafening silence. Then a small "hmm".

"It was a quiet sort of group today," she muses later. "Perhaps it was the weather. You know, the last group was most interested in our quilts."

And this, I realise, is the beauty of this scheme. Each house, each group, each visit is as individual as its owner and as unpredictable as the weather. Certainly Suffolk has been surprised by its success. This year visitor numbers have doubled. They're hoping to extend the scheme across the whole of the county. And let's hope other counties follow suit soon, and we can become a nation of snoopers once more. *Invitation to View runs on selected days until 1 October. For more information, call 01449 676800 or visit www.suffolkhistoric-houses.org.uk.*

Each house, each group, each visit is as individual as its owner and as unpredictable as the weather

has to be remembered that these houses were always centres of communities, with people coming and going. Not so shut off as many of them are now."

And so to Bedfield Hall, near Earl Soham, with its lush moated gardens shimmering in vivid sunshine. This is a smaller, younger group, almost all women. Owner Timothy Easton, an architectural historian, oil painter and expert on witchcraft, leads us straight to the nearby church where he mounts the lectern and delivers a veritable torrent of information, which barely slows even when he knocks over a vase of flowers.

The moat was dug out for prestige, not protection, he explains, and the path to the church loops the long way round it in order to impress the villagers of Bedfield. He then conducts us along a lengthy section of this path to the house. Between

hooks in the ceiling of the old kitchen are circular sooty marks which, he tells us, kept witches away from the bacon. Hanging in his bedroom, where he and his daughter have recreated the 17th-century wall painting, is a full frontal male nude he sketched in 1970. We recover in the sitting room, where Easton's books are on sale.

By the time I pull up at another moated manor house, Columbine Hall outside Stowmarket, I feel like an old hand. But this visit is all about key collections and old maps, not beams and pargeting. It's a dreary day, so we

