Kenwood House reveals its true colours

26/11/2013

Over 200 years since its colours and decoration disappeared from view, English Heritage has restored the library at Kenwood House in London to its original glory. One of the great rooms of 18th-century Britain can now be enjoyed as its famous Scottish architect Robert Adam intended. This revelation is part of a major £5.95m repair and restoration programme at Kenwood House, made possible by a £3.89m grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), with support from the Wolfson Foundation and many other donors.

As well as the library, the Caring for Kenwood programme sees three other Robert Adam-designed rooms restored to their original glory, the redecoration of four rooms in the 18th century style, and the repair of the house's slate roof to protect not only the interiors but the internationally important collection of paintings by among others, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Turner and Gainsborough.

As part of the Caring for Kenwood project, Kenwood House closed to the public at the end of March 2012. When it re-opens on Thursday 28 November 2013, the house will not only be restored and repaired – it will also feel more like a home. English Heritage has dispensed with the usual paraphernalia of ticket desks and rope barriers, replacing these institutional trappings with an open fire, warm rugs and leather sofas on which guests can relax, enjoy the paintings and discover the many stories of family life in Kenwood. Each of the restored or refurbished rooms includes a writing box, containing attractive information booklets and layers of ephemera to explore – aimed at both young and old.

Simon Thurley, Chief Executive of English Heritage, said: "Kenwood House is one of the great buildings of Britain and one of London's most special places. It combines one of the nation's greatest collections of art set in now painstakingly restored historic interiors. Thanks to our restoration, it once more has the feel of an 18th century gentleman's residence. We want people to experience Kenwood as a home, to sit back and enjoy the views, both inside and outside the house."

Dame Jenny Abramsky, Chair of HLF, said: "The reopening of Kenwood House marks an exciting time in its history and for the public who will come and visit. This will be a new dawn for the house - an exceptional building with a nationally important art collection. The HLF-funded restorations were essential for a building of its status and now future generations will have the chance to explore and enjoy Kenwood to its full potential."

True colours

The Library or 'Great Room' at Kenwood House in north London was built and decorated to Robert Adam designs between 1767 and 1770 as part of the Scottish architect's remodelling of the entire villa for its owner – the celebrity judge of his day, the Lord Chief Justice, William Murray, First Earl of Mansfield. Hailed at the time as "superior to any thing of the kind in England," the library was redecorated many times over its history, obscuring Adam's original scheme. It was restored at the end of the 1960s but in 2011, detailed historic paint analysis revealed that redecoration to be inaccurate. Now using the evidence from more than 400 tiny samples of historic paint, a newly discovered inventory and some of Adam's original drawings, English Heritage has re-created the complex palette of colours from the original decoration scheme. The result features a subtle palette of pale blues, greens and pinks in a framework of delicate white plasterwork that serves to unite the 19 ceiling paintings from 1769 by the Venetian artist Antonio Zucchi. The extensive gilding – historic but not original Adam – has been painted over but carefully protected beneath removable layers. Finally the modern carpet was removed to reveal the original deal floor.

Three other Robert Adam designed spaces in Kenwood House have also been restored to their original colours – the entrance hall, the Great Stairs (where the stair balustrade has been changed from a 20th century black to a more appropriate blue and the walls from turquoise to a pale blue), and the antechamber or entrance to the library which is now restored to its original delicate lead white and pale green, and its once-marbled columns are white again as Adam intended.

Items of furniture designed by Adam and integral to the overall scheme have been tracked down, brought back, and now stand again in their original places, including an original library window seat and two long stools in the antechamber.

Paintings rehung

In 1925, Kenwood was saved from development when Edward Cecil Guinness – brewing magnate, First Earl of Iveagh, and England's second richest man – bought the house and the grounds and donated them to the nation, along with 63 paintings from his exceptional collection. Now English Heritage has refurbished four south front rooms, rehanging many of the Earl of Iveagh's paintings and evoking – as the Earl wished – "a fine example of the artistic home of an 18th-century gentleman."

Wind and weather tight

By 2011, despite regular years of maintenance, time and the elements had taken their toll on Kenwood House. The last major repairs to the roof were in the 1950s and inspections revealed worn, cracked and slipping slates as well as damage to the leadwork and to the timber beneath the roof. The façades were also peeling and cracked. The house had reached a point where it needed a thorough repair. Over 10 months, the House was completely covered in scaffolding as the roof was completely re-slated with new Westmorland slates and over 30 windows were overhauled. Kenwood House is now wind and weather-tight, its interiors and works of art protected for generations to come.

The north façade with its portico is now painted in a darker colour than the previous pale cream, and its paint has a granular texture, resulting from the application of sand to the wet paint. This technique was used at Kenwood from the 1790s to make the brick and wooden walls and columns appear as stone. The cream south façade – the classic view of Kenwood – has also been completely repainted in the light stone colour of the late 18th century.

A forgotten slice of history and a new home for volunteers

It was fashionable for 18th-century ladies to run dairies: they were designed as elegant places where their friends could visit, and an 'eye-catcher' in the landscape. The Second Earl of Mansfield built a dairy at Kenwood between 1794 and 1796. Designed by George Saunders in the Swiss chalet style, it consists of three separate buildings around a central courtyard. The earl's wife Louisa supervised a dairymaid who lived in the cottage and produced the fresh butter, cream, puddings and ice-cream enjoyed by the family and their guests.

The dairy remained relatively unaltered until 1929 when it was converted to residential use by London County Council who acquired the estate after the First World War. Further residential improvements were carried out in 1955 and the buildings were tenanted until the mid 1990s when it fell out of use.

As part of the Caring for Kenwood programme, the dairy is now restored and is a home for the volunteers at Kenwood House as well as local community group the Heath Hands. The dairy room with its original marble benches and tearoom are now conserved and will be open regularly to the public as well as for visits by local school children and education

groups.

Making the caring for kenwood project possible

The Caring for Kenwood project has been made possible almost entirely through fundraising. As well as the £3.89m grant from Heritage Lottery Fund and generous support from the Wolfson Foundation, dozens of other donors have contributed to the project, many of them local to Kenwood. The Friends of Kenwood and the Kenwood Dairy Restoration Trust have also made significant contributions.

Kenwood House will be open daily with extended opening hours, 1000 – 1700, visitor information can be obtained from the English Heritage Kenwood page.

Notes to editors

The Caring for Kenwood project is being made possible by significant grants from Heritage Lottery Fund and the Wolfson Foundation. Vital support has also been given by the Friends of Kenwood; Kenwood Dairy Restoration Trust; J Paul Getty Jnr Charitable Trust; the John S Cohen Foundation; the Kirby Laing Foundation; the Iveagh Circle supporters group and a number of other donors and members of the local community.

English Heritage is the custodian of over 400 historic monuments, buildings and sites through which we bring the story of England to life for over 10 million visitors each year. Further information can be obtained through the English Heritage website.

Further information

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