FROM SOAP SALESMAN TO RUNNING A FIRM AT THE CUTTING EDGE OF TECHNOLOGY





■ FAMILY HOME: Andy Wood outside Brereton Hall and (top left) in the drawing room, which is being hired out for wedding ceremonies

Master of the video games

MANCHESTER'S MILLIONAIRES



BY MATT FINNEGAN

ANDY Wood is a very modern man with his very own place in history. Modern, because he has made his fortune from one of the most futuristic businesses in the world — computer and video games. And it has secured his place in history — a magnificent Elizabethan country home, built in 1585.

Andy bought Brereton Hall, one of the first brick-built mansions in Cheshire, for £1m earlier this year. It is a Grade One listed building, dominated by two octagonal stone towers with battlemented turrets, which frame the imposing arched main entrance.

The hall has more than 50 rooms, including a banqueting hall, oak-panelled sitting rooms, elegant drawing rooms, nine principal bedrooms, eight bathrooms, even a minstrels gallery.

And it is crammed with history. The name Brereton first cropped up in the Domesday Book. Queen Elizabeth I is said to have laid the foundation stone for the hall. A dramatic mantelpiece in the stunning drawing room honours Good Queen Bess and bears her initials, the Royal Coat of Arms and the hall's founding date.

All around the room runs a cornice bearing the ancient royal shields of the crowned heads of Europe who held sway over their subjects during Elizabethan times.

The building has a priest's hidey-hole, elegant staircases and a galleried hall with a superb black and white tiled floor, which runs almost the entire length of the house. Everywhere there are marble fireplaces, fine pictures, intricate carvings, and stained glass.

At every turn, outstanding examples of architecture and heraldry which chart the ancient traditions and legends of the Brereton family.

And now it all belongs to Andy Wood, who was born 39 years ago in Cardiff, was adopted when a few months old, raised in Cheadle Hulme, and left school without a single O-level.

NOW he is the modern-day Lord of Brereton Hall — and master of his own piece of olde worlde history. And with great irony, the boy who was once sent to the back of the class for school history lessons is now lovingly recording the hall's medieval past. "I must be making up for lost time," he laughs, as he proudly shows off his country pile.

Andy, his wife Bev, and their four young children fell in love with the hall when it was featured in a magazine. Until recently, it had been a girls' school.

Now Bev is running her own business from the hall — hiring out the beautiful drawing room for civil marriage ceremonies and the adjoining Victorian conservatory — strewn at present with children's toys — for wedding receptions. "We thought that might be an interesting way to combat the heating bills," says Andy, with a smile.

It is their only concession to commercialism, for Brereton Hall is very much a family home. "We bought it because we thought it would be a bit of an adventure," he says, with typical understatement.

That same spirit of adventure probably explains why he has risen to the top and become a big player in the world of computer games.

Success has come from following the advice of his adoptive father, who languished in the civil service for long, frustrating years.

"He told me, 'Never stay in one job,' and I have always remembered that. I think it was a highly responsible thing for a father to say. I like change — whether at work or at home. And you only get one go at life — this is not a rehearsal.

"I suppose my determination to experience as much as possible, to focus on things and to achieve, probably comes from being adopted. I think it's added a lot of extra drive to my character."

After leaving school without qualifications — "I was too busy trying to become a rock star" — he eventually went to polytechnic and graduated with a degree in social sciences — "I chose that subject because I didn't know what I wanted to do."

Then he started selling soap powder. He didn't stay, but moved on to get a foot in the door of one of the emerging new industries — computer games. His sales skills were priceless — "They had no sales experience at all."

Then he moved on again, setting up his own company selling computer games to the High Street multiples. He had 50 No 1 sellers in 10 years.

But he wanted more. "We were selling other people's stuff — we weren't creating our own product. To get real satisfaction, you have to create something."

He remembered dad's advice again, and five years ago, with partner Peter Jones, set up Mirage Technologies to develop their own software and games, with state-of-the-art special effects, stunning graphics and cinema quality action sequences.

The 40-strong Congleton-based company is now at the cutting edge of technology and bursts with young, talented go-getters — spiky-haired computer programmers, introvert mathematicians, gifted designers.

Mirage's most successful game so far, "Rise Of The Robots" — a futuristic combat game with spectacular graphics and soundtrack by Queen's Brian May — took two years and more than £1.7m to develop. And it took more than $50m in sales.

Other games, all universally hailed by afficionados, have included Peter Gabriel's "Xplora", Ian Botham's "Cricket", "Darkseed" — based on the fantastic artwork of Aliens designer H R Giger — and many more.

The next project is a 3D snooker simulation game, which can rotate around 360 degrees, creates any shape or surface of table and can make balls pop like bubbles or explode like bombs.

"To create that we had to employ three PhD mathematicians to work with our programmers and a guy with a PhD in artificial intelligence, who had been working on computer simulation of the brain . . . these are very bright guys."

Surprisingly, there are no signs of his hit computer games at home in historic Brereton Hall, although he does have his share of millionaire playthings: a gull-winged De Lorean motor car, a 20-strong collection of vintage Les Paul guitars and a subterranean music room where he practises his drumming — he still plays in a band with his teenage mates.

BUT, remarkably, this very modern millionaire, who spends all his time thinking up the latest computer games, hates that other modern-day invention, television.

"I don't watch TV, apart from the football. It does more harm than we all know. It's easy to lose yourself in it, watching other people's lives instead of getting on with your own."

Couldn't the same be said of computer and video games?

He pauses and gazes out over the Cheshire countryside from the towers of historic Brereton Hall.

Then Andy Wood, a modern man with his own place in the past, laughs. "It's a wise man who accepts his own contradictions."