

Clandon Park Manager addresses Village Meeting

On Wednesday 8th July Alex Bush, General Manager at Clandon Park and Hatchlands addressed a village meeting on the future of Clandon House.

Alex told us that the fire on the 29th April had been the biggest emergency that Surrey Fire Service had had to attend with 80 fire service personnel involved at one point. The Fire Service working with National Trust Staff had tried to salvage what they could.

The building was profoundly damaged and we are left with a tale of two halves. On the right hand side there has been complete devastation. All the floors have collapsed although interior walls are still standing. The fire went across the ceiling and down the left hand side where there is a more mixed picture. The Speaker's Parlour, one of the most important rooms, is almost unscathed.

On the afternoon and over night NT staff worked with the Fire Brigade using a recently rehearsed plan coordinated by the House Manager to salvage as much as possible. Over 4000 items were saved including a lot of paintings. Salvaged items were stored in Clandon School where a special thank you assembly was held a week later. Much of what has been salvaged is undamaged although a few paintings had to be cut from their frames but they are now being reunited.

The first few days were about assessing the damage. The external structure is in very good condition. There is a mixed picture internally. The marble has stood up well and most of it is unscathed. As yet it is not clear how much else has survived. The last couple of months have been about stabilising the building. A lot of metalwork has collapsed and a large number of timbers and beams are dangling down making it unsafe to work and restricting access. These are currently being removed with a crane.

The Speaker's Parlour is in good condition some in situ work has been done but the room above it has collapsed. They were able to work with Surrey Fire and Rescue to salvage more items and now 450 items have come out of the building with more set to be rescued over the coming months. During the course of the investigation a few interesting discoveries have been made about the building revealing some hidden doorways and niches.

NT have worked with English Heritage who have undertaken a geophysical survey of the site which revealed the layout of an earlier Tudor garden.

One of the main questions is, "How did the fire start?" As yet the investigation has not yet been able to get into the building – the first big beam came out only yesterday. Contractors are picking out loose material

to make it safe for the investigation team to get in. This will take 5/6 weeks.

This is forensic archaeology looking at everything that comes out of the site. A large container has been set up to receive and process the salvage. The total time needed for this work is unknown but 6 months has been allowed but this might change if there are unstable elements. The hope is to complete this work by Christmas. Everything which comes out will be looked at including whole items but everything will be identified and where possible restored.

NT are starting to look at what the future may hold. The building has been assessed and it looks hopeful that the building will be rebuilt in some form. The nature of this rebuild however is still up in the air and depends on what is found over the next few months.

There are a huge number of options. At Uppark House the building was completely restored but there are a myriad of other options. Everyone hopes there will be a decision made within the next 6 months and there will be a lot of consultation about how it will look. There are many fantastic advisors involved including the Director of the National Portrait Gallery.

Questions were then invited from the audience.

Is there a plan to put a roof on?

Yes within 6 weeks free standing scaffolding with a tin roof which could last up to 5 years will be put on. NT are also looking at the option of installing a visitor route for tours. They are looking at opening the site in the next few months – an opportunity to see a major salvage operation and cutting edge work by the National Trust but likely to be open only to small groups at this stage.

What will happen to the Maori House?

A visiting delegation from New Zealand came over a few weeks ago looking at a major bid to restore the house. The needs are as great as ever and the NT will be working with people in New Zealand to restore it in parallel with the House. It will stay on site – the parallels with its role in surviving a volcanic eruption have not been lost.

How do you stand with regard to insurance?

NT do not self insure and have standard insurance. We are working with the loss adjusters as they move forward. A fundraising drive has been launched as we expect there to be a gap between insurance and aspiration. Tens of thousands have been raised which are currently in a holding account.

Do you know where the fire started?

No but we know it was first detected in the basement by smoke alarms.

How much of the marble hall is still there?

The ceiling is now on the floor. Directly under the hall is the restaurant which is vaulted and therefore the floor is intact. The ceiling is now on the floor and it is hoped that much including cornicing has survived. Restoration should be achievable.

How much of the military memorabilia was lost?

Steve Johnston of the Queen's Royal Surrey Museum responded. "We don't know what we will do until we see what we get out. The Fire Service rescued 4 of the regimental colours in a brave action. 800 medals have been retrieved. Hopefully there will be non-combustible items under the rubble."

The GM of Uppark said, "Prepare for some nice surprises". Very detailed folders of what was in was each room are available which is helping the archaeologists.

A resident of West Clandon commented, "Many people feel an emotional attachment to Clandon Park as they embraced us as villagers and invited us in. It would be very nice if there are scaffolding tours that villagers were invited and informed."

Alex Bush responded that she will continue to use the email system to inform villagers and we might need some volunteers too. They are looking at blogs, video diaries etc.. It would be good to maintain the sense of engagement.

Will you be looking for volunteers?

The archaeological investigations have been contracted out. There is conservation by the house team but NT are looking at how more people could be involved. There is a real opportunity for professional development for conservators. Depending on the volume of work we may look for volunteers.

What are the range of options for re-build?

Some are Museums. Galleries, Hotels. The guiding principles are we are charged with looking after heritage.

What about residential options?

This may not be a great use of the building but all options are being considered.

Do you have detailed photos of the original building?

We have very detailed shots. This was one of the lessons of Uppark. We also have fragments of material in the V&A to aid restoration.

Will disability access be a consideration when it is rebuilt?

Yes definitely. With the building as it is we have the opportunity to do things that cannot normally be done with a grade 1 building. English Heritage have told us they work within current building regulations.

Will the NT learn from this eg install a sprinkler system?

Yes but these would have been very difficult to retrofit. The Fire Service said sprinklers would have been unlikely to suppress the fire in this case because of the voids and other features of the building. There are other fire suppressing systems which might be appropriate. When we see the fire investigation report we will be in a better option to judge.