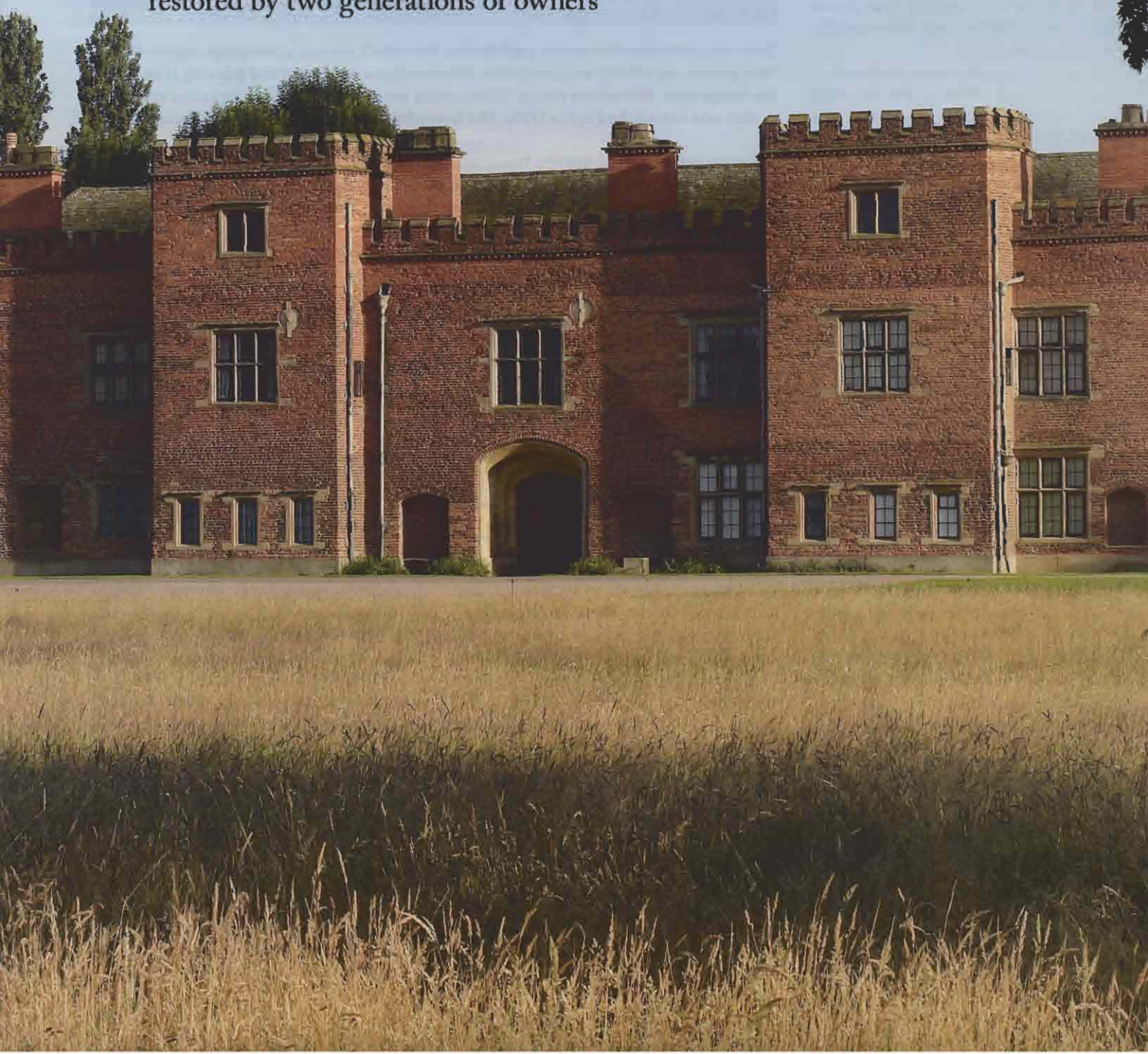


HOLME PIERREPONT HALL

NOTTINGHAMSHIRE
THE HOME OF THE
BRACKENBURY FAMILY

WILLIAM PALIN discovers the delights
of a Tudor house that has been lovingly
restored by two generations of owners



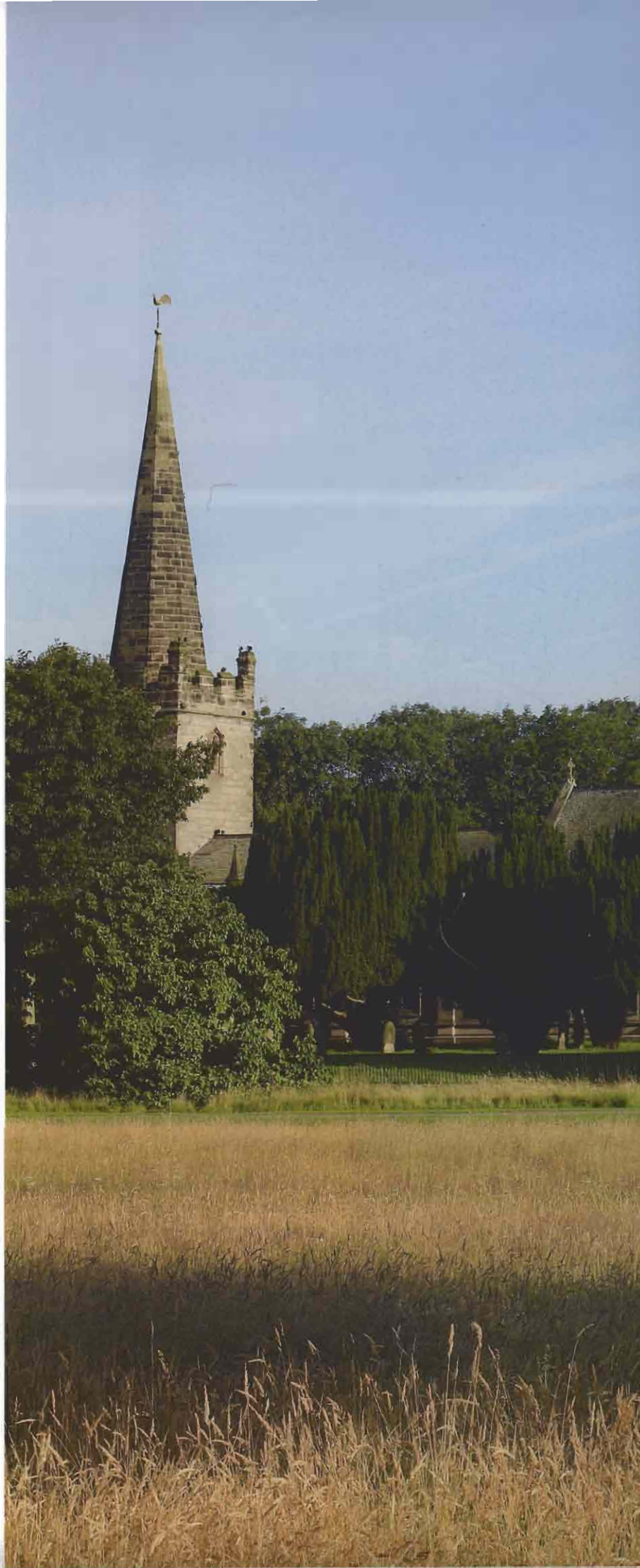
ANCIENT, picturesque and enigmatic, Holme Pierrepont Hall (Fig 1), on the outskirts of Nottingham, is an unexpected delight. Given the dismal fate of so many houses on the fringes of industrial towns, its survival within a close setting is remarkable. Fortunately, since the Second World War, the house has enjoyed a series of energetic and individualistic owners, determined on its preservation. Family pride has also played an important role, as, remarkably, the house is still occupied by descendants of its builder, Sir William Pierrepont, who inherited the property in 1499.

Descended from a Norman family at the time of William the Conqueror, the Pierreponts had consolidated their wealth and power by marrying into the Manvers family (another great Nottinghamshire dynasty) in the 13th century. Holme, as it was then called—from the Saxon for island—came to the Pierreponts through this union. Sir William probably enjoyed the means to build through his marriage to a daughter of Sir Richard Empson, a notorious and hated instrument of Henry VII's severe financial exactions.

Certainly, scientific dating of timbers from the Tudor range suggests that the house was under construction in about 1509. This was the last year that Sir Richard enjoyed power at court, before his fall and execution in 1510 after the death of Henry VII. The new courtyard house was constructed of brick, one of the earliest usages of this material in Nottinghamshire.

Since the death of Sir William in 1534, the fortunes of the house have fluctuated dramatically. Considerable alterations and additions (Fig 2) were made before the Civil War under Robert Pierrepont, who later assumed the titles >

1—Hidden away, just beyond the eastern suburbs of Nottingham, Holme Pierrepont has stood firm against the elements—and development pressures—for five centuries. The gatehouse range is the principal surviving element of the courtyard house, which was erected in about 1509 by Sir William Pierrepont. The two square towers—which housed latrines—and battlements present a defensive show, but this martial impression is softened by the rich red brick and 17th-century mullion and transom windows. Flanking the front are pairs of blind arches that back onto fireplaces within the building, a curious feature paralleled in other houses of the period, such as Gosfield Hall in Essex



of Baron Pierrepont, Viscount Newark and, finally, Earl of Kingston. When the earl's son, Henry, Marquess of Dorchester, died in 1680, the house was mothballed by the family in favour of Thoresby Park, their other great Nottinghamshire seat. In the 1730s, the building was partially Georgianised and the 17th-century 'high parts' demolished.

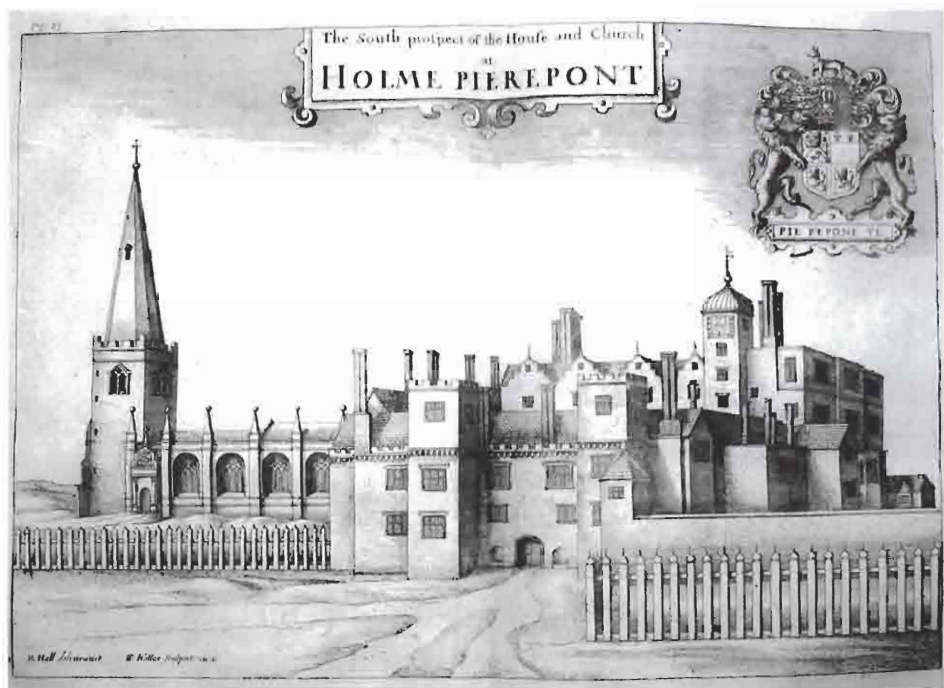
By 1790, the house had passed to Charles Meadows, great-nephew of the 2nd Duke of Kingston, who had undertaken the 1730s alterations. The new owner took the name of Pierrepont, and was created 1st Earl Manvers in 1806. He then initiated a programme of repairs and alterations for which drawings in the hand of William Wilkins (surveyor at the Thoresby and Holme Pierrepont estates) survive. As part of these works, the house (by now reduced to the gatehouse and eastern ranges) was given a new coat of stucco that dramatically altered its appearance.

Further alterations were undertaken in the 1860s and 1870s by the 3rd Earl. A new north range was erected at this time, which was to be the last significant change to the house for a century.

In 1969, following the death of Lady Sibell Argles, the house was bought by Mrs Elizabeth Brackenbury. Lady Sibell, sister of the 5th Earl Manvers and cousin of Mrs Brackenbury, had kept the house alive against all the odds during the difficult post-war period, but years of neglect had left it in a perilous state. Aided by grants, Elizabeth and her husband, Robin, undertook an extensive restoration programme. One of the first and most significant decisions was to remove the 1800s stucco. This exposed the fine early-16th-century red brickwork that gives Holme Pierrepont so much of its character, and transformed the look of the house.

At the same time, work inside the gatehouse range revealed fine Tudor timberwork (Fig 8). From 1979 to 1980, other work (including the creation of the long gallery in the east range) was carried out by recruits from a Nottingham-based training scheme for the long-term unemployed. More than 100 people worked on the house and gardens as part of the scheme, and, during my visit, Robin Brackenbury recalled some of the many challenges presented by this unconventional arrangement. However, many of the trainees flourished, and the fruits of this remarkable initiative were reported in a COUNTRY LIFE article of 1979.

The house is approached along a short drive that curves round past the church of St Edmund. The ancient, and



2—A view of Holme Pierrepont published in Thoroton's *History of Nottinghamshire* (1677). The gatehouse, with its original Tudor chimneys (now truncated and rebuilt), is visible in the foreground. Behind it is the tall 17th-century range with its decorative gables and tower that was demolished in the 1730s. The heavy fencing is a paling for the adjacent park

intimate, relationship between house and church is reflected in St Edmund's fine monuments. Many of the Pierreponts are here entombed, including the Yorkist Sir Henry (died 1499) and his great nephew Sir Henry, who married Frances Cavendish, Bess of Hardwick's daughter (died 1615)—a success which accounts for his magnificent alabaster

'The removal of the stucco during restoration exposed the fine 16th-century red brick that gives Holme Pierrepont its character'

tomb chest designed by John Smythson, the son of Robert, Bess's architect.

Arriving on a clear but bitterly cold November morning, my host, Robin Brackenbury's son, Robert, emerged, cheerfully, to greet me. He confided, modestly, that his knowledge of the building history of Holme Pierrepont was not nearly as detailed as that of his father, whom he expected would join us during the tour. He also explained that, although he and his family occupied apartments in the north range, his parents remained in the older part of the house, meaning that the two generations could enjoy separate territories under the same roof. At that moment, looking slightly mischievous, his father

appeared, and, from that point on, father and son provided a dual escort. I was swept along, bombarded by historical detail, entertained by extraordinary tales of the 1970s restoration work, and educated on the present state of the house and plans for the future.

Once the visitor enters the gatehouse range, the great antiquity of the building, with its Tudor brick walls and timber framing, at once becomes apparent (Fig 7). Much of this fabric, including one magnificent Elizabethan fireplace, was exposed during repair work in the 1970s to treat dry rot.

Its original contents long dispersed, the house now benefits from two important collections. Most of the furniture (left to Robin Brackenbury by his grandmother) comes from Thorpe Hall in Lincolnshire. And in 1989, following the sale of Thoresby Hall, a collection of paintings—including many portraits known to have been at Holme Pierrepont in 1830—was gifted by Lady Rozelle Raynes, daughter of the last Earl Manvers. They now hang throughout the house, forming a narrative of the family and its changing fortunes. There also survive in the house and neighbouring church several windows painted with the crests and heraldic devices of the family by Henry Giles of York in 1666.

By the 20th century, the 2nd Duke of Kingston's Georgianised east wing beyond the gatehouse range had fallen into decay. Its repair and transformation



3—The dense green of the yew trees sets off the rich red brick of the house and the stone steeple of the nearby church that rises beyond



4—A view through the family apartments in the north range of Holme Pierrepont, where the building has been converted into a comfortable set of rooms for Robert Brackenbury and his family



5—The 1660s oak staircase with its rich foliated balustrade and newel-post urns with carved fruit is similar to staircases at Sudbury Hall in Derbyshire, and nearby Thrumpton Hall. As at Sudbury, a John Fowler paint scheme has been adopted, with the joinery painted white. Here, the paint helps disguise the many repairs and reinstatements made during restoration in the 1970s



6—The courtyard, which originally featured a cloister, now contains a charming formal garden, the design of which is based on a late-19th-century layout. Surrounded on three sides by the house and on the west side by a fine battlemented wall, the garden feels both enclosed from, and connected to, the external Nottinghamshire landscape

into a single long gallery was one of the biggest tasks Robin Brackenbury faced in the 1970s. It is now a splendid room, ideally suited for large parties of diners, and crucial for the running of the house as a venue.


On the west side, a 17th-century window looks out onto the courtyard garden (Fig 6) and church beyond.

A treat awaits the visitor on leaving the long gallery. At one end, an archway opens out onto a beautiful oak staircase of the 1660s (Fig 5). It is a grand piece of architecture that owes its surprising location, so far from the entrance to the house, to a twist of historical fate, having been re-sited here from another part of the house in the 1730s remodelling.

7—The spacious ‘lower lodging’, with its closely studded timber walls. Grandly proportioned, this interior is an appropriate and atmospheric space in which to perform official ceremonies such as marriages—all part of the new life of the house



‘A collection of paintings, including many portraits known to be at the house in 1830, form a narrative of the family and its fortunes’

The north wing, across the garden from the gatehouse range, was built by the 3rd Earl Manvers to house his family during the rebuilding of Thoresby under Anthony Salvin in the 1860s and 1870s. This has now been converted into a comfortable set of apartments for Robert Brackenbury and his family (Fig 4). Rooms include a cosy, book-lined eating room on the first floor with a view of the courtyard. Here, a bay-fronted dining room opens onto the garden and a beautifully maintained avenue of yews (Fig 3), beyond which visitors can look back and admire the varied textures and architectural forms that reflect the eliding histories of this romantic and delightfully quirky house. 

Photographs: Paul Barker.

Holme Pierrepont Hall and gardens are open to the public on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays, from 2pm to 5pm, until March 19, with special openings on February 10, March 9 and April 13. The house is available for weddings, corporate events and other functions. For more information, telephone 0115 933 2371 or visit www.holmepierreponthall.com



8—One of the bedchambers on the first floor of the gate-house range. The west wall with its exposed timbers reaches up to the cusped timber braces of the 16th-century roof. In pride of place, there hangs a large swagger portrait by Henri Gascar of the young 3rd Earl of Kingston