

Exposing a mansion of mystery

MYSTERY still surrounds the reason why Victorian workmen downed tools one day 136 years ago and abandoned the half-finished Woodchester Mansion near Stroud.

One theory is that a man was murdered on the site, but the reality is more likely to be that owner William Leigh ran out of cash and called a halt to building work.

The mansion is unique in its half-built state, and while emergency repair work is underway, the Woodchester Mansion Trust and Friends of Woodchester Mansion are adamant that the building should never be completed.

"The mansion is of great importance and interest to stonemasons and students of architecture because you can see every stage of Victorian building methods," said member of the Friends group, Val Easton.

"We never want to finish it. That would destroy the whole charm and interest of the place, but we do want to convert part of it into a flat for a resident caretaker and create residential accommodation for up to 24 students in the old servants quarters."

"Our aim is to restore it to how it was when it was abandoned. There is enough work for generations of stonemasons — it will take years to do everything," she added.

Stroud College has taken advantage

by Jess Carter

building and turning it into a hotel or casino, but I think it would have been impossible as well as unwelcome," said Val.

The plans for the mansion came to light purely by chance when they were discovered inside a wicker basket by an architect browsing at a market at Leominster.

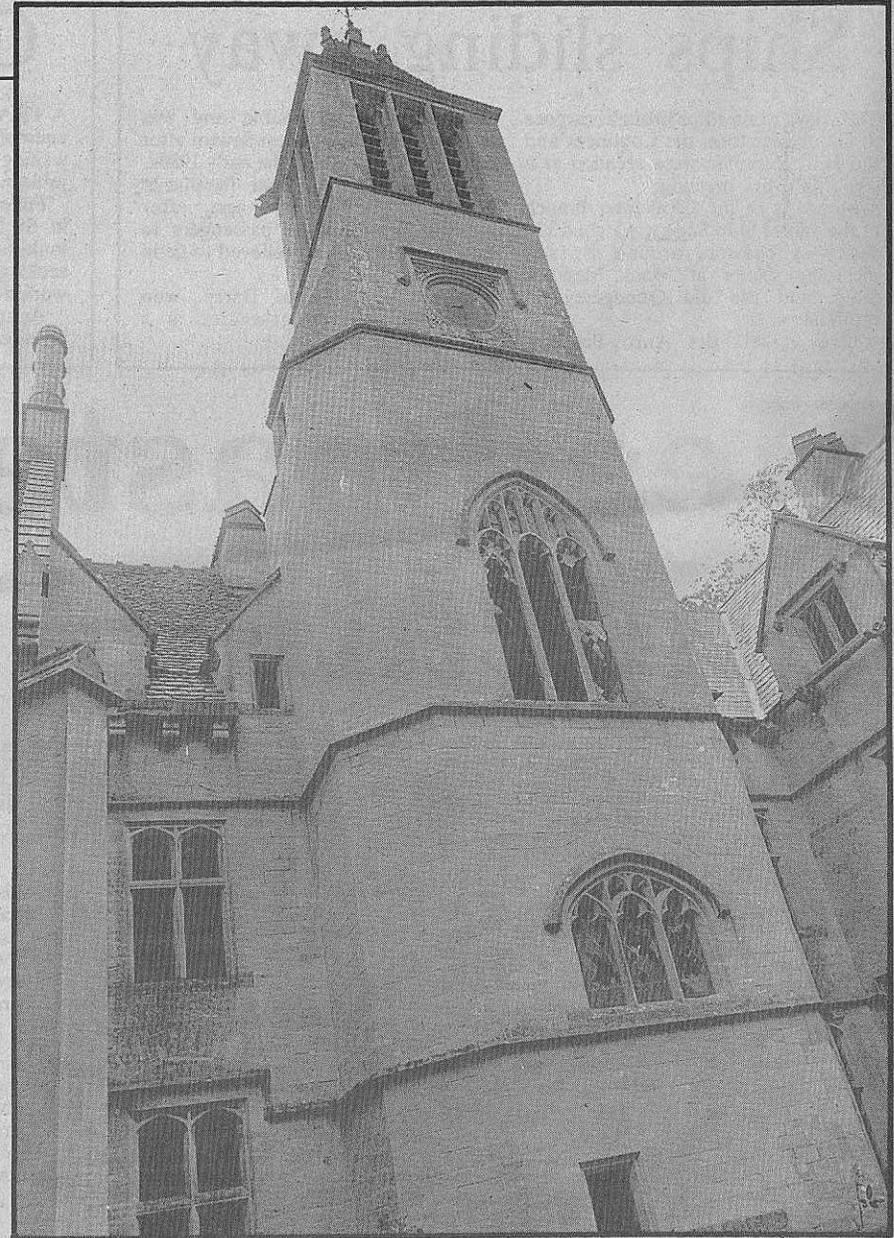
"Luckily the man who found them was familiar with Woodchester and recognised the work of Victorian architect Benjamin Bucknall," said Val.

The find means that visitors to the house can be given guided tours of most rooms, starting in the front hall, which is also marked as a billiard room.

The lack of proper flooring means visitors walk on the curved roof of the cellar below, and because there are no ceilings, they can see straight up about 50 feet to the roof.

The dining room emphasises the apparently hurried departure of workmen from the site — wooden scaffolding is still in place, a thirty foot wooden ladder was left propped up against a wall, and sheets of "temporary" protective boarding fixed to guard stonework against falling masonry are still protecting it 130-odd years later.

The drawing room is the only one to



■ The clock tower at Woodchester Mansion, the turret-like roof of which is carved from stone to resemble slates

and all surfaces finely plastered flush with the stonework. In this one ceiling alone there are more than 50 carved stone bosses, and had the room been completed it would almost certainly have been painted in the fashionable bold primary colours.

two galleries, one for the master, and a lower one for the servants.

"It is an interesting example of Victorian values. The front of the servants gallery was carved because the master would have been able to see it, but servants looked up at a relatively

insight

stonemasons — it will take years to do everything," she added.

Stroud College has taken advantage of the opportunities the Mansion offers to set up a full time masonry training course at the college in conjunction with the Construction Industries Training Board and the Mansion Trust, starting next year.

The mansion is owned by Stroud District Council, who bought it three years ago from an off-shore trust to save it from ruin through vandalism and neglect.

They also bought 23 acres of pasture surrounding it, partly to provide a safe habitat for four species of bats, one of them the rare Greater Horseshoe, which have made the mansion their home.

But they were then faced with the problem of how to finance repairs to the house and what to do with it once it was rescued — until a few local enthusiasts formed the Woodchester Mansion Trust and launched a £3m campaign for its restoration.

"There was talk of completing the

masonry are still protecting it 130-odd years later.

The drawing room is the only one to have been finished with a wooden floor

completed it would almost certainly have been painted in the fashionable bold primary colours.

The chapel has a vaulted ceiling and



■ The Mansion — stately or spooky?

servants gallery was carved because the master would have been able to see it, but servants looked up at a relatively bare balcony where he sat.

"Also in the servants quarters there are two sets of stairs, one for the women and one for the men, and at no time did they ever meet," said Val.

Upstairs there is a fascinating bathroom, with a bath carved out of a single block of stone and gargoyle taps which would have been operated by a servant in the next room.

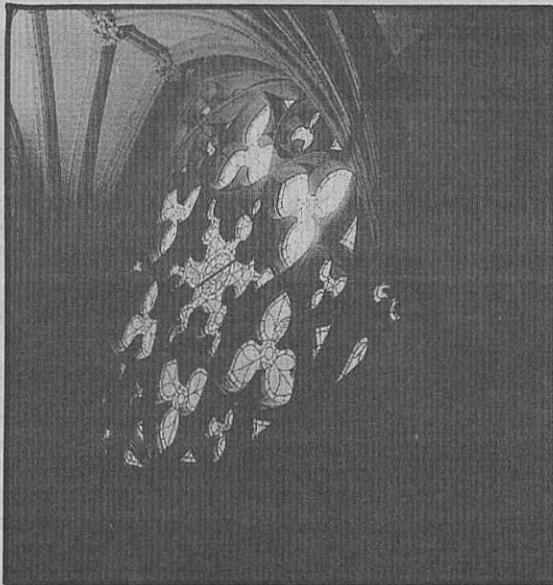
And incredible though it seems for a mansion with only one toilet, there was also a stone shower cubicle with two water inlets shaped like leopards heads fixed into the ceiling.

It will never be known whether or not the system would have been efficient.

One mystery which has still to be unravelled is the role played by American soldiers stationed at the mansion during the war.

"We are trying to find out more about their time here. They left X-Ray equipment and we believe the mansion was used as a medical centre," said Val.

VICTORIAN TREASURES UNLOCKED



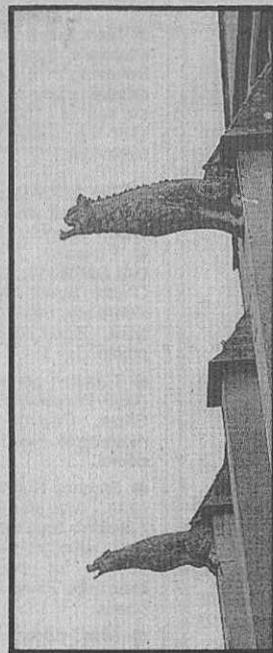
■ The west window of the chapel has been fashioned into a shape popular with Victorians — a circle within a triangle — and is believed to have been influenced by architecture at the Notre Dame cathedral

Beastly guard of honour

MONSTROUS hollow stone gargoyles project horizontally from the south face of Woodchester Mansion.

They look purely decorative but are actually part of the drainage system, acting as water spouts to throw rainwater clear of the building.

They are thought to represent all the different animals seen on the estate, and feature all over the mansion. Ten stone owls act as gutter supports across the roof-line of the servants terrace.



Top name aids trust

INTERNATIONAL advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi have offered to donate their services to the Woodchester Mansion Trust.

In the modern world of charity business, mansion trustees hope the expertise and resources of the agency will give it vital impetus in fields like public relations, corporate funding, direct mail, international links and marketing of training services.

One of the first jobs for Saatchi & Saatchi is to help the Trust recruit an executive director.

They want somebody to organise a major fund-raising and sponsorship strategy and oversee the administration of all Mansion activities.

The job will be nationally advertised soon, and further details can be obtained from Sally Birch on Dursley 882368 or Mike Hill on Stroud 763872.

And they are to help the Trust prepare a full-colour information leaflet about the Mansion, the Trust and the Friends.

Woodchester Mansion is available as a venue for meetings and special events, with bookings for 40 or more costing from £5 a head. Further details can be obtained from Rose Westwood at Nymphsfield Post Office, on Dursley 860531.