

LAURENCE MARKS

notebook

# The fantasy house that James built

*On the pale yellow sands there's a pair of clasped hands,  
And an eyeball entangled in string,  
And a bicycle seat and a plate of raw meat,  
And a thing that is hardly a thing.*

ON Wednesday week, the trustees of the National Heritage Memorial Fund, led by their chairman Lord Charteris, Provost of Eton, will visit Monkton House, the Surrealist fantasy in Sussex created by Edward James in the 1930s and now threatened with dismemberment by his trustees.

Next day, they will meet in London to decide whether to help English Heritage to buy it and its contents for the nation.

The founding fathers of Surrealism would surely have been charmed to see the flower of the liberal Establishment, apostles of reason, moderation and sound money, marching soberly to rescue this famous monument to the irrational.

Monkton is a marvellous compendium of *trompe l'oeil* jokes, an English domestication of the spectral Dali-esque style commemorated in Lord Berners's jingle, quoted above. Outside: a chimney-stack disguised as a tombstone with a clock that tells the days of the week, not the hours of the day; and window-mouldings resembling sheets hanging out to air. Inside: a Dali lamp constructed from a mountain of champagne glasses, a chair-back formed by the arms of a drowning man, a four-poster modelled on Nelson's hearse, and the celebrated bright red sofa by Dali in the shape of Mae West's lips.

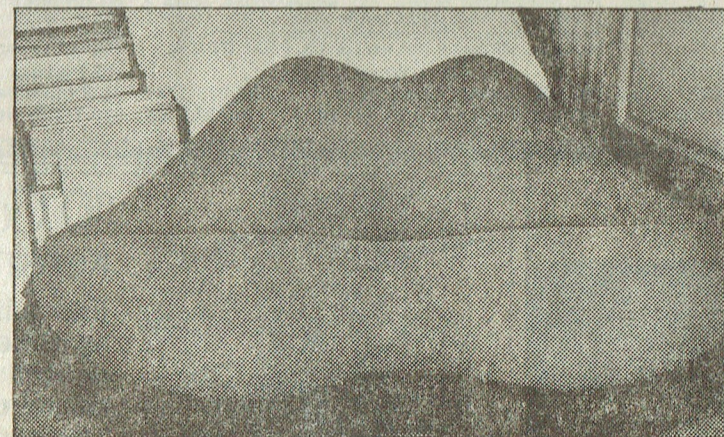
The house, which also contains many objects of earlier centuries, is a unique memorial to Surrealist taste. 'There's nothing like it anywhere in the world,' says Philip Core, an American art historian. 'The only comparable interior —

that of the Vicomtesse de Nouailles's house in Paris — was broken up after 1969.'

James, who died in 1984 aged 77, might have stepped straight out of the pages of Timbs's 'English Eccentrics.' He possessed that indispensable combination of dilettanteism and obsession — with the wealth to indulge both.

Like Kenneth Clark, he was an aesthete spawned by the 'idle rich.' The family fortune, made in America, came from timber and railroads. His father died when he was five. He grew up in a world of Edwardian excess devoted to eating, spending and slaughtering game (and, from time to time, rebellious tribesmen) on a prodigious scale.

James lived his life in the same extravagant spirit. At Christ Church in the Twenties (according to Philip Purser's fascinating biographical sketch), he hung his dining-room with Flemish tapestries, walled his bedroom in crimson,



Dali sofa inspired by Mae West's lips.

grey and silver silk, and decorated his drawing-room with a purple ceiling and a gold frieze with the legend 'Ars Longa Vita Brevis . . .'

In Rome, where he served at the British Embassy, he rented two palaces facing each other across the Tiber, linked by a bridge. His guests would take dinner in one, then stroll across to the other for coffee to the music of a quartet. He resigned under a cloud after making an encoding error, having cabled a panic-stricken Foreign Office that Mussolini was building 300 warships (prohibited by the Treaty of Locarno) at La Spezia. The correct figure was three.

He was a generous patron of Balanchine's ballet company, of Poulenc, Milhaud and Weill, and of the artists Magritte, Dali, Paul Nash and Leonora Carrington.

Monkton was originally designed by Lutyens as a shooting lodge in the grounds of West Dean, an eighteenth-century Gothick mansion by one of the Wyatts. After James's notorious divorce action against the Viennese dancer Tilly Losch, which

caused him to be ostracised by London society, he retired to Sussex and transformed the house with the help of the architect Kit Nicholson and the designer Norris Wakefield.

Although his most important Surrealist paintings were sold before he died, there remains an important secondary collection, including the so-called 'neo-Romantics' (Pavel Tchelitchew, Christian Bérard and Eugene Berman) who are again becoming fashionable with American collectors.

The house is owned by the Tragopan Corporation, a Guernsey-based company. Its assets are held for the benefit of the Edward James Foundation (currently worth around £20 million — £6 million of it in cash), which James set up to run West Dean as a crafts college. Its sole executive is Robert Farmer, an American tax lawyer who replaced James's friend Noel Simon as chairman of the foundation last year, after a disagreement over the trustees' attitude towards Monkton. James's friends say that he had a deed drawn up that would have kept Monkton intact but never signed it.

When he died, the trustees decided that their first duty was to maximise income for the college. Nobody can blame them for that. But they also had a moral duty to find out whether James's dream house could be saved. One of them, Christopher Gibbs, the Mayfair antique dealer who advises John Paul Getty Jr, says they asked 'a lot of pretty informed people' and were told that this would not be practicable. So they put Monkton on the market with the 1930s objects, and asked Christie's to auction the remainder of the collection.

The 'pretty informed people' didn't include the National Trust, which is well known to be keen to acquire important twentieth-century houses, or the Thirties Society. The decision baffled conservationists. The trustees are cultivated men and women. Besides Gibbs, they include: Helen Lowenthal, a furniture specialist who worked for the V&A for 40 years; Lady Egremont, chatelaine of Petworth; and Simon Sainsbury, whose Monument Trust has saved many threatened houses.

It's true that Surrealism is

hard to fathom. In 1938, when Freud was living in exile in St John's Wood, James visited the spiritual father of the movement with the idea of writing a book about him. He took along Dali and Dali's painting: 'The Metamorphosis of Narcissus,' which he then owned. It depicts a hand in a dreamscape, with ants crawling up the thumb. Freud studied it intently. The two men waited in lengthening silence for the great interpreter of the subconscious to deliver his thoughts. At last he spoke. 'Warum die Ameisen?' Freud asked. ('Why the ants?') James changed his mind about writing the book.

But at this stage of the twentieth century, when the Surrealists' paintings hang in museums and their influence is seen everywhere from cigarette ads to rock videos, it's surprising that the trustees should have been persuaded that Monkton and its idiosyncratic clutter was unimportant. 'It's all Bugger's Regency,' one of them wrote to a friend.

'It's the old prejudice against anything modern, and particularly against the Surrealists

as really not being quite worth bothering about,' says Margaret Richardson, assistant curator of the Soane Museum. 'It's the feeling that it's all a bit of a joke, and that we ought to be concentrating on rescuing respectable Georgian country houses.'

Clive Aslet, author of 'The Last Country Houses,' blew the whistle in *Country Life* last September. Lord Montagu, chairman of English Heritage, wrote to the trustees that it would be disastrous if the interior were destroyed. Farmer replied at once, offering English Heritage an option to purchase. To their credit, the trustees (embarrassed by the whole affair) are doing their best to be helpful, although they refuse to extend the deadline.

But they are stuck with the consequences of their first decision. They have received an offer of £850,000 from an unidentified buyer which English Heritage must match by the end of this month. If it does so, they will allow SAVE and the Thirties Society time to raise money for the objects they want kept,

which will be taken out of the Christie's sale on 2 June.

Everything now depends on Charteris, who is receiving a flow of encouraging letters from the Pevsner-toting classes. The conservationists are worried that, having forced one bunch of traditionalist fogies to repent, they are now in the hands of another bunch of fogies at the National Heritage Memorial Fund.

These certainly don't look like people who would naturally warm to the art of delirium and beautiful accidents. There's a clutch of Tories (Lady Airey, Sir Robert Cooke and Lord Anglesey); Sir Martin Jacomb, the banker; an authority on the early Roman Empire (Michael McCrum); a marine biologist (Professor Fred Holliday); a brace of industrialists (Sir Norman MacFarlane and Charles Kinahan); Clive Jenkins, the trade union boss; and an expert on Jacobean theatre (Professor Brian Morris).

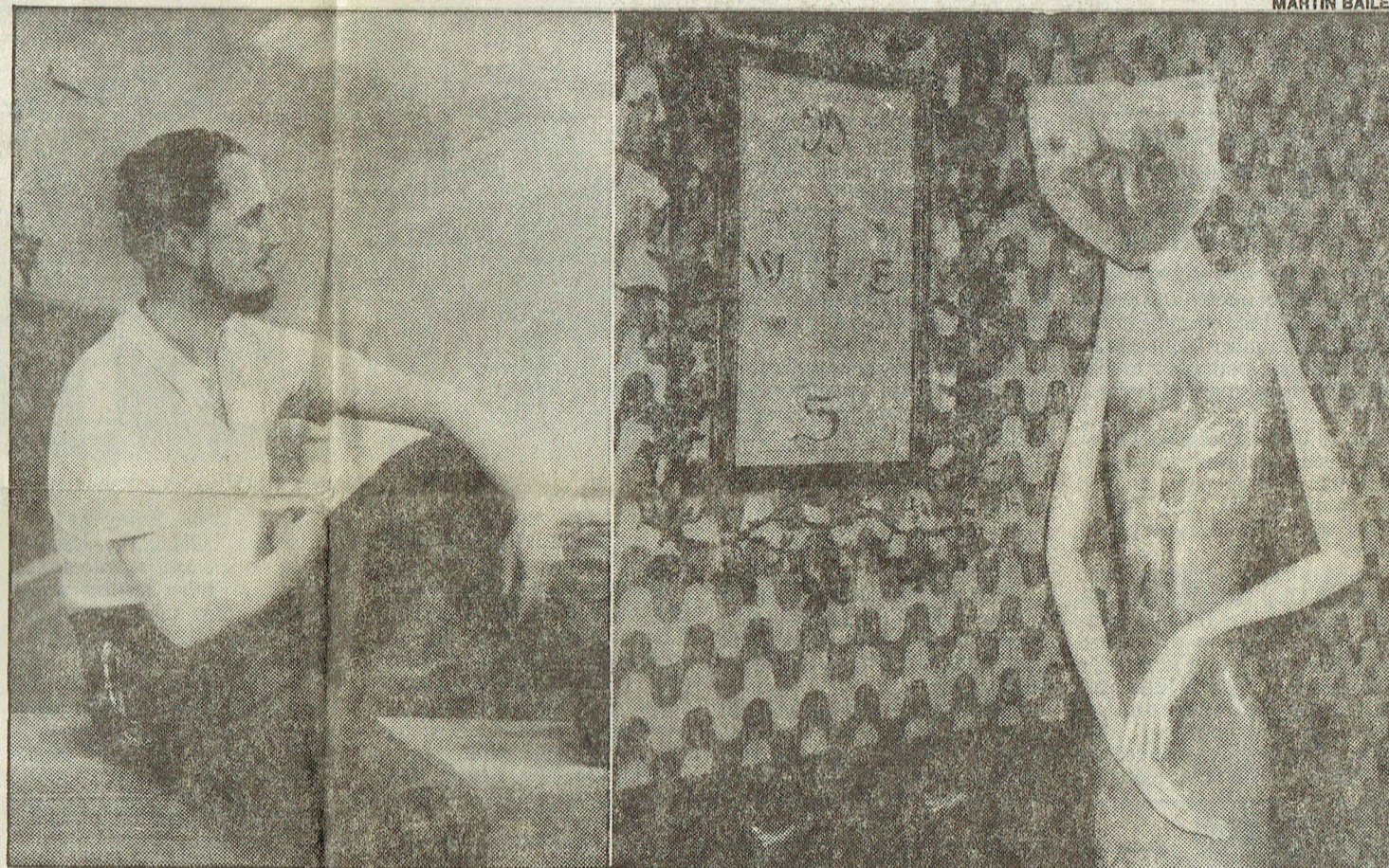
However, the memorial fund has the most eclectic portfolio of any grant-giving conservationist body, covering everything from Roman pavements to Modernism. It is unlikely to be constrained by prejudice.

Its difficulty is that neither English Heritage nor (according to Gibbs) the foundation knows anything about the private bidder. He may be a nostalgic octogenarian Surrealist, or some Yuppy who's made a killing in the commodities markets, or just a quiet chap who wants a nice view of the Downs.

'If the prospective purchaser agrees to buy the important contents and look after the house properly, even if he doesn't open it to the public, then there's no reason to part with £1 million or so of scarce money,' says Francis Golding of English Heritage.

'The memorial fund's view on this is the same as ours. On the other hand, if he wants to let most of the objects go, and has two enormous Afghan hounds and five children under the age of 10, and intends of remodel all the bathrooms. . . . The trouble is that we're all being asked to take an important decision without essential information.'

Will the gentleman with the large bank account please step forward?



Edward James, in his late twenties, and a Leonora Carrington Surrealist sculpture he left at Monkton House.

MARTIN BAILEY