

SECTION 3 Questions 28–40

Read the text on pages 113 and 114 and answer questions 28–40.

OUT OF THE ASHES

A On the afternoon of 30th August 1989, fire broke out at Uppark, a large eighteenth-century house in Sussex. For a year builders had been replacing the lead on the roof, and by a stroke of irony, were due to finish the next day, on August 31st. Within fifteen minutes of the alarm being sounded, the fire brigade had arrived on the scene, though nothing was to survive of the priceless collection on the first floor apart from an oil painting of a dog which the firemen swept up as they finally retreated from the blaze. But due to the courage and swift action of the previous owners, the Meade-Featherstonhaugh family, and the staff, stewards and visitors to the house, who formed human chains to pass the precious pieces of porcelain, furniture and paintings out on to the lawn, 95 per cent of the contents from the ground floor and the basement were saved. As the fire continued to rage, the National Trust's conservators were being mobilised, and that evening local stationers were especially opened to provide the bulk supplies of blotting paper so desperately needed in the salvage operation.

B The following morning, Uppark stood open to the sky. A sludge of wet charcoal covered the ground floor and basement, and in every room charred and fallen timbers lay amongst the smoke. It was a scene of utter devastation.

C After the initial sense of shock, the days which followed the fire were filled with discoveries. Helped by volunteers, the National Trust's archaeologists and conservators swung into action, first of all marking the site out into a grid and then salvaging everything down to the last door handle. The position of each fragment was recorded, and all the debris was stored in countless dustbins before being sifted and categorised.

D There was great excitement as remnants of the lantern from the Staircase Hall were pulled out from the debris of two fallen floors, and also three weeks later when the Red Room carpet, thought to have been totally lost, was found wrapped around the remains of a piano. There was a lucky reprieve for the State Bed too. Staff who had left the scene at 3am on the night of the fire had thought its loss was inevitable, but when they returned the next morning it had escaped largely undamaged. Firemen, directed by the National Trust's conservators from outside the Tapestry Room window, dismantled the silk-hung bed and passed it out piece by piece. Twenty minutes later the ceiling fell in.

E The scale of the task to repair Uppark was unprecedented in the National Trust. The immediate question was whether it should be done at all. A decision had to be

taken quickly, as the building was unsound and whatever had not been damaged by the fire was exposed to the elements. Within a month, after consulting many experts and with the agreement of the National Trust's Executive Committee, the restoration programme began. It was undertaken for three main reasons. After the fire it had become apparent just how much remained of the structure with its splendidly decorated interiors; to have pulled the house down, as one commentator suggested, would have been vandalism. Also the property was covered by insurance, so the repairs would not call upon the National Trust's own funds. Lastly, much had been saved of the fine collection acquired especially for Uppark from 1747 by Sir Matthew Featherstonhaugh and his son Harry. These objects belonged nowhere else, and complete restoration of the house would allow them to be seen and enjoyed again in their original setting.

F The search for craftsmen and women capable of doing the intricate restoration work was nation-wide. Once the quality and skill of the individual or company had been ascertained, they had to pass an economic test, as every job was competitively tendered. This has had enormous benefits because not only have a number of highly skilled people come to the fore – woodcarvers for example, following in the footsteps of Grinling Gibbons – but many of them, for example plasterers, have relearned the skills of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which can now be of use to other country house owners when the need arises.

G In June 1994 the building programme was completed, on time and on budget. The total cost of the work to repair the house and its contents came to be nearly £20 million, largely met from insurance. In addition, it made economic sense for the National Trust to invest time and money in upgrading water and heating systems, installing modern environmental controls, and updating fire and security equipment.

H The final stages of restoration and the massive programme of reinstallation took eight months. The family and the room stewards were visibly moved when returning to their old haunts, perhaps the best testament that the spirit of Uppark had not died. But the debate will no doubt continue as to whether or not it was right to repair the house after the fire. The National Trust has done its best to remain true to Uppark; it is for others to judge the success of the project.

Note: The National Trust is a charitable organisation in Britain set up over a hundred years ago to preserve the national heritage.