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ESCAPE TO FINGASK CASTLE – HOME OF THE FINGASK FOLLIES

By Caroline Phillips



It's like disappearing down the best of rabbit holes and arriving at a Scottish baronial version of the Mad Hatter's Tea Party. The skew-whiff clipped topiary on the sloping lawn looks as if it's been cut by a drunken gardener or the March Hare; the 240-acre estate is dotted with water-sprouting mermaids, characters from Robert Burns, Robert Burns himself and Ossian, the mythical Scottish Bard. The Queen of Hearts must have shouted, "Off with their heads" because there are decapitated heads (AKA stone busts) on the garden walls.

Nearby stands a castle with a giant camelia crawling up its walls and white rhododendron on the drive, surrounded by hills cloaked in summer mist. Welcome to Fingask Castle, Perthshire, perched on a rocky and steeply sloping hillside above the Carse of Gowrie and the river Tay. I'm here to snoop around the castle, see the Fingask Follies — drawing room entertainment for the thinking man — and to stay the night.

I'm greeted at the door by Helen Molchanoff: chatelaine, white Russian in a flowing, silk embroidered coat and wife of Andrew Threipland. The castle (founded in 1194, remodelled in the 18th and 19th centuries and then much of it demolished and rebuilt after 1925) has been in the Threipland family for 400 years with the occasional break — once due to the family being Jacobites.



In the hallway, there are Victorian curling stones strewn across the floor, taxidermy, armour, and Mary Queen of Scots' sundial. There's also a 19th century Butler's Daybook — which records said butler buying a new bag for his bagpipes and how, in 1851, the castle's then owner, Sir Peter, had his portrait painted but so did this butler, the housekeeper, ladies' maid, coachman and coachman's horse.

We step into the adjoining family chapel, created from a 15th century kitchen, decorated with Russian icons and with a beautiful painted ceiling: an unexpectedly magical place to find by the front door of a Scottish castle. "We think the huge chimney gives access to the heavens," explains Helen.

I follow her up the main stone staircase, past the obligatory deer head trophies and 24 gilt-framed portraits of Andrew's friends and family. Finally, we reach the 20-foot subscription mural, a modern-day Night Watchman, painted on one of the big walls. "It's the only subscription mural going in Britain, possibly Europe," says Helen.



Every year for the past 14 years, one or two brave souls volunteer to pay £2,000 to have their faces added to it, to support the Fingask Follies charity; the wall currently features 57 individuals from the Follies' late patron Sir James Cayzer to Harry Wood the cat — sponsored by author Alexander McCall Smith. Caroline Dawnay, queen of literary agents, peeps out from behind a trompe l'oeuil bookcase. It also features the North wind, nine dogs, and a Bentley.

It's time, however, for the Fingask Follies (the 2020 performance has been postponed for next year. Its theme is 'Colours.' Miss it at your peril.) In times when there's no pandemic, the performance takes place in the Long Gallery with clouds on its ceiling, 100 comfy chairs, Blüthner grand piano and a small, red-carpeted stage. The Fingask Follies perform at private parties in Great Britain, to the Ballroom in the British Embassy in Paris.

There's nothing quite like it. Fingask Follies — a professional company of nine, including five performers and a pianist — is like Kit and the Widow with bells (and bagpipes) on. Think proper cabaret-cum-musical revue: rumbustious, rollicking, exuberant and politically incorrect. Slick and witty. And thought provoking, in a Radio 4 political satire-meets-musical sort of way.



It might run its irreverent way from skits such as ones on Ulysses and Odysseus to ones on Boris (*that* Boris) the buccaneer — to howls of laughter from the audience, some of whom will have travelled hours from remote Scottish islands to attend. It has been known to get an equally upbeat reception at performances in London's Chelsea Arts Club or at L'Escargot.

There's an EAT ME and DRINK ME moment afterwards over dinner for seven in the interval, a meal served in a library that's lined with ancient tomes such as Hayley's *Life of Cowper*, and bound volumes of the Illustrated London News 1857. The dinner guests are eclectic and eccentric, although not quite as eminent as previous visitors, who've included James VIII, Bonny Prince Charlie and Sir Walter Scott.

The placements — forget handwritten cards, these are wooden discs with the diner's name imprinted on an island — show that I'm supping with my hosts: the castle owners, Helen and Andrew. He's an old Etonian and erstwhile debt specialist (at the Financial Times) and artisan cheese manufacturer (in Wales) who's wearing harlequin's trousers. These days he oversees events in the castle, including parties and weddings.



‘Lofty’ Buchanan — a former lawyer turned Follies contributor and co-director — sits atop his own Heath Robinson-style invention: a contraption that he’s adapted from a wheelchair so that he’s at the height of a small woman. “I don’t want people to have to bend down to talk to me and feel sorry for me,” he says, raising a glass of wine made from local berries. It’s true to say that everything at Fingask feels happy in a topsy-turvy kind of way.

Afterwards, in my bathroom — with chunky Edwardian towel rail, oil paintings and freestanding bath — I find, slung over a chair, someone’s top hat, red braces and black-tie suit. My bedroom is probably shared with some of the castle’s multiple phantoms — possibly drawn to its four-poster, chaise longue, and make-your-own cuppa with a tin of Fortnum & Mason’s tea. “Someone offered to get rid of our ghosts, but we like them,” explains Helen, later.

In the morning, a cockerel performs its morning musical revue and, through the window, there’s the lifting blue light and the vista of ancient trees. Alexander McCall-Smith said, “Hooray for the Fingask Follies: you add to the sum of human happiness.” What could be better? Well, staying the night too.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information about Fingask Castle and to book a stay, visit www.fingaskcastle.com. The Follies season is in April and May, and Fingask welcomes visitors throughout the year in self-catering accommodation.

Caroline Phillips is an award-winning freelance journalist who contributes to publications from Sunday and daily newspapers to glossy magazines and various luxury websites. To see more of her work, go to www.carolinephillips.net.