

Free inside: *THE MUST-HAVE Tottering-by-Gently wallplanner*

# COUNTRY LIFE®

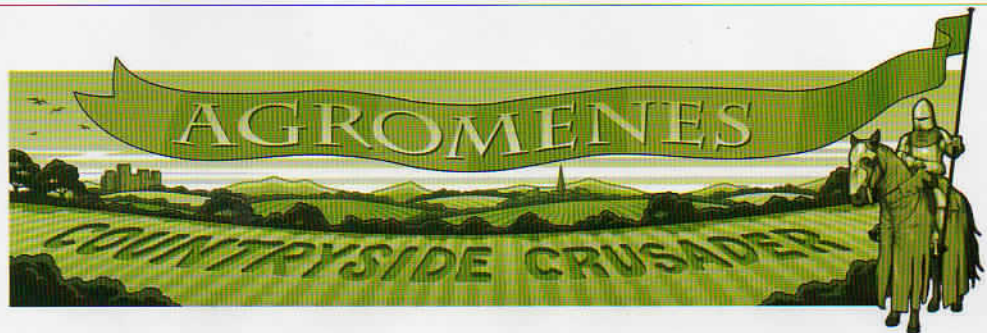
DECEMBER 2, 2009

EVERY WEDNESDAY £3

What next for  
our climate?



Real rural heroes: the **COUNTRY LIFE** Awards  
Who would be Father Christmas now?  
PLUS Gordon Ramsay and Jeanette Winterson



# How the rich can be a force for good

**B**ANKERS' bonuses have had one unlooked-for advantage. They have restored many a rundown country house, recovered several estates and produced some remarkable art commissions. Naturally, many of the newly rich are foolish enough to spend their money on yachts, cars, and vulgar holiday homes. Such has always been the case. Nonetheless, the boom years have improved the stock of our great houses and made up a little for the years after the Second World War, when taxation destroyed so much of our built heritage. The tradition of private patronage should be treasured, and its return has been good for all of us.

Of course, it's not only the bankers. Economic success has produced a slew of millionaires and, inevitably, a prodigious waste of money by many. However, those who have profited from the good times have also made possible some wonderful contributions to our national environment. The magnificent new house in Derbyshire built by Johnny

Greenall, and Jon Hunt's sensitive restoration of that 18th-century gem Heveningham Hall are but two examples where old and new money have achieved something for future generations to enjoy. A brewer and an estate agent making real contributions to our national heritage.

Of course, the rich are rarely praised for what they have done. Instead, people who themselves have added nothing to our national store of treasure take every opportunity to cavil. So, property man Christopher Moran, instead of being honoured for his magnificent re-creation of Sir Thomas More's house in Chelsea, was forced to fight continued battles with an obscurantist local council; planning officers around the country have stopped the building of new country houses; and small-minded quangos continue to nitpick their way into obstructing any grand design.

Everywhere, resentment rules. We have lost the art of encouraging the patron and celebrating the discerning rich. Yet, without them, Britain's historic inheritance would be immensely the poorer and, were we to rely today on State and municipal taste, our artistic future would, indeed, be bleak. It should, of course, not be 'either or' but 'both and'. Government, national and local, should be encouraging private cultural enterprise. Two examples from a small Suffolk local authority make the point. Plans for a new country house, set among trees in the village of Darsham, were opposed by a number of council professionals seemingly set in the ways of the 1960s. It was the enthusiasm of elected local councillors that gave the planning permission so ardently opposed. Now, the young architects, Paul+O, have been named runners-up in the Architects of the Year Awards. What a remarkable memorial to the brave woman, Sara Low, who funded it all and sadly died a few months after moving in. But a tribute,

too, to local people who were willing to look beyond the nitpickers and enable the vision.

Down the road, in Aldeburgh, Benjamin Britten's magisterial contribution to music has been commemorated by private generosity. Instead of a conventional statue, the promoters commissioned a local artist, Maggi Hambling, to produce a glorious shell—challenging and yet embracing—to celebrate his genius. Town and district councils stood out against powerful local critics and gave it planning permission. A fitting example of effective public-private partnership. Pity that Uttlesford District Council over in Essex didn't have the same courage. They turned down Miss Hambling's work, and Saffron Walden is the poorer for it. As, indeed, we all will be unless we begin to say yes to the patrons and benefactors who are rich enough to make artistic vision a reality.

---

'We have lost the art of encouraging the patron and celebrating the discerning rich'

---