

Personal invitation into the

Fancy a glimpse of how the other half (a percent) live? **ROWAN MANTELL** reports on the scheme that throws open the doors of some of Norfolk's most stunning homes and invites you for an access-all-areas tour of everything from grand staircases to family kitchens.

THEY'RE THE HOUSES YOU'VE GLIMPSED THROUGH HEDGES AND ACROSS FIELDS; the beautiful, lavish unreachable homes you've always wanted to see close-up. And now you can.

The owners of 11 of Norfolk's loveliest homes, plus several more just across the borders into Suffolk and Cambridgeshire, are inviting you over. They'll show you round their venerable Elizabethan manor house or stunning Georgian hall, let you wander through gorgeous gardens and treat you to lunch, or afternoon tea on the terrace.

With just a tiny bit of positive spin you are not just a rubbernecking tourist on a roped-off tour of a few stunning-but-sterile stately rooms, but an invited guest in a family home.

Kirstead Hall

When I arrived at Kirstead Hall it was labrador retriever Lucy who greeted me first, closely followed by Judy and Dermot Murphy.

Within seconds I was sitting in their kitchen, part Tudor, part 21st century, and finding out about the beautiful house which has been home to the Murphys and their family for more than 30 years.

It was snowing when they first saw it, and the drifts were building up inside as well as out. But they knew they were looking at both a historic gem and their future family home.

"This kind of place was cheaper then. We could never afford it now!" said Dermot.

Ever since, Dermot, a furniture restorer, and Judy, a teacher, now retired, have devoted themselves to the 440-year-old hall.

Lovely Kirstead, just outside Brooke, was the perfect place to raise their three daughters and orphaned nephew. Today they still share it with two of their daughters, a son-in-law and their two granddaughters.

And there's even a ghost! The middle-aged lady-of-the-manor ghost has been spotted by Judy, two daughters and a local historian...

Over the years Judy and Dermot have installed electricity throughout the house, restored blocked-in windows and removed unsympathetic additions, tended the lovely walled garden and gradually discovered more and more about their home.

Outside it is all mullioned windows, barleycorn chimneys and mellow, patterned brickwork. Inside the rooms are filled with an engaging mix of family possessions and photographs; furniture and paintings collected at sales and auctions; and some fascinating heirlooms of their own. There is a letter to Dermot's aunt from



STUNNING VIEWS: Owners of Kirstead Hall, Judy and Dermot Murphy, are inviting the public to explore their home under the Invitation to View scheme. Above, nesting boxes in the dovecote and below, one of the letters on display at Kirstead Hall. Inset, one of the hall's grand rooms.



Agatha Christie, and a painting of the official surrender of the German army in 1945, with Dermot's uncle standing alongside Montgomery. Another document details this uncle removed two cyanide capsules from Himmler, but missed the one, concealed in his mouth, which killed the Gestapo leader.

Dermot is part of the van Cutsem family, who can trace their lineage back to the 8th century emperor Charlemagne. He is also a direct descendent of the sister of Fletcher Christian, of Mutiny On The Bounty fame.

He has spent time labelling many of the paintings and pieces of furniture, not because he wants to turn the house into a museum but because the couple want to offer as much information as possible during each tour of their house. This way they can take guests around the ground floor rooms of their home before serving tea and cakes. Visitors can then return to whichever paintings, furniture, heirlooms or architectural details that interest them

TAKE THE TOUR

Invitation to View is run by the owners of 51 East Anglian properties. They live in manors, halls, abbeys and towers across Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire and Essex.

And, on set dates each year, they invite you to join them for a tour of their homes, plus anything from tea and biscuits to a gourmet dinner.

Some of the owners are used to showing specialist groups around their homes, but the Invitation to View scheme means individuals can book in to join a tour.



most.

Judy would like to think a false floor in the room above the porch was once a priest-hole, to shelter the men keeping the Catholic faith alive as England lurched towards Protestantism.

The hall is part of an impressive group of listed buildings, including its dovecote and two barns on the next-door farm. Guests can also see the old dairy building where Dermot restores and conserves antique furniture.

This is the first time Kirstead Hall has been part of the Invitation to View scheme but Dermot and Judy are looking forward to welcoming new guests.

They have opened Kirstead before, for church charities, and shown specialist groups around too. Three years ago a party of local archaeologists pointed out the strange symbols scratched into the paint on the porch walls, and on a fireplace. These, Dermot and Judy were fascinated to learn, were anti-witchcraft charms. Other parties of visitors have included people with information on

everything from the scorch marks on timber (which would have been recycled from other buildings, or even ships, by the Tudor builders) to the time the beautiful hall was used to store hay.

Between the world wars artist Edward Seago used the drawing room as his first studio and the honeysuckle that climbs outside the window is the same plant he saw as he launched his painting career from Kirstead. The son of a coal merchant from Brooke went on to become a wildly popular artist and a favourite with the Royal family.

Today the walls of Kirstead are full of paintings – but no Seagos. "They're too expensive!" said Dermot.

"This is definitely a home, not a museum," said Dermot. "But it's tremendous fun showing people round." "I think it's such a good idea," said Judy. "People are rather tired of looking at houses that aren't lived in. We are treating people as if they are friends of ours."

"We feel we are just tenants in time, here."

Didlington Manor

Homes don't have to be hundreds of years old to feature in the Invitation to View scheme, or even include the house itself. Didlington Manor, between Thetford and Swaffham, was built, in a historic park with lakes and follies, in 2004. Another Norfolk property joining the scheme for the first time this year is Hilborough House Gardens, near Swaffham.

Its Invitation to View tour takes in a fabulous garden including some top topiary, a maze, a labyrinth and tea in the chapel organ room. The house itself, which is not open, was built in the late 1990s – for Hugh van Cutsem, a close

It's the only scheme of its kind in the country, or possibly in the world. One owner said: "The houses are lived-in family homes, individual and even eccentric. Tours are usually taken by the owners who will reveal secrets, ghosts, cupboards full of skeletons (and clutter)."

■ To book, call the Mercury Theatre in Colchester, on 01206 573948 or book on-line at www.mercurytheatre.co.uk.

■ For more information on Invitation to View, including details on all the homes and the times, dates and prices of each tour, visit www.invitationtoview.co.uk

