

It takes a VILLAGE



Preserving and maintaining an estate that has been
in your family for generations is no mean feat, as
the owners of the Rowley Estates can testify

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PHOTO: TRACY KIDD

Blencowe Hall



PHOTO: ROWLEY ESTATES

There is a corner of Cumbria that will be forever Rowley. Set against the backdrop of the North Pennines and spread across the Eden Valley, the Rowley Estates stretch from the far reaches of Melmerby in the east to Blencowe and Martindale to the west.

Comprising houses large and small, fertile farmland and wildlife-filled woods, it is all there to be admired by the visitors who get to spend their holidays in the estates' shepherd's huts, cosy cottages, farmhouses, barn conversions and country manors.

It is also a lot of work for owners Charlie and Christine Rowley. Simply maintaining historic homes like Grade II listed Melmerby Hall, built as a 15th century pele tower with Georgian additions, and Glassonby Hall, a 17th century Cumbrian longhouse, would be enough for some people.

Ensuring the roofs aren't leaking, the walls and beams remain sound and the plumbing works can sap energy levels and bank accounts.

For Charlie and Christine, they are simply issues to overcome in a much bigger picture of rebuilding, renovating and reviving family estates that were inherited, acquired and most definitely, at their hands, enhanced. They started taking an active role in the family estates 30 years ago, five years after meeting at rowing club, and run multiple properties, mostly holiday lets sleeping anywhere from two to 24 people, hosting up to 60,000 guest nights per year, and some long-term lettings.

The estates have been built up over six generations. Charlie's great, great grandfather made his money in the Yorkshire woollen industry and came to Cumbria in around 1870. He bought land at Glassonby and, over the next 60 years or so, added to his estate. He renovated a farmhouse now known as Glassonby

Lodge, which is the family home and where Christine and Charlie stay when they aren't in London, where Charlie remains dedicated to his specialist insurance consultancy.

Christine, who is originally from Chicago, focuses full time on the Cumbrian estates.

Charlie's grandfather and great uncle continued the legacy that was subsequently followed by his late father Robin and Uncle Tim, who were committed farmers and foresters. Robin retained land that includes the historic Long Meg Stone Circle and the nearby fields dedicated to Rowleys Raspberries, a must visit for pick-your-own fruit lovers in summer, which Charlie now runs.

The family has continued Robin's forestry legacy with a 6,000-tree planting project on the Melmerby and Glassonby Pennine fell moorland, extending and linking wildlife corridors. They are also looking to plant extensive new woodland at Scalehouses, above Renwick.



Melmerby Hall drawing room



PHOTO: TRACY KIDD



‘Christine is convinced the need for accessible holiday properties will grow and they are future proofing by ensuring any new property they renovate or develop has a step-free ground floor and a ground floor bedroom’

PHOTO: FRANKY HILD

Charlie’s mother Anne’s family estate at Melmerby, acquired by her father Dr Alan Shelton-Agar in 1958, was contiguous to Rowley land, which led to a happy unification on both land and matrimonial fronts. With both mother and father’s legacies at stake, the family clearly has a sense of responsibility towards the past while having a progressive outlook.

‘My dad was very big on maintaining the estate, not in the sense of control but in looking after the land, its heritage and its wildlife. That was very important to him, as it is to me and my brothers. It’s about supporting nature, the landscape and the local community because, if you don’t, things start to fall apart,’ says Charlie.

As some cousins have divested, they have acquired around 200 acres in the past 15 years and some historically significant

homes. Through it all, they have remained mindful of the impact of turning properties into holiday lets, aiming to strike a balance. Christine says: ‘When we got permission 25 years ago to convert two small barns into holiday lets, I remember Charlie’s mum saying: “you have to be mindful of the balance of people living in the village and people holidaying.” That was long before holiday rentals were seen by some as a blight on the Lake District.’

Since then, we have tried to make sure that if we repurpose a dwelling for holidays, we replace it with a residential unit.

For example, at Melmerby Hall, which is a historic nine-bedroom manor house, and three-bedroom Stag Cottage that we holiday let, we have built three new houses and kept two as long term residential. It is the same at Blencowe Hall where we have retained a

long-term residential cottage of roughly the same scale as the original habitable section of the historic building. At Martindale, we took a three-bedroom house out of occupation and are restoring its Lower Barn into a residential unit that has a local occupancy clause for people with family ties or who are educated or work in the area.’

They also rescued Todd Hills Hall Farm, on the edge of Melmerby, where the house was sound, but the outbuildings were derelict and no longer fit for agricultural use. They have since transformed the property into a six-bedroom farmhouse holiday let and two cottages – Gill Beck Barn and Vale Croft – set around an 18th century courtyard garden.

With panoramic views of the Pennines in one direction and the Lakeland fells, including Blencathra, Arthur’s Pike, High Street and Helvellyn on a good day in the



Blencowe Hall castle South Tower

PHOTO: TRACY KIDD

other, it is easy to see why it is a popular destination. The famous bakery and The Shepherd's Inn are within walking distance.

Post-Covid, the couple were unsure how quickly guests would return to their larger properties and, at the same time, sensed a trend towards holidays that offered a retreat-style experience. Their response was to introduce shepherd hut stays in the private woodland next to Melmerby Hall.

They sourced the chassis then built the cabins using timber from Ivinston Sawmill in the village. The investment has been substantial – £25,000 simply to lay a track through the woods, not to mention power and water – but it has been worth it to provide

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holidays where guests share the outdoor space with deer, hedgehogs and foxes amid carpets of bluebells in spring.

In collaboration with wildlife photographers Jason Hudson and Paula

Mould, of Wildlife Hides and Surveys, they have gone a step further, providing space for a bird viewing hide next to a long-fallen oak. A second woodland shelter up the fellside offers a unique opportunity to observe the area’s red squirrel population; an experience that helps to support the work of Penrith and District Red Squirrel Group.

More visitors will get the chance to stay in the woods too, as the couple have plans to build two fully accessible glamping pods that will overhang a valley among the trees, providing a whole new outlook. The pods will have step-free interiors and features like pull-out counter tops and decks for watching the wildlife. Christine is convinced the need for accessible holiday properties will grow and they are future proofing by ensuring any new property they renovate or develop has a step-free ground floor and a ground floor bedroom.

In a similar vein, they are taking properties off fossil fuels and have invested in ground source heat systems and biomass boilers,



Blencowe Hall Cromwell's Folly en suite bedroom with balcony

PHOTO: TRACY KIDD

with the woodchip supplied by Charlie's cousin Grant from the estate and nearby woodlands.

Only one location still relies on oil heating. The focus on local, as well as quality, is also behind Christine's pride and joy – the estate's new in-house dedicated linen store and laundry. 'We have 15 people in our housekeeping team and they were all pushing for us to have this under our direct management rather than outsourcing, thereby saving travel and improving quality.'

She and Charlie responded by restoring and converting a redundant stable block at Melmerby Hall and installing solar panels at the facility, which is proudly managed by team members Tracey Hoskins and Kathryn Butler.

When they started in 1996, their daughter Lauren was just a baby. This summer, she will be married at St John's Church, in Melmerby, followed by a reception and ceilidh in the village hall.

As beautiful as it is, as a wedding venue, Melmerby Hall is somewhat overshadowed by Grade I listed Blencowe Hall, a truly historic property of castellated towers, 12 bedrooms and 11 bathrooms. It is Grade I listed and a scheduled monument, and is a much more recent addition to Rowley Estates, Charlie and Christine's legacy to future generations.

Legend has it that when Cromwell's men attempted to storm nearby Greystoke Castle, they stumbled upon Blencowe. Cannon fire split the south tower in two leaving a dramatic, V-shaped gash in the stone wall. Others suggest that it is more likely, and less romantically, the result of subsidence. Either way, the then owners' loss has been modern marrying couples' gain.

Christine and Charlie acquired the hall in 2005, when it had been derelict for 300 years and the tower was open to the sky, revealing the locations of original fireplaces. They wanted to bring it back into use as unique holiday accommodation and, with the ideas and support of Eden District Council and English Heritage, commissioned a multi-million-pound restoration. The spectacular gap was filled in with glass to create balconies and bedrooms with a dramatic outlook attracting multiple architectural awards.

Christine says: 'This was a real heritage project and we were so pleased to have been awarded the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors national Conservation Award for 2010 as well as a Constructive Conservation Award from English Heritage, one of the few family (non-corporate) projects included.'

The project is a jewel in the crown of the Rowley Estates, which has preserved its history but has also made it a viable business, striking so well that balance the Rowleys strive to achieve. Melmerby, Glassonby, Blencowe and the rest could not be in safer hands.

Find out more at: therowleyestates.com



PHOTO: JO CROMPTON



A view from the woodland at The Rowley Estates

PHOTO: JO CROMPTON



Open plan kitchen and living space at Birch Retreat at The Rowley

PHOTO: TRACEY KIDD