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She's not messing about



The house that inspired Toad Hall in *The Wind in the Willows* is being given a new lease of life by an owner with a colourful story of her own. By John Arlidge



"I have property in my genes. I like getting 'down and dirty' in buildings"

Aida Della has had more than enough drama for one lifetime – and she's still only in her 30s. Born an Iraqi Jew, she was brought up in Catholic convents in Iran. She left to study at the London School of Economics when she was 17, but never went home. "The revolution," she says by way of explanation.

Her family, prominent property and business magnates in Tehran, went into hiding for more than a year before finally escaping to New York in 1981. Since then, she has married, had two children, divorced, and fought and won bitter legal battles with everyone from property agents to the local Polish religious community. Oh, and she has dug up a dead body.

She's telling me all this on a dank Friday afternoon in her study, where it will make it easier to accept that she has become one of the luckiest women in England. She is the mistress of Fawley Court. You might not have heard of it, but you will have heard of Toad Hall. Fawley Court was Kenneth Grahame's inspiration for the fictional house he describes in his 1908 classic *The Wind in the Willows*.

It's not hard to see why. It is one of the finest homes in England. It sits on the banks of the Thames, just downriver from Henley, with, yes, weeping willows on the banks. It was designed by Sir Christopher Wren and built in 1684. Each room was styled by a leading architect of the day, including James Wyatt and William Gibbons, Wren's master carver. The 75-acre grounds, which have uninterrupted views of Fawley Hill and the Chilterns, were landscaped by Capability Brown.

There's only one problem with the place. When Della bought it for £13m in 2008, it was "a total dump. Horrific. It had been partly burnt down, the rest was falling down, and the gardens were so neglected, they were on English Heritage's 'at risk' register," she says as she shows me into the Wyatt room, kept warm by a sole electric heater. "We don't have heating yet," she apologises, drawing heat on her cigarette, as if the glow from the burning tobacco will keep her and me warm.

Della says the rot set in after the war, during which the estate was requisitioned by the army and used for decoding Nazi signals and training special forces. The house and the surrounding park were bought by the Congregation of Marian Fathers, a Polish order, in 1953, and used as a boarding school, Divine Mercy College. It became home to 150 boys, aged 9 to 19, mostly the children of Poles displaced during the war who had found refuge in Britain.

The owners, being priests, did not have much cash and certainly not the millions needed to maintain the house. Year by year, it fell more and more into disrepair. In the 1970s, one of the priests allegedly fell asleep while smoking, and a fire started that destroyed the roof and covered the priceless ceilings below with rubble.

Fixing Fawley will cost Della many millions more than she paid for it. She is

working with historians, archivists and English Heritage to get it "just right". "We are digging out 170 years of paint colours," she says. "We're reopening fireplaces and installing new chandeliers. Everything is coming back. It's an enormous undertaking."

Any rows with the heritage people? "It took four years to agree the demolition of a spiral staircase – four years, 20 historians, archaeologists, paint analysts and every archive in England, to be precise. But they do have an important job to do. I'd hate to think what England would be without English Heritage."

She adds that being foreign and a woman makes things easier, not harder.

"They are happy to work with me to help me, rather than hinder me. I think they like what I am doing. It would be awful if Fawley became another country-house hotel."

In the park, she has felled 2,500 trees and planted 3,000 new ones. "I go around in my Wellington boots with the original Capability Brown plans and say, 'We need a tree here!' And I mark the spot. I look manic, bonkers, obsessive."

Wasn't she bonkers to buy Fawley Court in the first place, given the state it was in? "Not at all," she shoots back, her eyes narrowing. "It's perfect – or at



of Józef Jarzebowski, a prominent clergyman whose grave was on the property. "That was a serious business," Della says.

Separately, she had to fight off a claim from a property developer, Richard Butler-Creagh, who alleged that she owed him a £5m fee for facilitating her purchase. "Those were dark days," she frowns. "I was in the crossfire." Was it worth the hassle? "Yes, yes. Fawley is a magic place."

Now that the battles are over and the rebuilding work is almost complete, she hopes it will be a magic home for her and her two children, who are both London-based entrepreneurs, one developing flexible shared workspaces, the other setting up a healthcare firm. Few would begrudge Della a place in the country to call home – even if it is a 46,000 sq ft grade I listed home with 13 grade II listed buildings in the grounds, some dating from the 12th century, and a staff of 11. But she does not simply want to be a home "full of family history". She wants it to become "relevant".

"I hope this does not sound too 19th-century," she says, "but I would like to create a kind of modern-day 'salon' where people can discuss the issues of the day and try to make some progress. I could start with the area I once called home – the Middle East. I'd like to host a festival of peace to bring Muslims, Jews and Christians together side by side, just as they were when I was growing up in Tehran."

She wants to team up with Chatham House, in London, and partner with other think tanks and private companies to attract politicians and business leaders for public debates and meetings. "It's a great advantage that we're so close to the centre of London and to Heathrow." But it's not all work, work, work. Last year, during the Henley Regatta, she launched the Fawley River Club, the swankiest spot from which to enjoy the regatta, with a private clubhouse and restaurant.

She is doing all the work and hosting all the events partly because she wants to; partly because her family's fortune means she can afford to; and partly because bricks and mortar are in her blood. "I have property in my genes," she says. "My father used to walk around buildings when he was a kid. I like getting 'down and dirty' in buildings." But more than anything, she is doing it because it is her way of saying thank you to her adopted home.

"You never forget who helps you, who takes you in when you have nowhere else to go," she smiles. "After the revolution, I had no country to go back to. No home. England adopted me. It became home. Wherever I am in the world, I'm happy to come back, even when it is pissing rain on a day like today."

"Doing a project like Fawley, in the heart of England, made me feel even more English. This work, all this struggle, is wonderful, because it's my home, my castle, of course."

She must get a kick out of being the mistress of Fawley Hall, too? Despite her foreigner's love of England, Della shrieks with horror at the idea of becoming some kind of Downton Abbey Lady Cora figure. "No, no, no," she insists. "After everything that has happened, I just feel lucky to be here."

least it will be. When the English get things right, they really get things right," she says as she strolls through the arboretum, past the deconsecrated chapel that now serves as a 300-seat concert hall.

Besides, she knew she had to buy it the first time she walked in, seven years ago. "I felt a connection with the place," she recalls. "I went upstairs and there was a Persian room decorated with pistachio wallpaper and scenes from Persian history. Lots of old English country houses have Chinese rooms, but Persian rooms are rare."

It is taking years to get all the repair work done, not just because there is

Wind of change
Aida Della, inset, has undertaken a vast restoration job after buying Fawley Court for £13m. Top, the Imperial Chinese dining room. Middle, the entrance hall, originally styled by Sir Christopher Wren. Left, the James Wyatt salon

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