

RABY RISING

The plans of Lord and Lady Barnard to re-imagine their spectacular castle and gardens in County Durham are nearing completion.

Ciar Byrne took a tour

When Kate Robson, now Lady Barnard, and her husband Harry Vane were courting, she took him on one of her favourite childhood walks around Upper Teesdale, where her grandmother had lived when she was growing up. Halfway round he stopped and said, 'I really must do something about these paths.' That was when she realised just how vast his family estates were, stretching from County Durham to the Cumbrian border.

There is a story that a former Duke of Cleveland – a title once held by the family that has now died out – got lost while hunting and had to spend the night at a farmhouse. In the morning, the farmer said, 'It's been a pleasure hosting you, my lord, but just to let you know this isn't one of yours.' Mortified, the duke ordered all the houses on his estate to be painted white to mark them out.

It was not until 2016, when Harry inherited Raby Castle from his late father and became the 12th Baron Barnard, that Kate discovered the true extent of their new dominion. Based around four towers, the oldest dating back to the 12th century, Raby is a classic border castle. Built for the powerful Neville family after the Rising of the North – a Catholic plot to replace Elizabeth I with Mary Queen of Scots – the estate was seized by the crown and then bought by Sir Henry Vane the Elder in 1626. The castle has more than 300 rooms, many of which have lain neglected for decades and are only now being rediscovered.

Tall, slim and dynamic, Lady Barnard is the creative director at Raby and the powerhouse behind The Rising, an ambitious project to take the estate into the future that will open this year. When I visited as part of a small group on a crisp winter's day, there was still much to be done. A woodland adventure playground called Plotter's Forest was already open, but much of the site was thick with mud left behind by recent snow, and we had to dodge JCBs as we toured the site.

The Rising is a redevelopment of a large, south-facing slope overlooking the impressively turreted castle, and ➤



Raby Castle. Below, from far left: Lord and Lady Barnard, a view of the castle and the walled garden



PICTURES: DAVID GREY; DAVID FORSTER





a restoration of three interlinked walled gardens by leading designer Luciano Giubbilei. The aim is to make it a destination that combines a visit to the gardens and house with upmarket food and shopping – a northern version of The Newt in Somerset or Daylesford Organic in the Cotswolds.

At the top of the site a former glasshouse is being converted into The Vinery, a 200-seat restaurant that will use produce from the estate. We got a taste of what will be on offer over a lunch of melt-in-the-mouth fallow deer venison, in a room in one of the towers. The walls are decorated with an assortment of taxidermy found in cupboards around the castle.

The rest of the gardens, including lawns and walkways, have been designed by award-winning North Yorkshire-based landscape designer Alistair Baldwin. There is a huge Dutch barn that will be used for open markets and events, and the apricot-rendered Georgian stables will become a retail space for a range of carefully selected local products. The Grade-II listed coach house will become a new interactive exhibition space telling the story of Raby

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through a unique locally handcrafted table with a map projected onto it. Meanwhile, the old riding school is being turned into a huge events space.

Visitors entering the new development will be led down accessible paths to receive a warm welcome at the newly built Round House, inspired by the architecture of the Dutch barn, with doors that can be opened in fine weather. Here they can buy tickets to enter the castle and walled garden and plan their visits around the estate.

The eastern section of the walled garden is now finished, and was opened to the first guests in June last year. Designed by Giubbilei and Lady Barnard, it is a romantic, peaceful space flowing around a grass

amphitheatre that can be used for outdoor performances in summer. This is flanked by two woodland gardens with meandering paths and amelanchiers underplanted with epimediums, sweet woodruff (*Galium odoratum*), the perennial foxglove (*Digitalis lutea*) and Japanese spurge (*Pachysandra terminalis*).

A huge tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) that dates back to 1900 is mirrored by a younger tree of the same species. Beds are filled with *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Flamingo', which looks wonderful in the winter light, as well as towering *Verbena hastata*, *Stipa tenuissima*, nepetas, *Gaura lindheimeri* and *Salvia nemorosa*.

The central walled garden runs between two ancient elephantine yew hedges. Between these Giubbilei has run a new staggered rill, so that water runs slowly down to an existing round pond. On either side of the yew hedges are new mazes, just tall enough for little children to feel as though they are lost, while their parents can still see them over the top.

The western walled garden was still under construction when we visited. When it is completed it will be used to



grow seasonal vegetables for the restaurant, have a new glasshouse for hothouse plants, and a cut-flower garden with roses, peonies, dahlias and sweet peas. Along the outside of the bottom wall are espaliered fruit trees and an original glasshouse housing the famous Raby fig.

Unusually, the walled gardens are on a south-facing slope, so they offer views of the castle and can be seen from it. Lady Barnard says: 'There was a watercolour that Luciano did

for me right at the beginning, with washes of purples and beiges and bits of dark red. I came out of the castle one day and was looking over the garden, and thought: "Blow me down – that was his very first vision".'

The 14th-century castle is a maze-like warren of rooms that seems to go on for ever, though only a fraction are currently open to the public. It was the childhood home of Cecily Neville, known as 'the Rose of Raby', who was the mother to two kings: Edward IV

Glorious gardens

Opposite page: an aerial view of Raby Castle and the estate. Left, from top: artist's impressions of what the completed gardens and buildings will look like

and Richard III. This important history is reflected by the approach, through a portcullis, into a large courtyard and from there into a grand entrance hall.

Lord Barnard's father, the 11th Baron, was rather eccentric and lived in only a few rooms, which are now the offices of the team who run the estate. When his father died in 1964 he closed off the entire suite of rooms where his parents had lived. Lady Barnard showed us around them, and it was like stepping back in time. You can still smell the cigar smoke in the billiard room.

In the public rooms there are paintings by Van Dyck and Joshua Reynolds, while in the vast Barons Hall there is a collection of rare Meissen porcelain birds. Such is the extent of the treasures to be uncovered that Lord and Lady Barnard, who have three children, Cicely, Alice, and William, have come up with a 20-year plan, looking forward to the time when their oldest son will inherit the castle and estate.

We traipsed down spiral stone stairs to a basement room filled with a pile of old mattresses suggestive of The Princess and the Pea, a grand hand-painted bedroom containing 17th-century four-poster beds, complete with original drapes, and a room dominated by a portrait of Barbara Villiers, mistress of Charles II, whom he created the first Duchess of Cleveland. Her granddaughter married into the Vane family, bringing with her the Cleveland title.

The tour ended in the kitchen, a huge, whitewashed space filled with gleaming copper utensils. It was in continuous use from medieval times until 1954, and is now used for cookery workshops.

The name The Rising was chosen for the project in a nod to the castle's past, but also because of the optimism and energy the name expresses for the future. Seeing it under construction, the sense of excitement is palpable. I can't wait to come back when it's finished to see this historic site re-imagined for the 21st century.■

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