

A new lease of life for the fully-restored St Elphin's House at Darley Dale.



Restored – a magnificent centrepiece



The swimming pool at the St Elphin's Park complex.

Audley St. Elphin's House forms the magnificent centrepiece of the retirement village, in Darley Dale. It also has a fascinating history and many passionate former residents. If these walls could talk, this is what they might say...

ST ELPHIN'S HOUSE has a long and varied past. It first appears on records as Grove House in 1820, built and lived in by John Alsop and his wife, who later sold the house and emigrated

to the warmer climes of Australia. Following this, the house was brought by the Rev William Hiley Bathurst, who wished to pursue his literary interests by taking inspiration from the surrounding Derbyshire countryside. After the clergyman's father died, though, he decided to relocate his family to Lydney Park in Gloucestershire and sold the estate to Robert Pringle in 1863.

It is thought that the house remained empty for a number of years when Robert Pringle moved away from the area, but in 1878 William John Roberts, a wealthy brewer, farmer and landowner from Didsbury in Manchester, brought the property to be nearer to his extended family in Derbyshire. A romantic soul, William Roberts had the house redesigned and turned into a Gothic mansion for his beloved wife, with the intention that they would later retire there. However, it turned out that his wife was a fan of neither Derbyshire nor Gothic buildings and refused outright to live there! This is despite her husband spending £35,000 on the renovation work - a vast sum in 19th century Britain. The Robert brood later returned to Didsbury where William built a house in keeping with his wife's style and taste and, no doubt, under her direction!

The architect who worked on turning the building into a Gothic mansion at William Roberts' request was Thomas



Ingrid Pasteur, Derbyshire High Sheriff Alan Woods and Nick Sanderson, chief executive of Audley Retirement Village, planting a tree at St Elphin's Park last week.

Worthington and Elgood. He was also responsible for a number of famous works in Manchester, including the Albert Memorial and the City Police Courts. It



The Invicta Stone – now back at its rightful home in Darley Dale and with a commemorative plaque provided by the Old Elphinians.

"His wife was a fan of neither Derbyshire nor Gothic buildings and refused outright to live there!"

is widely thought that Grove House, as it continued to be called, was modelled on a continental Gothic design with Italian influences after Worthington spent time travelling in Europe studying different styles of architecture.

Interestingly, the house was made of local sandstone from Johnston's quarry in Darley Dale. This is a feature that has been faithfully restored by Audley Retirement. The interiors were decorated with ornate limestone and wooden fireplaces and a green Murano chandelier is said to have hung in one of the reception rooms.

Sadly, William Roberts' children did not wish to live in Grove House either and it remained uninhabited until it was sold to William Atkins in 1889 for just £11,500. At one stage it is believed that a memorial stone was situated above the front door of what is now St. Elphin's House, recalling the year of William Roberts' death.

At the end of the 19th century, Victorians had developed a fondness for visiting hydropathical establishments. In 1891, William Atkins sought to make the most of this trend and turned Grove House into the Grove Hydro, later known

as the Darley Hydro with further help from Thomas Worthington. He had added a number of treatment rooms to the house, along with a swimming pool and tennis courts. He was, however, late to the craze and the venture was unsuccessful.

In a state of disrepair, the house was eventually sold in 1904 and turned into what became known as St. Elphin's Girls' School. Despite closing in 2005, there is an active alumni association to this day established by two former pupils, Liz Bailey and Gill Prescott, who keep the spirit of the school alive. The group is dedicated to celebrating and honouring the wonderful history of the school, the building and its grounds.

The Old St. Elphinians, as they have become known, have retained a fondness and an interest in the developments at the site since the school's closure in 2005. When the school owners chose to auction off the contents and fixtures of the building and grounds, the Old St. Elphinians watched as significant pieces of their history were sold. One such item was the Invicta Stone, which originally sat on the top of a turret above the front door of St. Elphin's House. It

Feature

was taken down for health and safety reasons in the 1960s and was left to languish in a rose bed. But in 2011, a former pupil at the school, Marianne Jackson, traced the Invicta Stone to a salvage merchants in Oxfordshire – and determined to bring the stone back to its rightful home in Darley Dale.

Meanwhile, in 2005, St. Elphin's School had been bought by luxury retirement village provider Audley, a company which has since established a close relationship with the old girls of St. Elphin's and the local community. Audley has retained the name and the village is known as St. Elphin's Park. And when Audley became aware of Marianne's ambition to return the Invicta Stone to its home, it stepped in to purchase the stone and committed to returning it upon completion of the house's restoration.

The Invicta Stone was reinstalled to its rightful home at St. Elphin's Park in October 2011. It was unveiled at a school reunion ceremony by Marianne Jackson and hosted by Audley Retirement. Since then, the Old Girls have also installed a plaque by the stone.

St. Elphin's House now forms the centrepiece of Audley St. Elphin's Park retirement village. It was formally reopened by Lord Edward Manners, brother of the 11th Duke of Rutland, last September. The restored house now offers eight exceptional apartments, a far cry from the boarding school accommodation yet retaining the character and charm that so many previous residents have enjoyed. In place of classrooms and common rooms is the Audley Club, which includes a luxury health club, fitness pool, bar/bistro and



■ Some of the guests at last week's ceremony.

Orangery restaurant. In total, the completed village will have 127 retirement properties to purchase for those over 55 wishing to live an independent later life in and around a beautiful and historic building.

The sensitive restoration work and high-quality finish delivered by Audley Retirement was recognised in the 2012 What House? Awards with the prestigious silver award for Best Retirement Development.

And last week, a traditional 'topping out' ceremony was held to lay the final stone

at Robinson Court, marking another major step towards the completion of the Park complex. Local council leaders and other guests, including some former school pupils, were welcomed by Audley Retirement's chief executive officer, Nick Sanderson, and saw a tree planted to commemorate the occasion as well as enjoying a tour of the restored main building.

Editor's Note: Next month, a former pupil reveals details of what the school's 'regime' was like back in the late Sixties and early Seventies. ■

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