

# Woman spent eight years and millions restoring Fawley Court (and hasn't finished)

By **JAMES BURTON**

jburton@henleystandard.co.uk

AFTER decades of neglect and eight years of restoration, Fawley Court is opening to the public during Henley Royal Regatta.

The 75-acre riverside estate and stately home off Marlow Road, about a mile north of the town centre, was badly dilapidated when wealthy divorcee Aida Dellal bought it in 2008.

Its grounds, which were landscaped during the 1760s by Capability Brown, were overgrown while the ornate carved ceilings inside the main 17th-century house were on the verge of collapsing.

Now, after pulling it back from the brink of ruin, Ms Dellal is offering a high-end hospitality service on all five days of this summer's rowing event.

Her venture, which she has named Fawley River Club, includes a "floating" bar on the estate's long water and viewing decks on the banks of the Thames plus a lounge, a restaurant and live music.

She says Fawley Court is ideally located for watching the races as it is exactly halfway along the 2.1km course, meaning spectators can see the entire length of the Henley reach.

The venue is the second of two checkpoints at which crews' times are logged and announced, the first being the "barrier" near Temple Island Meadows.

Additionally, the folly on Temple Island, which is the regatta's starting point, was originally built as a fishing lodge for the estate in 1771.

Ms Dellal held a low-key "soft launch" for about 100 invited guests last year. She says it was a success and generated significant interest in this summer's official debut.

The 55-year-old, who is originally from Iran, decided to purchase Fawley Court because she regularly visited Henley at weekends while studying at university in London during the Seventies.

The Grade I listed, three-storey house was built for the wealthy Freeman family in 1684 by Sir Christopher Wren, who redesigned St Paul's Cathedral after the Great Fire of London.

It then passed into the hands of the Mackenzies, a Scottish banking and engineering dynasty, in the 1850s. They added a wing to the north-western corner in a matching red-brick style and intended to build another to the south-west but abandoned this following a death in the family.

The foundations, service tunnels and a cesspit were dug and remain largely intact.

The estate used to cover 10,000 acres and stretched as far south as Phyllis Court Club but was split up and sold off in the early 20th century. It was requisitioned by the army during the Second World War and served as a training base for commandos and radio operators.

It was purchased in 1953 by the Congregation of Marian Fathers, an order of Polish Catholic priests who used it primarily as a boarding school and later a private museum. They stripped out many of its features, including the dado rails, and sold its collection of ancient Greek marble sculptures.

During the mid-Eighties, there was a fire in the roof caused by a carelessly discarded cigarette.

As a result, the voids above the ground and first-floor ceilings were filled with debris and weakened by the water used by the firefighters to tackle the blaze.

When Ms Dellal moved in, large cracks and stains could be seen with the naked eye and detailed examination revealed smaller structural weaknesses which needed urgent attention.

Her contractors had to remove the floorboards above each ceiling and manually remove the rubble before they could restore them to their original condition.

These included an elaborate ceiling by Grinling Gibbons, Wren's master carver, which depicts prancing fallow deer. This is in the salon at the south-east corner, directly beneath where the fire broke out, and is one of only three surviving Gibbons works.



Pictures: Francesco Guidicini



**Lady of the manor:** Aida Dellal outside Fawley Court, after the removal of the Victorian spiral staircase which was cutting through the grand staircase hall and, below, the Grinling Gibbons ceiling



## How I saved Wren masterpiece from falling into total disrepair

Additionally, the electrical wiring in the property was frayed, corroded or had been improperly upgraded, posing a fire risk. This had to be immediately stripped out and replaced.

The priests had also run a mains water pipe through the tunnel that was dug for the abandoned extension. This had weakened and finally collapsed last year so the supply had to be shut off and redirected.

Ms Dellal says: "Even on a superficial level in terms of décor, the main building was highly dilapidated. However, the state of the electricity, fire alarm, water supply and so on meant it was no longer fit for purpose.

"The brutal reality is that it was defunct, miserable, unusable and unsafe. Had we not stripped the wiring out, the building could have burned down pretty soon after we moved in."

Ms Dellal also replaced 58 Victorian sash windows with replicas in the original 17th-century style. English Heritage later gave her permission to remove a 19th century spiral staircase which cut through the grand staircase hall on the ground floor and a bathroom partitioned off from the hall.

She argued the room was meant to be open and imposing so these features went against the architect's original intent.

She then restored 12 other Grade II listed buildings on the site, including a 12th-century flint chapel which needed repairs to its roof, and the north and south gate-houses, which she had to buy back

as they had been sold. Ms Dellal also converted a deconsecrated church built by the priests in the Eighties into a concert hall. This now regularly hosts performances by young musicians and community groups.

In 2008 the gardens at Fawley Court were on English Heritage's address schedule, a list of historically significant sites in urgent need of attention.

Ms Dellal's 20-strong estate management team surveyed every single tree and felled about 2,500 which were beyond rescue. Since then, about 4,000 saplings have been planted in their place. Some were planted by Henley schoolchil-

dren who were invited to help with the project. In 2012 they helped to plant a two-mile avenue of limes, oaks and elms along the western border to mark the Queen's diamond jubilee.

This was carried out in partnership with the Woodland Trust and the first tree, a 4.5m English oak, was planted by Henry Aubrey-Fletcher, the Lord Lieutenant of Buckinghamshire.

"I've never really sat back and reflected on what we've achieved," says Ms Dellal. "There's always so much to do that I've never had a chance to slow down and appreciate it. I'm always thinking about what to do next. However, I'm very

glad to have done this. When I took over, Fawley Court was probably months from being lost forever and that would have been a tragedy, both historically and architecturally.

"For much of the time, it has felt like we're chasing our tails. It wasn't just about preserving the existing fabric but actively undoing the damage inflicted by my predecessors. Some of it we found through routine checks, whereas other damage was identified by the specialists we brought in.

"It has taken many years but I think the hardest work is behind us and I'm sure Fawley Court is safe for at least another 150 years.

"There are a few minor improvements to be made but that should be finished in the next two years or so.

"The buzzword around this place is 'iconic' and I think that's a fair description. It's quite unusual to have so many historic figures associated with one site.

"Fawley Court and its associated buildings date as far back as the 12th century and span many periods from there.

"My task was to become an expert on every era of English architecture because you can't touch these things without a degree of knowledge.

"I've never stopped learning since I bought the estate — it's something I've always had to do. This was never going to be a project for the faint-hearted but I always knew we'd get there in the end. It has been challenging but also very rewarding."



**Launch:** guests at the first Fawley River Club during last year's regatta

Ms Dellal came up with the idea for Fawley River Club in 2014 and designed its logo, which depicts two oars crossed over the date 1684.

The site opens at 11am and guests receive a glass of champagne on arrival. A four-course meal is served with wine during the lunch break and afternoon tea is served in the second break. There is a complimentary bar throughout the day as well as traditional launch trips on the river.

Visitors can arrange to be picked up by chauffeur from Henley station or even land their helicopter at the estate. Prices range from £250 plus VAT on the Sunday to £455 plus VAT on the Friday.

Ms Dellal said: "Until recently I've been far too busy with the restoration to even think about anything else.

"However, we're the only stately home on the regatta course and now the work is almost finished we felt it was time to join in. We spoke to Henley Royal Regatta first to get their blessings and they were very excited about it.

"Last year's launch went very well; we feel it brought a new ambience to the river. A huge number of people wanted to come back because it was such an unforgettable experience.

"It has got a Capability Brown garden and a Christopher Wren building as the backdrop so it truly is a premium hospitality service. It has proven enormously popular and I'm really looking forward to this year's regatta."