

# We bought an abandoned island on the Thames

D'Oyly Carte Island was a Victorian celebrity hotspot with a resident crocodile. Now its new custodians are bringing the party atmosphere — and the wildlife — back



The 13-bedroom mansion on D'Oyly Carte Island, on the Thames near Weybridge; Andy and Sheila Hill, the owners

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**A**ndy and Sheila Hill had planned to downsize. Instead, they bought an abandoned island on the River Thames on a whim, moved into its derelict 13-bedroom mansion and brought it all back to life with a café, concerts, Edith Piaf's love boat and even a visit from Princess Anne. Andy is still pinching himself about their "mad" project: "You just go, 'What on earth?'"

With three children and three grandchildren, the Hills have been together since secondary school, nearly 50 years ago. Five years ago they were talking about selling their family house in Richmond, southwest London, for something smaller “to just chill out”, according to Andy, 67, a music entrepreneur.

Then they went kayaking on the Thames in Surrey. Between Weybridge and Shepperton, they passed a Victorian mansion on D’Oyly Carte Island. It looked like a Swiss chalet with Tudor-style chimneys that would not be out of place at nearby Hampton Court Palace. It also looked haunted — every window was smashed and brambles grew chest-high in the gardens.



An aerial view of D’Oyly Carte Island

But Sheila, 66, who had studied at the Royal College of Art, saw potential. “She said, ‘It’s so sad. This amazing building is just dying,’” Andy recalls. He could see their downsizing plans fade in her eyes. “At that point, you’ve never seen anyone kayak so fast.”

The 13-bedroom mansion, they learnt, had been built by Richard D'Oyly Carte, the Simon Cowell of the late Victorian age. Carte had brought together Gilbert and Sullivan, then built the Savoy Hotel in London on the profits.

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The partnership he forged between the dramatist WS Gilbert and the composer Arthur Sullivan created comic operas including *The Pirates of Penzance*, *The Mikado* and *HMS Pinafore*. Still popular today, these were “the pop music of their time. In those days, you either had highfalutin opera or you had someone with a piano in a pub,” Andy says.



Richard D'Oyly Carte

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... and a poster for his opera company

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On this success, Carte and his wife, Helen, created an empire that spanned two West End theatres, a string of hotels — including the Savoy, Claridge's and the Connaught — and this island. Bought in about 1890, they wanted to turn it into a country hotel for their celebrity guests, but the local authority refused them a drinks licence.

Undeterred, the impresario asked Thomas Colcutt, the architect of the Savoy Hotel, to design them an island home with a ballroom, set in gardens created by the



Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. Oscar Wilde, JM Barrie and Winston Churchill's mother were regulars. "This was a party house," Andy muses as he gives me a tour in the spring sunshine.

To top it off, Carte acquired a crocodile, for which he built a pond with a long step where the beast could enter. It might, Andy says, have inspired the crocodile in Barrie's book *Peter Pan* (known as Tick-Tock in the Disney film)



The home's crocodile pond

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... and the wooden crocodile carving in a roof dormer

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“In those days the gentry used to have competitions as to who had the most exotic pet,” Andy says. “The crocodile, being a bright sort of thing, looked at the river and went, ‘That looks more fun over there.’ So it used to escape.”

After Carte offered a reward, “some local watermen ... managed to secure it in a net, and returned it to [Carte], apparently none the worse for its month’s sojourn in the river”, the St James Gazette reported in 1897. In its honour, a wooden crocodile was carved into a roof dormer, where it remains today.

Over the years the grade II listed house became a nightclub, then flats, before being bought by a Chinese owner who left it empty for 12 years — until the Hills kayaked past.

Andy discovered that the owner had accepted an offer to sell to a Russian oligarch. For the next year the Hills called the owner’s agent weekly for updates. Then, as

the pandemic struck, the Sino-Russian deal collapsed. Andy and Sheila bought the island for £2.925 million in 2021 and moved in.

“When walking into a place when it is literally chaos, you’ve just got to have a mental attitude, which is: we don’t have a deadline. We’re not in a rush. If you just take the slightly bonkers next step every day, we’ll make a little bit of progress. And eventually you get to where you get to. And you don’t get overwhelmed with the magnitude of it.”

They found an expert to carefully bend three layers of glass to fix the shattered glass dome at the top of the house, “so when it rains, we don’t flood”.



The glass dome

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D'Oyly's café

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They sat through a public hearing to get permission for a buzzing new café, D'Oyly's, in what was a concrete "ghetto" at the opposite end of the island.

They reopened the moorings and filled them with boats — including the £1.5 million vessel where Edith Piaf met the married boxer who was the love of her life. (The *Flamant Rose*, or pink flamingo, is still filled with Piaf's records, photos and the shag-pile boudoir from where they would escape the paparazzi.)



Edith Piaf's boat, the *Flamant Rose*, occupies one of the island's moorings

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While living upstairs, Andy and Sheila are slowly reconfiguring and extending the mansion with a design by their daughter and son-in-law's architecture studio, Parti. "The plan was always to have it as our family home," Andy says. One day, if the stairs are finally beyond them, they might turn the house into a five-star rental run by Parti's Arc.Club, which turns historic homes into boutique stays for large groups.

Now Sullivan's original grand piano, carried over the narrow footbridge to the island, is back in the entrance hall. Once a year Gilbert and Sullivan memorabilia bequeathed by the collector Melvyn Tarran — including costumes, old opera posters and 19th-century box sets — fill the house for open days. Annual summer concerts fill the air once again.





The restored interior

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Last winter Princess Anne visited, planting a new cedar tree in the garden to replace an original from Kew that died. The lawn was still full of weeds then; Andy told her it would become a wildflower meadow. “She said, ‘I’ll keep an eye out on it. My helicopter goes straight over here,’” he recalls. Today the wildflowers sway gently in the breeze.





Princess Anne visited the island in February and met the Hills

ANDY NEWBOLD PHOTOGRAPHY/MARK LEWIS

Keen to get an exotic pet in Carte's tradition, the couple considered peacocks or miniature ponies. "We're not having a crocodile, obviously, because we've got cats," Andy says. "Then Sheila said, 'How about red squirrels?'"

So next year, with help from the British Wildlife Centre, they are due to turn the island into a sanctuary for the endangered native squirrels. It will involve cutting back tree branches hanging over the narrow footbridge to the island, catching all the grey squirrels inhabiting it and building a secure den where the reds can shelter.

"As I kept saying to Sheila, if we'd have downsized and I was going down to the golf club, I'd have been dead in ten years," Andy says. "Stuff like this, it keeps you alive."

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