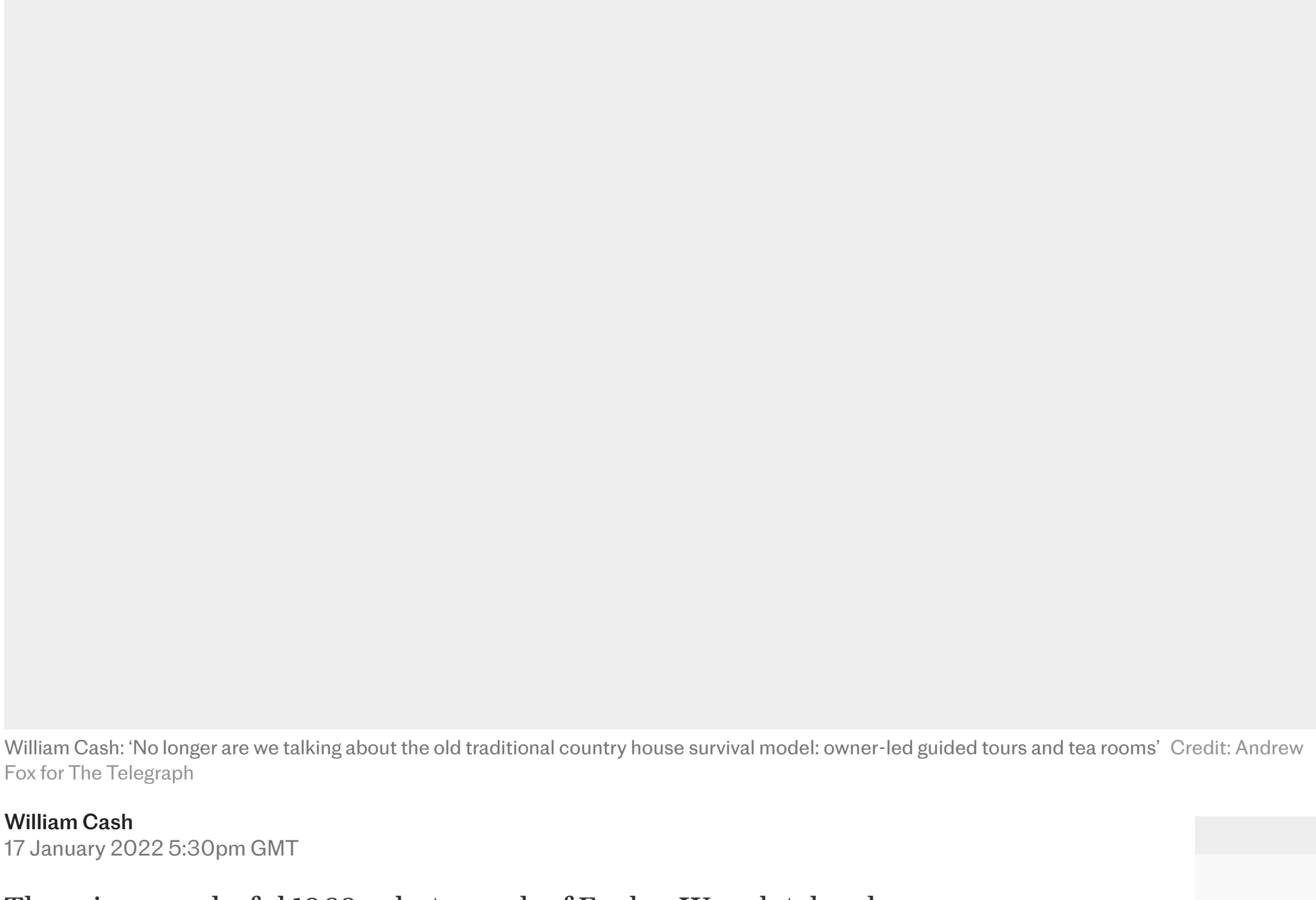


'Aristocrats have always had to reinvent themselves to survive'

While grand estates have been morphed into film sets or ghost tours, no amount of money is worth giving up the security of a family home

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William Cash: 'No longer are we talking about the old traditional country house survival model: owner-led guided tours and tea rooms' Credit: Andrew Fox for The Telegraph

William Cash
17 January 2022 5:30pm GMT

There is a wonderful 1960s photograph of Evelyn Waugh taken by photographer Mark Gerson in which he is standing in a dogtooth, bookie-style, three-piece suit fiercely between two stone caryatides with armoured breasts who are guarding his small Somerset estate, Combe Florey. His hands are slung deep into his pockets and his frosty expression says: "Do not enter". In short: public keep out.

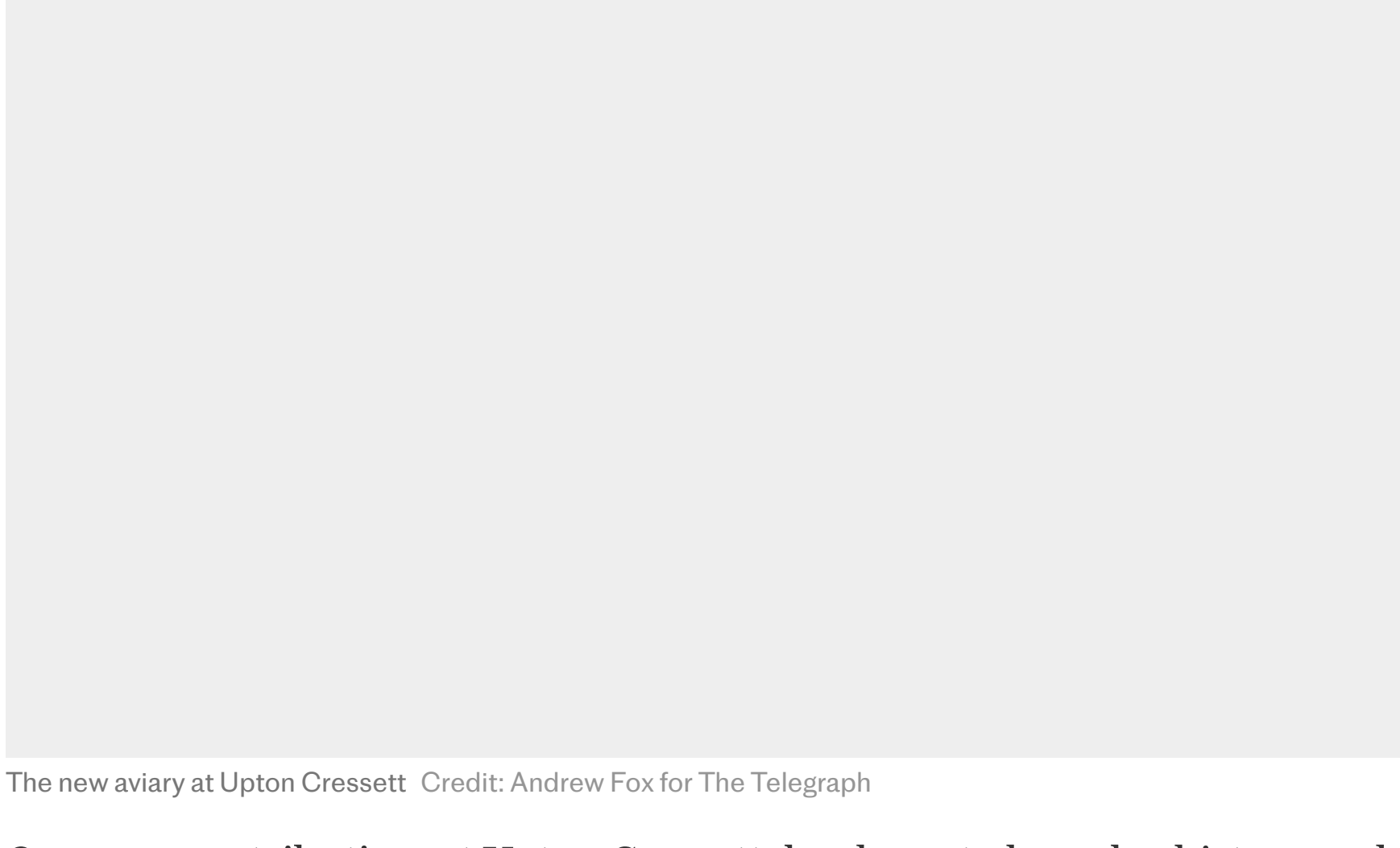
The reverse is true today. To keep going, the public – or “guests”, as the former Duke of Devonshire always used to call Chatsworth’s tens of thousands of visitors – are now being courted with an increasingly wacky array of ventures. As seen by the enterprising efforts of the colourful cast of the new reality show, [Keeping Up With The Aristocrats](#), which starts tonight on ITV, long gone are the days when aristos relied on thousands of acres of land and tenant rents to pay for their London houses and school fees.

It’s nothing less than an artisan country house revolution, and my milliner wife, Lady Laura, and myself are proud to be part of it. English country houses have always been stage sets and by reinventing themselves again they are helping to regenerate local economies and become local community hubs as they were in the Victorian and Edwardian (ie Downton) era.

No longer are we talking about the old traditional country house survival model: owner-led guided tours and tea rooms. Thanks in part to the [Culture Recovery Fund](#), which doled out previously unheard of grants to struggling privately owned heritage owners, many faced with near ruin after their visitor businesses were closed due the pandemic, there has been a gold rush of planning applications and projects to turn every disused barn or stable into some innovative new ‘sustainable’ enterprise.

English aristocrats have long reinvented themselves and adapted as a means of survival and regeneration. And as a social tribe, their entrepreneurial resourcefulness – even if some ideas are straight out of the PG Wodehouse School of Country House Survival – should never be underestimated.

In truth, [Keeping Up With The Aristocrats](#) only scratches the surface of the eclectic and colourful range of businesses now offered by the aristo-artisan classes. ‘Forest bathing’ at Browsholme Park in Lancashire; yoga at Powderham. Hiring out the house as locations for reality TV, as well as period drama – Sexy Beast at Knebworth and [I’m a Celebrity... Get Me Out Of Here!](#) at Gwrych Castle. Llama walks at Harewood; escape rooms at Picton Castle. Ghost tours and overnight stays in haunted rooms at Muncaster. ‘Broomstick flying lessons’ at Alnwick Castle in Northumberland.



The new aviary at Upton Cressett Credit: Andrew Fox for The Telegraph

Our own contribution, at Upton Cressett, has been to launch a history and literary festival, create a sanctuary for white peacocks – not going well, I should add, after Mr Fox ate the latest pair I bought my wife for her birthday – create a rare breed chicken and wild fowl aviary and build what we hope will be Shropshire’s flagship new disabled tourism boutique holiday let, a new self-catering holiday cottage called The Cider House, which will be a form of Claridge’s for those with accessibility needs. It’s all about looking for a gap in the market. When I looked up Shropshire on a disabled tourism website, I saw we had the worst disabled availability in the country.

We also have been busy cutting through acres of ten foot high brambles to create a new eco-heritage trail through some formerly abandoned medieval woods. Come the spring, we will (hopefully) have bluebell and snowdrop walks and a new ‘Pig Palazzo’ barn conversion that will double up as an exhibition and events space. We are working overtime to get it ready as the catering HQ of a new World War I ghost film called Can I Hear You, which is being filmed at Upton Cressett in March for six weeks, starring Charlotte Radford and Matt Barber of Downton Abbey.

One reason for the recent boom in diversification is that traditional farm buildings don’t fit modern commercial agricultural machinery any more. The buildings are too small. So why not use them for creative industries, or opening a deli, or a clothing or cycling shop? Examples in the ITV series include Lord Gerald Fitzalan-Howard, owner of 126-room Carlton Towers in Yorkshire, turning one shed (bought at HomeBase) into a smokehouse for curing meat and fish; he also has a vineyard.

The main business is weddings, like at Highclere Castle, owned by the Earl of Carnarvon, who evicts himself and his wife out of his family stately – used as the stage set for Downton – to live in a nearby farmhouse during the summer wedding season.

What the ITV series probably hasn’t stressed is where this new entrepreneurial DNA comes from. Many of the owners of today’s historic houses are not aristos but bankers or entrepreneurial families who bought their houses and estates in the 1950s-1970s when historic derelict properties and estates were going cheap.

This was certainly the case at Upton Cressett Hall, where I live with my wife Lady Laura (nee Cathcart) who has the same title as Lady Mary Crawley, daughter of an earl, in Downton. In our ‘Upton Downstairs’ world of a journalist turned publisher and artist artisan milliner world, it is the reverse of Downton as we actually now do much of the work that the domestic servants would have done in the Brideshead era. Although she absolutely draws the line at “cleaning the bogs”, the delicious scones served in our medieval tea tent – based on a field tent at the Battle of Bosworth – are made by her and she does the odd holiday let changeover when our holiday let staff fail to show up, or walk out. Which is often.

One of the peculiarities of the holiday let business – our main revenue stream – is that the more exclusive rental agencies will make up a fictional name for your estate or house. This is because they don’t want prospective clients seeing pictures of your tassled romantic four-poster beds, turreted gatehouse or hot tub terrace, and then contacting the owners directly through their own websites. Hence Upton Cressett has had several different monikers over the years.

It can get confusing when your weekend mini-break punters arrive in the dark on Friday evening, after a long drive, and ask: “Is this Harlequin Manor?” More than once, I’ve turned people away, saying: “I’ve never heard of the place”, only to frantically run after their car or try and call them when they have disappeared through the gates.

We took on a country house deluxe rental agency as our exclusive agent. They had promised us an exclusive clientele with appropriate fees. The only snag was they could only command the level of fees they were proposing if their clients were given the run of the house.

“You will need to evacuate the rest of the house for the duration,” said our bubbly client relationship manager after inspecting Upton Cressett. “You can lock your private bedroom and bathroom doors.”

“It’s £1,000 a night, I suppose,” I said later after we opened a bottle of wine.

Our first booking was enough to realise our mistake as we cowered in a basement bedroom in my parents’ barn next door. The white party limousine had come from somewhere like Surrey. Inside were just five people, one of the strangest groups we have ever had to stay. It was also the most traumatic.

The ordeal of having to clear away every scrap of our lives, including Christmas cards from our friends, and move out of our own family house, still haunts me. It was a low point in my life. It taught me that no amount of money is worth giving up that precious security of a family home life.

We’ve never rented the main house out again – only our gatehouse and three holiday cottages.

Looking back, perhaps we should have been wary of accepting the booking when the agency warned us that the “booking was unusual” – in that the party consisted of five young men, in their early 20s. When they stepped out of their empty luxury coach, they were carrying a few Marks & Spencer sandwiches and expensive overnight bags. They had no other food, no drink, no supplies and most alarmingly, no transport.



William Cash no longer lets out the main house, but the gatehouse (pictured) as well as three holiday cottages Credit: Andrew Fox for The Telegraph

Four were from the United Arab Emirates – apparently – and they were dressed like pop stars in velvet tracksuits or tight designer jeans with brand new (mudless) sneakers. The only Brit among them had an alabaster complexion with peroxide blonde hair and was wearing a white mink coat.

At the time our housekeeper was Sacha, a gregarious Bridgnorth divorcee (with two children) in her 40s who was brilliant with the guests. Her catchline was: “Will you write a nice TripAdvisor review?” She began by asking if they wanted a cooked English breakfast every day. “Thank you,” said one. “But we are vegetarian. Can you do popcorn?” What he had really meant was that they were Muslim but he was too polite to say so.

TrippAdvisor reviewers have opened up a new class war on the reviewing front. “Spend your time & money elsewhere,” ran one nasty TripAdvisor review of Provender House in Kent, where Princess Olga Romanoff lives (a cast member of the new ITV series) “Princess Olga has got to be the most rude, self-important & ill-mannered woman that I have ever had the misfortune to meet.”

We’ve found that the majority of people who have a pleasant time at your house tend not to bother writing a review.

That’s one reason why we have diversified into audio tours last year, with our house tours led by Sir Francis Cressett, treasurer to Charles I, who last lived in the house in the 17th century. At least they can’t be rude to him.

Keeping Up with The Aristocrats, a three-part series, starts at 9pm on Monday January 17 on ITV

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