"If anybody wants to judge me [...] frankly, they can fuck off": The Fulfords and Their Country House

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Introduction

"The idea of the country house as the quintessential English home" (Mandler 1997: 412) has permeated British culture since the middle of the twentieth century. What is it like to make a country house one's home? Splendid, but melodramatic. At least, this is the image films and television series like *Brideshead Revisited* (ITV, 1981) or *Downton Abbey* (ITV, 2010-2015) tend to project. Viewers are regaled with immaculately polished staircases, sparkling chandeliers, admirable artwork, well-stocked libraries and drinks tables, but behind every Georgian pillar and baroque wainscoting lurk family secrets, death, intrigues, and disaster — more often than not connected with the loss of the house. In a more sober vein, documentaries about real stately homes relegate the drama into the past, but they share the emphasis on the magnificence of the estate and its eminent position in the national heritage. Both fictitious and real owners exude an understated noblesse and demonstrate their high cultural and social capital.

Not so the Fulfords. They star in the Channel 4 documentary series *Cutting Edge* in the episode "The F***ing Fulfords" (2004), the BBC3 miniseries *Life Is Toff* (2014), and special editions of reality television series like *How Clean Is Your House?* (Channel 4, 2003-2009, here: 2005) or *Country House Rescue* (Channel 4, 2008-2012, here: "Great Fulford," 2012). The viewers get to see shots of rubble and dirt; the six family members — patriarch Francis, his wife Kishanda, and the children Matilda, Arthur, Humphrey, and Edward — drink, smoke, swear, and bicker. The Downton vibe of the manor house Great Fulford contrasts with the Fulfords' demonstrations of (supposed) poverty. And yet, the rescue narrative remains more or less intact: "Asset rich, income poor" (*Country House Rescue*: S04 E04: 00:36), the family is shown struggling with the crumbling house and mounting costs. They need to face the modern world and adapt to the mechanisms of the neoliberal market — which they adamantly refuse. Or so it seems.

How does Great Fulford as 'lived space' appropriate and vary discourses about the country house as "quintessential English home"? To what extent does the Fulfords' politics of home tie in with their sense of hygiene? How do they correlate with national identity and neoliberal governmentality? This article will have a closer look at the mediatised homemaking of the Fulfords and the imaginaries and practices associated with Great Fulford. It will trace discourses of (English) heritage in danger, the family's apparent resistance to modern times, and their using the mass media to their advantage.

The Traditional Country House

Until the early twentieth century, country houses were "power houses" (Girouard 1978: 2) which served as centre of a landlord's administration with important symbolic functions. A country house was

> the headquarters from which land was administered and power organised. It was a show-case, in which to exhibit and entertain supporters and good connections [...]. It was an image-maker, which projected an aura of glamour, mystery or success around its owner. It was visible evidence of his wealth. (Ibid.: 3)

While home is where the heart is, country houses are where the landed estate is. It was land which guaranteed "wealth, status and power" (Cannadine 1990: 16); the house was secondary. "Land provided the fuel, a country house was the engine which made it effective." (Girouard 1978: 3; see Mandler 1997: 298). Hence, in her classic essay on "The English Aristocracy" (1955), Nancy Mitford points out that only members of the middle and lower classes talk of "home," members of the upper class speak of a "house" (6), evoking dynasty, heredity, and longevity. Especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the owners of country houses seldom lived there. Most preferred their abodes in London (Girouard 1978: 6). The country house as home, a realm of comfort and privacy, only evolved over the course of the nineteenth century (ibid.: 285).

In the twentieth century, the economic and political functions of country houses gradually disappeared. Due to the relative loss of power of the nobility and gentry, owners tended to sell their houses. During the Second World War, stately homes were requisitioned, damaged, and often demolished (Cannadine 1990: 627-28; Mandler 1997: 312-16). The impending loss raised their value and turned them into examples of splendid architecture, repositories of art, and nostalgic symbols of a lost era, idealised and romanticised in both fictional and factual writings as central part of the nation. Vita Sackville-West, for example, praises medieval and Tudor manor houses as "part of the country, not only in the country, but part of it, a natural growth" (1944: 7). After the war, Evelyn Waugh grieves the disappearance of the stately homes in his novel *Brideshead Revisited* (1945). "It seemed then," he writes in the 1959 Preface, "that the ancestral seats which were our chief national artistic achievement were doomed to decay and spoliation like the monasteries in the sixteenth century." (1986 [1945]: 8).

"Seemed," because organisations like the National Trust or English Heritage set out to preserve historic buildings for the nation. At first, they were met with scepticism from both the landowners and 'the people.' Taxpayers were not convinced about financing an essential part of the lifestyle of the rich and famous; the landowners did not think themselves part of national heritage, but of dynastic heredity (Mandler 1997: 273; 305). Bequeathing their house to the National Trust and thereby promising to open it to the public was and still is not to every aristocrat's taste. But not least thanks to the 1974 exhibition "The Destruction of the Country House" at the Victoria & Albert Museum (Adams 2013: 5), the idea caught on, and getting a glimpse of the national past in combination with a private living space is seen and sold as something unique: "A museum is a dead thing; a house which is still the home of men and women is a living thing which has not lost its soul." (Sackville-West 1944: 47). In this respect, the documentaries about the Fulfords and their estate can also be seen as soul-searching missions, albeit updated and adapted for television.

The House of Fulford

The Fulfords came to the attention of the wider British public in 2004. Before that, Francis Fulford had been a regular contributor to *The Field*, a magazine "founded for those who loved shooting, fishing, hunting and could sniff out a decent claret at 1,000 paces" (Young 2007). He had also written *Bearing Up: The Remarkable Survival of the Landed Estate* (1998) and featured in an episode of *Classic Homes* (Channel 4, 1998). But the Fulfords' main claim to (mild) fame is founded on "The F***ing Fulfords," a broadcast seen by 3.5 million people and awarded a BAFTA nomination (Hogan 2022).

"The F***ing Fulfords" starts like an updated version of *Brideshead Revisited* or *Downton Abbey*, with a wide shot of a white Tudor manor house amidst a park with a lake. A middle-aged man drives a jeep through the impressive landscape. While Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters sing "Don't Fence Me In," the viewers see aerial shots of the estate, and narrator Peter Bowles sonorously explains:

> In 1199, King Richard the Lionheart bequeathed a magnificent house and 3000 acres of prime Devonshire countryside to Francis Fulford the First for a job well done in the Crusades. 800 years later, the Fulford family are still here, but the house is falling apart and there's no money to save it. ("F***ing Fulfords," Part 1: 00:52-01:15)

This is followed by a quick succession of the middle-aged man ejaculating "fuck," "fuck me," or "fuck all," with the caption: "Francis Fulford the 23rd (aka 'Fucker' Fulford)" (ibid.: 01:24), his wife telling someone to "fuck off," and the four children fighting and telling their mother to "fuck off." The introductory sequence ends with the family assembling at the main entrance of the house and the title: "The F***ing Fulfords" (ibid.: 02:18).

The first two minutes economically tell the story of how the mighty have fallen. If it were not for the extensive swearing, the programme would come across as yet another version of the "heart-string-tugging saga of a once-great house, whose owners are threatened by death duties, who may be forced to sell, but who are rescued (or not) at the eleventh hour" (Cannadine 1994: 244) that has been made popular by heritage television and film since the 1980s. The Fulford variation replaces the appeal to the heart with a mixture of cringe and kitchen-sink realism.

Great Fulford looks impressive from a distance. It is a Grade I listed Tudor manor house with additions from the seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries, indicating Ye Olde England from outside and neoclassical squirearchy inside, in the entrance hall, the grand staircase, and the representative state rooms. But the wallpaper is peeling off and the ceiling has become flaky due to a leaking roof. The family's living quarters are cluttered and look rather shabby. Meals are taken in the kitchen, surrounded by dirty dishes, old newspapers, and full ashtrays. The living room sports worn-down sofas; the attic is filled with assorted trash; other uninhabited parts of the house are covered in cobwebs, filled with rubble and animal faeces. The viewers regularly see shots of the labradors licking dirty plates, faces, or hands and making a general mess of things.

In a modernised version of the House of Usher, the Fulfords mirror the state of the building: once grand, but currently in need of improvement. Posh accents and pastimes such as fencing, shooting, or playing cricket contrast sharply with their excessive swearing, chain smoking, and drinking. In "The F***ing Fulfords," the children, then ranging from ages eight to eleven, fight all the time and get on their mother's nerves. In a memorable scene, she unplugs the children's television set and throws it into the lake ("F***ing Fulfords," Part 2: 11:00-12:45), and Francis points out that the education of his children parallels that of his dogs: They hardly get any.

Both the story of the house "falling apart" and the televisual aesthetics highlight Great Fulford as part of national heritage. Not only does the country house hark back to the times of chivalry and the supposedly glorious English past, but most of the images emphasise its beauty, despite the visible physical decay. The position of the family, however, is more ambivalent. They are shown to fight against the decomposition of the house, but it remains open whether they are part of the solution or at the root of all the problems.

Great Fulford in Danger

All shows featuring the Fulfords offer versions of the "heritage in danger" discourse prevalent since the middle of the twentieth century and made hegemonic in the 1970s thanks to the exhibition "The Destruction of the Country House" (Adams 2013: 5). Preserving stately homes as a central part of national heritage seems to be a losing battle:

"Given an entropic view of history, it is axiomatic that 'heritage' should be in danger. To the extent, moreover, that threat defines the heritage as valuable in the first place, the struggle to 'save' it can only be a losing battle." (Wright 2009: 69; see Adams 2013: 3). Moreover, framed by the heritage discourse, country houses come to represent more than just a piece of architecture, but "some higher, more abstract good" (Mandler 1997: 400; see Adams 2013: 5): They stand for the best of Englishness and a by now lost communal lifestyle, where everyone had their comfortable place in a benevolent hierarchy (Adams 2013: 7). By this, stately homes perfectly encapsulate the nostalgic yearning for supposedly better times.

Country House Rescue is probably the most explicit example of the "heritage in danger" discourse in connection with the Fulfords. Right at the beginning, narrator Hugh Bonneville (aka Lord Grantham of *Downton Abbey*) informs the viewers that "the future of Great Fulford is hanging in the balance" (S04 E04: 02:05) and that entrepreneur Simon Davis has been called in to "save a vital part of our heritage" (ibid.: 03:05). Davis involves Francis and Kishanda in earnest heart-to-heart talks about finances, asks other country-house owners for their expertise, and tries to develop the best strategy to turn Great Fulford into a "thriving venture" (ibid.: 03:28). In most other episodes of *Country House Rescue*, Davis manages to get people on the neoliberal track, using the house as asset for tourism; but not so with the Fulfords. They do not make any serious attempts to put Davis's rescue plans into action. Although they appear interested in making money, both Francis and Kishanda are obverse to change. When Davis leaves Great Fulford, he angrily complains: "I wasted my time" and comments into his dashcam: "I feel their time at Great Fulford could be running out." (ibid.: 45:40).

Although less outspoken and alarmist, both "The F***ing Fulfords" and *Life Is Toff* also operate with plotlines constructed towards the same cliff-hanger: Will the Fulfords manage to maintain their family home? Will Great Fulford survive? Dramaturgy and cinematography of the shows use the repertoire of reality television, more precisely of docusoaps, with "a focus on personalities, storylines and interpersonal conflicts" (Kavka 2012: 61). Experts fight against the inertia of the Fulfords; Francis and Kishanda fight against the children and against each other; Great Fulford and the Fulfords fight against the decay of the house and the demands of modern times.

Within this medial framework, the Fulfords offer a telegenic and entertaining mixture of ordinary lives and extraordinariness (ibid.: 66). Their social position as landowners dwelling in a country house lends them extraordinariness. Their lack of decorum and the shabby-genteel lifestyle signals ordinariness and in turn sets them apart from other members of the landed classes. Similarly, Great Fulford oscillates between serving as ordinary home and extraordinary national treasure. While the authoritative voice-over and especially the shots of the exterior mostly emphasise the

latter, the transparent camera, the quick editing, and the interview sequences point to the former, offering the viewers insights into everyday life in a stately home.

In the interviews, the Fulfords do not reflect on Great Fulford's relevance as part of national heritage. On the contrary, Francis deems institutions like the National Trust utter anathema. British heritage? "Well, it fucking ain't their heritage, it's my heritage." ("F***ing Fulfords," Part 2: 21:36). All the nation ever did was "to tax people into the ground" (ibid.: 21:25). Besides, the "people from British Heritage and the like are a load of wankers" (ibid.: 21:05), an aspect that he has elaborated on in his book. He denounces heritage organisations and their schemes of preservation either as socialists keen on nationalising private property or riddled with non-gentlemanly experts: "[…] now we are subject to the formulas of the bullshit-baffles-brains variety and the grip of the professional manager has extended even to such a quintessential English institution as the National Trust." (Fulford 1998: 56). Trying to preserve historic buildings and opening them to the public leads to the "sterilisation and 'Disneyfication' of the countryside" (ibid.: 61) — a state of affairs already bemoaned by Sackville-West in her booklet on *English Country Houses* (1944). For Fulford, country houses are "living breathing developing *homes*" (Fulford 1998: 58; emphasis in original), meant "to be enjoyed" (ibid.: 152; see also ibid.: 58). All the family members are emotionally attached to Great Fulford and repeatedly confirm that "it matters, 'cause it's home" (*Life Is Toff*: S01 E01: 28:09), with its traditional connotations of "feelings of belonging," of safety and intimacy (Blunt and Dowling 2022: 28), appropriating the past into the present (Lipman 2020: 20).

By means of their narrative and their aesthetics, however, the shows beg to differ. Great Fulford is more than just an ordinary family home. The images of the estate from a distance, emotionalised by classical music in the background, suggest that Great Fulford is an important part of the country and deserves to be preserved as "a vital part of our heritage" (*Country House Rescue*: S04 E04: 03:05). Especially the voice-over comments with the recurring phrases "800 years," "3000 acres," "Richard Lionheart," "one of the oldest families," assume the authoritative discourse of public historiography with longevity as indication of high value (Wright 2009: 66; Lipman 2020: 19), thereby suggesting national significance and a feeling of nostalgia for the impending loss. Experts and vox pops confirm the urgency for saving the building, the old family and, last but by no means least, rural England. Likewise, the villagers in Dunsford who are interviewed at the country fair in episode 4 of *Life Is Toff* see the family as "part of England" (S01 E04: 28:54).

As is wont of docusoaps, the shows turn "inward to the personal rather than outward to the social" (Kavka 2012: 68). Hence, Francis Fulford can fashion himself as "asset rich, but cash poor," living in "genteel poverty" ("F***ing Fulfords," Part 1: 03:34-

03:35)[1] and having to face tremendous costs for the maintenance of the house. In all the television shows, this claim is substantiated by impressive numbers, which indicate the overwhelming task facing the family. Intriguingly, the sums vary to a great extent. In "The F***ing Fulfords," the upkeep of Great Fulford alone amounts to £30,000 per year, and Francis has acquired an overdraft of "over £200,000" (Part 1: 03:45). A thorough repair of the house would cost about one million, with the leaking roof as major liability. In *Life Is Toff*, the running costs have risen to £150,000, but the price for a renovation is down to £130,000 (S01 E01: 05:08). In *Country House Rescue*, the running costs are quantified as £20,000, and the renovation of the great hall with the staircase is estimated at £30,000. This is offset by an income of between £6,000 and £10,000 from tourism and the unspecified rent from ten tenants (S04 E04: 09:36-10:25). "The pot is empty," Francis explains, "because the pot has been spent on the roof" (ibid.: 10:25). At least one of the major problems looming large in "The F***ing Fulfords" seems to have been solved.[2] But — despite the changing details — the gist of the matter is always clear: Great Fulford is doomed. The nation is about to lose one of its treasures and with this, the family will lose the place which has served as their home for "over 800 years."

The Fulfords would not be the first to reiterate "myths of aristocratic decline and penury" (Adams 2013: 11; see Mitford 1955: 9). In this, they are aided by the dramaturgy of docusoaps: "Whereas televised documentary had previously offered big-picture views of the social world, the docusoap strove for little more than a 'backstage' view of ordinary individuals going about their business." (Kavka 2012: 61). In the bigger picture not mentioned on television, Fulford actually belongs to the group of great landowners who managed to preserve their wealth from the nineteenth century (Thompson 2007: 18). Depending on the time of filming, the 3,000 acres[3] would have fetched between £7,200,000 in 2004 and £22,827,000 in 2012 (Savills 2013; "Price of Farmland" 2013).[4] More importantly, the usually so outspoken squire keeps very quiet about the rent his tenants pay him. He also does not mention his involvement in investment companies and the stock market.[5] Most likely, he heeded his own advice given in *Bearing Up*, i.e. not to invest in the house, but to "plough [your money] into the stock market instead. Not only will you be richer, but you will find that life is a lot less hectic and you have more time to enjoy your estate." (1998: 152).

[1] In *Country House Rescue*, the phrase returns as "asset rich, income poor" (S04 E04: 00:36), this time uttered by Francis Fulford.
[2] According to Kim Easton-Smith, it cost a mere £100,000 (2023).
[3] 1,215 hectares, the equivalent of 1,722 football fields.
[4] The land prices were constantly rising and are still going strong. In 2023, an acre of land cost £9,583 (Farming Life 2024).
[5] The government website *Companies House* lists six appointments for him and three for Kishanda (see "Francis Fulford" n.d.; "Diana Kishanda Fulford" n.d.).

Like quite a few landowners, the Fulfords seem to live comfortably on "unearned income on property and through speculation in the financial sector" (Littler 2018: 118; see Mandler 1997: 243). It is no coincidence that the only politician Francis respects is Margaret Thatcher, because of her tax policy and stopping "the bias against unearned income" (Fulford 1998: 94; see ibid.: 24). Due to their focus on the personal, none of the shows attempts to question the Fulfords' statements about their supposed poverty. Not even financial expert Simon Davis dares ask for bank statements or further documentation. Neither do they have a closer look at the expenditure. All the children, for example, attended public schools with fees of around £30,000 a year — enough to fix the roof and buy a new sofa for the living room.[6]

In *Against Meritocracy*, Jo Littler demonstrates how the wealthy justify their privileged position by emphasising hard work and ordinariness. In this respect, the Fulfords perform as "Normcore aristocrats" (Littler 2018: 124), a bit privileged, but on the whole just like a normal family. In contrast to the new meritocrats analysed by Littler, the Fulfords are not ambitious to rise in society, they just want to maintain the status quo, a state of affairs difficult to present with the means of a docusoap. Hence, the neoliberal meritocratic spirit is projected onto Great Fulford as both material reality and imaginary of the family's past (Blunt and Dowling 2022: 28). In each of the shows, Francis talks about his ancestors and what they did for the estate: planting trees, designing the lake, building the staircase. Great Fulford thus accrues a personal historical dimension further corroborated by the scenes of family life and the assurance that "it matters, 'cause it's home" (*Life Is Toff*: S01 E01: 28:09).

Framed by the "heritage in danger" discourse, the Fulfords' visible 'hard work' consists in trying to actively make money to save the house — with embarrassingly little success, but — as I will argue below — an effective long-term strategy on the meta-level. In "The F***ing Fulfords," Francis buys a metal detector and goes on a treasure hunt around the house. Later, he tries to charge British Telecom rent for using his grounds for their cables. In *Life Is Toff*, the younger generation — now aged between eighteen and twenty-one — takes over with equally doubtful results: The car-boot sale in episode one turns out to be an "omnishambles" (S01 E01: 24:14). In episode three, Matilda tries to develop "brand Fulford" by selling home-made products on the village market. The siblings gather to make cheese for the very first time in their lives and end up throwing away the gooey mess (S01 E03).

Most of the times, making money boils down to making Great Fulford fit for the tourist market or, in the words of Simon Davis from *Country House Rescue*, to turn it into a "thriving venture" (S04 E04: 03:28). The family is shown to offer guided tours through the state rooms, organising hunting parties, murder mystery weekends, and ghost hunts.

[6] Arthur attended Sherborne School; Humphrey and Edward went to Milton Abbey like their father.

But as with their other money-making activities, they do so with a lack of professionalism and quite a bit of detachment. The children need a cheat sheet to remember their ancestors' names, and, when engaging with tourists, Francis deprecatingly sees himself as "a bit like a hooker" ("F***ing Fulfords," Part 1: 15:14). After the guided tour brings in £100, Kishanda calls her turf accountant and actually wins £1000 at the horse race. To celebrate, she disappears to London. On the surface, the Fulfords do not manage to adapt to modern, neoliberal times; their activities do not bring any palpable improvements for the house and create moments of awkwardness. At the same time, their failures corroborate the narrative of time running out for Great Fulford, which is further enhanced by its decrepit state.

The Politics of the Abject Home

The docusoaps get great mileage out of highlighting the filth at Great Fulford which they often connect with Francis Fulford's reactionary politics. The dust and grime of centuries are implicitly linked to dusty and outdated ideas. The Fulfords actively violate common Western notions of an orderly home, what belongs inside, what is to be considered dirt, and what is deemed hygienic (Mallon 2018: 44). Labradors licking dirty plates, ducks waddling through the state rooms, cobwebs, rats, or dead bats bring the outside inside — as do the children playing cricket in the ballroom or roller-skating in the corridors. This clearly signals "matter out of place" in the sense of Mary Douglas or the "abject" in the sense of Julia Kristeva (Campkin and Cox 2012: 4). The Fulfords' demonstrations of negligence "transgress established borders, confound order and disrupt dominant belief systems" (ibid.).

The dynamics of (non-)cleaning also highlights gender norms (Blunt and Dowling 2022: 21; 99). In "The F***ing Fulfords," Kishanda is the only person who attempts to get rid of some of the dirt. The narrator explains that, traditionally, "an army of servants" would have been employed to take care of the estate, "a luxury Francis can no longer afford" (Part 1: 04:38-04:45). Therefore, he married Kishanda. The documentary presents this statement with ironic overtones but does not explicitly question the situation. In contrast to this, in *How Clean Is Your House?* cleaning experts Aggie MacKenzie and Kim Woodburn tease Francis about his outmoded attitude, make sure everyone gets involved in the great clean-up, and command the patriarch to at least wax the floor. Due to the laws of entropy, this state of affairs does not last (Mallon 2018: 42), and the next instalment of the Fulford saga returns to the same mess as before, running parallel to the notion of history as an inevitable "process of degeneration and decline" (Wright 2009: 66): Dust and dirt return, and Great Fulford is never really safe from being lost.

Tying in with the dramaturgy of docusoaps, highlighting extraordinary ordinariness (Kavka 2012: 66), the unhygienic state of Great Fulford puts the family into an

ambivalent class position between the abject poor and the lazily posh. At first sight, the Fulfords follow the trajectory of "poverty porn," the voyeuristic abjectification of members of the lower class on reality television as "forms of neoliberal governance" (Tyler 2013: 148): We watch losers losing, wondering about their intellectual capacities as well as their standards of hygiene and etiquette. The behaviour of the family violates notions of middle-class respectability and feeds into representations of the abject underclass, the marginalised who do not fit into the order of things, generally deprecated as the "great unwashed" or as "smelly foreigners" (Campkin and Cox 2012: 5). In this context, the 'poverty' of the Fulfords seems to have rubbed off on their lifestyle and vice versa: The lifestyle corroborates their claims to poverty.

Seen from a different angle, however, negligence and not caring about keeping up appearances reiterates a traditional upper-class stance. After all, it is the members of the lower classes who are associated with serious housework, often taking pride in their cleanliness and high standards of "decency" (Evans 2010: 127; see Campkin and Cox 2012: 5). Thrift or lack of money probably have little to do with the Fulfords' shabbiness. Being house-proud is a sign of a lower-class position: "Upper-class and upper-middle-class homes tend to be shabby, frayed and unkempt in a way no middle-middle or lower-middle would tolerate." (Fox 2004: 115). Cleanliness is mainly associated with naff middle-class suburbia (Blunt and Dowling 2022: 114). Moreover, entitled people do not care about making a good impression, as "shame is a bourgeois notion" (Mitford 1955: 10). Accordingly, each episode of *Life Is Toff* opens with Arthur wearing a tuxedo, in front of him a glass and a bottle of wine, stating: "If anybody wants to judge me […] frankly, they can fuck off." (00:00-00:10).

The unmannered manor house and the attitude of negligence tie in with Francis Fulford's oppositional stance towards the metropolitan elites: "The modern world, the urban metrosexual world, despises tradition and looks down on everybody who says he's proud to be British, or proud to be English, and I guess we are a bit of an aberration in the modern world," he pontificates in *Life Is Toff*, intercut with images of him, Arthur, and Edmund shooting in the park (S01 E02: 02:46). Although he explicitly rejects the notion of Great Fulford as part of national heritage, he sees himself as guardian of a traditional lifestyle and implicitly of "some higher, more abstract good" (Mandler 1997: 400). Fulford assumes the voice of common sense, as both the paternalistic country squire and a man of the people. Being rooted in what Patrick Wright calls "Deep England" (2009: 81), corroborated by the long line of Fulfords and owning Great Fulford, lends him additional authority and serves as linchpin for his political ideas.

Great Fulford will go to the oldest son Arthur; twin sister Matilda and her brothers must fend for themselves. Why? Because it is fair — "I give as I receive" —, and it has always been like that, as he explains in "The F***ing Fulfords" (Part 2: 24:56; see Fulford

1998: 171). Besides, "women's brains are a mystery and have been since the beginning of time to men" ("F***ing Fulfords," Part 2: 12:11-12:16; see Fulford 1998: 166). Hence, Kishanda might be good for cleaning and giving birth to an heir, but she should not meddle with the serious business of running the estate (ibid.: 167). Getting an heir and passing on the estate also underlies Francis' homophobia. "Queers" would be the ruin to the family line, because "you got to breed" ("F***ing Fulfords," Part 2: 08:53-09:14). Although the dynasty started out as "de Fulford," Francis gleefully likes to point out that one of his ancestors killed many French in battle (and rightly so, his tone and posture imply). He also does not feel friendly towards Germans, Americans, or Russians. Fulford is well-aware that not many people (and not many viewers) share his notions of both politics and hygiene, hence, he self-confidently sets himself up as "an aberration in the modern world" (*Life Is Toff*: S01 E02: 02:46), which in turn makes him more attractive for the media.

Meta-Medial Selling Points

Paradoxically, the Fulfords seem sceptical towards strangers trampling through their house, but they allow viewers access to their home and provide them with intimate glimpses into their lives that paying visitors would normally not get. This self-fashioning fits perfectly into the dramaturgy of docusoaps, oscillating between public and private, ordinary and extraordinary. The "filthiness" of both house and family here serves as unique selling point and stages authenticity (Kavka 2012: 160) in contradistinction to the 'sterilised' and 'Disneyfied' tourist venues, offering a portrait of life in a country house with warts, cobwebs, and all.

Not caring about hygiene and positioning oneself on the loony right produces moments of awkwardness, a popular strategy employed in recent documentary film and reality television and adding another layer of meaning. As Adam Kotsko has pointed out, awkwardness emerges as a structure of feeling at the end of the 1960s, when traditional values lost their dominance, but were not replaced by equally normative new values: "the tension of awkwardness indicates that no social order is self-evident and no social order accounts for every possibility" (2010: 16), a description which also encapsulates a potential audience's reaction to Francis Fulford's political views. The cringeworthy moments make fun of the Fulfords; at the same time, they boost the impression of honesty and authenticity (Middleton 2014: 2-4). Oscillating between feelings of "shame-humiliation" and "contempt-disgust" (ibid.: 9) within the framework of lifestyle television in turn enhances the multifaceted and precarious viewing positions between critical distance and complicity:

> On the one hand, we, as viewers, are drawn into the emotional situations the characters find themselves in and yet, on the other hand, we are also encouraged to

> speculate, judge and attend to the choices and decisions the families have made and continue to make. (Gorton 2009: 111)

Furthermore, the mixture of contempt, familiarity, and humour feeds into the "complex mechanisms of contemporary celebrity culture" (Kavka 2012: 145; see ibid.: 167). The self-fashioning of the Fulfords as incompetent and poor, living in a rickety and dirty country house, heightened their prominence in the public sphere and triggered further appearances on television, social media, and in newspapers. Francis Fulford has become one of the persons to go to whenever broadcasters need extreme and extremely outspoken positions. In 2009, *60 Minutes Australia* portrayed him as an example of the British eccentric aristocracy ("Wealthy English Aristocrats"). In 2013, a Channel 4 news piece featured him as ardent supporter of male primogeniture (although he is neither a member of the House of Lords nor directly affected by its legislature; the broadcaster just could not find any lords openly supporting the extant system, see "Genteel Revolution"). In 2019, he appeared on Danish television as expert on Brexit ("Britisk godsejer"). In all the examples, his supposed expertise merely consists in owning Great Fulford, having had ancestors who killed many French, and planning to bequeath the estate to his oldest son.

Seen from a long-term perspective, the Fulfords thus demonstrate their masterful use of the mass media and celebrity culture as source of income, specifically in connection to their house as a lived-in space related to more abstract issues of heritage and a national past. Opening their house and behaving badly creates profitable news and entertainment value for audiences keen to explore 'their' (and the Fulfords') heritage. Francis alludes to this in "The F***ing Fulfords" when he welcomes a busload of tourists and tells them to ignore the camera team, because "they are part of a money-making venture like you are" (Part 1: 16:14). Indeed, despite the continuing complaints about the disintegrating estate, the look of Great Fulford gradually improves from show to show. The roof is fixed; rooms are renovated; a new stucco ceiling graces the dining room. In his article for *The Telegraph*, Michael Hogan confirms this impression by pointing out that with each television appearance, the family has become "less skint" (2022).[7]

To a certain extent, this form of opening one's country house and family to the media is a tried and tested method. As early as 1952, Lord Montagu of Beaulieu posed for the cameras scrubbing the floor of Beaulieu on his knees together with a host of servants. In the 1960s, he sang Noel Coward's "The Stately Homes of England" (1928) in a duet with the Duke of Bedford for BBC's *Tonight* (Mandler 1997: 374-75). Showing oneself as approachable, humble, and being able to make fun of oneself helped to

[7] In an interview with Miranda Levy, Edmund disclosed that he received £12,000 for *Life Is Toff* (2024). Francis supposedly earned £40,000 for "The F***ing Fulfords" (James 2025).

promote the "stately-home business" (ibid.: 373) and attracted quite a few paying visitors. The Fulfords go beyond this by not keeping up appearances and adding awkwardness and cringe into the mix. Their real work as "Normcore aristocrats" (Littler 2018: 124) consists in their embarrassing performances of 'hard work' in front of the cameras.

Although they do not give the impression that they are especially keen on paying visitors, the Fulfords manage to use their media fame for the promotion of the growing branches of their tourist business, whether selling shooting trips or renting out the house for weddings (praised on *Bridebook* for their "shabby chic hallways," 2024). Members of the younger generation earn extra money by participating in competitive reality shows. Arthur joined the *Big Brother* house in 2017 (but left after only one week). Younger brother Edmund won Channel 4's *Rise and Fall* in 2023, which earned him £85,610 (O'Grady 2023). He commented on his victory in true Fulford spirit: "I look at this game as an analogy for life. It has shown me that slow and steady wins the race, you don't always have to be dog eat dog in this world." (qtd. in ibid.).

Conclusion

The stories around the Fulfords resisting the neoliberal dog-eat-dog world evoke a tinge of nostalgia for a lost world albeit with a special twist. The "entropic view of history" (Wright 2009: 69) fuelling the discourse of "heritage in danger" correlates with the entropy of the living spaces and the intrusion of disorder. Half-hearted attempts by the family members to improve the situation either do not change anything or they add to the decay, as, for example, when Arthur and Francis knock down a kitchen wall in *Life Is Toff* (E02). The attempts to rescue Great Fulford as both family home and part of national heritage are intercut with scenes of muddling through and failure. As Edmund points out in *Life Is Toff*, "we are Champions League fuck-ups" (S01 E01: 27:34). The awkwardness of the fuck-ups enhances the extraordinariness of the Fulfords and their (minor) celebrity status. On the one hand, the resistance to the "urban metrosexual world" (*Life Is Toff*: S01 E02: 02:46) can be seen as a clinging to outdated values, from male primogeniture to the white British man's burden. On the other hand, the Fulfords also seem to fight the current neoliberal ethos, refusing to both 'Disneyfy' their house and professionalise their management of it.

At least, this is the impression they give in front of the cameras. The Fulfords seem to live comfortably on their unearned income, and especially Francis capitalises his way of life, turning the mixture of country-house nostalgia, reactionary politics, swearing, dirt, and bumbling failure into a unique and rather lucrative selling point for the media.[8] In all this, Great Fulford plays a central part. Firstly, because without it, the family would

[8] Fittingly, Edmund gave his prize money to Francis as interest-free loan (Levy 2024).

not be interesting enough for the media. Secondly, the abject home indicates the loss of the communal, pseudo-feudal lifestyle — servants keeping the house clean and managing the estate — and indirectly evokes comparisons with the more splendid (and often imaginary) aristocratic homes of the Granthams or Flytes. While the awkwardness and chaos of life at Great Fulford are associated with the family, the country house itself evokes a long gone (rural and Deep) England. Offset with the actual patriarchal politics of home expressed by Francis Fulford, the country house also represents an exclusionary notion of national identity and depoliticised British history. Lastly, both as living space and representative of British heritage, Great Fulford is definitely no longer presented as the "quintessential English home" (Mandler 1997: 412).

Is this framed as a good thing or bad thing?[9] As can be gauged by BBC3's tagline for *Life Is Toff* — "series about a chaotic and loveable aristocratic family on its rural Devon estate" (2014) — or the viewer comments under the YouTube clip of *Country House Rescue* (S04 E04),[10] the shows oscillate between laying bare the Fulfords' attitude of entitlement, their potential for amusing cringe, and their supposedly genuine attachment to Great Fulford. Thus, in the truly neoliberal vein of recent British heritage, it is left open to the viewers whether and to what extent they want to buy into brand Fulford.

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[9] Thanks to the anonymous peer reviewer and the editors for their pertinent questions and constructive criticism.

[10] Ranging from "Watching the Fulfords has been a guilty pleasure of mine for over a decade" by @strictlyyoutube6881 to "Could they be nastier? Put them in a trailer and call it a day. Nothing redeemable about this family" by @BillyAlabama.

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