

Hawarden Estate

North Wales



ANTONIA WINDSOR STEPS INSIDE THE HOME OF VICTORIAN PRIME MINISTER WILLIAM GLADSTONE AND DISCOVERS A GRAND APARTMENT IDEAL FOR HOSTING FRIENDS

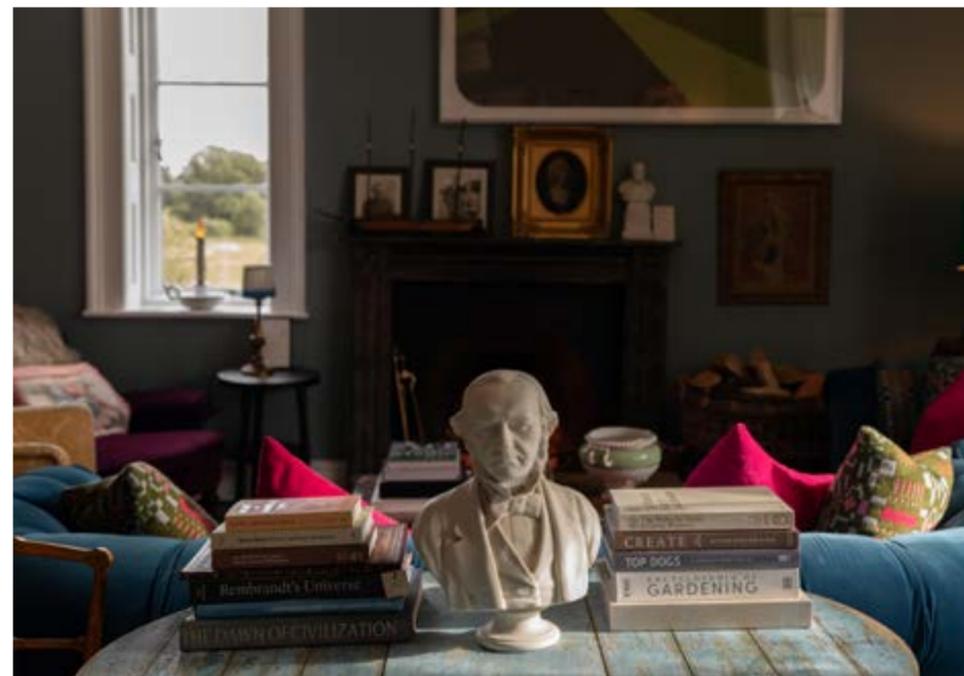
The fire is crackling in the hearth, emitting a warm glow to those of us sprawled on the velvet sofas. I've picked up a signed copy of Tessa Hadley's novel *Free Love* from a pile on the coffee table; my friend Malaika has been engrossed in a book called *Wilding* for the past couple of hours. Books are

everywhere in this grand drawing room, which also contains a record player and collection of vinyl, a huge ornamental bird cage and a floor-to-ceiling portrait of the Liberal Victorian prime minister William Gladstone. Those who can recognise his distinguished features will also spot a marble bust in his likeness on the occasional table, surrounded by more piles of books. The room we are in is part of the castle in which Gladstone lived from the mid-1860s until his death in 1898. His great great grandson Charlie Gladstone and his family still reside in the other half of the building.

The books are for the enjoyment of guests of this five-bedroom, two-floor castle apartment, but perhaps also a partial homage to the man who created a library of about 32,000 books at Hawarden during his lifetime – a collection that is now housed in Britain's only residential library in the village. It is said that Gladstone personally carted more than 20,000 of his books there in a wheelbarrow at the age of 79 and the library now contains over 150,000 volumes – well worth a visit if you have time during your stay.

Hawarden Estate is just inside the border of North Wales in Flintshire, about a three-minute drive or a 15-minute stroll from the centre of the village. When we came to the end of the tree-lined drive, there was a unified gasp among the

Left Hawarden Castle Estate
Right One of the bedrooms in the apartment
Below Bust of William Gladstone surrounded by a selection of the many books in the drawing room



IMAGES: FRAN MART (LEFT & RIGHT), DASHY WINGATE (TOP RIGHT)

seven people in the car. Even our dog pushed her snout against the window as though in disbelief.

Hawarden Castle is an imposing mansion built in the local sandstone and its floodlit form emerged at the end of the driveway like something out of a gothic fairytale. I grew up on a diet of Enid Blyton books in which the adventurous young people were always finding such grand old buildings to explore. My own children and the friends we'd brought with them haven't had their imaginations fired in the same way, and yet yelped as they got out of the car, pointing to the heavy oak and iron door and up at the crenellations that for them proved it to be a real castle. However, although it looks every bit the castle, it's actually an 18th-century mansion remodelled in Gothic revival style by the family of Gladstone's wife Catherine Glyne at the beginning of the 19th century. There is a real castle on the estate, a ruined medieval castle that played an important role in the struggle for Welsh independence in the 13th century, which the children discover on their walk the next day.

We scaled the two flights of stairs to the apartment at breakneck speed and the children quickly busied themselves with elaborate games of hide and seek, while us grown-ups investigated the goodies in the welcome hamper – fresh bread, jams and juices from the farm shop in the village, which is also owned by the estate. Rooms are easily distributed as each has its own personality and feel and there are no arguments. The decoration throughout is a pleasing blend of traditional and modern. An impressive collection of contemporary art lines the walls of every room and it

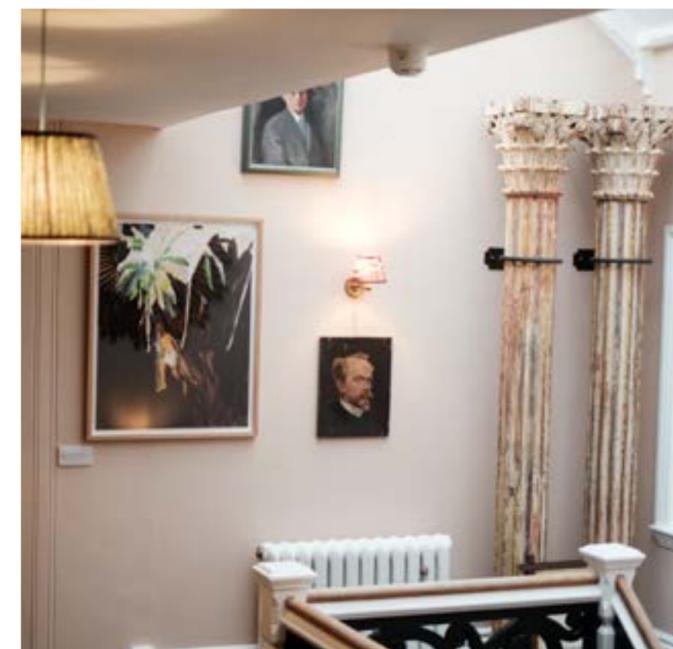


doesn't jar that you may also find a stray Corinthian pillar, a grandfather clock or a bronze weathervane alongside a row of Andy Warhol's Mona Lisas or a bright neon-coloured artwork by the London-based young artist Lakwena.

Our dog has come to join us in front of the fire, curled at my feet like a footwarmer. "Dinner is served," announces my friend Julian. Bringing a giant vat of bolognese out of the kitchen and lighting the candles on the long wooden table that comfortably seats the 10 of us. We eat slowly, enjoying the conversation as Julian tells us of the most recent documentary that's been made of his explorations into African rainforest. Tales of finding new species, seem suitably Victorian and match the setting. There is no television in any of the rooms and none of us had noticed; without the pull of the screens we have settled into a slower pace.

After dinner we toast marshmallows (another gift in the welcome hamper). Were it not a cold February evening we might have braved a walk to the little clearing in the woods which is set up with an outdoor pizza oven, a wood-fired hot tub and a fire pit, but instead we toast them on the drawing room fire, too snug to leave the comfort of this welcoming space.

Next morning we wake to find a wooden crate on a stool in the kitchen with the most delicious croissants and pain au chocolat I've tasted outside of France. They've been brought up fresh from the bakery in the village and stealthily deposited without waking any of us (we were enjoying the wine and the fire and the conversation so much last night that we didn't make it to bed until 2am). Alongside the hamper service, there are also honesty cupboards in the apartment



with essentials such as extra bags of marshmallows or jars of jam that you can help yourself to and write the amount on the pad. It's not just perishables that are on offer, you can also buy a copy of Charlie Gladstone's book *Do/Team: How to Get the Best from Everyone* about how to create and maintain a happy and engaged workforce (and if you bump into him in the driveway, you might just get him to sign it). We make coffee in the cool retro-styled turquoise Moccamaster coffee maker to enjoy with the pastries and the children discover they've been left an envelope full of treasures including wild flower seeds and a map of the grounds encouraging them to get out and explore with tasks such as "find something intensely beautiful" and "find something that's naturally blue".

With the kids on their quest, Malaika and I venture into the pretty Victorian walled garden to light up the wood-burning stove in the outdoor sauna and get a fire going under the cast-iron bath that serves as a "hot tub". The sauna warms up quickly, the bath less so. This serves us well as we create our own Nordic cycle, catching up with deep conversation as we work up a sweat and then running outside to plunge into the cool water of the bath before repeating. Inside, my husband discovers an infrared sauna on the ground-floor in a little side-room that also contains all the equipment you might need to create a picnic in the woods – flasks, enamel mugs, picnic blankets and a cool box. We are enjoying the winter warmth of the saunas, but my imagination roams to summer on the estate, when the evenings are long and the outdoor kitchen can come into its own and I begin to hatch a plan for a return visit. This is definitely an estate to be enjoyed in all seasons. 🍷

A two-night stay at the West End for 10 people costs from £2,000. hawardenstateholidays.co.uk



Top left (clockwise) The vintage-styled coffee maker; a shared dinner; the morning breakfast hamper; Andy Warhol's Mona Lisa (with a Lakwena print in reflection) and an antique weathervane
Left The outdoor dining and lounging area in the woods
Right (clockwise) A view of the old castle; Corinthian pillars on the landing; the ornamental birdcage in the window of the drawing room

IMAGES: ANTONIA WINDSOR (TOP-LEFT SQUARE), FRAN MART (LEFT, RIGHT & TOP-MIDDLE), DABBY WINGATE (TOP-RIGHT)