

By K. Lee Howard

Sherlock's Home

Connecticut's most unusual mansion gets a full makeover.



Gillette Castle as it was then and is now. It opens again to the public this month.

FOR SALE: Castle in the country. Six stories, 24 rooms, 66 ornamental carved doors, 98 light fixtures, 104 windows, 3,962 square feet of wall coverings, 7,000 square feet of exterior walls, 14,372 square feet of living space. Fabulous water views. Three-and-a-half miles of miniature train tracks, on 184 acres. Needs a little TLC. Listed in East Haddam for \$11.5 million. as long to restore as it did to build. And it

A real estate ad aimed at a millionaire? Nope. It's a fixer-upper for the little guy—and all of us are paying.

Gillette Castle, the Connecticut tourist mecca closed for more than three years, reopens Memorial Day weekend after a state-financed \$11.5 million restoration and improvement project. Brainchild of famed actor William Gillette, the castle took almost

as long to restore as it did to build. And it cost more than 10 times as much. It turned out to be the home-improvement nightmare of the decade for the state—which, though it might be tempted to run the ad above to recoup costs, is holding on to the historic property that attracts some 200,000 tourists yearly.

"There was a lot more structural damage than we expected," says Linda Levine, the program specialist in the DEP's parks division who has overseen the project. "I'm not sure how the stone ceiling above the main door stood up, the rafters were so rotted."

Water problems haunted the castle from the day of its completion, in 1919, and probably even before that. Gillette, who earned his millions as a Broadway actor best known for playing Sherlock Holmes, knew he wanted his home to resemble a castle on the Rhine. He didn't seem to have thought through, at first, that his aesthetic demands meant

the place he referred to as his "stone heap" would be inundated by water seeping through its walls.

"We think his intent was to have the look of a dry-laid wall with no mortar," says David Barkin, project architect, referring to the gooey substance that fills gaps in stone walls and, once dry, helps keep water out. "He had a leaking castle from the day he built it."

Gillette appears to have been a quick study, though. He soon realized practical thinking would be required to protect the castle from the elements. He deployed awnings over windows and used mortar to shore up the walls. Lots and lots of mortar.

As Barkin began to figure out what Gillette had done, he noted mortar in mustard, green, red, black and burgundy dotting the walls. But he believes he has solved "The Mystery of the Many-Colored Mortars."

"To get back the look of dry-laid stone, he experimented with painting the mortar [in a variety of colors]," hypothesizes Barkin, who has roamed the place with PalmPilot and cell phone rather than Holmesian pipe and deerstalker cap. Not wanting the maintenance headache of repainting every few years, the state has decided on an off-white shade.

"Gillette Castle is like no building anywhere," Barkin says. "No one ever tried to duplicate it . . . It really defies description?"

The same could be said for Gillette himself, scion of a prominent Hartford family (his father was a senator, his mother a descendant of Thomas Hooker). Disinherited when he became an actor, he went on to adapt a series of Sherlock Holmes stories for the stage. Critics weren't entranced but the public was, and he made millions. In fact, audiences had such a hard time letting go that his "farewell tour" lasted two years.

Even at age 60 as he settled into retirement in his dream castle high above the Connecticut River, he didn't slow down. He's said to have raced around the site on a motorcycle, which one day wound up in the river after its brakes failed. The train around the property, however, stayed. He was obsessed with the miniature choo-choo, which he ran at full throttle, in some spots teetering near the edge of the hillside above the river.

As amusing as Gillette's outdoor escapades may have been, Barkin, president of Barkin Andrade Architects in New Haven, seems most taken with the actor's in-house projects, particularly the massive wooden doors and intricate lock mechanisms he designed and had built by local craftsmen.

"They just invented this stuff as they went along," he marvels. The skill of his workmen inspired Gillette to improvise. Plans for the

From the Field

castle exist, says Barkin, but the actor kept changing his mind and kept no notes. It took Barkin's firm 800 hours to document the layout, including a secret tower room and hidden passageway. Still, questions lingered.

Among the mysteries Barkin has tackled is "The Case of the Seaweed and Sawdust Insulation." It seems that Gillette bought into some experimental materials. Sawdust, intended to insulate or soundproof, led to dry rot. Seaweed insulation backed by paper didn't work out either. "I think someone sold him a bill of goods," chuckles Barkin.

Then there's "The Case of the Rotating Raffias." At first it appeared the nearly 4,000 square feet of wall coverings had been purposely flipped. But analysis by a textile conservator found that most of the colorful grass weavings and sisal rugs, also damaged by water seepage, had been meant by Gillette to be displayed in all their colorful majesty.

"People will have a whole new castle to get to know," says Barkin. "It will feel a lot different ... lighter, with more colors around."

The new look will be especially noticeable in the Great Hall, where Gillette entertained such notables as Albert Einstein, Charlie Chaplin and Helen Hayes. Not only will the wall hangings be exposed for the first time in decades, but the hand-carved fir and oak woodwork has been dramatically lightened.

Barkin's charge was to return the castle to the way it might have been in Gillette's time. But as the actor lived there for nearly two decades, the question was: Which time?

"This place is on the National Register, so we had to be sensitive to the original design," says Barkin. "It's been a balancing act." (Together with the state, he settled on a time toward the end of Gillette's residency.)

Complicating matters was the state's insistence that the project adhere to life-safety and building-code updates. The mansion will now include a sprinkler and smoke-detection system and a railing extension overlooking the Great Hall. The plan, which was implemented by Kronenberger and Sons Restoration of Middletown, also included the creation of a climate-controlled archive as well as the replacement or restoration of 98 light fixtures and 104 windows. A dark green color once used around the windows has been replaced with a more historically accurate hue.

Jim Sabith, project manager for Kronenberger, estimates the restoration took 50,000 man-hours (24 man-years) as well as an astounding 7,500 gallons of mortar.

Maintenance had been irregular over the years and not in keeping with the historical value of the house, state officials concede, but restoration has brought new life. "People should expect to see a clean, restored castle," says Barkin, whose firm has put 3,500 hours into the project. But still, it's not quite ready for prime time. The visitors' center, reconfigured parking lot and updated exhibits probably won't be complete till fall.

The beloved miniature train in which Gillette careened around—they say the trestles were so low a passenger who stood up would have lost his head—also won't be ready right away. The state has located the original engines (at one time displayed at Lake Compounce), but finding the original tracks has proven trickier, says the DEP's Linda Levine.

Levine, who has been under pressure from neighbors and environmentalists over the train restoration, says the railroad will basically be a static display anyway. "We'll probably set it in a single loop and run it one Sunday a month, so people will be able to see it—but not ride it," she says. "We'll never run it the way Gillette did—all over his property. OSHA would have our head."

Or the head of someone who stood up at the wrong time.

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