

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**

most desirable family homes



friend of Prince Charles, and second cousin of Dermot Murphy.

Scheme administrator Pat Jacobs said owners open their homes for all kinds of reasons. "Some feel that other people should share the history of their homes, some do it to fund repairs, some like the company, some just like to show their gardens off after they've put so much work into them!"

Visitors book and pay in advance, so owners have a list of their "guests", helping with security and also emphasising the feel of a private visit. "We try to make it like showing a group of house guests round," said Pat.

Voewood

Hidden away just outside Holt is another astonishing house. Built in the shape of a butterfly just over a century ago, the four floors of Voewood are packed with a breathtaking array of rooms. The imposing entrance takes you, via a short flight of stone steps into a double-height medieval-style hall and gallery with oak-timbered roof and massive fireplace.

There is a huge dining hall too, a comfortable, homely kitchen and a wing of light, relaxed rooms. Upstairs the 14 bedrooms have been named to reflect their idiosyncratic decoration. There is the Patchwork Room, the Delft Room, the Heaven Room, the Purple Haze Room... Plus the Shell Bathroom, the Mosaic Bathroom, the Chill-Out Room, and a dormitory for seven which is all white duvets and drapes.

Many of the rooms look out onto the beautiful sunken gardens and it is hard to believe this was all just a turnip field a little more than a century ago.

Voewood was built as a family home for a rector but the £60,000 it cost was a phenomenal sum in those days,

equivalent to many millions today, and it was only lived in, as a rented house, for around a year before it was sold to become a boys' school.

A haunting photograph album begins with relaxed pictures of school life, including a parade of theatrical productions. But it ends with stiff, solemn portraits of the boys, dressed in uniform, off to fight in the first world war. Many never returned, and the idyllic days of school teas on the lawn never returned either. The school closed in 1915 and, for 70 years, Voewood was as a TB hospital, a convalescence ward, a retirement home...

Then, 12 years ago, rare book dealer Simon Finch saw the Arts and Crafts gem behind the divided rooms, plastic baths, linoleum corridors and bulky lift shafts.

Ever since he has been restoring Voewood to its former glory. And, in the spirit of the Arts and Crafts movement of which it is one of the best examples, he has brought it paintings, furniture, ornaments, crockery, curtains, tapestries, mosaics and more. Butterflies are a recurring theme, reflecting the design of the house and appearing in rooms all over Voewood. There are embroidered and painted butterflies, plus museum case drawers of real butterflies pinned down by long-dead collectors.

The dining room is dominated by a beautiful Last Supper painting. A bedroom fireplace features original Delft tiles. There a parquet floors, elaborate chimneys, lovely paintings, mosaics made of tiles and a mosaic made of buttons, stuffed ducks, a 1960s robot, a warren of cellar rooms, that imposing medieval-style hall... But essentially it is still a family house.

"Every time Simon returns he brings something else he has picked up. Sometimes I think there can't be space for anything else!" said Indra Jones, who was a florist in Holt before she took over gardening at Voewood. She now manages the business of booking in visitors and guests and weddings and retreats.

"One of the special things about this house is that it's undiscovered," said Indra. "Simon Finch wants people to share his house. And people are inspired by it, they come round and say 'Oh what a good idea. I can try that at home.'"

Architecture buffs might like the fact that the house is constructed from poured concrete, historians will enjoy the early 20th century pastoral anti-industrial ethos it was once part of. Other visitors will simply like the sense of discovery as they come upon this lovely house, hidden down a wooded drive and opening its wings to reveal a treasure of strange-shaped and eccentrically, exquisitely decorated rooms.

HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVE: Top, Voewood, built in the shape of a butterfly, is packed with four floors of rooms, while Mannington Hall is also part of the invitation to View tours.

DON'T MISS OUT

■ Take up an Invitation to View Kirstead Hall on May 6 and 20, June 1 and 17, July 1 and 27, August 11 and 25 or September 9 and 23.

■ Take up an Invitation to View Voewood on April 28, May 5 and 12, June 3, 9 and 30, or September 1, 8 and 15. Other Norfolk homes in the Invitation to View scheme include:

- Bayfield Hall and Brinton Hall near Holt.
 - Clifton House, King's Lynn.
 - Didlington Manor and Hilborough House Gardens, near Swaffham.
 - Earsham Hall near Bungay.
 - Mannington Hall, pictured above, and Wolterton Hall near Aylsham
 - Silverstone Farm between Fakenham and Dereham.
- Just across the border into Suffolk and Cambridgeshire there are more manor houses, moated halls and magnificent family homes.