

CARTE and soul

Richard D'Oyly Carte was the man who made Gilbert and Sullivan. Now his neglected Thames island home has been given a brand new run. Richard Nye meets the buyer breathing life into the house of Savoy

Mid-afternoon and the ghosts are singing in the sunshine. Pirates, fresh in from Penzance, moored up beside the lawn; three little maids just back from school; a tom-tit singing soulfully in his riverside tree. D'Oyly Carte Island, once owned by the man who brought the world Gilbert and Sullivan, is awakening from a long, morbid sleep. Welcome to Titipu-on-Thames.

And here, strolling across the gated pedestrian bridge to meet me, is the new Lord High Everything: Andy Hill, redeemer and restorer of this verdant isle – plonked down in midstream between Shepperton and Weybridge – and its exuberant, idiosyncratic mansion, Eyot House. For years the place lay empty, cobwebs and vandals dividing the spoils. The future looked as grim as November. And then, one day in 2019, Andy came floating past.

"I was out on the river with my wife, practising for a charity kayak," he explains, as we navigate our way to the ballroom through the shoals of renovation work.

"When we reached here and saw the house, I knew nothing about it whatsoever – I had no idea who D'Oyly Carte was or anything. Sheila, who is a designer, thought it was fabulous. I just thought it looked incredibly sad."

But intriguing. For what the Hills had discovered was a remarkable late



Victorian legacy; the creation of a man who, like Oscar Wilde or WG Grace,

seems almost totemic of a pleasure-loving age intent upon enjoying its success. Already an astute talent agent – widely styled now as the Victorian Simon Cowell – Richard D'Oyly Carte struck his purest gold in 1875, bringing together librettist William Gilbert and composer Arthur Sullivan to collaborate on *Trial by Jury*, the first of what would prove to be a long and enduring series of witty and intelligent comic operas. *Patience*, *The Mikado*, *The Yeomen of the Guard*: at the Savoy Theatre, D'Oyly Carte's new London venue on the Strand – the first public building lit entirely by electric – the surging Gilbert and Sullivan brand went through the Renaissance roof.

"Back then there wasn't anything like it," says Andy, his former ignorance of the subject now long since dissolved. "It was either really serious opera or beer music on the piano. D'Oyly Carte was determined to bridge the gap."

Soon he was branching out into luxury hotels. The Savoy, his first, opened in 1889, and it was this that inspired his acquisition of the island. Why not build a country annexe here, he mused, and ferry his well-heeled, celebrity guests upstream? Unfortunately the local magistrates were less enthused and refused to grant an alcohol licence. But D'Oyly Carte bought the island anyway, bestowed his name upon it and



constructed a private dwelling instead: Eyot House, a rambling 13-bedroom affair reminiscent of a vast Swiss chalet, complete with Tudor-style chimneys that would not have disgraced Hampton Court.

And the great and the good still came. Here in the ballroom, soon to recover its glory, Gilbert and Sullivan would rehearse with the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company, while locals listened in from the Weybridge bank. JM Barrie, creator of *Peter Pan*, was another frequent guest. As for the outdoors, Carte had the spacious gardens laid out with a pond,

brought in a pet crocodile (why wouldn't you?) and ringed the island with tall, secluding trees courtesy of the experts at Kew.

"Apparently the crocodile escaped, but come and see this," laughs Andy, escorting me upstairs and out onto the balcony. "There, look – up in the eaves. D'Oyly Carte has had a wooden crocodile carved there, presumably in memory. He could be quite wacky."

There are striking parallels between the first and latest owners of Eyot House. Like Carte, Andy Hill is an innovator; and, like Carte, he emerged from the pack as a hugely effective conduit of other people's music. D'Oyly Carte united Gilbert with Sullivan and provided a stage for their genius. Andy Hill – a Richmond man for more than 50 years before coming here – used his IT background and skills to deliver the first online music service in the world, I Like Music. And the two men share a further characteristic: the uncanny knack of making the right move at the right time. Having formed his own tech company to build on his breakthrough, Andy sold it off in 1999, at the height of the dot-com boom. Eighteen months later, at a much deflated sum, he bought it back.

"People say it was genius, but I can honestly tell you that it was just pure good fortune. I've always been lucky," he admits. "But I do believe that there is a comparison with D'Oyly Carte, in that he brought high-quality music to the people. I like to think that I did something similar through technology."

Fortunately for posterity, when it came to the purchase of D'Oyly Carte Island, Andy's perennial luck held. By the time he first paddled past, Eyot House was

in terminal decline, weathered and warped by the sustained neglect of an absentee Chinese owner who had finally decided to sell up. A wealthy Russian had put in an offer. Then came Covid; the prospective buyer feared a property slump; the Sino-Russian deal collapsed.

"By then I knew all about the island, and I'd told the agent that I was interested, but I needed another viewing to make sure. When I got over here, I found a squatter called Midge who described himself as the "caretaker". He gave me a tour and evidently knew the whole story. Later, after we'd bought the place [for just over £3m] and moved in, he ended up mooring his boat round the back and helping out in the garden."

And so began, for house and island, the long road back to health. If vision and vigour were sufficient cause, the work would be complete already.

For Andy Hill is no ordinary homebuyer: he is, by self-appointment, a fiercely protective guardian of history. Everything he does here, from the restoration of the fabric to planning for future events, dances merrily to the tune of D'Oyly Carte. There are fairy lights on the balcony because Carte invented them, designing the first string illuminations for his theatres; £50,000 will go to fix the original dome; and when the ballroom is ready, a grand piano once purchased by Sullivan himself is set to move in – a gift from the man who used to run the largest permanent display of G&S memorabilia in the world. Andy has already promised the Gilbert and Sullivan Society the

chance to hear it in its stately new home, with a production of a G&S opera next year.

"I want to build on that by staging intimate concerts in the ballroom with top contemporary artists like Adele, Ed Sheeran and Joan Armatrading. You'd get about 50 people in the ballroom, so it would only be for the artist's friends and family, but we'd pay for it all by streaming it and charging via pay-forward. It's what Carte would have done."

There are also plans to convert the former boathouse into a high-class eatery and coffee shop.

"It used to be a shop for the people who moor their houseboats here. But

wouldn't it be lovely to have it as an elegant cafe, a bit like Petersham Nurseries, up in Richmond? We'd call it the D'Oyly Carte Café and Creperie, and it would have direct access from the Weybridge bank by ferry. You'd get about 70 seats in there. And I will definitely be applying for a drinks licence. I'm sure that D'Oyly Carte would appreciate my tying up that loose end.

"You know, every time I walk over that bridge to the mainland, someone stops me to say how pleased they are that something is finally happening with this beautiful house. Yes, it's a lot of work, and it's going to cost me another million to restore the whole place, but it's when you really commit to a project that things get done. I love a challenge. I just want to get this right."

From a theatre way downstream there comes the sound of applause.

"Gilbert & Sullivan rehearsed here while locals listened in from the bank"

Photos by Vojtech Bartonicek
Food, travel and lifestyle photographer, Vojtech is the founder of online print shop imagesVB. Based in London, he currently works with notable brands locally and internationally.

■ imagesvb.com @imagesvb_