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Family enterprise: the Earl and Countess of Ronaldshay with their children (from left), Mianna, Eliza and twins Imogen and Flora in front of the former stables at Aske, Yorkshire, which now house offices. The sculpture, *Unison*, is by Charles Hadcock

NEW LIFE FOR OLD ESTATES

THE EARL OF RONALDSHAY AT ASKE, YORKSHIRE

FOR most owners, the ancillary buildings that once were vital cogs in the great machine that drove the rural estate represent something of a double-edged sword. Designed to impress as eye-catchers in the landscape, they are often of architectural as well as social interest and situated in beautiful, unspoiled settings. Yet today, largely redundant for their original purpose, many face neglect and dereliction, their owners unwilling to sell because they lie at the heart of the estate. It is a category of buildings at risk closely associated with rural decline, yet the problem is not a new one, and there have been many successful reprieves.

The recent rescue of the Marquess of Zetland's magnificent complex of hunting stables at Aske, near Richmond, built in 1887 to the designs of Thomas Oliver, is particularly inspiring. Zetland's descendant the Earl of Ronaldshay describes this imposing quadrangle as 'absurdly grand', charting its decline, following wartime requisitioning, to a chicken-rearing premises, and then storage for 'the floosam and jetsam that goes with farming—sick animals, straw bales . . . clobber'. By 1999 the stables were 'sick and tired, although not derelict'. He explains how, after he returned from running a sausage-manufacturing business in Newmarket to live permanently at Aske in 1998, the estate decided to let out all its farmland, mostly to existing tenants. 'We'd farmed for years, because that was the traditional thing to do, but we didn't know much about it—we were exposed in a business we had no expertise in.'

Lord Ronaldshay then initiated a programme of diversification that has reversed the fortunes of the Grade II*-listed buildings, and is revitalising the estate. Employing Rural Solutions (the award-winning company founded by Roger Tempest, who pioneered the concept of the rural business park at his own Broughton Hall near Skipton), Zetland Estates converted the Classical ranges into high-quality modern offices. These accommodate about 15 small to medium-sized companies, some local, others relocating from the noise, pollution and traffic jams of the South. With sweeping views towards the North York moors, trouble-free parking in a discreetly located car park, ease of access from most northern cities and the A1, and an inspiring architectural setting sensitively restored, Aske Stables provides a model working environment. Lord Ronaldshay's business does not stop with property development; he and his management team are involved with the buildings and their occupants on a

daily basis, enjoying a relationship that traditionally landlords and tenants rarely had.

A detached riding stables is being converted into five more offices, and there are plans for more farmbuildings across the park. The estate, however, wants to steer clear of becoming a 'business park', and is considering upmarket holiday conversions for some of its farmhouses and steadings. The success of these ventures has brought the wheel full circle. There are now new jobs for estate employees and benefits to the local economy, which was badly hit by foot-and-mouth restrictions. The estate's renaissance has seen parkland that had been ploughed up for arable reinstated, and long under-used buildings take on a new lease of life. There are now as many people working here as there were a century ago, and companies queuing up to relocate to the country.

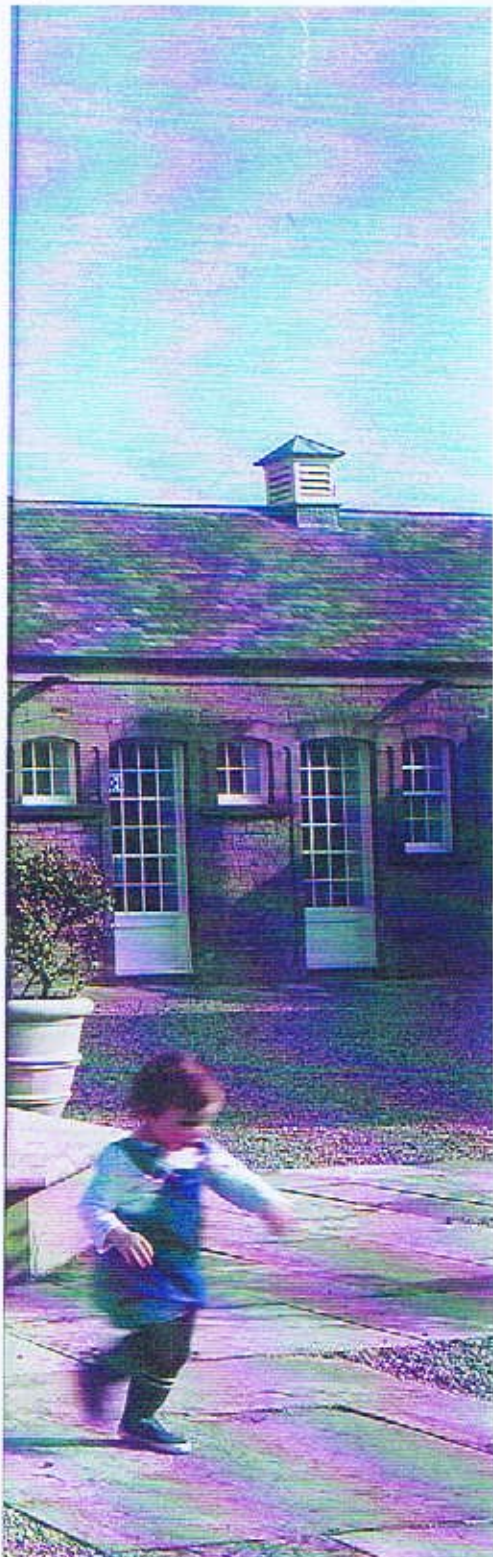
(01748 822000; www.aske.co.uk)

NICHOLAS DETERDING AT KELLING HALL, NORFOLK

MOST traditional estates were acquired or founded by entrepreneurs. It takes money to buy land and build houses. East Anglia in particular is dotted with estates that owe their origins to beer, banking and business. Typical of these is the Kelling Hall estate, near Holt, set up a century ago by Sir Henri Deterding, founder of Royal Dutch Shell. The handsome brick-and-flint house was built in 1913, to designs by Edward Maufe.

Sir Henri's great-grandson Nicholas observes that 'there will always be farming here—pigs, beef, barley and potatoes—but traditional mixed agriculture is no longer the guarantee of an estate's income, so we have to find new avenues'. To this end, the Deterdings have launched into the holiday-cottage business, but with a difference. 'Our furnished cottages, the interiors done to a high standard by my wife, Emma, through her property-management business, can be taken on a lease for short tenancies, a year or so, and they are completely serviced by the estate. We arrange laundry, firewood, gardening, cleaning once a week, laying up fires for the weekend and so on. It is partly inspired by something we experienced in the Far East, and partly by the well-established American habit of taking serviced cottages and houses in the Hamptons. We have four up and ready and three almost ready. There are plans to create a group of cottages in an old farmstead, with their own pool and tennis-court and to do something with the old palm houses.'

But balance is important. 'We will never do more than about 20 cottages, as the whole beauty of this place, a traditional



MARY MIERS and
JEREMY MUSSON visit
four estate owners who are
using innovative strategies
to revitalise and give new
purpose to their property.

sporting and agricultural estate, is that it is private and unspoilt.' The facilities of the estate are also available to tenants—walks and picnics in the woods, fishing for trout and carp. 'It is a business venture for us, but it also gives other people an investment in a place and a local community that a house taken for only a week or so cannot do. Countryside stewardship plays a big part in what we do, and these serviced cottages help us keep the right balance for Kelling.' (01263 712201, www.kellingestate.co.uk)

THE COUNTESS SONDES AT LEES COURT, KENT

IN what she describes as a 'cutting-edge initiative', a widowed American countess has combined the resources of her 4,500-acre English estate with the glamour of Fifth Avenue. The Countess Sondes is reinventing the 700-year-old Lees Court estate she inherited from her late husband, the 5th Earl Sondes, with an unusual programme of diversification. Three interrelated projects have harnessed the activities of a rural community to the research of leading agronomists and the marketing skills of a New York company whose clients include Christian Dior and Yves St Laurent. If the PR has a somewhat corporate ring, this belies the essential spirit of the venture, which is to preserve the integrity and values of a traditional English estate.

The first involves a technique known as inert supercritical CO₂, used to extract pure wheatgerm oil from wheat grown on the

Wheatgerm jamboree: the Countess Sondes with her range of products



home farm. Using this luxurious, chemical-free oil (a byproduct of the wheat, and thus 'added value', not compromising the estate's arable output), the Countess has developed a range of bath, body and home products called 'Seeds the Countess Sondes', currently being launched in America.

That she has managed to engineer this unlikely union between an English farm-based business and the sophisticated world of American marketing says much about Lady Sondes's own, unusual perspective. Brought up on Long Island, with no experience of the life of a British landowner, she developed a passionate interest in nature and rural issues when she came to live at Lees Court in 1986. This, and her personal commitment to make 'an enduring tribute to my husband's memory', have focused her determination to sustain the cycle of agriculture and sport which underpins the estate's way of life and natural environment.

Another initiative being developed with Springdale Crop Synergies Ltd will explore the potential of growing certain specialist non-food crops at Lees Court. This conforms with current government incentives for farming, but it is still relatively uncharted territory. Lady Sondes

stresses the need, in the recent climate of rural crisis, to seize new opportunities, and she acknowledges the risks. But in collaborating with Springdale, she has chosen a lead player in the co-ordination of research, industry and agriculture, and has an excellent support team on the estate.

Although Lady Sondes does not shoot, she is committed to preserving 'the soul of the estate' by keeping the shoot going, not to make money, but to protect the estate's biodiversity and maintain the involvement of the local community. She is involved in a joint research project with the Game Conservancy Trust to highlight the conservation benefits of shooting. 'When the Government attacks shooting, as I am certain it will, we will have scientific evidence to support the fact that there are already more songbirds, butterflies and bumblebees at Lees Court.' In her designer sunglasses and knitted mink cardigan, Lady Sondes seems an unlikely spokesperson for the Game Conservancy Trust, but it is her particular style, coupled with an impressive knowledge of a complex subject, that may be the key to alerting a wider audience to her message.

For information, telephone 01227 731331.



House party: Nicholas Deterding (*in doorway*) and (*anti-clockwise*) his wife Emma, children Isabella and Thomas, with the family parrot, Bubba, in one of their serviced cottages to let on the Kelling Hall estate



DAVID MACKAY

SIR FERRERS VYVYAN, BT AT TRELWARREN

TRELWARREN in Cornwall is a remarkable story. An ancient estate, of about 1,000 acres, in the same family since the 15th century, it has embraced the need to change brought about by the crisis in farming at the beginning of the 21st. Sir Ferrers Vyvyan, who took over its complete running in 1997, says: 'We experienced a nemesis in traditional agriculture and have come up with a solution that gives us an income and helps maintain the buildings and the land.' Sir Ferrers seems a laid-back, even studenty figure, with his dark beard and easy manner, and has taken quite an intellectual approach to the new era of Trelowarren, with a postgraduate diploma in landscape conservation. He is committed to environmental issues. 'We will remain an agricultural estate, we have contract farming for clifodils and grazing for beef, but our new business focus is time-share properties adapted from estate cottages and redundant farmbuildings. I know people cringe at the word timeshare, but that is a result of unprincipled sales policies in Mediterranean resorts.

ALAN JONES/ISTOCK

'At Trelowarren they give people a chance to invest in a country retreat, set in a bit of unspoilt country. We have no 'sales policy' as such, and word has spread rapidly by word of mouth. I like to think as a result of the all-over quality and integrity of our product. We have a lot of Cornish expats keeping a toe in the country, or people who feel a second home unused for much of the year cannot be justified. Our model has been that of Robert Dorrien-Smith of Tresco Abbey. We have refurbished all the current timeshare buildings to a high standard; hopefully, the next phase will replace our old caravan park with a small number of time-share properties. These will be heated by District wood burners, using wood from our own woodland. We intend to take back some 500 acres which have been managed by Forestry Investment Management Ltd, which we hope to run as

a coppice woodland, which also allows greater ecological diversity.'

Sir Ferrers, the father of five sons, observes: 'The great joy of this project has been that as the timeshares all "fall in" in 30 years, the next generation can make their own decisions then, but in the meantime we will have restored all the buildings and developed an excellent business.' He has also converted the old estate yard to include a major gallery of the Cornwall Crafts Association and a restaurant which attracted a French chef two years ago, 'whom everyone talks about', Sir Ferrers adds: 'Our next project is to restore the walled garden to provide organic vegetables for the restaurant, that in turn will create more jobs. The amazing thing is we now employ five times the number of people on the estate that we did 10 years ago.'

(contact@trelowarren.com; 01326 221224)

Trelowarren time-sharing: Sir Ferrers and Lady Vyvyan with three of their five sons (*from left*), Inigo, Rowan and Gabriel, at their home in Cornwall

