The new age Elizabethans

Rock music has replaced the minstrels, but the coats of arms remain. **Caroline McGhie** meets the family that rattles about in the 60 rooms of Brereton Hall, now for sale

Andy Wood juggles the demands of work, the mobile phone and four rowdy children with panache. In his 16th-century mansion in Cheshire he has a perfect Grade I house, with twin octagonal turreted towers and, as a rock music and computer games impresario, he is as inventive and playful as any Elizabethan courtier.

Just as it would have done four centuries ago, his home, Brereton Hall, is made to earn some of its keep. Music groups pile in to record in the studio before joining the family for large lunches. Romantic weddings take place in the Great Hall, with receptions in the conservatory. In summer the grounds click with cameras as they become the backdrop for photographic shoots of willowy models wearing tweed jackets — or not very much at all.

"We bought it for the adventure," says Andy. Three years ago he and his wife, Beverley, had been looking for a prime slice of Prestbury, Alderley Edge or Wilmslow with seven bedrooms, tennis court and swimming pool. Then they discovered that the Elizabethan dream cost about the same.

"It was in such good condition. It took 12 years to build 400 years ago and was as good as new — none of your cardboard and plastic," says Andy. "We only live once, so what a marvellous adventure to have."

They and their four children, Nicola, Tom, Conor and Ben, opted to settle into the snugness of the converted servants' quarters, the three boys choosing to sleep together, dormitory-style, in one room. "They don't need the other 60-odd rooms here," says Andy. "But I like to think that they have had a unique experience in using the Hall as a cycle track."

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The house is admired by history groups for its panelled interiors, minstrels' gallery and magnificent fireplaces decorated with coats of arms. "We sit surrounded by the shields of all the rich neighbours who could be reached by horseback within a day," says Andy.

His company, Chaos Productions, attracts a rather different sort of visitor. "We work with lots of musicians. Stone Roses have been here, and a new band called Immaculate, which is a cross between the Beatles, Manic Street Preachers and Pink Floyd.

"On the other hand, you can walk into the drawing-room and find a grand piano and a soprano working together. It gives the place a Bohemian feel and it is very enjoyable."

His Elizabethan predecessor, the hard-drinking aristocrat Sir William Brereton, who built the Hall, had strong enough royal connections to invite Elizabeth I to lay the foundation stone. His very early panelled bedroom and dressing-room are still intact, decorated with elaborate mantelpieces celebrating illustrious family marriages.

The heads of muzzled bears appear frequently as a motif around the house, and the muzzled bear is a feature of the Brereton coat of arms. The story is that Sir William was interrupted at dinner by his valet and was so angry that he chased him upstairs and killed him. The King — Charles I — offered him a pardon if he could invent an effective bear muzzle in the space of three days.

Sir William was shut in the Tower for the stipulated time and then brought before a bear, whereupon he flung his newly invented muzzle over its head and escaped unharmed.

The Wood family is ready for another adventure now and are selling Brereton, with its nine principal bedrooms, eight bathrooms, flat, domestic offices, kitchens, banqueting hall and muzzled bears, for £2·75 million through Jackson-Stops & Staff (01625 540340).

What next? "The simple life, an apartment in Soho, in New York, a dairy farm. Who knows?" says Andy.



PHOTOGRAPHS: SIMON NORFOLK





For sale, £2·75m Elizabeth I laid the foundation stone of Brereton Hall, main picture. Left, the Wood family. Above, their recording studio

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