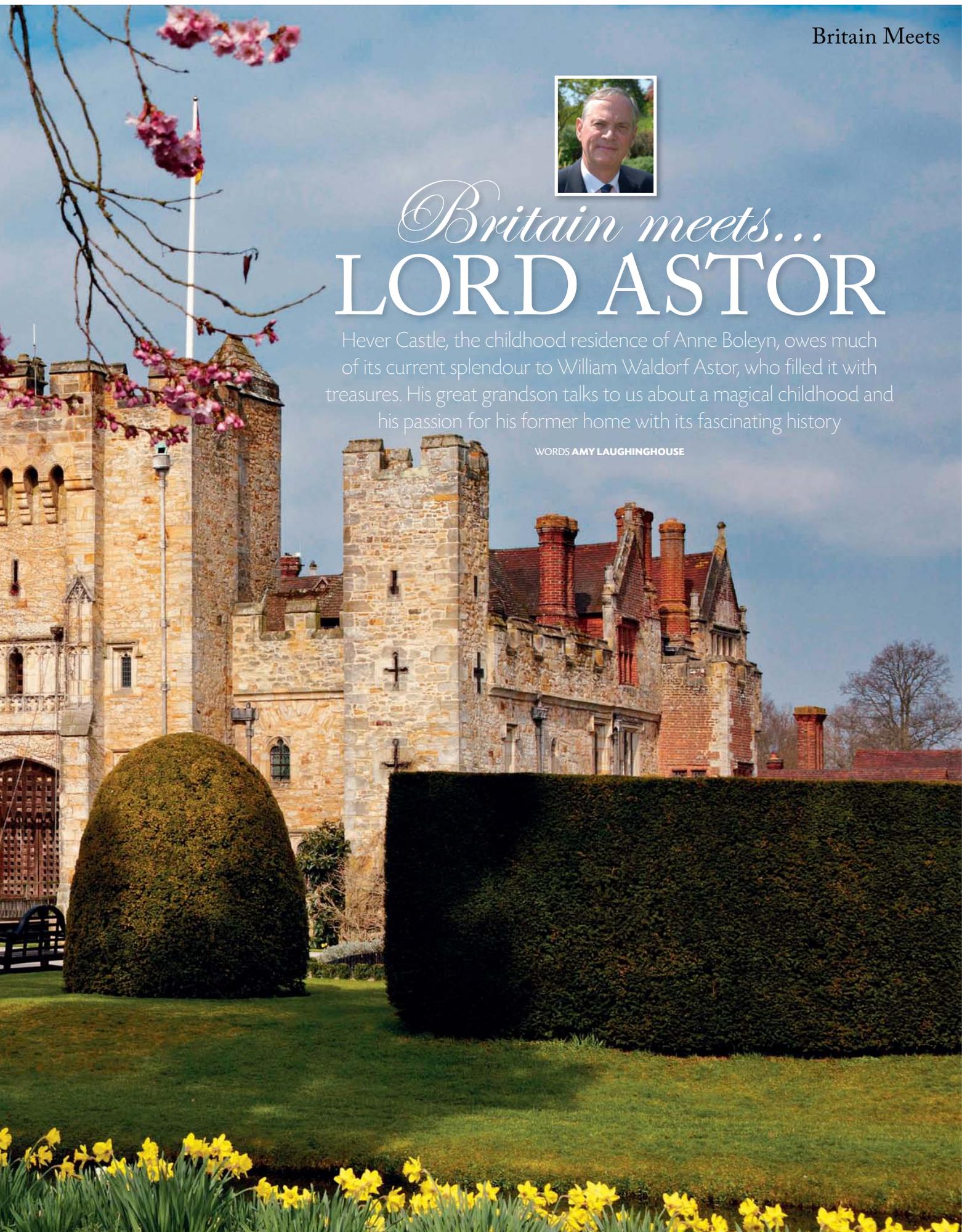




*Britain meets...*  
**LORD ASTOR**

Hever Castle, the childhood residence of Anne Boleyn, owes much of its current splendour to William Waldorf Astor, who filled it with treasures. His great grandson talks to us about a magical childhood and his passion for his former home with its fascinating history

WORDS AMY LAUGHINGHOUSE



The idea of upping sticks to live in a castle – particularly one as significant as Hever, the childhood home of Anne Boleyn – would seem a daunting proposition to most. But when John Jacob Astor VIII, 3rd Baron Astor of Hever and the current Under Secretary of State and the Lords Spokesman on Defence, moved to this historic Kentish estate at the age of 17, he wasn't leaping blindly into unfamiliar territory.

Lord Astor's great-grandfather, the American millionaire William Waldorf Astor, bought and restored the castle in the early 20th century and passed it down to his younger son, John Jacob Astor, 1st Baron Astor of Hever. So to Lord Astor, Hever was, foremost, the home of his grandparents, a comfortable and welcoming hive of familial activity he had visited countless times before he and his siblings came to live here in 1963 with their mother Irene and their father Gavin, the 2nd Baron Astor of Hever and Chairman of the Board of the Times Publishing Company.

"It was an exciting place to grow up as a child. It had all kinds of secret passages and miles and miles of cellars where we used to go roller skating," Lord Astor recalls, settling back on the soft sofa cushions in the sitting room of his present home, a 15-minute drive from the castle. "But we were always aware of the history of the place – you know, Anne Boleyn and the fact that Henry VIII had been there and wooed her there."

The most ancient portion of the castle is the 13th-century gatehouse, and in the 15th century, the Bullen family built a Tudor addition within the walls. It is here that Anne – who changed her last name to Boleyn after a stint in the French court – lived as a young girl, and it is here where Henry VIII came in 1525 to win her heart.

Hever is filled with reminders of these formidable figures. Throughout the castle, they gaze out from original Tudor portraits – looking stern and distant, Anne calm and inscrutable behind her famous black eyes. One of these portraits, featuring Anne in her iconic 'B' pendant and a French pearl-trimmed hood, hangs in the modest bedroom that is thought to have belonged to her. Another adorns the wall of the Queen's Gallery, alongside Henry VIII's other five wives; his brother, Arthur; and father, Henry VII. Two paintings of Henry and Anne's daughter, Queen Elizabeth I, preside over the Staircase Gallery.

Near Anne's bedroom, the Book of Hours Room is mostly unfurnished, save for a tapestry illustrating the marriage of Louis XII to Henry VIII's sister, Mary, and two elaborately illustrated prayer books that belonged to Anne, including, quite poignantly, the one that she is said to have carried to her execution. Years later, when Henry

bequeathed Hever to Anne of Cleves following their rather amicable divorce, this would serve as her bedroom.

Despite its importance during Tudor times, the castle had fallen into decline before it found its saviour in the form of William Waldorf Astor. Between 1903 and 1908, Astor worked with architect F L Pearson and a team of hundreds of craftsmen to update the castle, installing electricity, central heating and bathrooms with modern plumbing, and restoring it using the same tools and materials labourers would have employed centuries before. He also diverted the course of a nearby river to accommodate a new 100-room addition, designed to look like a small Tudor village, to house his family, guests and staff.

Astor's vision – and seemingly inexhaustible budget – extended beyond the castle walls, as well. He engaged Joseph Cheal and Son to turn 125 acres into a series of glorious gardens, with an orchard, walled Rose Garden, Yew Maze, and an Italian Garden specially created to display Astor's priceless collection of Italian sculptures, which he amassed during his appointment as American Ambassador to Italy from 1882-85.

To the delight of future generations, Astor also hired 800 men to dig out a 38-acre lake. "The winters were much colder when I lived there, so we used to ice-skate on the lake," Lord



**"IT WAS AN EXCITING PLACE TO GROW UP AS A CHILD. IT HAD ALL KINDS OF SECRET PASSAGES AND MILES AND MILES OF CELLARS WHERE WE USED TO GO ROLLER SKATING"**

Astor remembers. "Then in the summer, there was swimming and boating. I remember we had two rowing boats – *Kate* and *Dupli-Kate*," he adds with a grin.

As idyllic as the grounds were – and remain – Lord Astor admits that, as a boy, "it was always quite spooky going into the castle. My oldest cousins would try and terrify me, you know, with ghosts stories, that sort of thing".

Nor was he exempt from perpetrating such shenanigans himself. "A friend of mine got the arm of one of the suits of armour in the Long Gallery and tied it up with a long piece of string, and when one of my sisters walked past, we pulled it. It went down and frightened the life out of her," he recalls, allowing himself a small smile.

The Astors didn't have free reign of the entire castle, however, as his father took the decision to open Hever to the public in 1963. "He was always very conscious of his fortune and wanted to do something for other people," Lord Astor says. "He wanted people to see it and enjoy it."

It was also partly a financial decision. "You couldn't live in a place like that without a huge amount of income. There are 17 miles of central heating pipes. Imagine what the heating bills were like," he says. ▶

*Facing page, top: Looking through the rose arch in the castle gardens. Facing page, bottom: The lake and loggia. Above: William Waldorf Astor*



The 20th-century wing that William Waldorf Astor built remained the family's private domain in those days, although it is now open for special functions and for bed-and-breakfast guests. But the public is welcome to tour nearly 20 rooms of the older parts of the castle, as they have done for the past 50 years.

Entering via the stone gatehouse, through one of the oldest working portcullises in the country, visitors pass

## HISTORIAN DAVID STARKEY DECLARED THAT HEVER CASTLE POSSESSES "ONE OF THE BEST COLLECTIONS OF TUDOR PORTRAITS AFTER THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY"

through a cobbled courtyard into the timber-framed Bullen addition. Then, turning to the right, one enters the Inner Hall, a grand Tudor-style room overlooked by a carved gallery, added by William Waldorf Astor and inspired by the screen at King's College Chapel in Cambridge. At eye level, the Italian walnut-paneled walls display portraits of Henry VII, Henry VIII, Edward VI, Anne Boleyn and her sister Mary – a glimpse of the treasure trove that led historian David Starkey to declare that Hever possesses "one of the best collections of Tudor portraits after the National Portrait Gallery".

William Waldorf Astor also restored the Dining Hall, where the Bullens would have entertained Henry VIII, installing linenfold panelling and a formidable carved

stone fireplace emblazoned with the Bullen coat of arms. Two sturdy gilt locks – one of which belonged to Henry VIII – are affixed to the doors, which appear more than capable of barring any unwelcome visitors.

Any unwelcome visitor, that is, apart from the floodwaters which have twice invaded the castle. The first deluge was in 1958. "My grandfather was taken off to breakfast in a boat down these passages, which were just like the canals in Venice," Lord Astor recalls. "The butler who rowed him had on a jacket and a black tie – and swimming trunks." It seems an amusingly incongruous image, but "my grandfather probably didn't see the funny side of it," Lord Astor says, shaking his head. "It must have been pretty depressing for him to see everything destroyed like that."

Following an extensive cleanup, life returned to normal. Then an even more devastating flood struck the castle in 1968. Heavy rains caused the River Eden to overflow its banks, sending a surge of water up to 1.4 metres deep through 100 rooms of the castle.

"The staff were able to move a lot of the portraits, but it came in so quickly and with such force that lots of valuable books and wonderful manuscripts were damaged," Lord Astor says. "The water got into the diesel tanks and the sewage, and the worst thing was the smell," he remembers. "It was just terrible, and it hung around for years. They had to get all the floorboards up, and industrial



*This picture: Aerial view of Hever Castle. Facing page: The Dining Room*



The Rochford Room

dehumidifying machines were brought in. Lots of things had to go off to be repaired. It was a three-year operation.”

The family was forced to relocate from the newer ‘Astor Wing’ to lodgings within the old castle, giving Lord Astor’s father, Gavin, an opportunity to indulge his creative side. “I think he would have loved to be an architect,” Lord Astor says. “He loved designing.”

His father’s flair is evidenced by the three cosy bedrooms that he tucked into the eaves for his daughters on the top

## LORD ASTOR IS PARTICULARLY FOND OF THE MUSICALS AND OPERAS THAT ARE HELD OUTDOORS AT HEVER IN THE WARMER MONTHS

floor of the castle. Visitors are welcome to peek into ‘The Kennels,’ as they were dubbed because of their intimate proportions, after passing through the Long Gallery that runs the length of the castle and is filled with portraits of key figures from the Reformation.

Just beyond these bedrooms lies the Astor Suite, a wood-panelled study housing a new interactive ‘Upstairs Downstairs’ exhibit, which opened in March this year. Guests can watch the Astors’ rare home movies, depicting happy family moments ice-skating, sledging, and preparing for a hunt; listen to interviews with former below stairs staff talking about life on the estate; marvel at footage of the flooding and listen to Lord Astor’s account of the disaster by picking up a rotary dial telephone; and enjoy a film from 1928 showing the annual

‘Hever Day’ celebration. “All *The Times* employees would come down in specially rented trains for huge tea parties and regimental bands,” Lord Astor explains.

The walls are filled with photos of some of Hever’s most illustrious guests, including Queen Elizabeth II, and letters from Winston Churchill. “My grandfather was an MP, and Churchill used to like to come to Hever to paint with him,” Lord Astor explains. He says some of the Prime Minister’s paintings of the Italian Garden now hang at Churchill’s country home, Chartwell.

In 1983, the Astors’ devoted tenure at Hever finally ended. With the financial pressures of running such a large estate mounting, they sold it to the Guthrie family, who still own it today.

“It would have been nice to have the challenges of taking it over and running it, but I’ve had other challenges,” says Lord Astor, who credits his early exposure to the international guests his father hosted at Hever for his lifelong interest in other cultures, which proved formative in his career in government.

But he still returns occasionally. Two of his daughters were married at Hever, and he is particularly fond of the musicals and operas that are held outdoors at the castle in the warmer months of the year.

“It’s quite romantic looking out over the lake at the swans flying overhead,” he says. “It’s just a special place. I think we were always aware that we were very lucky to live there.” **B**

Go to [www.hevercastle.co.uk](http://www.hevercastle.co.uk) to check visitor opening times or visit the *BRITAIN* magazine website at [www.britain-magazine.com](http://www.britain-magazine.com)

PHOTOS: ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF HEVER CASTLE