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Aida Dellal has had more than enough drama for one lifetime — and she's still only in her fifties. Born an Iraqi Jew, she was brought up by Catholic nuns in Iran. She left to study at the London School of Economics when she was 17, but never went home. "The revolution," she says by way of explanation.

Her family, prominent property and business magnates in Tehran, went into hiding for more than a year before finally escaping to New York in 1981. Since then, she has married, had two children, divorced, and fought and won bitter legal battles with everyone from property agents to the local Polish religious community. Oh, and she has dug up a dead body.

She's telling me all this on a dank Friday morning because she thinks it will make it easier to accept that she has become one of the luckiest women in England. She is the mistress of Fawley Court. You might not have heard of it, but you will have heard of Toad Hall. Fawley Court was Kenneth Grahame's inspiration for the fictional house he describes in his 1908 classic *The Wind in the Willows*.

It's not hard to see why. It is one of the finest homes in England. It sits on the banks of the Thames, just downriver from Henley, with, yes, weeping willows on the banks. It was designed by Sir Christopher Wren and built in 1684. Each room was styled by a leading architect of the day, including James Wyatt and Grinling Gibbons, Wren's master carver. The 75-acre grounds, which have uninterrupted views of Fawley Hill and the Chilterns, were landscaped by Capability Brown.

There's only one problem with the place. When Dellal bought it for £13m in 2008, it was "a total dump. Horrific. It had been partly burnt down, the rest was falling down, and the gardens were so neglected, they were on English Heritage's 'at risk' register," she says as she shows me into the Wyatt room, kept warm by a sole electric heater. "We don't have heating yet," she apologises, drawing hard on her cigarette, as if the glow from the burning tobacco will keep her — and me — warm.

Dellal says the rot set in after the war, during which the estate was requisitioned by the army and used for decoding Nazi signals and training special forces. The house and the surrounding park were bought by the Congregation of Marian Fathers, a Polish order, in 1953, and used as a boarding school, Divine Mercy College. It became home to 150 boys, aged 9 to 19, mostly the children of Poles displaced during the war who had found refuge in Britain.

The owners, being priests, did not have much cash, and certainly not the millions needed to maintain the house. Year by year, it fell more and more into disrepair. In the 1970s, one of the priests allegedly fell asleep while smoking, and a fire started that destroyed the roof and covered the priceless ceilings below with rubble.

Fixing Fawley will cost Dellal many millions more than she paid for it. She is

The house that inspired *Toad Hall* in *The Wind in the Willows* is being given a new lease of life by an owner with a colourful story of her own. By John Arlidge

She's not messing about



'I have property in my genes. I like getting 'down and dirty' in buildings'

working with historians, archivists and English Heritage to get it "just right". "We are digging out 17th-century paint colours," she says. "We're reopening fireplaces and installing new chandeliers. Everything is coming back. It's an enormous undertaking."

Any rows with the heritage people? "It took four years to agree the demolition of a spiral staircase — four years, 20 historians, archaeologists, paint analysts and every archive in England, to be precise. But they do have an important job to do. I'd hate to think what England would be without English Heritage."

She adds that being foreign and a woman makes things easier, not harder. "The organisations I have to work with want to help me, rather than hinder me. I think they like what I am doing. It would be awful if Fawley became another country-house hotel."

In the park, she has felled 2,500 trees and planted 3,000 new ones. "I go around in my wellington boots with the original Capability Brown plans and say, 'We need a tree here!' And I mark the spot. I look manic, bonkers, obsessive."

Wasn't she bonkers to buy Fawley Court in the first place, given the state it was in? "Not at all," she shoots back, her eyes narrowing. "It's perfect — or at



Wind of change Aida Dellal, inset, has undertaken a vast restoration job after buying Fawley Court for £13m. Top, the Imperial Chinese dining room. Middle, the entrance hall, originally styled by Sir Christopher Wren. Left, the James Wyatt salon

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least it will be. When the English get things right, they really get things right," she says as she strolls through the arboretum, past the deconsecrated chapel that now serves as a 300-seat concert hall.

Besides, she knew she had to buy it the first time she walked in, seven years ago. "I felt a connection with the place," she recalls. "I went upstairs and there was a Persian room decorated with pistachio wallpaper and scenes from Persian history. Lots of old English country homes have Chinese rooms, but Persian rooms are rare.

It is taking years to get all the repair work done, not just because there is

so much to do, but because Dellal has been distracted by the kind of problems that could only happen to her. Fawley had been a Polish religious centre and school for decades, so many Poles regarded the place as an honorary part of their country, and opposed the sale by the priests. "They used to climb the walls and come in to protest," she says. "It was scary."

The departing priests, according to Dellal's research, also fell out with their congregation, amid claims that they had removed sacred religious artifacts from the house without permission. The Marian Fathers also demanded the exhumation and reburial

of Jozef Jarzebowski, a prominent clergyman whose grave was on the property. "That was a serious business," Dellal says.

Separately, she had to fight off a claim from a property developer, Richard Butler-Creagh, who alleged that she owed him a £5m fee for facilitating her purchase. "Those were dark days," she frowns. "I was in the crossfire." Was it worth the hassle? "Yes, yes. Fawley is a magic place."

Now that the battles are over and the rebuilding work is almost complete, she hopes it will be a magic home for her and her two children, who are both London-based entrepreneurs, one developing flexible shared workspaces, the other setting up a healthcare firm. Few would begrudge Dellal a place in the country to call home — even if it is a 46,000-sq-ft grade I listed home with 13 grade II listed buildings in the grounds, some dating from the 12th century, and a staff of 11. But she does not simply want it to be a home "full of family portraits". She wants it to become "televisual".

"I hope this does not sound too 19th-century," she says, "but I would like to create a kind of modern-day 'salon' where people can discuss the issues of the day and try to make some progress. I could start with the area I once called home — the Middle East. I'd like to host a festival of peace to bring Muslims, Jews and Christians together side by side, just as they were when I was growing up in Tehran."

She wants to team up with Chatham House, in London, and partner with other think tanks and private companies to attract politicians and business leaders for public and private meetings. "It's a real advantage that we are so close to the centre of London and to Heathrow." But it's not all work, work, work. Last year, during the Henley River Regatta, she launched the Fawley River Club, the swankiest spot from which to enjoy the regatta, with a private clubhouse and restaurant.

She is doing all the work and hosting all the events partly because she wants to; partly because her family's fortune means she can afford to; and partly because bricks and mortar are in her blood. "I have property in my genes," she says. "My father used to walk me around buildings when I was a kid. I like getting 'down and dirty' in buildings." But, more than anything, she is doing it because it is her way of saying thank you to her adopted home.

"You never forget who helps you, who takes you in when you have nowhere else to go," she smiles. "After the revolution, I had no country to go back to. No home. England adopted me. It became home. Wherever I am in the world, I'm happy to come back, even when it is pissing with rain on a day like today."

"Doing a project like Fawley, in the heart of England, makes me feel even more English. This work, all this struggle, is worth it, because it's my small measure of thanks."

She must get a kick out of being the mistress of Toad Hall, too? Despite her foreigner's love of England, Dellal shrieks with horror at the idea of becoming some kind of Downton Abbey Lady Cora figure. "No, no, no," she insists. "After everything that has happened... I just feel lucky to be here."