

PROPERTY



MAN THE RAMPARTS
The Duchess of Roxburghe, main, lives at Floors, below, said to be the largest inhabited castle in Scotland

'You want improvements to last the next 100 years'



CHRIS WAIT FOR THE TELEGRAPH

GREAT ESTATES

Scotland's largest lived-in castle is laden with history and ready for the future, finds Eleanor Doughty

Few families can claim a whole county in their name. Roxburghshire might be the oldest world name for a picture-perfect pocket of the Scottish Borders, but its current patrons live very much in the present. The Duke and Duchess of Roxburghe have a plan to make this part of southern Scotland the most desirable in the land. Headquarters is Floors Castle (pronounced Fleurs), a large country house - indeed, it claims to be the largest inhabited castle in Scotland - dating from the 1720s with a 52,000-acre estate an hour from Edinburgh. It is Virginia, the Duchess, who is driving Floors' latest development. Slight and glamorous, she is all smiles when we meet outside an elegant cottage around the corner from the castle. This is the Head Gardener's House, built in 1857 for the original chief landscaper, Hector Rose, and now the first holiday let on the estate. It is full of light, with high ceilings and elegant interiors. Downstairs, there's a large utility room with dog beds and boot storage, and a comfortable sitting room jam-packed with old hardbacks and backgammon boards, opposite a modern kitchen-diner, where a basket of goodies from the Roxburghe farm shop awaits arriving guests. Upstairs, the two bedrooms overlook the walled garden, which guests have to themselves after the public have gone home. It is, by all ac-



counts, a grand little house. "They must have valued their head gardener a lot in those days," the duchess observes.

GARDEN COTTAGE
The Head Gardener's House, above, was built in 1857

The house became vacant last year when the last member of estate staff living there moved out. After a year's work modernising the interiors, with the majority of the work done by locals, the house opened for bookings in April. These are organised by Emma Crabtree, whose holiday lettings business is based in the nearby town of Kelso. Prices start from £544 for three nights or £650 per week for up to a month (crabtreeandcrabtree.com).

Interior decoration projects are not new to the duchess, who was dressing up flats in Kensington for property developer David Naylor-Leyland when she met the duke, Guy Innes-Ker. The couple married in 1992 and have two children, Isabella, 23, and George, 21; the duke has three more from his first marriage to Lady Jane Grosvenor. Virginia's vision for the Head Gardener's House was modern and clean: "I wasn't going to stick a whole lot of brown furniture from the Floors attic in here. It's got to appeal to every age group." It ended up being quite an endeavour, she recalls. "You forget how much goes into a house, down to the last tea

cup, padded coat hangers and the glasses by the bed. I hadn't done that for a bit."

A different approach entirely is required at the main house, where it's more about curation than creation. Over the last 25 years, Virginia has modernised the castle bit by bit, updating bedrooms and adding new bathrooms. "It's a big call doing things in a castle because you want them to be there for the next 100 years, you can't make too many mistakes." She points to the biomass boiler they installed in 2010. "We've made it more comfortable for the 21st century."

The castle is open daily between Easter and September, but the estate has a packed timetable throughout the year. Five miles away, surrounding the 22-room Roxburghe Hotel, there's a championship golf course and shooting school, salmon

fishing on the Tweed and Teviot rivers, grouse shooting in the Lammernuir Hills and pheasant in the park. Visitors come from far and wide for these activities, while locals can buy a "Roxburghe card" from £20, which gives them 10 per cent off everything across the estate. There are two places to eat: the courtyard café, situated in an old stable block that was once home to the duke's polo ponies, is open from May to September, and the terrace café, which is next door to the Head Gardener's House, is open all year. It is from here that the famous Floors fish cakes are served. These have "a secret recipe which no one has ever divulged," Virginia says.

"We're always asked why we don't do mail order and send them to London. Moving fish cakes has always sounded quite complicated."

Still, she has plenty to be getting on with. New signs for the walled garden are in development and she is installing cycle paths across the estate. The Roxburghes are thinking of ways to attract a larger crowd, too. "We might expand the play area," she says. "The family market is huge, so that's an area that we are looking at increasing."

Floors Castle itself is a major burden. The house, with its three-storey main block and a hefty wing on either side, is so wide that it is almost impossible to photograph from the drive. But "when you get inside, it's only two rooms deep - it's not as intimidating as it looks from the outside," the duchess insists. Soon though, the roof will need redoing, after a century's wear and tear. The duke and duchess are resigned to this inevitable outlay. "Those kind of projects you have to build in and budget for," Virginia says. "The castle is a huge upkeep in itself. If we didn't have it then it would be rather easier to make ends meet."

STATELY STAYS
A week at the two-bedroom house, left, costs from £650



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