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And so to battlement

Turrets galore, 750 acres of parkland and a glorious history to match at Beaurepaire



By Marcus Binney

PARK, LAKE, MOAT and battlements – Beaurepaire has all the trimmings of a grand country estate on a manageable scale. Distinctive estate cottages with white diamond glazing stand along local roads.

From the pleasant Hampshire village of Bramley, the main drive passes a gingerbread gate lodge up an avenue of tall limes. From the south, another drive sweeps through the park, providing a distant view of turrets across a small lake and medieval stew ponds.

For five centuries Beaurepaire was the domain of the Brocas family from Aquitaine, who gave their name to the Brocas, the waterside meadow beside Eton College boathouse. In the 14th century members of the family were leading courtiers. Sir Bernard Brocas was Master of the Horse to Edward III, who in 1369 gave him permission to enclose the park at Beaurepaire. He was also a favourite knight of the Black Prince, fighting with him at the Battle of Poitiers. He was a friend of William of Wykeham, founder of Winchester College, who made him “chief surveyor and sovereign warden” of his parks. Later he became Captain of Calais, and steward of its buoyant customs revenues.

The Brocas crest of a Moor's head crowned was granted by Edward III, and handsome Othello-like heads appear on gateposts and even on the parish church weathervane. Elizabeth I visited “Burraper” – an entry in the Bramley parish register records payments to the bell ringers on the occasion.

The ancient moat at Beaurepaire survives, enclosing more than an acre of gardens and lawns, but the castle-style house shown in old engravings and early photographs has largely vanished. This appears to have been a typical Georgian sham-castle of 1777 with tall sash windows, corner towers and battlements, but the architect is unknown.

Beside it stood a Tudor wing, with hood moulds to the windows. This is built in warm red brick with the trellis pattern of darker bricks known as diapering. The Brocas family sold the property in 1873. Tragedy struck in 1942. The elderly owner, the financier Sir Strati Ralli, MC, was returning home when his chauffeur exclaimed: “Sir, the house is on fire!”

“Take me back to the station,” came the reply. With postwar austerity there was no means of obtaining suitable building materials to repair, let alone restore, the house. The Tudor wing, which alone survived the fire, was faced in slates at one end to keep out the rain.

So it remained until Beaurepaire was acquired in 1959 by the diplomat Sir Roger Makins (who was created Baron Sherfield in 1964) and his wife, who lived in a Georgian house, Sherfield Lodge, nearby. They commissioned the architect Colonel Tom Bird, who made a specialty of elegantly downsizing country houses, to restore beauty and dignity to the remains.

Bird had started off in the office of the modernist Maxwell Fry. There, he says, “Le Corbusier was God, but I soon discovered I did not like what I was doing at all.”

He cleverly concealed the gash left by the fire, adding twin towers with battlements at the end of the Tudor wing with a pretty Regency-style veranda between. The brickwork is inset with a diaper pattern matching the Tudor work. “I drew out every brick,” he says. Above the veranda, Bird set a large, three-tier window filling the broad landings with light as well as providing a bathroom in one of the towers in which the owner can recline in the bath looking out down the drive.

The drawing room created in the former kitchen has been amusingly frescoed by an Australian woman named Gill, who told her clients: “I’m a plagiarist. You can have Rousseau or Rubens.” Jungle animals and trees have delighted visitors since. There may be no mahogany doors, but the handsome bread oven door with scroll hinge supplied by Messrs Wilder & Sons of Reading is a good stand-in, not to mention the double-fronted safe on full view on the other side of the fireplace.

The spirit of caprice has been continued by the Makinses’ son, Dwight, who has created a cloister garden with battlements, towers and stepped gables, approached through an archway flanked by an attractive, white wooden colonnade. This is the work of the Henley architect Andrew Nichols.

The rooms around the courtyard are neatly designed to serve as a self-contained children’s wing or a place for summer and winter entertaining – a fresco in the central garden and indoors in a garden room with gazebo.

In front of the house, the lawns, cleverly cross-mown on a trellis pattern to match the diaper brick, sweep down to the moat where engaging sentry box-size turrets stand at the corners. The lines of the vanished main house are marked out with formal planting – and yes, say the agents, if you really want to rebuild the missing parts, the planners are sympathetic.

Two footbridges cross the moat, one a miniature suspension bridge. The other leads to the stables and to an open two-stage pagoda, which was built a century ago, apparently intended for drying fruit.

Beaurepaire is being offered in lots, presenting a tease over how much should be bought. The house and main parkland are on offer for £3.4 million, with offers of more than £7 million invited for the full 753 acres.