



# VILLA PARISI

Piero Parisi, home from the war, rode on a donkey to see the new home he had bought sight unseen. His family camped out amid pastoral frescoes and dusty furniture piled in uncharted rooms. Now his daughter, Arabella Lennox-Boyd, has added plumbing and brought the castello, in the Sabine Hills near Rome, to comfortable rural grandeur. Text: Min Hogg. Photography: James Mortimer



When we pack up and leave I put down my embroidery in mid-stitch, and forget all about it until I pick it up again the following year and finish the row. It has become that sort of a house.' We are in the Sabine Hills, north-east of Rome, and Arabella Lennox-Boyd is speaking of her childhood home. Being a designer of gardens and the wife of a British MP means that the time she can steal for her Italian castle is strictly limited.

The castle was not always a family property and its acquisition was hazardous in the extreme. In 1940 when the lira was plummeting in one of its more hectic nosedives, Piero Parisi, Arabella's father, found himself suddenly in possession of that then most undesirable commodity, liquid cash. Worse still, he was far away from Italy on military service. To stem further drastic erosion of the money he gave instructions for it to be plunged into an estate, bought sight unseen, in the Lazio province.

It is not hard to imagine the apprehension with which he set out after the war to explore his property for the first time – the suspense teased out by his having to ride the last twelve kilometres along a track navigable only by donkey. Even today the road peters out at the village of Oliveto, which boasts neither restaurant nor filling station. Apart from a few newer buildings where once there were vines, the scene cannot have changed much at all since Piero Parisi reached the summit of the hill round which the village clusters, and found that he owned a forty-room castle, two churches and 10,000 olive trees.

Signor Parisi was not too numbed to set about repair work. He engaged a painter to restore the pastoral frescoes with which some of the rooms are decorated and to dab and sponge other walls in various shades of stone-coloured paint to give them the ancient and mottled air of weathered masonry. Round every door and window, on each shutter, he painted-in marbled panelling and architectural mouldings with a brave, bold brush. Sometimes one can detect ten or twelve differing greys, beiges and yellows in this feat of optical illusion.

Scant attention, though, seems to have been paid to other domestic arrangements such as plumbing, for a little later on, when Signor Parisi's wife became so bewitched by the romance of this medieval castello that she must live there, she found herself

without bathroom or electricity. Cooking took place two floors below her living quarters, on charcoal stoves in the cavernous kitchen, and water was hand-pumped from a cistern. Her departure from the city had been frowned upon by her Roman friends. Burying herself in the country was bad enough, but in such impoverished conditions... *Madonna*.

Arabella Lennox-Boyd looks back on her childhood in Oliveto with fond amusement. She may have been the little girl from the big house, but her friends were the village children with whom she played in the street beneath its ramparts. She recalls the strangeness of camping out with her mother in four palatial rooms while all those around were piled high with dusty furniture. From her portrait as a society beauty, daughter of Italy's first-world-war hero and commander-in-chief of the army, General Diaz, there is no hint that Arabella's mother was a woman devoted to her hens. She even had an incubator for the chicks in her magnificent bedroom, and would write to her daughter during term time giving accounts of their health.

After her mother's death, when Arabella was married and had inherited the castle, proper bathrooms with hot and cold water were installed, and with youthful disregard for the decorative correctness so fashionable today she hung their walls in pretty Colefax and Fowler papers. They may look a touch out of place, but they do strike a comfortable and cheerful note amid the albeit countrified grandeur of the rest of the house. A more up-to-date kitchen was put in too, which if not exactly 'Smallbone' is the perfect place in which to make fresh daily the mountains of pasta with which Lisa, who has cooked there for twenty years, fattens up household and guests each summer.

Discovering the history of the palazzo continues bit by bit. Mark Lennox-Boyd has turned archivist and combed the attics, collecting papers to do with baronial courts held in the house since 1591. They are now stored in a series of green box-files tied with ribbons bought from the Albrizzi shop in Milan and marshalled in ranks on the billiard table in what was once a courtroom, or *aula*. The papers are inscribed with beautiful calligraphy; some carry papal seals. Their mixture of Latin and Italian is hard for non-scholars to decipher, but occasionally an easy one

*Trompe-l'oeil creates elaborate doorways in the billiard room. The deep skirting and marbled panels of the recess are painted on to flat surfaces, as are the mouldings on the doors. Above are armorial banners, pikes, fasces and plumed headgear*







*Boxes tied with green ribbons, containing archive papers, are piled on the defunct billiard table. Spears, trumpets and standards are painted above the doors and mantelpiece, and on the walls are heads of game shot by Arabella Lennox-Boyd - for food, she hastens to add, when on safari in Africa*









*Previous page: The bed in the master bedroom was made in Naples in the 19th century. It has a gilded cornice and domed roof topped by a cupola and gilded figure of a boy. Birds and trompe-l'oeil mouldings decorate the room's domed ceiling. Top: Plants in terracotta pots and ancient curly-care furniture adorn the terrace. Above, from left: The family chapel dedicated to Santa Maria. Lisa, cook at Oliveto for twenty years, with fellow housemaids. A washstand with a pair of basins installed before piped water. The basins are pivoted so that used water can be tipped out into a slop bowl. Right, top: The old kitchen, with its barrel-vaulted ceiling, has lower walls of terracotta pink. A brick bread-oven is in the fireplace. Right, below: The cellar with its old wine barrels, and the gallery with an arched window looking into the village church. The family would have once taken part in the service kneeling on the cushions*







*Frescoes give the dining room the feel of an orangery, with a rural landscape set beyond false columns. A trellis entwined with morning glory runs round the room at cornice-height. In the far wall is a cupboard painted into the scenery*



emerges, such as the description of the sorry state of prisoners incarcerated in the dungeons of a neighbouring castle. Oliveto has its dungeons too, accessible only via a narrow, winding staircase deep within its walls. The cells are unlit and fetid - the Lennox-Boyd's small daughter particularly enjoys the frisson of being shown them.

Gradually more furniture is brought from oblivion and back into commission. A long, pale pink brick terrace, perfectly placed to watch the huge, pale red orb of an Italian sun sink slowly behind a distant hill, is roofed over and used almost as an extra room, populated with old basket chairs and curly-cane chaise longue, restored by Mark Lennox-Boyd and with the added comfort of faded terracotta canvas covers and buttoned-and-frilled cushions in green-and-white check gingham. On the parapet wall sits a sundial in a mahogany box designed and made by Mark Lennox-Boyd to work exclusively and accurately at this point on the globe. He worked out its gradations on a small computer while at his constituency home in Lancashire, and hopes one day to scale up the blue-and-gold interior of the box into a tower building here.

Sad to say, wine is not made on the estate these days, but old vintages are still drawn from massive barrels in the cellar winery, and decanted from a motley selection of bottles at the dining table. Olives, though, are still harvested and pressed lower down in the village; their virgin oil is marketed in five-litre

cans with a picture of the castle.

Smaller houses nestle up against the castle walls on three of its sides. On the fourth are a narrow box-hedge garden and, through a gate beyond, a saddle-shaped piece of land of bleached grass planted with chestnut trees. On slightly rising ground at the far end is a small classical building dedicated to Santa Maria which is the family chapel. The roof, which had been caving in, was restored by the Lennox-Boyd to fulfil a vow made before the birth of their daughter Patricia. Wooden candlesticks riddled with worm still crowd around the altar. The present congregation is a white owl, but unless the whisper that Oliveto could be sold becomes a necessity Arabella intends that one day her daughters Dominique and Patricia will be married here.

It is a simple matter for a visitor to sink into the minutiae of life at Oliveto. Every syllable uttered in the amphitheatre of the village square ricochets off the surrounding buildings to be received in one of the guest bedrooms. One becomes acquainted with the price of tomatoes, football scores, and children plotting as one lies half awake, while outside an early morning haze gives way to impending heat. Throughout the day some unseen hand 'fine tunes' louvred shutters all over the house, keeping some rooms shaded and cool, others airy and bright with reflected sun. One begins to understand how raising chickens beside the bed could become a life's work. ■

*The frescoed walls and vaulted ceiling of the sitting room (above) show romantic pastoral views of the Sabine Hills, while exotic birds flit over the ceiling. The Ali Baba jar (right) is one of a pair standing in the deep window recesses. The walls, doors and shutters are painted with fake mouldings and marbled panelling.*

