

King and queen of the castle

Mark Whitley meets a couple who are still 'living the dream'



It is twenty years ago this month that Simon and Wendy Temple-Bennett decided to swap their busy lifestyle in London for a new life in the country, and embarked on their journey of 'living the dream'.

At the time they were running a restaurant in Mayfair, with Simon also working as a journalist and Wendy in freelance recruitment.

"It was all Wendy's fault," Simon recalls, smiling. "We thought it was time that we looked at buying a house rather than renting." (Simon was thirty, Wendy twenty-eight.) Then Wendy saw an advert in the July 1987 issue of *Country Life* for a castle for sale in Cumbria ("I thought she said it was in Umbria," Simon jokes.) They went to have a look at Augill Castle, near Brough — and knew straight away that this was the place for them.

The castle was originally built between 1837 and 1841 in the Neo-Gothic style as a venue for lavish dinner parties. Its heyday was in the Victorian and Edwardian eras, but by the 1950s had fallen into disrepair, and in the late 1980s was bought by developers who tried unsuccessfully to divide the castle into separate self-contained

Wendy and Simon Temple-Bennett at the entrance to Augill Castle.



flats, before abandoning it and leaving it empty for several years.

So when Simon and Wendy first arrived at Augill Castle, it was sadly neglected and needed a great deal of work doing to it — but they were not deterred.

"We were emotionally entranced with Augill as soon as we saw it," Wendy says. "We said to each other 'We can do this' ... oh the arrogance of youth!"

With the help of Simon's mother, who sold her house to help them out financially, Simon and Wendy made an offer for Augill, "which miraculously was accepted," Simon says, "so that was it — we moved in on 19th September 1997.

"The whole place was was dirty and ringing wet — there was water literally dripping out of the walls. On the

Augill Castle, originally built as a country house to host lavish dinner parties.

first night Wendy (who had just discovered she was pregnant with our first child) and my mum slept in the drawing room in sleeping bags, and the next morning their sleeping bags were wet through — we all then wondered what we had done."

Their plan was to live in Augill as a family home, with perhaps a few letting rooms to pay the bills.

"We were going to have lots of children and live the good life," Wendy explains. "Our business plan was on the back of a matchbox, and here we are today — it's been a wonderful journey. We opened as a B&B with three bedrooms, then in 1998 we put an advert in the *Daily Telegraph* saying



‘Stay in a Castle in Cumbria’, and that was how we started as a country-house hotel. Now we have fifteen bedrooms, surrounded by twenty acres of gardens and wild grounds bordering on some of England’s most beautiful countryside.”

Simon has written two books (*Undressed for Dinner* and *Stop for Breakfast*) about their experiences at Augill Castle, and raising their two children Oliver and Emily there (“Our kids will always be able to say they grew up in a castle,” Simon jokes).

Thanks to Simon and Wendy, Augill Castle has been saved from possible dereliction, given a new lease of life and is once again an important part of the local community.

“Whatever we need — whether it be food supplies, tradespeople or staff — we always start with what’s on the doorstep,” Wendy says. “We aim to

Make yourself at home: the entrance hall at Augill Castle.

cook using local, seasonal ingredients, with a mind to food miles and we are part of the slow food movement.

“We have what we call this ‘natural symbiosis’. With a place like this you cannot detach yourself — we are so much part of the local landscape.”

“We don’t think of it as running a hotel,” Simon concludes. “Twenty years ago we had a dream, which we’re still living and enjoying sharing with other people. Coming to Augill is like staying in a genuine family home that happens to be a castle, here in this little piece of rural heaven.” ■

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