

## Quex House 1979 Homely state of elegance

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The morning sun streams through the living room windows on to a warm red carpet. It illuminates comfortable armchairs near the log fire, with magazines and well loved books within easy reach. Bowls of flowers decorate the dining and side table, a spectacle case lies on the sideboard and the television set is ready to be switched on for a favourite programme. But this is no living room in an average modern 'semi-det. Res.' – this is part of Quex House at Birchington, the home of Christopher Powell Cotton and his sister Antoinette.



Yet, despite its size – at a guess, about 50ft by 30ft – this living room manages to be comfortable and relaxed and is obviously used with pleasure, as are most of the other rooms in this very large house at some time during the year. Six of the 40 rooms are open to the public in connection with the museum, and the top floor is generally used only in the summer, or for storage. The remainder of the house is used by Mr. Powell Cotton and his sister and their guests.

Officially designated Quex House, the residence is, nevertheless, referred to by a number of people as The Mansion. It was built in 1808, but its roots go back at least four centuries before this date, with a very interesting history. Mr. Powell Cotton keeps a number of fascinating old maps in his elegant library, and one of them, dated about 1400, is marked with the name Parkers – the original family that lived on the farm which stood on this site.

The next occupants were the Quex family and it then passed to the Crisps, some of whose 16<sup>th</sup> century tombs can still be seen in the chapel. In the early 1700s the Crisps died out and later the farm became part of the Kingsgate estate of the first Lord Holland, whose white marble bust is now situated at the head of the staircase.

When Lord Holland died round about 1775 he left the Kingsgate estate to the Whig politician Charles James Fox who, always short of money, sold it to John Powell, one of the present owner's ancestors. He was very wealthy and for a short but no doubt remunerative period, he held the position of Paymaster General. He never lived at Quex, but the estate and another one in Middlesex passed to John Powell Roberts, who was Mr. Powell Cotton's

great-great grandfather's brother-in-law, and who built the present Quex House.

As he had no children, Quex passed to the Powell Cotton family on his death. The demolition of the original building, which lay slightly to the north of the present house, was started in 1805. Major alterations and extensions were made to Quex House in 1883 by Mr. Powell Cotton's grandfather, Henry.



*Quex House in 1788, before it was demolished in 1809*

## **Game**

The museum, which was a separate building to house Mr. Powell Cotton's father's collection of preserved game animals, has been considerably extended since World War 2 and now part of the house is also owned by the museum.

This still leaves a very large part of the building to be cared for by the Powell Cottons with the aid of a housekeeper. It is a pleasure but a vast responsibility at the same time, involving a constant review of roofs and other possible vulnerable parts of the building.

The large but welcoming hall was originally much smaller, but wine and beer cellars were incorporated to provide more space.

Each part of the elaborate oak panelling is a work of art by itself – it is difficult to appreciate every individual piece of carving and furniture for they are all beautiful in different ways.

Under the staircase is an interesting item which not many homes can boast – a bronze cannon which was made in England in 1797, captured in Egypt at the battle of Aboukir by Bonaparte in 1788, inscribed and presented to Gen. Murat and finally recaptured by Gen. Abercromby in 1801.

The staircase leads up to the gallery, presided over by the smiling Lord Holland, and on to the elegant boudoir which lies on the left.

A lovely light room facing south, it is in the Adam style generally and



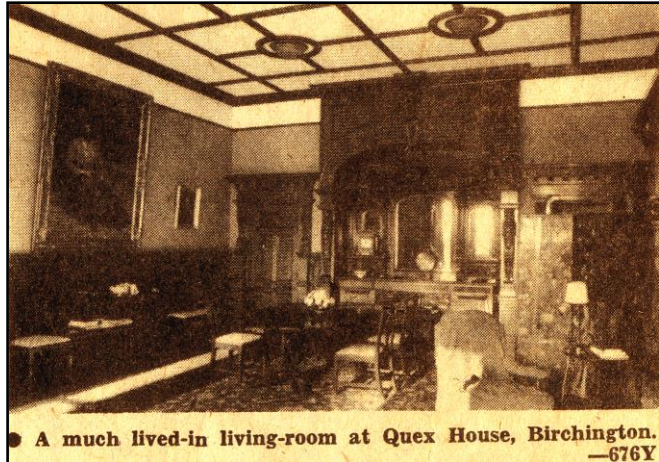
most of the furniture, after Sheraton, is in warm, well polished satin or rosewood, including a grand piano by Robert Stodart of London.

*One of the dioramas in the Powell Cotton Museum, with animals collected by Percy Powell-Cotton*

## Porcelain

Other furniture includes half-circular tables in satinwood inlaid with tortoiseshell, a bureau and a satinwood cabinet which contains decorative porcelain – Meissen, Dresden, English, French, Chinese, Japanese and Italian.

The contents of the room are set off by the beautiful white plasterwork relief on the ceiling and walls and an unusual plain blue carpet underfoot, and it is easy to imagine the ladies of bygone days in their elegant gowns, enjoying gossip over their coffee while the men drank after-dinner port in the library.

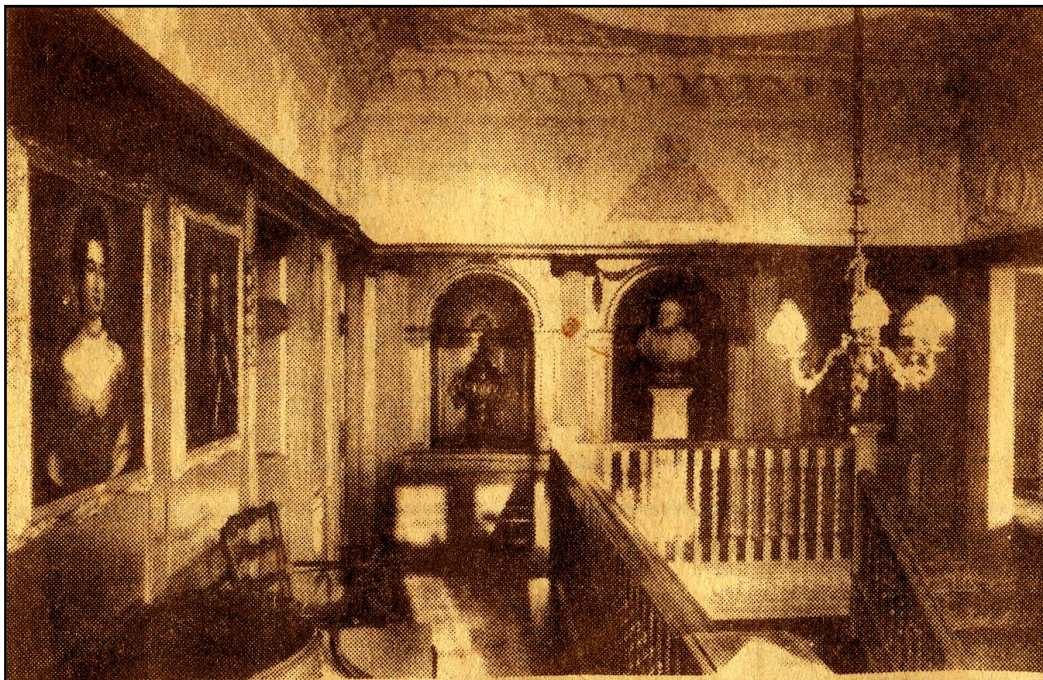


● A much lived-in living-room at Quex House, Birchington. —676Y

The library itself was originally the gentlemen's retiring room and was used as the family sitting-room until World War 2.

Facing north and, therefore, somewhat dark compared with the pretty boudoir, it is equally interesting in a different way, with an unusual curved wall, large central table-cum-bookcase and a rosewood and satinwood sofa gaming table.

A Congreve clock on the bookcase is not a particularly good timekeeper but a fascinating piece of workmanship. It obviously likes a quiet life, for when Mr. Powell Cotton accidentally jarred its resting place the brass mechanism stopped temporarily it took a practised hand to start it again.



● The bust of Lord Holland presides over the gallery.—678Y

*View of the landing above the entrance hall*

Family portraits hang in many of the rooms, one of them showing the present owner as a young lad, albeit rather pale.

“Something wrong with the pigment – I didn’t really look like that,” commented Mr. Powell Cotton drily.

As we progressed round the house memories of childhood must have been revived by the battered old dapple grey rocking horse which took him on may an imaginative gallop up and away from the homely nursery upstairs, with its cosy fireplace and shelves of adventure and other story books.

## **Treasures**

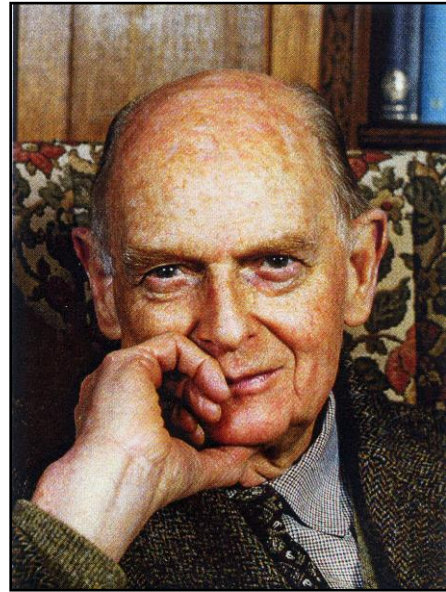
The house has so many treasures – portraits, furniture, ornaments, architectural features – that most of them must go unmentioned.

But I cannot leave unremarked the four poster and Victorian be-knobbed brass beds and the curved wall in what is now the main bedroom.

And the bathrooms with their original Victorian floral tiles; the huge kitchen with its vast dresser and table; the Oriental drawing room with its ornate furniture; and the elegant façade overlooking ancient trees and parkland

Altogether, Quex House is a fascinating place which, despite its museum and rooms open to the public, retains all the warmth of a home.

It’s nice to know that the house and the reassures within it are in such understanding and capable hands, to be passed on, appreciated and enjoyed by future generations of the family.



*Christopher Powell-Cotton in thoughtful mood*