

Article from The Style Section of The New York Times:

Last month, Emma, Duchess of Rutland, sat in her drawing room and weighed the pros and cons of living over the shop. Specifically, Belvoir Castle, a stately and splendid pile perched on a wooded hilltop in the English countryside with more than 356 rooms and soaring neo-Gothic towers and turrets. It has been the site of the family seat since the 16th century.

“Well, it is magnificent, of course, and we are incredibly lucky, but you never quite know who is in here with you,” she said. “There isn’t privacy in the way most people might expect from their homes. And don’t get me started on the ghosts.”

Starting in the 1970s, changing laws about inheritance taxes made it fiscally advantageous to open up houses to the public for a certain number of days each year, generating funds for eye-watering preservation costs. (Today, Historic Houses estimates its properties have, collectively, a [roughly £2 billion \(about \\$2.5 billion\) repair and maintenance backlog.](#))

“We find that visitors really love seeing houses that remain lived-in homes, as opposed to being museum pieces where nobody now lives,” Mr. Cowell said.

At Belvoir, some even stay the night. The castle, which was a stand-in for Windsor Castle in “The Crown” and has been featured in movies including “The Da Vinci Code” and “The Young Victoria,” often hosts guests for weekend events and photo shoots. They can stay in sumptuous state bedrooms, several of which are newly renovated, including one that, in

[collaboration with de Gournay](#), is covered in hand-painted wallpapers. (Belvoir wallpapers are, naturally, available to order.)

In fact, wallpaper preservation is often a priority for the duchess, a onetime interior decorator (and real estate agent and opera singer). It is a cornerstone of her new charitable initiative, [American Friends of Belvoir Castle](#), which will host an inaugural fund-raising gala at the Breakers in Palm Beach, Fla., next year. Last month, Emma, Duchess of Rutland, sat in her drawing room and weighed the pros and cons of living over the shop. Specifically, Belvoir Castle, a stately and splendid pile perched on a wooded hilltop in the English countryside with more than 356 rooms and soaring neo-Gothic towers and turrets. It has been the site of the family seat since the 16th century.

A private secretary wandered by with a giant flag that needed repair before it could fly from the castle's two-and-a-half-acre roof. Downstairs, the castle tearoom hummed with tables of tourists sampling scones with jams from the [Belvoir estate](#). Nearby, a platoon of pickup trucks bounced across a field packing up obstacles from a recent Tough Mudder endurance event. For the duchess, born Emma Watkins, it was a day like any other.

A farmer's daughter from the Welsh borders, she moved to Belvoir in 2001 when her husband became the 11th Duke of Rutland, one of the most senior hereditary titles in England. He may have inherited a fairy-tale castle, but they were also landed with 12 million pounds (almost \$15.5 million) of inheritance taxes and, in her words, "battalions of rats and staff who clearly preferred the former incumbents to us."

In the years since, as both chatelaine and chief executive, the duchess has brokered filming and event deals, streamlined

the operations of the estate and undertaken a costly restoration to safeguard Belvoir for the next generation.

Recently, despite tabloid scrutiny for her [unconventional living arrangements](#) (the duke and duchess are legally separated and have lived in different wings since 2012) and the fact that Britain's historic houses [are increasingly part of a brewing culture war](#) over how the country should reckon with its colonial past, the duchess has displayed a growing taste for the limelight, albeit on her terms.



Belvoir Castle has been the family seat of the Duke of Rutland since the 16th century.

Credit...

Alice Zoo for The New Times



Helena Bonham Carter in a scene from “The Crown,” in which Belvoir was a stand-in for Windsor Castle.

Credit...

Netflix

In 2020, she started a podcast, “[Duchess](#),” in which she interviews other duchesses. A Duchess Gallery shop on the estate sells branded clothing, home wares, gins, wines and cider. And last year the duchess published “[The Accidental Duchess](#),” an autobiography that includes candid accounts of her husband’s serial affairs and her string of miscarriages while raising five children.

Now 59, she is emerging as one of the more amiable public faces of Britain’s aristocracy at a time when many prefer to remain below the radar. That means she is more sanguine than most about airing dirty laundry.

Brisk but friendly, she crossed her bare, toned legs (she said she runs about two miles each day after a cup of Earl Grey

tea at sunrise) as she recalled an early morning attempt to put a load of clothes into the washing machine. Her utility room, she said, is on the other side of a landing from her living quarters, which are concealed from the public by screens. She wore what she described as “a granny nightie” as she nipped across the hall.

“To my horror, there were 20 or 30 mesmerized Texans from a coach tour all pointing at me from a staircase,” she said. She smiled and stroked the duke’s little Shih Tzu, Spitfire, who was resting in her lap with a resigned air.

“There is always something happening here,” she said. “We do what we need to do to keep the lights on.”

Belvoir, Pronounced ‘Beaver’

It is an idiosyncratic — and fiercely protected — quirk of the British cultural landscape that so many of its stately homes can have visitors even while the families that own them remain in residence. About one-third of the historic houses are in the care of conservation charities like the National Trust or English Heritage, but Belvoir Castle, in Leicestershire, remains in private hands.

“Many houses opened up for the first time after the Second World War, when new income streams needed to be found to meet repair bills and when houses were being knocked down because owners could no longer manage to keep them,” said Ben Cowell, the director general of [Historic Houses](#), a nonprofit that helps preserve about 1,500 privately owned properties.









Starting in the 1970s, changing laws about inheritance taxes made it fiscally advantageous to open up houses to the

public for a certain number of days each year, generating funds for eye-watering preservation costs. (Today, Historic Houses estimates its properties have, collectively, a [roughly £2 billion \(about \\$2.5 billion\) repair and maintenance backlog.](#))

“We find that visitors really love seeing houses that remain lived-in homes, as opposed to being museum pieces where nobody now lives,” Mr. Cowell said.

At Belvoir, some even stay the night. The castle, which was a stand-in for Windsor Castle in “The Crown” and has been featured in movies including “The Da Vinci Code” and “The Young Victoria,” often hosts guests for weekend events and photo shoots. They can stay in sumptuous state bedrooms, several of which are newly renovated, including one that, in [collaboration with de Gournay](#), is covered in hand-painted wallpapers. (Belvoir wallpapers are, naturally, available to order.)

In fact, wallpaper preservation is often a priority for the duchess, a onetime interior decorator (and real estate agent and opera singer). It is a cornerstone of her new charitable initiative, [American Friends of Belvoir Castle](#), which will host an inaugural fund-raising gala at the Breakers in Palm Beach, Fla., next year.