

A ROYAL OBSESSION

The annual Royalty Weekend at Ticehurst in Sussex attracts some strange and far-flung visitors

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In the gloom of a converted oast house in East Sussex, 60 people stare at a slide of an elegant woman in Victorian dress, leaning against a bicycle.

‘Question one,’ says the projectionist. ‘This princess’s 25th birthday was also her brother’s wedding day. What was her name, what was the date, and who was her brother?’

There are a few groans, followed by a facetious cry of ‘What about the make of the bike?’ But most of the quiz contestants are scribbling away in deadly earnest. Those who do not recognise George V’s sister, Princess Victoria, look agonised by this blow to their self-respect.

The quiz is part of the Royalty Weekend held every year in the village of Ticehurst. Some of those present – such as Frances Dimond, the curator of the Royal Photograph Collection, who is playing the role of Anne Robinson – earn a living from their expertise. Most of the participants, though, are dedicated amateurs, who have gathered for two days of lectures and discussion from as far afield as Denmark, Spain and the United States. The only person missing is a Hong Kong delegate who has cancelled, much to everyone’s relief, on account of the SARS epidemic: the general enthusiasm for crowns does not, it seems, extend to the corona virus.

The weekenders are almost impossible to categorise, though there is a noticeable dearth of women under 40. Middle-aged matrons in pearls rub shoulders with close-cropped young men in leather jackets and dapper pensioners in blazers. ‘They’re a disparate lot,’ agrees the weekend’s

organiser, Paul Minet. ‘They really have nothing in common apart from their interest in royalty. They may be a bit odd, but it’s fascinating to see people who are really passionate about something. For most of them, this is their yearly visit to Jerusalem.’

Among the overseas contingent is Ove Magensen, a small, trim man with a pencil moustache who works for a Danish department store. This is his seventh visit to Ticehurst, and he is quick to emphasise that he has no interest in court tittle-tattle. His passion is something rather more sober: royal burial places. ‘There used to be 24 monarchies within the German Reich,’ he explains, ‘and I’ve been travelling around all their palaces. Some of the vaults are really wonderful.’

Before you dismiss Ove as a one-off, meet Leslie Grout, a former Mastermind winner from Windsor, strikingly attired in a tweed jacket and purple polo-neck. He is eager to tell me about his recent visit to Archduke Franz Ferdinand’s castle in Austria. ‘It was a three-mile walk across country. I enquired about the crypt at the ticket office, and they said, “There’s the key, down you go.” So down I went, and I took a picture of the sarcophagi, and then I looked and saw that there was an *extension* of the crypt on the other side of the gate; so I locked myself in and climbed over the gate and took a photograph of *that*. And when I told Ove about it afterwards,’ he concludes triumphantly, ‘he said, “No! I never thought of climbing the gate!”’

The weekend, now in its ninth year, sprang from the magazine which Paul Minet edits, *Royalty Digest*. With its grainy black-and-white photographs of hatchet-faced dowagers – and abstruse articles such as ‘The jewellery of Grand Duchess Sophie of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenbach’ – this is as far as you can get from the cheerful vacuousness of *Hello!* It may only have 700 subscribers, but they stretch from here to Japan, and include (the subscription manager reveals proudly) ‘a smattering of princes and princesses’.

A spry 66-year-old of military bearing, Paul Minet has spent most of his life as a second-hand book dealer. (One of his shops, Baggins Book Bazaar in Rochester, claims to be the largest of its kind in England.) The discovery of a strong niche market in books on European royalty prompted him first to start his magazine and then to republish a variety of works on the subject. The profit he makes from the Royalty Weekend comes not from the modest £20 participation fee, but from the money that visitors spend in his Ticehurst shop.

‘I’m not as nutty as some of my customers,’ he says. ‘I don’t believe in the divine right of kings. I know various royals – Simeon of Bulgaria, Michael of Rumania – and they’re good, solid people. But there are some who just want to get back into power to be dictators. I wouldn’t touch Leka of Albania with a barge pole.’

The lecture programme begins with a talk by a Danish schoolteacher on Scandinavian royal jewels. As he struggles with the overhead projector and takes us through a manuscript list of 471 tiaras, necklaces and diadems, the weekend promises to be a very long one indeed. But the audience responds with loud applause, and only the stout American next to me – thumbing his *Almanach de Gotha* like a Maoist conning his Little Red Book – seems less than thrilled.

The next talk is more accessible. John Wimbles, an expert on the Rumanian monarchy, reads a selection of unpublished royal letters in a splendid Radio 4 newscaster’s voice. Most are by the *fin de siècle* Duchess of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, and their content is genuinely fascinating – detailed accounts of a Spanish royal wedding marred by an anarchist bomb, and of a Volga cruise with the Romanovs on a yacht with inadequate plumbing. The appeal of this strange world suddenly becomes, if not blindingly obvious, something more than a pinprick of light from a dying star.

Most of the weekenders, when asked to explain their presence, claim an interest in history and genealogy rather than the glamour of royalty. ‘You look at all those people descended from Queen Victoria, and it’s the interconnections that are fascinating,’ says Andrew Loughrey, a Birmingham librarian who, at 32, is one of the youngest present. ‘We come here because we like to discuss those aspects, rather than gossip. Very little is published in Britain about other royal families, but a lot of people here are in regular touch with deposed royalty, and bring first-hand knowledge of them.’ Does he have a favourite dynasty? ‘It would have to be the Habsburgs – there’s something very appealing about those large Catholic families intermarrying.’

There is one group, however, that is undeniably attracted by what Paul Minet calls ‘all that dressing up’: ‘Forty per cent gay, I reckon,’ remarks the *Times Magazine*’s photographer, scanning the room. (The campery is hard to miss: ‘Do I hear queen talk?’ exclaims one weekender delightedly.) ‘It’s the same as in the royal palaces, I suppose,’ says Minet, ‘but it suits me fine – they’ve got more money to spend than other people.’

At lunchtime, a buzz of anticipation greets the arrival of the star speaker, the biographer Hugo Vickers. One acolyte – a fashionably dressed American woman – hurries forward with an offering wrapped in an M&S bag. ‘It’s boysenberry jam from South California,’ she explains. ‘I wanted to thank you for jump-starting my book.’

Vickers delivers an entertaining talk on Harold Albert – a mysterious author of royal biographies – and clearly feels at home with his audience. ‘It would be wrong to dismiss them as trainspotters,’ he says. ‘There are people here who know about lots of very specific things, but what’s nice is that they have a good sense of humour. They’re also very generous with their information – unlike a lot of similar groups, where they hate others in the same field.’

The general atmosphere is certainly remarkably friendly and good-humoured. But that evening, at a buffet dinner in Paul Minet's flat, various areas of tension become apparent. 'Someone please find that woman a man!' exclaims an exasperated American as he climbs the stairs. 'It's the only thing that's going to stop her talking!'

The diners have spread themselves through several rooms, where they chat about Romanov funerals ('first class to heaven') and the use of mitochondrial DNA in tracing female-line ancestry; photographs are passed around of the building in Athens where Princess Marina of Greece was born. Our host cuts an indulgent, slightly detached figure, like a toymaker who has stepped back to watch his creations at play. As we queue for the buffet, my neighbour points out a solemn-looking group at a nearby table. 'That's the upper strata,' he whispers. 'They're all the people who are writing books, trying not to tell each other what they're up to.'

There is one particular fly in the ointment, and his name is Arturo Beeche. He has travelled from San Francisco, where he runs an empire similar to Paul Minet's – dealing in royal books, editing a magazine and organising a royalty weekend of his own. Minet accuses him of trying to poach his writers, but tolerates him because he spends so much money at his shop. 'We've had two or three people like him who've tried to move in on our act,' he says, 'but we've managed to see them off. I just take the view that I have deeper pockets than he has.' He does, however, lament the absence of one regular weekender – Robin Piguet, a buyer for the Piccadilly bookshop Hatchards: 'He's a very nice chap, but unfortunately he's deadly enemies with this Beeche, and won't come if he's here. There's a lot of that in this field.'

The following morning we are treated to a three-hour preview of a Norwegian documentary on European royalty. The interviewees include Prince Michael of Kent, and the producer, Anna Lerche, seeks me out to

share her admiration of him: ‘When I see how the British press are treating him, I cannot believe it – he’s doing such a brilliant job for the royal family.’ Although no royal has yet attended the weekend, Paul Minet admits that he has considered inviting Princess Michael: ‘I have mixed feelings about it,’ he says, ‘but I *am* quite a fan.’

In between events, the weekenders repair to the bookshop. On the ground floor a plaster representation of the royal coat of arms marks the entrance to shelves lined with biographies and magazines. But aficionados know that the real treasure is to be found hidden away upstairs, and here they cluster like bees around honey, clogging the corridor and perching on every available surface to pore over books on Metternichs and Battenbergs and zu Erbach-Schönbergs, with titles such as *Always a Grand Duke* (a sequel to *Once a Grand Duke*) and *Royal and Other Noble Visitors to Postojnska Jama 1819-1945* (text in English and Serbo-Croat).

‘I come over here every year,’ says Mary Houck, an elderly lady from Perrysberg, Ohio, ‘and I go back with four boxes of books. I can hardly get into my house any more: it’s become a repository for all things royal. In the United States you don’t have all this, and for years I could barely find a book on the Queen of England; but now I’m retired I can travel the world, and I’ve been so lucky to find people who are like-minded. I think we all felt very solitary: you’re interested in these things for so long with absolutely nobody to talk to about them, and suddenly it’s like being a kid in a candy store – I’m stuffing bonbons in my face until I get sick because it’s all so great.’

Back at the oast house, the royalists settle down for their final lecture. Leslie Grout’s hour has come, and he launches into an illustrated talk on – surprise, surprise – royal burials at Windsor. Throwing in a couple of anecdotes about exploding coffins (‘a build-up of gas, a weak spot in the lead, and – bang!’), he uses a red laser pointer to guide us through slides of the

castle crypt: 'Let's have a look at the south side now. There we have George III and Queen Charlotte...Queen Adelaide, who put in her will that she wanted to be carried at her funeral by sailors...then there are two Augustas...and look at the size of this coffin of a stillborn infant!'

Enough is suddenly enough. It is time to slip away.