

'Primogeniture is an emotive issue, and it's hard to understand in today's world' Great estates Lady Alice Fortescue had embarked on married life in Hong Kong w....



'Primogeniture is an emotive issue, and it's hard to understand in today's world'; Great estates Lady Alice Fortescue had embarked on married life in Hong Kong when her father asked her to take on the ancient family home. By Eleanor Doughty

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Body

Ebrington Manor Year built 14th-century origins, developed through 17th, 19th and 20th centuries Address Ebrington, Gloucestershire, GL55 6NF Notable owners Sir John **Fortescue**, chancellor to Henry VI

It was not a given that Lady Alice **Fortescue** would return to Ebrington Manor, the house she grew up in outside Chipping Campden, Gloucestershire, which has been owned by her family since 1456.

After all, she was an aristocratic woman in a world where women still, overwhelmingly, do not inherit big houses. But when she returned after 15 years in Hong Kong with her husband and their two children, Ebrington suddenly looked like a breath of fresh air.

Lady Alice, eldest daughter of Charles **Fortescue**, 8th Earl **Fortescue**, was brought up at Ebrington, the handsome Cotswolds stone house her father inherited in 1978. It marked the beginning of a new chapter of a truly ancient family history.

The Fortescues had come over from France with William the Conqueror in 1066, when Richard Le Fort is said to have saved the king in battle with his shield, becoming known as "le Fort-Escue" or "strong shield".

GROVER

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The family settled in Devon, and in 1454 Martin **Fortescue** married local heiress Elizabeth Denzell, who brought with her estates in north Devon. Two years later, Martin's father Sir John **Fortescue**, chancellor to Henry VI, bought Ebrington from the Corbett family. For centuries, the

PAUL estates ran in tandem, and Ebrington was often let or used as a dower house.

But with war came a change to the established plan. In 1932, on the death of his father, Hugh **Fortescue**, the new 5th Earl **Fortescue**, moved from Ebrington to the Castle Hill estate in Devon, and his younger brother Denzil took on Ebrington. Hugh had a son, Peter, but a decade later he was killed at El Alamein.

Since Peter had died unmarried, his younger sister Lady Margaret **Fortescue** became, on their father's death, the owner of the Fortescues' unentailed Devonshire estates. (Castle Hill has since passed through Lady Margaret's family down the female line.)

Denzil, meanwhile, inherited the earldom on his brother's death, having made Ebrington his permanent home in August 1945, where he started a fruit farm. In the early 1960s, the actor

Donald Sinden lovingly described Denzil and his second wife, Sybil, to whom he had become close, as "the archcartoonal [sic] Earl and Countess: Sybil was tall, elegant, wan, and slightly absentminded; Denzil... was Eton, Army (MC, TD), bluff and... rather deaf - a disability he preferred or pretended not to concede, with frequent hilarious results."

Denzil died aged 83 in 1977, whereupon his son Richard succeeded as 7th Earl **Fortescue**, but chose not to move into Ebrington. A new owner was needed. Enter Lady Alice's father Charles, then Viscount Ebrington, married with a newborn daughter.

"My father inherited Ebrington when I was three months old," she says. "There was no point in my grandfather moving in for a few years - it needed a family to live in it, and a huge amount of money spending on it."

The house the Ebringtons inherited had been replumbed during the Second World War, when the United States Air

Force used it as a flak house, but by the 1970s the radiators were clogged with Cotswolds limescale. The Ebringtons rewired, replumbed and redecorated, making a magical idyll of a home for Lady Alice and her two younger sisters.

Growing up, Lady Alice remembers, "We thought we lived in the middle of nowhere," since out of the upstairs windows all they could see were other estates. "My great-grandfather had intensively fruit-farmed the land and we had gooseberries, raspberries, apples, pears, plums. We'd get our ponies and go out riding for hours."

Lady Alice married the former Household Cavalry officer Rob Derry in 2008, and in time they moved to Hong Kong. Ebrington remained a happy home for Charles and Julia Ebrington, who in 1993 upon Richard **Fortescue**'s death succeeded as 7th Earl and Countess **Fortescue**.

But who would take it on next remained unknown.

That Charles **Fortescue** did not have a male heir was not lost on him, but given that Castle Hill had gone down the female line, this pathway was familiar.

As children, Lady Alice and her sisters were not drilled on peerage law, nor on the reality of their situation. There was no formal succession plan for Ebrington, "unless my father had a plan and we didn't know about it", she says. "When we were little he said that he wouldn't wish [inheritance] on any of us."

Indeed, Lady Alice scarcely considered that her father would one day be Earl **Fortescue**. "I remember someone saying to me when my grandfather died, 'That means your father is the Earl **Fortescue**.' I thought, 'Oh yeah, I guess it does.'"

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"As children, it was frustrating because my father was Lord Ebrington and we were Fortescues. I'd say to people who knew my parents, 'I'm Alice **Fortescue**', and they'd look blank."

In 2015, conversations began about whether Lady Alice and her husband might come home.

"We had a couple of businesses in Hong Kong, and the plan was to establish them and then sell them. That had become a reality, and then everything aligned. We wanted to get the children back here, as they were both born in Hong Kong, and then Dad asked if we would be interested in taking on Ebrington."

They decided that they would be, but "it was clear that if we were to do it then we would have to share the house".

They made their peace with that, and in 2020 returned to the UK to turn Ebrington into the kind of house that could be both a family home and a commercial prospect. Adding swathes of ensuite bathrooms, they moved 22 skip-loads of junk from rooms untouched since the war, and comprehensively spruced the whole place up.

Charles **Fortescue**'s art-world connections came in useful when, during the Covid lockdowns, they had to source furniture unseen at auction. And then, in 2021, Ebrington opened as a whole-house let, sleeping 16.

Now, it is run in such a way as to cover the running costs, plus a bigger project annually.

"My great-grandfather might well have been appalled," Lady Alice laughs. "But my grandfather would have been pragmatic, and my father is. If he hadn't liked our business plan then it wouldn't have gone ahead." Her parents live only a few hundred yards away, and her father is "straight up here if I need anything".

It is now, technically, the first time since 1456 that Ebrington is being run by someone whose surname is not **Fortescue**. Perhaps there is something to be said for not being the male heir knowing his destiny.

"It's such a tough one, primogeniture," says Lady Alice. "It's a really emotive issue, and hard to understand in today's world. I was brought up with no expectation [of anything]. It should be the best person for the job, but how you put that into law I don't know. Every action has a reaction, and what's good for some won't be good for others."

Her father got it right, she says. "If I had known that Ebrington was a possibility I wouldn't have gone to Hong Kong. Working out there has helped me do a much better job here - with fresh eyes and fresh perspective." www.ebringtonmanor.com Ebrington Manor can be booked via Perfect Hideaways Heirs and Graces, a History of the Modern British Aristocracy by Eleanor Doughty is available to pre-order now

'If my father hadn't liked our business plan then it wouldn't have gone ahead'

Graphic

Modern makeover: the drawing room mixes old and new
The hall features 17th-century panelling
The lake and boathouse

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