

# DEVON LIFE

## Beautiful Burgh Island

*Revealed: new owner's big plans for the world famous iconic hotel*

# 25

*fabulous*

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# All hail the sea tractor

There are people who say they could sit and stare at a roaring fire for hours, lost in the moment. I get that, but for me the same applies to the sea tractor serving Burgh Island.

At a time when the word 'unique' is bandied around with unthinking abandon, I think I can safely state that the tall contraption on wheels which serves the island from Bigbury-on-Sea truly does deserve that description.

As I watch it wend its way back and forth to the iconic island, when the vagaries of the tide necessitate its use, I get lost in thought. The gently chugging sounds which rise up from the sea as it makes the journey back and

**'Burgh Island is a beautiful enough spot as it is, but it would not quite be the same without its tremendous form of transportation'**

forth only add to the charm. It truly feels hypnotic to me.

I remain undecided over the years just which is the best vantage point to watch the sea tractor. Sitting on the beach at Bigbury watching it pootle over through the waters from the island as excited passengers (many of them first-timers to



Andy loves watching the sea tractor make its way back and forth to Burgh Island

the island, it would seem) await its arrival is a proper delight. Its stately passage only adds to the sense of anticipation.

But then again, perched on the terrace of the Pilchard Inn pub on Burgh Island, pint in hand, watching the sea tractor make its way towards you with that stunning South Hams coastline as a backdrop behind it also has to be one the best views around.

Or, perhaps even better, when viewed as a resident of the Burgh Island Hotel – something I have been lucky enough to experience a couple of times – you truly get the feeling you are watching something special as part of the whole experience of being cossetted in luxury.

I am unaware (but about to be put right by *Devon Life* readers, of course) of any other sea tractor operating in the UK. In fact, are there any elsewhere in the world, even? This only adds to the appeal; to be sat watching something you pretty much can't see anywhere else is so special.

It's such a unique factor in our county's make-up that perhaps we should seize on it a little more for marketing purposes... after all, when the current boom in staycation holidays means opportunity knocks for this county then having something of the sea tractor's uniqueness in our midst surely gives us a USP (as the marketing whizzes would have it) that offers a commercial opportunity.

Long live the sea tractor then. I never tire of driving over the horizon down into Bigbury and immediately attempting to spot where it is. Burgh Island is a beautiful enough spot as it is, but it would not quite be the same without its tremendous form of transportation. ♦



**ANDY COOPER,**

*Editor, Devon Life*

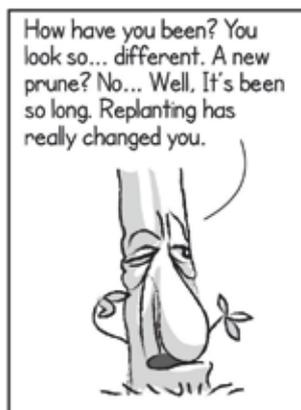
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## drizzleditch A tale of two trees in a big wide wood



STEVE EVANS

Photo: ian woolcock/Getty Images/Stockphoto

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# Offshore investment

Hotels don't come much more iconic than Burgh Island, the infamous Art Deco retreat visited by many well-known figures of the 20th Century. **CHRISSEY HARRIS** talks to the new owner to find out what today's guests can expect

**G**iles Fuchs admits the first glimpse gets him every time. "You know when you come into Bigbury-on-Sea, just over the brow of the hill and you see the island? That just does it for me – a huge smile comes over my face. We are so lucky."

Entrepreneur Giles bought Burgh Island Hotel in 2018, after seeing a picture of it and falling in love with one of Devon's most remarkable buildings.

Built in the Art Deco style in

1927 by filmmaker Archibald Nettlefold, the opulent hotel quickly became known as 'the best hotel west of the Ritz', and has a reputation for decades of decadence.

It famously became Queen of Crime Agatha Christie's bolthole and inspired the settings for two of her novels, *And Then There Were None* and *Evil Under the Sun*.

The Beatles, Winston Churchill and Noel Coward are just a few of the other famous names who have made the journey across the water

Photo: Burgh Island Hotel/Victoria Gibbs



Photo: Steve Haywood

**ABOVE:** The art deco style of the Burgh Island Hotel off the south coast of Devon attracts people from all over the world.

**LEFT:** The hotel has been visited by many well-known figures of the 20th Century.

**RIGHT:** Self-made multi-millionaire Giles Fuchs is the owner - or 'custodian' as he puts it - of Devon's Burgh Island Hotel



to stay on Burgh Island. Giles, who owns and runs a serviced office business in London, says he was immediately hooked by the appearance, location and history of the building – which he'd never heard of before.

"It's bizarre but it's true," he says, describing the moment he was shown an image of Burgh Island over coffee with businessman Duncan Gray, who was planning to buy hotels.

"He said he was buying this island in Devon and I just went: wow! Can I get involved? He said no; he was fully funded. A week later, Duncan rang me and asked if I was still interested and I said:

Yes, I'll buy it. It was a no brainer. I'd just fallen in love with it."

As a teenager, Giles failed his A-Levels before turning up on the doorstep of an estate agency and asking for a job.

Years later he went on to co-found Office Space in Town



Photo: Office Space in Town

(OSiT) with his sister Nikki and is now a self-made multi-millionaire.

Giles says he wanted this latest Devon-based venture to provide a safe investment but also a place where he and his family could enjoy spending time together.

"It was about love, good investment and somewhere we could go on holiday," says Giles. "It's an island off the south coast of Devon for god's sake. It's beautiful!"

Giles admits he has had his work cut out. The hotel was in need of modernisation, all the while preserving its beautiful Art Deco heritage.

The businessman immediately ▶

**'It was about love, good investment and somewhere we could go on holiday. It's an island off the south coast of Devon for god's sake. It's beautiful!'**



Photo: Burgh Island Hotel/Victoria Gibbs

Many of the suites have been given a makeover.

invested more than £1 million to renovate some of the rooms and suites. The kitchen has been replaced, floors stripped and furniture updated.

Giles has also doubled the number of staff on site, drafting in Mark Mosimann, son of legendary Swiss chef Anton Mosimann, to help with training. Giles has also created a staff area in the hotel and bought a cottage in Bigbury for some of the hotel's workers to live in.

There are plans to improve staff accommodation further, plus spend another £500,000 on renovations to the main Grade II-listed building, one of the foremost examples of the Art Deco style in Europe.

"It's all looking pretty spectacular," says Giles, adding that occupancy is up and turnover has almost doubled in the past two years. "We're not there yet. We know we can still improve."

One of the major tasks ahead is to spread the word about Burgh

Island and what a fantastic place it is.

Lockdown saw the building close, with just a handful of staff on site ("We moved them into the best suites in the hotel!" says Giles. "It's a pretty good place to isolate.")

Now the plan is to reopen with great fanfare, telling the whole country about this very unique retreat and ensuring this important building can be enjoyed by even more guests in the years to come – famous or not.

"My vision is to get it full throughout the year," says Giles. "My mother said to me when we bought it: it will be interesting to see if you take the super rich's money or you stay at the prices you're at with the clientele you've got. My view is that we stick with the people who already go there. It's like a house party because everyone is so similar."

Island life certainly has its perks. ♦

See [burghisland.com](http://burghisland.com)

## COMING UP IN SOUTH DEVON

(please check websites for latest information).

**2 August:** Celebrate Start Bay will feature local musicians, inspiring words from speakers and story tellers and demonstrations from local organisations, plus locally made food and drink. See [slnr.org.uk](http://slnr.org.uk)

**2 to 14 August:** See the local artistic talent at Dartmouth Art Society Summer Exhibition. See [dartartsociety.wixsite.com](http://dartartsociety.wixsite.com)

**20 to 22 August:** The Association of Sail Training Organisations (ASTO) is the UK's National Sail Training Organisation. Boats will race from Southampton to Dartmouth, the majority of the crews are aged under 25. The race is organised by ASTO, in association with Dartmouth Mayflower 400. See [visitsouthdevon.co.uk](http://visitsouthdevon.co.uk)

**5 September:** relax and enjoy some sunset beach yoga at South Milton Sounds, part of the National Trust's Big Night out on the Beach event. See [simplysoulful.co.uk](http://simplysoulful.co.uk)



Photo: Steve Haywood

Burgh Island and its surrounding area is simply stunning.

### FIVE THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT BURGH ISLAND, BIGBURY AND BANTHAM:

**Tractor trips:** Burgh Island is connected to the mainland by a sandy beach, which is covered daily at high tide. The famous 'sea tractor' takes visitors to and from the island at high tide.

**Out of sight:** The Pilchard Inn, at the foot of Burgh Island, was originally a 14th century hideout smugglers. The most notorious was an Elizabethan called Tom Crocker, who was allegedly shot outside the inn by a revenue officer.

**Re-fab to fabulous:** In the 1890s, the music hall star George H. Chirgwin built a prefabricated wooden house on Burgh Island, used by guests for weekend parties. The island was sold in 1927 to the filmmaker Archibald Nettlefold, who built a more substantial hotel in an Art Deco style.

**Noteable hotel guests:** Winston Churchill, The Beatles, Noel Coward, Josephine Baker and Agatha Christie have all stayed at the Burgh Island Hotel. Agatha Christie is said to have made Burgh her second home, writing two books on the island.

**Surfers paradise:** Nearby Bantham Beach has a reputation for being one of the best surfing beaches in Devon because of its topography and reliable big waves. The estuary and surrounding area are a natural haven for wildlife.