



# HERITAGE: TO THE MANOR REBORN

A STATELY HOME IN SOUTH EAST CORNWALL  
IS GIVEN A NEW LEASE OF LIFE

Words by **Kirstie Newton**

In a crumbling, overgrown tower high on the banks of the Tamar Valley, an austere presence surveys his estate with a beady eye, in the hope that he might one day return to wander among its lush gardens.

Sir James Tillie, who built Pentillie near St Mellion in 1698, was convinced that he would be resurrected two years after his death, and decreed that his body should be placed in a purpose-built mausoleum overlooking the Tamar and dramatic Dartmoor beyond. He was seated in fine robes, wig and hat with a chest containing his personal effects – a meal was even placed in front of him, ready to eat upon his awakening.

Predictably, his skeleton was found in the collapsed tower a few years later, and reburied. A statue, which he had commissioned to stand outside his front door, remains in the mausoleum, now roofless and overgrown.

“As children, we would come up here and scare ourselves silly,” says Sammie Coryton, who grew up on the farm next door. Now 31, she is the latest generation to be playing a part of the Pentillie story.

Despite a fascinating history encompassing convoluted family inheritance and alleged murder, fanciful remodelling and dilapidation, Pentillie has spent many centuries tucked

away out of sight. However, it is about to step out of the shadows and welcome the public across its threshold. Thanks to an extensive renovation project by its new owners, Pentillie is a house reborn – a rather more successful resurrection than Sir James had vainly hoped for.

Tillie was a flamboyant land agent of dubious character, who rose from humble origins to work for Sir John Coryton, owner of a large estate in the Tamar Valley. When an otherwise fit Sir John died an agonising death at just 42, Tillie married his widow, increasing his wealth considerably and rousing suspicions that Coryton had been poisoned.

While nothing was ever proven, records show that King James II mounted an investigation into “Sir” James Tillie’s title and coat of arms, amid suspicions that he had usurped the “favour of knighthood”.

Without an heir, Tillie’s estate went to his nephew James Wooley, whose daughter Mary Jemima married Peter Coryton, thus restoring the family link to Pentillie. The house was then transformed into a Gothic castle by 18th century architect William Wilkins and the renowned landscape gardener Humphry Repton.

Most recently, it was home to Kit Coryton, whose husband



**MAIN IMAGE:** PENTILLIE BOATHOUSE ON THE BANKS OF THE RIVER TAMAR  
**RIGHT:** SIR JAMES TILLIE. PHOTOS SUPPLIED BY PENTILLIE **BELOW RIGHT:**  
SARAH AND SAMMIE CORYTON IN THE GROUNDS OF PENTILLIE. PHOTO:  
STEVEN HAYWOOD/WESTERN MORNING NEWS

Jeffery died in 1980. An heiress to the Wedgwood fortune and a former codebreaker at Bletchley Park during the Second World War, Kit lived a reclusive life at the castle with just a skeleton staff.

The estate has now been in the Coryton family for more than 300 years, and in September 2007, it passed to Jeffery's cousin, Ted, and his wife Sarah - Sammie's parents. By this time, the property was in a sorry state – paint was peeling, trees needed felling and the Victorian greenhouse was close to collapse.

"As a family, we had some major decisions to make about what to do with the house," said Sammie, who gave up her job as a home economist in Sydney, Australia, to return home and take on a major role in Pentillie's future.


"Right at the very beginning, we considered selling it – and someone even offered to buy it. But we decided against it, as we would have been looking at the house thinking 'Isn't it nice over there – what a shame we didn't give it a whirl.' We could never have afforded to live here, so the only option was to open it to the public."

With the help of their three children, Ted and Sarah hope to make the estate work for itself by running it as a high-end wedding venue – it has a marriage license - and as a country

retreat for hire. With its nine bedrooms, a Victorian bathing hut and a lime walk which once led horse-drawn carriages to the house, Pentillie offers an irresistible slice of country life.

An interesting business decision was to invite the television cameras into Pentillie. Film-makers from Channel 4 visited the estate as part of the *Country House Rescue* series, in which plain-speaking Ruth Watson, formerly of Channel Five's *The Hotel Inspector*, advises country home owners looking to support their estate by running them as modern businesses.

"It was a great learning curve," said Sammie. "A lot of people gave us very good advice, and knowing that they'll be back in a few months to see what you've done about it really spurs you on to take action."

And she is sure that her ancestors would approve of the direction the house is now taking. "I think they'd be chuffed to see that it's Corytons here now, not Tillies," she adds with a smile. 

*Prices start from £4,595 for three nights' exclusive hire. Please contact Sammie Coryton for more information on 07974 143344, or visit [www.pentillie.co.uk](http://www.pentillie.co.uk) Country House Rescue will air on Channel 4 in December*