

FOCUS ON UPTON CRESSETT HALL

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Of all the surprises that the wonderful county of Shropshire has to offer, Upton Cressett is one of the more unexpected. Tucked away down a long, narrow, dead-end lane some four miles west of Bridgnorth, this tiny settlement consists of just a manor house, gatehouse, a little Norman church, and a cluster of outbuildings, and until the young Bill Cash and his wife came across it in August 1969 it was all very much 'out of sight, out of mind'. The church was redundant and vandalized (extraordinary how the philistines manage to penetrate even the remotest spots), and the house was abandoned and un-lived-in. "It was like Sleeping Beauty", says Mr Cash, "humming with insects, trees growing out of the side of the house, animals running around inside, the gatehouse stairs deep in bat droppings – the whole thing in a state of glorious dereliction."

Upton Cressett, which won Best 'Hidden Gem' at the inaugural 2011 Hudson's Heritage Awards, is a very ancient place – a Roman settlement has been found in a field behind the house, the Saxon manor is mentioned in Domesday Book, and parts of the church can be dated to about 1135 – but to all external appearances the present house seems Elizabethan. In fact this is just a brick encasing, in around 1580, of a 15th-century timbered hall house. Dateable by dendrochronology to either side of 1430, it was probably built by Hugh Cressett, who was sheriff and MP for the county. Truncated in the early 18th century after the Cressetts built a grand new mansion at Cound and let Upton as a farmhouse, what now survives is two bays of an aisled hall, plus a cross-wing that contained the solar and was extended northwards at the end of the 15th century. That century was a stormy time for the Cressetts, as for so many other landed families, and Robert Cressett's appointment as sheriff by Richard III put him in bad odour subsequently with Henry VII. However, the family were eventually reconciled with the Tudors, and in 1588 they were major contributors to the Armada fund. Thus it was that they felt confident enough to upgrade their half-timbered house in brick and add a charmingly petite turreted gatehouse to precede it. There is a long-standing tradition, supported by Cressett family documents, that the young Edward V, one of the 'Princes in the Tower', stayed at the manor in April 1483 on his fateful journey to the Tower from Ludlow Castle. Edward had been brought up at Ludlow and the Cressett family were close to Edward IV.

Having been educated in two Elizabethan mansions – Barlborough Hall and Stonehurst – Bill Cash felt a great affinity with Upton Cressett, and set about acquiring it. Having done so in 1971, he and his wife then spent three years on its restoration; he was then, he says, very strong and sporty, and relished the physical



challenge. He doubts that if they were trying to tackle the project now they would be allowed to do what they then felt was needed to make it viable; as it was, the listed building authorities were very helpful, and the local council – which had given up on the building – was only too glad that anyone wanted to take it on. Getting it habitable again took three years, with the work being carried out by Roy Beard of Shrewsbury. The Cashes opened the house to the public (groups by appointment) for about twenty years, but as his political career progressed he became too busy. Although he has become best known as the stoutly Eurosceptic MP for Stone, he was instrumental in formulating the bill that set up the National



Heritage Memorial Fund, and was involved from early on with the HHA. Nowadays one of his greatest passions is to combat the threat from wind farms to Shropshire's as yet unspoilt landscape.

In 2008 the Cashes decided that it was time to pass the torch to the next generation, and having converted an adjoining 16th century tythe barn that had been on the point of collapse, they handed over the manor house to their author son William and his wife. In the intervening years they too have left their mark on Upton Cressett, calling in the Stratford-based architects Hawkes, Edwards & Cave to turn the 1970s kitchen in the late-15th-century wing into a stylish Tudor dining room. Several later sash windows

were replaced with mullions and leaded lights, and the gatehouse was turned into a small, self-contained house. The latter is now available for mini-breaks as well as being home to the Upton Cressett Foundation, a literary retreat set up by him for aspiring authors to write in peace and seclusion. William is a highly literary person, being particularly knowledgeable about Shakespeare and his generation, and this is reflected in the schemes of painted decoration that he has commissioned from Adam Dant, which were prompted by the discovery of fragments of 16th-century wall painting during the recent works.

Dant, who won the Jerwood Prize in 2002 and also designed the



first-ever cover of *Spears* magazine – founded by William Cash in 2006 – uses paints that he mixes himself to an authentic 16th-century formula. He has executed three schemes. In the new dining room the enormous inglenook fireplace is now surmounted by sea dragons inspired by a fragment of Tudor carving formerly in the house, while the spaces between the ceiling joists are painted in boldly-coloured patterns. The 17th-century staircase (which has been given new newel posts, carved by Andrew Pearson in the form of the Upton Cressett sea dragon) is now adorned with panels whose colour scheme and strapwork patterns draw on the great staircase at Knole in Kent (of 1605-8) and the engravings of Vredeman de Vries and his Dutch contemporaries.

The panels incorporate appropriate quotations, including Virgil's 'May fortune smile on your first efforts', which has been adopted as the motto of the literary foundation. As for the gatehouse, its surviving genuine Elizabethan plasterwork is now augmented by further painted decoration and by painted cloth hangings, the latter on the theme of 'The Four Seasons of Prince Rupert'. This is an apt allusion to the period of the Civil War, when Prince Rupert is said to have stayed here, Edward Cressett was killed fighting for the royalists at the Battle of Bridgnorth, and SIR Francis Cressett tried unsuccessfully to rescue Charles I from Carisbrooke Castle. Francis survived the turmoil of those mid-17th century decades and his portrait, by Wissing, painted in 1677 in armour topped out

with a frothy wig, now presides over the dining room.

Although the Cressetts have long since departed from the place, one feels that the Cash family have made it very much their own. Having saved it from terminal decay in the 1970s, they are now developing a new role for it quite unlike anything in its previous long history. The house is in very good physical shape, embellished with appropriate furniture and paintings and with striking new decorative schemes. The once unloved church on the lawn is now cared for by the admirable Churches Conservation Trust, and there are new formal gardens, designed by Dr Katherine Swift (from nearby Morville Hall Dower House) and her colleague Lindsay Bousfield.

The intention now is to open much more to the public, and indeed on the day I was there last August the family were surprised and somewhat overwhelmed by a great influx of visitors generated by local publicity. As I left, two writers arrived to take up residence in the gatehouse and work on their respective books. Who knows with what literary masterpieces Upton Cressett will hereafter be associated?

FURTHER INFORMATION

For the 2012 season, Upton Cressett Hall and Gatehouse will be open from 1 April to 30 September on Wednesday, Thursday, Sunday and all Bank Holidays from 11.30am-5pm (last entry 4.30pm). For other special opening times and by appointment visits see the website or call 01746 714308. The Gatehouse (www.uptoncressethall.co.uk/gatehouse) is available for luxury mini-breaks and private let. www.uptoncressethall.co.uk