

## Country house oddities

# A vital partner in chambers

We take convenient plumbing for granted but Jeremy Musson is brought up short by Newby Hall's unrivalled collection of chamber-pots. Photographs by Charles Sainsbury-Plaice

ONE OF the great amusements at late 17th-century Newby Hall in Yorkshire is pointing out the IOU signed by Charles II to a Vyner ancestor who bankrolled the Restoration: "He never got it back," sighs Rick Compton, who took over the house and estate in 1999 and has continued a vigorous process of restoration and redecoration begun by his parents.

Actually, more recent royal visitors have taken an amused interest in Newby's less renowned treasure, a collection of nearly 100 chamber-pots brought together by Compton's great-great grandfather, Robert de Grey Vyner. Princess (later Queen) Mary asked for permission to see his collection in the early 20th century and left, apparently, with "a twinkle in her eye", praising the family's "most unique collection".

Little is known of why or where he collected the chamber-pots. "Robert de Grey Vyner was passionate about racing and owned a horse that won the Derby," says Compton. Perhaps he wanted to bring something of the earthy humour of the stables into the grand and refined atmosphere of Newby? The house had been given a series of exceptionally elegant interiors by Robert Adam, including the sculpture gallery made to contain one of the foremost collections of classical sculpture, and a tapestry drawing-room.

"At one time de Grey Vyner converted the orangery into a museum, with all sorts of stuffed animals, and my father can just remember that the skeleton of the Derby winner used to stand in the middle," says Compton. The museum has long since been dispersed.

De Grey Vyner also collected paintings, drawings and china figures of boxers. Compton says: "I think that he was typical of his age, a late-Victorian and Edwardian sporting country gent, in just the same way that William Weddell, who collected all the classical sculpture on his Grand Tour in the 18th century, was typical of his." The famous Weddell sculpture collection has just been cleaned under the direction of Compton's wife, Lucinda.



Lucinda and Richard Compton with a *bourdaloue* and slightly less discreet pot

The pots range from rustic-looking 17th-century pewter versions to extraordinarily elegant 18th-century Chinese porcelain, presumably made for the export market (I enjoy the formal descriptions for valuation: "a Chinese Imari chamber-pot with flared rim, painted with ogival panels of flowering shrubs divided by roundels and plants, the rim with trailing foliage and flower heads (slight fritting to handle and rim) Kanxi" but am disappointed that none of these bears an English armorial decoration as would a grand export dinner service of the time.

There are a number of elegant Staffordshire *bourdaloues*, kidney-shaped portable chamber-pots (from which the word loo may be derived). Small enough to carry concealed in a muff and slip under the skirts, they were used by grand ladies when caught in long, drawn-out social situations. They are said to be named after a fashionable Jesuit preacher of Louis XIV, whose lengthy sermons caused agonies to ladies of the court.

Most of the famous 18th- and early 19th-century English ceramic manufacturing centres are represented including Sunderland (lustreware) and Leeds (creamware). The more earthy examples are English pearlware, with startled faces in the bowl. Several of the faces are depicted peering upwards and shouting: "Oh dear me, what do I see?" Some continue: "Keep me clean and use me well/and what I see I will not tell." In addition they have gruesome-looking brown frogs climbing up the side.

Some early 19th-century examples appear to have been wedding gifts and bear inscriptions such as: "Dear lovely wife pray rise & piss, Take you that handle & I'll take this/Let's use the present which was sent/To make some mirth is only meant/Then let it be as they have said/We'll laugh & piss & then to bed."

Compton's favourite is one that has a crude caricature thought to be Napoleon. "I think that is a good patriotic choice," he says. He has not added to the collection but he and his wife hold a sculpture show in the gardens annually to present the work of living sculptors, and have begun to collect contemporary sculpture, including a piece by David Williams-Ellis and one by Marzia Colonna.

The little panelled room in which the chamber-pots are kept was adapted in the early Seventies, as a part of the improvements to the house carried out by Compton's mother. "She found them on the top storey, which was stacked with old furniture," he recalls. Appropriately, the room was originally the 19th-century water-closet between the dining-room and the billiard-room.

Lucinda Compton observes: "It's extraordinary but many visitors to the house today don't know what chamber-pots were used for, unless they have an elderly relative with them to explain. I suppose the *bourdaloues* must often be mistaken for sauce-boats in antique shops and end up on dining-tables." ■

Next month: curiosities from Wenlock Abbey. Jeremy Musson is a historian of the English country house, writer and broadcaster.



Upstairs, downstairs and in my lady's chamber, not to mention under her skirts: the pots at Newby Hall range from rustic-looking 17th-century pewter versions to elegant 18th-century Chinese porcelain



Richard Compton's favourite, thought to be a patriotic insult to Napoleon



"Oh dear, what do I see?" The gruesome frog calls for a sense of humour



The ideal 19th-century wedding present