# The reluctant country squire

Technocrats were seen as the saviours of country houses - but now even the ones who can afford them are moving out. Ross Clark reports

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Passing fancy: what Andy Wood lacks in squirearchal grandeur, he more than makes up for in brains and cash

As you enter Brereton Hall, a red-brick Tudor pile near Congleton, in Cheshire, you cannot fail to be unnerved by the portrait, hanging above the stairs, of a fearsome aristocrat. The figure, dressed in riding breeches and glowering from above his handlebar moustache, sits at a table with his swords laid out before him, a pair of gloves menacingly dangling over the edge like a Gestapo interrogation aid. Any moment, you expect his lordship to appear at the top of the stairs, demanding to know what the hell you think you are doing in his home.

When the real owner appears, the contrast is comical. With his glasses, sneakers and zip-pocketed trousers, Andy Wood makes Bill Gates look imposing. Anyone less likely to be spotted riding to hounds or collecting rent from his stooped peasants would be hard to imagine. But what he lacks in squirearchal grandeur, Andy more than makes up for in brains and cash. Unlike many of the aristocratic families toughing it out before a one-bar electric fire in the ancestral home, Andy can actually afford to live here. Having made his fortune from computer games with names such as Mortal Kombat, he is one of the many boffins who bought country piles during the great 1990s hi-tech boom.

While old money retreated to more manageable homes, in rushed the Nerdocracy. The great families of yore appeared destined to a future of envy, as their premises were taken over by men with glasses and ponytails.

One might imagine that the Brereton family crest - a muzzled bear which pops up on walls and fireplaces throughout the house - would give way to the arms of the Wood family: perhaps a joystick, a mouse and an exploding fireball from one of Andy's computer games; that the stern geezer hanging in the entrance hall - a headmaster during Brereton Hall's spell as a girls' school - is taken down and replaced with a picture of a beaming Andy at his Playstation; and that Woods will be lording it around Brereton Hall for centuries to come.

But that is not how things are going to be. While Andy says his business has been unaffected by the dotcom crash, he, his wife Bev and their four children are moving out to build something smaller and more modern.

This scenario is not uncommon. Far from enjoying a life of unparalleled luxury in an opulent home, many technocrats - used to casual clothes and informal offices - are finding their surroundings somewhat stifling. Life in a country pile, they have decided, isn't all it is cracked up to be.

While the local squirearchy marked his arrival with invitations to hunt balls, Andy was unimpressed by his sudden social standing. In fact, for those of us who salivate over photographs of large houses and can only dream of making the sort of transition he has done - from three-bedroom 1960s semi in Cheadle Hulme - his manner is alarmingly blase.

"I don't think the quality of life is improved by being surrounded by lots of nice furniture and paintings," he says as we walk into a sparsely decorated drawing-room with magnificent fireplace, gold-painted radiators but none of the clutter which graces the traditional aristocratic home. "We often ask ourselves why we moved here; it was just an interesting thing to do at the time. I don't see the house as a trophy. The biggest advantage from living in a place this size is that when you want a game of five-a-side football, you can have it in your own garden."

That is not quite how the Brereton saw their home. Sir William Brereton built the house in the late 16th century - the fireplace in the drawing-room bears the date 1585 - in order to impress royalty and his fellow aristocrats. The faade is on the scale of the great gate of an Oxbridge college, while the plan of the building was in the form of a large "E", for Elizabeth.The interior was plastered with dozens of crests and every room, even a pokey bathroom upstairs, adorned with grand fireplaces.

The end product impressed the antiquarian William Camden, who wrote that Sir William Brereton had "added much credit and honour to the place by a magnificent and sumptuous house that he had there built". More importantly, Sir William's efforts gained the admiration of good Queen Bess herself: he became the 1st Lord Brereton.

By the 19th century, the family decided the hall was no longer grand enough and remodelled it. Vast, floor-to-ceiling windows were installed to the rear. The old wooden staircase was shunted off to a wing and replaced by one of wrought iron. The dining-room was panelled in oak - then painted to resemble walnut.

While the Brereton title died out in the 18th century, there were enough cousins to keep the house in family ownership for more than three centuries until the Second World War, when the last owner finally gave up the unequal struggle against taxation and the cost of servants. The Hall then became a school until 1992.

The family is scattered around the world but they are still in awe of their former ancestral pile. Last year, Andy and Bev hosted a gathering of 120 Breretons - including university professors from Chicago and farmers from Zimbabwe - showed them around the house and gave them tea and scones.

The Breretons also held a service in the church which stands next to the hall. "It turns out there is a pew in the church which is reserved for me as owner of the hall," says Andy. "But I've never been in to have a look."

While the latterday Breretons travelled thousands of miles to crane their necks and enjoy the architecture, Bev, an amateur kick-boxer, has tired of turrets and decorative fireplaces. "In our last house, we had a fish tank incorporated into the kitchen and a fitted microwave," she says. "Then we moved in here and we didn't have a proper kitchen at all. And we can't do anything about it because the house is listed. The first time my father came to see the house he said to me: 'You've grown into a princess.' But I want somewhere where I can do my own thing."

The Woods insist that their move is nothing to do with the cost of running a Tudor mansion designed to be maintained by a small army of servants. They are certainly not short of a bean or two: Andy's idea of an impulse-purchase was a Delorean sports car, which he picked up one evening on the way home for £18,000. "It wasn't a very good car," he says. "I only bought it so I could drive home and surprise the kids."