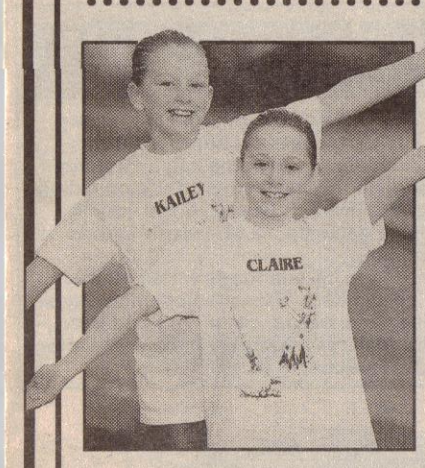
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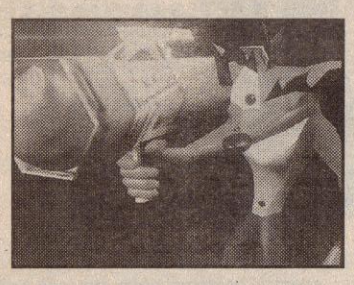
Your complete guide to the weekend

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Homes
BY RO BARRATT

Master in this hall . . .

I'VE visited a few houses in my time, but never before have I felt quite so excited. After all, it's not every day you get an invitation to explore one of the oldest and most historic Elizabethan manor houses in the country. Driving down a tree-lined country lane, in a village just outside Congleton, you see the magnificent twin octagonal towers of Brereton Hall come into view, their castellated turrets jutting into the sky.

The imposing facade of this grade I listed stately home instantly transports you back to Tudor England. Local legend has it that Queen Elizabeth I herself may have laid the foundation stone for the house and once slept in one of its opulent bedrooms.

If the descendants of the Brereton family were used to standing on ceremony, the current occupants of the house have dispensed with outmoded tradition. After 50 years as a girls' private boarding school, Brereton Hall has been transformed into a family home once more.

Andy Wood, a computer software entrepreneur, and his wife, Beverley, moved into the Hall just over two years ago, with their four children, aged between three and 15.

In a short time, they have injected renewed vitality and energy into the house which has become a kind of living exhibit.

The couple have opened up their home to the public for Sunday lunches in the dining room, and they also cater for wedding receptions and a variety of private functions in the banqueting hall. As I arrive, Beverley is up to her elbows in washing up, and so it is left to Andy, now a well-practised guide, to take me on a magical history tour.

"I think you could say there was an equal amount of courage and madness involved in coming to live here," observes Andy, dryly, as we begin our journey from the oak-panelled sitting room – which doubles as his office and the children's TV room.

"Our previous home was an extended five-bedroomed bungalow, set in 30 acres of land, which we sold to buy a 60-roomed hall, set in just seven acres of land! It wasn't until the 11th week of living here that I discovered the very last room. What I thought was a cupboard turned out to be a bathroom!"



■ ANDY WOOD, the master of Brereton Hall, is pictured ABOVE with his stately pile; and (INSET ABOVE) in one of the bedrooms with his sons, Tom, 9, Conor, 5, and Ben, 3; (RIGHT) beside one of the ornate fireplaces

Perhaps the grandest room of the house is the 33ft x 20ft drawing room, which is decorated with 43 heraldic shields and dominated by a huge carved fireplace featuring the royal coat of arms of Elizabeth I, which stretches as high as the ceiling. This is the room that is most in demand for civil weddings – although it is hoped that the brides have better luck than Queen Elizabeth's mother, Anne Boleyn, who was beheaded by her loving husband, Henry VIII!

As we move up the stone staircase to the second floor, observing all the period pieces of interest as we go, three-year-old Ben claps his hands in front of a rather incongruous plastic monkey dressed in football kit, and the chant of "Ole ole ole ole!", amid raucous cheering, resounds around the cavernous hall. By the time we reach the landing, the boys are already having running races up and down and are red in the face.

"The children think it's a great adventure playground," laughs Andy, adopting a very laid-back viewpoint on the potential danger to his investment. "The hallway and minstrels' gallery make a great track for their motorised tricycles!

"When we first moved in, we lived in the main Hall and rattled around from room to room. However, the night I found the children all watching a different television in a different room, I made the decision to create a more intimate living area."

Moving up to the top-floor and attic rooms, Andy beckons me to crawl through a narrow passageway and open a door half my size. I feel like Alice in Wonderland, especially as the doorway leads into another enormous landing running the entire length of the house.

There is no end to the historical interest. We enter Lord William Brereton's bedroom and dressing room, which is now used as a bathroom, to discover a beautiful marble fireplace containing images of a man and a woman. "Every fireplace tells a story here," says Andy. "This was built in 1633, to celebrate the marriage of William Brereton and Elizabeth Goring, who was brought up in the place where Buckingham Palace was eventually built."

As we move back downstairs, the contented diners are settling in the cosy bar area after their sumptuous roast. Beverley returns from the kitchen to resume her role as mum, and Andy prepares to hear the band he manages, a four-piece of talented teenagers called Immaculate, stage a rehearsal in the outside "gym". Since the days when minstrels entertained lords and ladies, Brereton Hall has never seen such activity.

"We decided that the place is better full of people than empty," explains Andy, pragmatically. "At first it felt weird having people being entertained in our house, but now we enjoy it and often join in with the celebrations.

"We feel immensely privileged to be guardians of such wonderful heritage."