

To the manor born

If *Downton Abbey* has you hankering after a period drama of your own, book yourself a long weekend at Gilmerton House in East Lothian for a taste of real-life country-house glamour

Words Gillian Welsh

Succulent grilled pear, tangy satsuma syrup, sweet brioche, all topped with walnut – and that was just the beginning. A flawless mint-crusted fillet of Lanarkshire lamb followed, nestled next to tender braised shoulder (think very posh sausage roll), and we were speechless. Then came the jewel in the crown: a Belgian chocolate marquise with sweet-and-sour pineapple and salted caramel ice-cream dripping with berry syrup. This, believe it or not, is not a food review; but it would be doing a meal of this calibre, prepared and served by first-class caterers in a dreamy Georgian mansion in East Lothian, an injustice if it didn't take the lead.

From the outside, Gilmerton House, near Athelstaneford, looks more pomp than pally, but it has been a family home since Francis Kinloch acquired it in 1655. Sir David Kinloch (13th baronet and owner) was there to meet and greet, encouraging us to drop our bags at the door and get sofa comfy by the hallway's log-burning fire – an English Rococo-style design, carved from lime-wood columns and scrolled red marble slips, specially built for the house in 1740.

On a bitter, blustery day, it was a warm start to this one-off weekend. Our friends arrived soon after and, thankfully, the thick walls muffled the high-pitched squeals coming from our two turbo-charged children. Their parents drank coffee and dunked shortbread while taking in the finer details.

Various family circumstances have influenced change in this A-listed country house. Sir David inherited it in the 1980s when it was in dire need of TLC. After lots of painstaking work to get ▶

[Top] The handsome Grade A-listed Georgian mansion sits amid 100 acres of woodland in East Lothian, just 20 miles from Edinburgh. **[Left]** Portraits of the ancestors line the main staircase. **[Right]** The drawing room is country-house elegance personified





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it ready for business as an exclusive-use venue, he enlisted the help of his partner Mel Pumfrey. With a background in interior design, Mel was well placed to co-ordinate the gradual, large-scale refurbishment, and mediate the heart-wrenching decisions when pieces as old and meaningful as the house itself had to be purged.

It was – and still is – a family effort. The whole place was emptied and some furnishings sold at auction to raise funds. Sir David’s son Matthew, director of MK Plumbing, was in charge of all the bathroom replacements and fittings. Another son, Alex, took on the mantle of project manager, overseeing both the interior and the exterior. Their cousin Richard cares for lawns and hedging, general groundskeeping and the wood programme for heating.

George Sked, of Devine Upholstery in Edinburgh, helped Mel to source fabrics and furnishings. The downstairs drawing room, leading to the snug (where the wee boys sniffed out a TV



IN THE AREA

Bring a rugby ball. The front garden is as big as a playing field – and there is a post at the ready. The rose garden (ideal backdrop to wedding photographs) is more secluded and is just the right size for a midnight feast for adventurous kids (with head torches).

Outwith the grounds, architecture fans will appreciate the nearby villages and towns where many buildings have been beautifully preserved and restored – you can feel the love in **Athelstaneford**. History geeks, meanwhile, will relish the crumbling castle ruins dotting the landscape. And environmentalists will appreciate everything about an area where conservation ranks high. The **Scottish Seabird Centre** is worth a visit and so are the nearby beaches at **North Berwick** – a must for anyone needing a long constitutional to clear the cobwebs. An office-bonding course should start with a yomp to **the top of Berwick Law**.



[Clockwise from above] One of the house’s ten bedrooms – this one has a bedstead hand-painted by Sir David’s grandmother; glamour in the bathroom, with an Aston Matthews shower and Fired Earth sink console; the glorious gardens; the panelled music room is a wonderful place for a wedding breakfast; make yourself at home by the fireplace in the snug

and DVD player), has been freshly spruced. For tasters, the drapes at the bay windows are by Ramm, Son & Crocker, while Sanderson’s brilliant Brianza China Blue covers two chairs. A bright pop of tomato from the Adler fabric by Jane Churchill is a fitting contemporary twist – and of course there’s the spinet (harpsichord), if the mood takes you.

Twenty can sleep comfortably here and even with nooks and crannies galore, its classical layout means it’s easy to navigate. The central staircase passes a collection of dramatic family portraits dating from the 17th century. The bedrooms on the first and second floors have been sympathetically modernised to evoke tradition. The West Room and Lady Kinloch, our two designated rooms, are in mellow, muted tones, the Romo printed fabrics complementing the soft artichoke-coloured wool carpet.

Both have en-suite bathrooms (the West Room’s, hidden behind a mahogany wardrobe, is particularly cute) replete with Ren toiletries and crisp, white bathrobes.

I reserved the hallway’s large contemporary bathroom for some personal restorative work. A free-standing bath, rain shower, floor-to-ceiling white marble the morning after a late night of postprandial drinking in the upstairs drawing room? Naturally. **Exclusive use of Gilmerton House starts at £3000 a night. 01620 880207, www.gilmertonhouse.com ■**

