

# 'There's Something Magical About This Place'

Lupton House is more than just a gorgeous Devonshire mansion. Renovated entirely by volunteers, it's now a haven for society's most vulnerable. Hannah Bass visits and finds an inspiring community at work

Turning off the busy Brixham Road, I find myself on a bumpy dirt track, winding my way deep into dense woods. As the trees begin to thin, a stunning white house straight out of a Jane Austen novel glints into view. I park in front of the rustic stone outbuildings and step out into sunlit silence,

punctuated only by birdsong. It feels a world away from the bustling fishing towns of nearby Brixham and Torquay.

Later, sitting down to talk to a group of volunteers here at Lupton House – at a table made by retired carpenters from recycled pallets, and sipping soup made from nettles picked in the grounds – Carol, who

works for the local council's recycling initiative, captures the mood perfectly. 'It is,' she says, 'like Narnia without the snow. Going through the gates feels like going through the wardrobe.'

It's not just the beauty of Lupton House that weaves such a spell; it's the ethos – because Lupton isn't just a grand house, it is also a centre serving the wellbeing of its surrounding community. Originally built as a private home and then converted into a boarding school, it was left derelict for five years until June 2009, when a group of trustees bought the property. Just four years later to the day – on 10 June 2013 – members of Lupton Trust dined at Downing Street to celebrate winning a Big Society Award

for their contribution to their community. Founder and chair, Janet Howard, calls the Trust, 'One of the greatest examples of big society David Cameron could ever find.' Because not only has the house been gloriously restored, all the work has been carried out by volunteers from the local community – including its most vulnerable, isolated members.

'When we first took over the lease, the house was dilapidated and vandalised,' Janet remembers. 'It took months to clean just one room at a time. We had no water – we had to bring our own to flush the loos. There was no electricity either, so we used a gas stove and when it rained we'd rush around with buckets... We must have been barking

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mad, but we loved the place so much it was like someone had put blinkers on us.'

Bit by bit, the trustees were joined by volunteers and apprentices from all walks of life – from local colleges through groups for the learning disabled to people on community service. 'Easier to say who isn't here!' says Janet. 'You can never tell where volunteers have come from. It's a real leveller. And we treat everyone the same, which means that if volunteers are ill or disabled, they don't have to be defined by their illness here.'

Moreover, Janet has seen the work change people's lives. 'Tony, our wood carver, has mental health issues and, before he came here, he'd lost the will to live. But now his wife says he's a

completely different person. This place gives people confidence; it gives them a new life.'

People such as the group of young autistic adults who are being trained in the carpentry workshop and who help with woodwork around the house. Their teacher, Nick, says Lupton Trust provides his students with a valuable stepping stone between school and work – a transition that would otherwise be 'virtually impossible'.

'It's an opportunity to be in a real-life situation, doing real, important work,' he says. 'It also teaches them life skills such as travelling to work independently, turning up on time looking presentable, sharing the staff room with other volunteers...' '...It's about getting into work and not on to benefits,' his colleague, Pete, adds. 'It's great for them and for the country – everyone's a winner.'

Nick describes the arrangement as 'mutually

## Woman's Weekly Real Life



The House is also a wedding venue



The Italian garden is still to be restored

beneficial', a phrase I hear often throughout the day.

Restoration is still ongoing – the front of the house has been painted by young offenders on community service but the sides retain what Janet jokingly calls the 'shabby chic' look, and work has yet to begin on the remains of the Italian garden – but Lupton has already been put to work as a community space.

Walking through the elegant, high-windowed rooms of the main house I come across the 'healing cafe' – full of people being offered free counselling and massage therapy. It regularly boasts up to 20 visitors for each two-hour session. One of the therapists – Alex Jordan – also helps to run the tearoom. 'When I first came here, I'd just left my husband and I had nothing,' she says, over a large slice of

recycled presents. 'Lupton gets to people,' explains Carol. 'It's a great way of sneaking education in through the back door.'

The House is also a venue for lots of events purely for fun – including regular weddings (the income from which enables the Trust to be self-sustainable) and a 1940s Weekend, which sees the grounds strewn with street parties, classic cars, military vehicles, men in full uniform, a vintage fair with old-fashioned organ grinders, live 1940s music and even a Spitfire on the lawn!

Its organiser, ex-military man Rod Hart, is one of many to point out that Lupton Trust has given the house back to the local community. 'I get so many people telling me they've lived in the area all their life and never visited the house before,' he says. 'I'd been living here for 17 years

and never knew what was behind these gates.

The first time I walked in, it hit me: there's something about this place. When I'm stressed, I come and sit here and within 20 minutes I'm able to walk out a different person. I'll admit, I was sceptical at first – but there's something magical about Lupton House...' 'And to hear an army man like Rod say that,' adds Janet, 'it must be true!'

❖ This year's 1940s Weekend is on 20-21 September. For more information on Lupton Trust, visit [discoverlupton.com](http://discoverlupton.com)



The Prime Minister presents Lupton Trust with their Big Society award, marking its contribution to the local community