

COUNTRY ILLUSTRATED

The pace heats up at Holkham Hall, North Norfolk's 18th Century stately home.

**By
Lady Olga Maitland**

**Photography by
Professor John Hedgecoe**

The crowd roared and stamped crying encore for the celebrated opera singer José Carreras, one of the legendary Three Tenors, to sing just once more – and more. And he did, facing the thousands seated on the ground and at picnic tables stretching way into the 600-acre parkland surrounding Holkham Hall. As he concluded the final aria, the crowds rose again and shouted with joy while the fireworks blazed down.

The great José Carreras, on a rare visit to Britain this year having flown in to Norwich City airport with an onward journey to Moscow, had dropped down into a landscape he had never seen before. The almost tropical burning sunset special to the area was but one element of a stage with the 18th century Holkham Hall, and the lake as a backdrop.

It was hardly surprising therefore that Carreras who has been feted all over the world should say: “Having been spoilt by the beauty of the Catalonian landscape, my home for so long, it is rare that I discover beauty that takes my breath away. Holkham was not familiar to me until I was informed that Holkham beach was the setting for the beautiful closing scene of ‘Shakespeare in Love’ with Gwyneth Paltrow. And so I found that Holkham is blessed with a tranquil setting and as the mists rose over the lake, I loved watching people arriving at this natural amphitheatre with their picnics.”

The weather may have turned more autumnal by the next night when some of the tranquillity gave way to high winds whistling over the trees to embrace the popular rhythm and blues pianist and band leader Jools Holland. The crowds huddled down under heavy-duty clothes and jaunty umbrellas creating a seascape of colour, and when the rain showers had passed they jumped up and boogied to his thumping music.

They were two massive events, each utterly different, but each attracting thousands. No mean feat when you bear in mind that unlike Chatsworth, Blenheim, Longleat or Woburn, Holkham is far from any major city or centre of population. It just means that the attraction on offer has to be that much better and much more polished.

These massive outdoor concerts which will be repeated on an annual basis were a first for Holkham, one of the finest neo-Palladian houses in Britain on the north coast of Norfolk., This was a new bold approach by Viscount Coke, who took over the running of the estate last year, which had been carefully nurtured over the past 32 years by his father, the 7th Earl of Leicester.

Indeed, the concerts could never have taken place had it not been for the excellent condition of the estate today. Now, Holkham is ready to embark on an era of diversification and expansion. And Tom Coke has engaged the finest talents he could find to help him in this journey.

It is all a far cry from the days when Lord Leicester took over from his uncle the late 5th Earl in 1973. At that time, the estate had just survived the post-World War 11 decline, when great houses were disappearing; but it has to be said that Holkham was barely fit for new demands. In any case, almost every facet of the operation was losing money. There was no central heating in the Hall, and of the 400 houses on the estate, only about 30 had bathrooms; the occupants of the rest had to walk down the garden path in the middle of the night to an old-fashioned earth closet.

Fresh from an upbringing in South Africa and a career in an agriculture company, Lord Leicester was able to look at the challenges with a fresh and uncluttered eye.

For all that, it took 15 years to modernise every one of those houses. And that was only the beginning. Huge borrowing from the bank at then very high interest rates enabled the process to continue. The only way to discharge the debt was to sell 66 Old Master Drawings from their Library, which is rated as only second in the land to the library at Chatsworth.

Asked if he was ashamed at selling yet another ‘Old Master’ which could be saved for the nation instead of going abroad, Lord Leicester replied: “If the attitude that ‘our heritage’ must never leave our

shores had been prevalent in 18th Century Italy, there would not be a single Italian Old Master in the country.”

But, nonetheless, sales had to continue, including parting with Leonardo da Vinci’s ‘Codex Leicester’, which now rests in an American museum. Tough decisions, yes, but the fund that resulted has secured the future of the rest of the very important collection of fine art, sculpture, and furniture let alone the house and estate. No public money has been available at a time when the original source of funding for the estate, agriculture was drying up. Today, while the in-hand farmland on the 25,000-acre estate pays its way, it cannot possibly sustain the huge costs involved. In 1973, wheat was £150 a tonne and the value of the pound was that much stronger. Today, it is down to about £70 a tonne. Times have changed, and so must the method of operation.

While a huge effort went into modernising the estate itself, equal attention was being given to the Hall. And in this, Lord Leicester will not hesitate to praise his wife Sarah who played a key role in supervising the refurbishment of all the state rooms and the private rooms to a very high standard. But, to the visitor, done in such a way the new has blended unseen into the old. The Great Master paintings were cleaned and re-hung, furniture was upholstered in specially woven fabrics, new carpets were designed, woven in Bulgaria. No detail ever escaped Lady Leicester. She whisked round the Hall and spotted lumpy beds which had to be replaced. Fresh bed linen was brought on stream. Flowers had to be on display; the house had to look ‘lived in’, and human. In short, the make over has been so complete that only maintenance will now be needed for many a long year.

And as time went by, so Lady Leicester personally developed the culture for Holkham to be a centre for the live arts as well. Concerts and opera performances in the Italianate Marble Hall have become a normal and expected part of Holkham life. And they will continue.

During the handover period, Lord Leicester and Tom worked closely together planning for the future. Tom, who had been groomed through a degree in fine arts at Manchester University and a period in the army before beginning his training at Holkham had already understood the pressure of the new dynamic needed.

The answer could only be diversification. First step in was to enter the property market. Thus Hector’s Housing Ltd named after his pet Irish terrier was launched. And with it an active programme of either

renovating existing houses on the estate; buying plots from the estate or neighbouring landowners and building new properties. What ever the outcome local materials were insisted upon, using traditional flints, chalk and red clay tiles – with a final result of quality housing reflecting the culture and character of the area. The properties have either been let or sold.

What began as an enterprise for a novice, has now grown into a mature business. It was merely the beginning. The future lay in the leisure and tourism sector, while preserving the natural beauty of the area.

Looking round, Tom turned his eye to the first real challenge on the ground. Holkham has been host to a caravan and camping site for 70 years at Pinewoods, now renamed Pinewoods Holiday Park, where for generations people have brought tents, and caravans to holiday behind the pines bordering the sea. But, back then, the Park was leased out and it was not in the best repair. Basic, shabby even is the best that could be said.

Thousands of visitors are drawn to this extraordinary environment every year. The attraction and sheer joy is the beach, which is one of the most unspoilt and beautiful stretches of sand in the country – some would say beating many a heady tropical paradise. Holkham beach is unique for being protected as a nature reserve, managed jointly by the estate and English Nature. Hence, out there you have only the wind, the sun, the birds, the sea and the pinewoods behind for company. You cannot hear one man-made sound; you cannot see one man-made building. It is a bird-watcher's paradise. This has been no accident. Robust and determined management has kept it this way.

But, as Tom Coke reasoned, those that stayed at Pinewoods deserved a better deal. He invested in a range of better facilities, but most of all in landscaping the park, and in so doing, made a very attractive base today for 550 permanent mobile holiday homes, which are double glazed and centrally heated: all a far cry from the spartan days of the past. The summer brings hundreds of campers. High-quality caravans sell for around £40,000 each and have netted a useful income to the estate. The wooden lodges with deck balconies for rent set among the pines painted in soft pastel colours merging into the landscape, are another successful new venture at the Park.

Tourism takes all forms. Perhaps the venture that has attracted the most public interest has been the opening of the Victoria Hotel. Old

hands will remember ‘The Vic’ as a dusty and dreary establishment rightfully ignored by all. But with the end of a lease, bought another opportunity to bring a business back into the estate fold. It was a chance to ‘have a go’, and Tom and his wife Polly jumped at it. It was time to be bold and imaginative. After a £1 million refurbishment, the hotel was re-opened in 2001, to great acclaim, thanks to its aim of first class, yet relaxed hotel – an updated reflection of its first opening in 1838, a year after Queen Victoria came to the throne.

The spirit for the renovation is largely due to Polly, who is a talented hat designer. Her artistic abilities may have something to do with her mother, dress designer Belinda Belville. The outcome was that traditional non-descript hotel furnishings were out of the question. Polly asked Burnham Market-based designer, Miv Watts (mother of actress Naomi Watts) to undertake the design. Miv, opted to choose an Indian colonial atmosphere with much of the furniture personally chosen and imported from Rajasthan. The main drawing room with its log fire and squashy sofas has become a ‘must’ meeting place.

With the hotel comes its restaurant. And with that, the challenge to provide quality cuisine based on local food. Game and meat (from Holkham itself), and fish. Pricey yes, but highly approved of by the *Good Food Guide* and no shortage of custom. The Good Pub Guide has just selected the Victoria as its Inn of the Year for 2007 and Norfolk county dining pub of the year.

In rounding off the leisure scene for the moment, Tom went one stage further. Conscious that success means catering for all levels –he decided to target the mid-level market. When The Globe Inn came on the market in near by Wells-next-the-Sea, he snapped it up. All the old fittings reeking of stale beer were thrown out, and in their place a stylish gastro-pub was born – relaxing courtyard, newspapers, a short but carefully selected child friendly menu, and seven bedrooms available. It has worked largely because the management is all run from The Victoria with the chefs working a rota system between the hotel and the pub ensuring consistency in performance.

The purpose of the article is not to itemise every feature of Holkham, but rather to examine how it is going through its own evolution from a traditional dependence on agriculture, to a competitive and sharp age where there is no room for amateurism.

As Tom Coke strode along the marshes between meetings, he reflected, “Yes, there is change in the air. For a start, I will be moving with Polly and our four children into the Hall next year. My father and his wife Sarah will move to Model Farm on the estate, which is being refurbished for them.

“If you want to keep ahead change is inevitable, but the estate is not new to change; my father has been instituting it for the last thirty years. Bringing in the right talent to help me has made all the difference. I drew up a business plan, discussed it with my father and then sought the advice of others. Managing the estate is a real team effort.

“I am proud that we have made farming more profitable and increasingly more efficient using new technology, but I am aware that there is no choice but to diversify. Tourism is the natural element here, but doing it in a way that moulds into the environment.

“Five years from now, we will have consolidated our current programme. I am not afraid to drop a project if it is not right for us. Retailing food is not as we found to our expense, but tourism is. We have to retain our focus; be careful yes, but bold as well in taking on new activities here such as the outdoor concerts. They are but a start. I hope that we will have sought out new opportunities, another caravan park perhaps, more hotels, who knows? I want to be flexible. I want to be alert to a chance, examine it carefully, and then go for it. “