



Alistair and Elizabeth MacLeod Matthews, below, are hoping for an English Heritage grant to help restore the ruined garden pavilion at Chenies Manor House. The Long

Chenies Manor House, Rickmansworth: Alistair and Elizabeth MacLeod Matthews

The family: The MacLeod Matthews family bought the house from the Russells (the family of the Duke of Bedford) after the war. The couple have a son, Charles, 40. A second son, Francis, 38, died tragically last year.

The house: 15th and 16th century, listed Grade I. Originally the home of the Earls of Bedford and visited by Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. Features include the Long Room, still used as a parish meeting room, secret passages and a priest's hole. The gardens, restored by Elizabeth MacLeod Matthews, are a particular attraction and include a magnificent tulip garden, a sunken garden, a physic garden and two mazes.

Paintings and artefacts: The house was empty when the family bought it. Furniture from 17th to 19th century was inherited or bought. Family portraits, but no valuable paintings; 16th-century tapestries; a doll collection built up from Elizabeth MacLeod Matthews' grandmother's dolls.

Income: Estate still owned by the Russells. Principal income from visitors, supplemented by wedding receptions, corporate entertaining and film shoots. Major expenses would have to come from capital.

Visitors: The house once attracted 2,000 visitors in an afternoon — "a bit of a crush" — and many more come to see the garden. A new venture is a plant and garden fair planned for 25 July.

Expenses involved in opening house: Include security systems, health and safety precautions and liability insurance. Advertising, guide books and other publicity. Staff, including a secretary, housekeeper and gardeners.

Major repairs: The house needed complete renovation when bought, including a new roof. No recent major work.

Grants: Hoping for an English Heritage grant to help with restoring a ruined garden pavilion to provide additional visitors' facilities, including conveniences for the disabled.

Other help: NADFAS provides volunteer guides. MacLeod Matthews was a founder member of the HHA and values its support.

Working hours: Colonel MacLeod Matthews is retired, but guides visitors as well as dealing with the financial administration. Elizabeth MacLeod Matthews organises publicity and events and works in the garden — "a full-time job".

Problems: Health and safety regulations mean the secret passages are out of bounds to visitors because there is no electric light, and the armoury only be viewed by appointment because there is no fire escape.

The future: The couple hope Charles will take over.

How could the Government help? Reduce VAT on building work, says MacLeod Matthews. And introduce more conservation grants. "We can't have what's desirable done to the tapestries because of the prohibitive costs of the labour. It's a pity there isn't any national fund to assist with that."

Opening times: April to October, Wednesdays and Thursdays 2-5pm; or groups any other time by appointment. Information: phone/fax 01494 7628

