



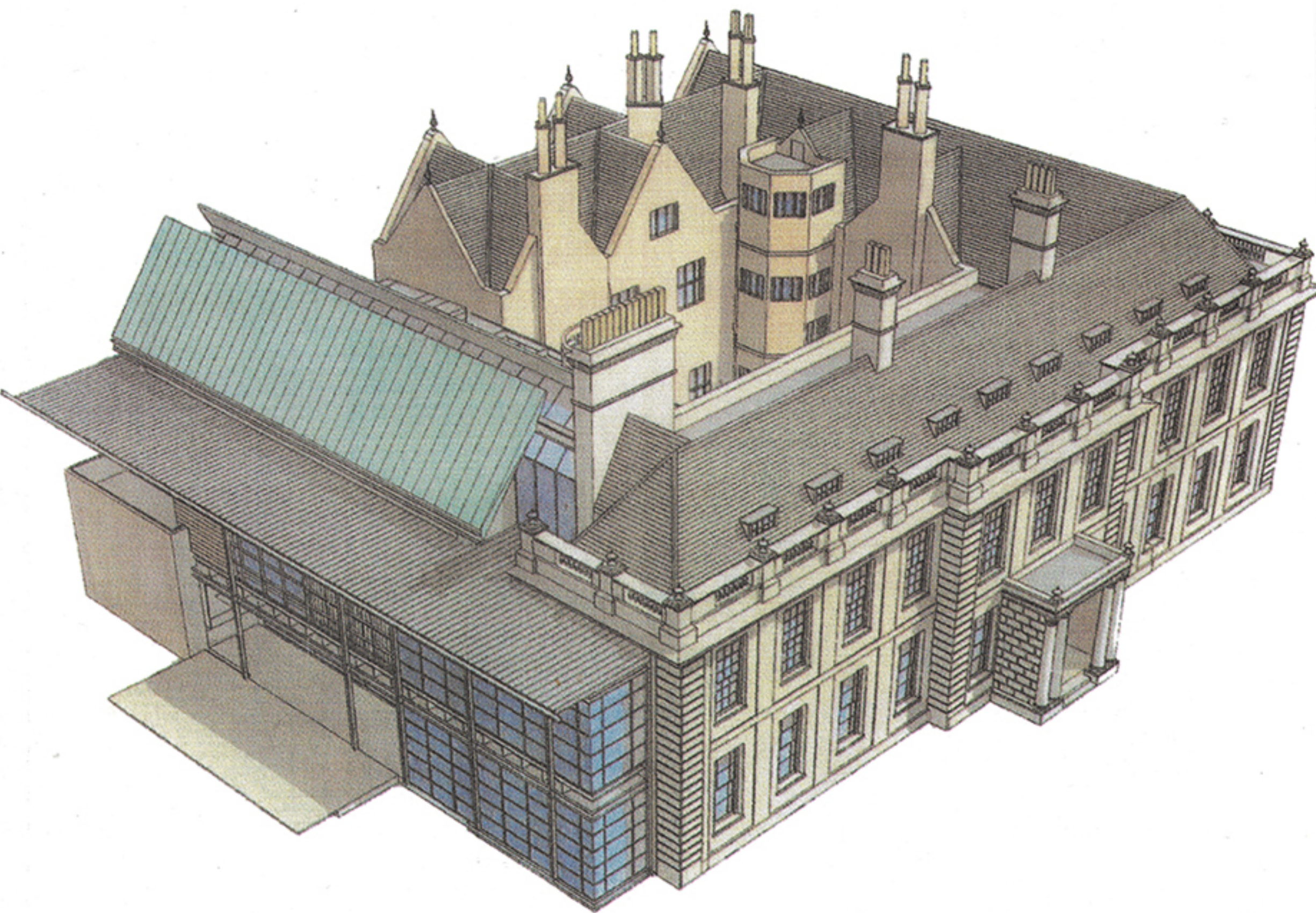
The Millennium and Beyond

In 1997 an arts-based project, The Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World (known as CCANW) under the direction of Clive and Jill Adams, had just withdrawn from negotiating a site for their headquarters in North Devon and were looking for a new location. Their vision was to create a centre to explore society's changing relationship to nature through the arts. The Arts Council Lottery Fund (ACE) had awarded Torridge District Council £75,000 for a feasibility study for the plan, and when this site fell through, it was agreed that £20,000 of that grant could be used for an 'options appraisal' study examining other suitable sites. Poltimore House was suggested by the National Trust, owners of the North Devon land and, after considering thirteen other areas in Devon, it was decided to proceed with Poltimore House. Following this, the ACE agreed that East Devon District Council would coordinate a development study, and as a result of an architectural competition, two leading Edinburgh firms, Richard Murphy Architects and Simpson & Brown Architects, were selected to prepare an integrated approach which would conserve the historic building and move it into the 21st century. The new element would be as distinct from Poltimore's 18th-century rebuilding as the 18th-century additions were from Richard Bampfylde's Tudor house. These plans were enthusiastically supported by English Heritage.

In 1998 Buildings At Risk Trust applied to English Heritage for a repair grant of £480,000 for Poltimore House; this was rejected because of uncertainties relating to the end user, and by 1999 BART had become increasingly concerned about the lack of a solution

OPPOSITE

*The derelict south,
in spring 2004*



ABOVE
Design for Poltimore House for the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World. Drawing by Richard Murphy Associates in association with Simpson and Brown Architects of Edinburgh, 2000

to the use of the house. Their proposal was to put it on the open market, but English Heritage and all those concerned were convinced that the property could not withstand another cycle of commercial speculation and instead suggested the setting up of a wholly independent Poltimore House Trust. The Trust was established early the following year with Alan Payne as Secretary. His first job was to recruit a cross-section of people suitably qualified—and enthusiastic—to act as Trustees. Nine were initially appointed, Derek Button became the first Chairman and monthly meetings began in Exeter in the spring of 2000. The Trust acquired the freehold of the property, received charitable status, and declared its main aim to be the restoration and re-use of Poltimore House with public access to the historic parts and grounds a major consideration. A

quarterly newsletter was instituted, the mailing list growing from an initial 50 in 2000 to nearly 900 by 2004. With the publicity that these activities generated, enquiries and donations began to arrive from various parts of the country, and indeed from across the world—notably from former pupils of Poltimore College (1923–1939) and Dover College (1940–1945) and from members of the nursing staff, as well as from patients and their relatives, dating from the hospital era (1945–1975). Two restricted funds were set up at the instigation of former members of the schools, one by Poltimore College to help restore the 17th-century staircase and one by the Old Dovorians Association to reinstate the chimneypiece in the 18th-century Saloon.

Whatever grants or loans might be got in the future by an end-user, it became obvious that even small-scale fundraising was going to be essential to keep the regeneration of Poltimore House in the public eye. In April 2000, as part of a Poltimore village millennium celebration, the Wardour Garrison, a Living History group, was invited to set up their camp in the grounds of the house for three nights and re-enact

BELOW
A group of Old Poltimore College and Dover College pupils and former Poltimore Hospital staff and patients outside the main door in 2002 following the BBC Restoration filming





the negotiation and signing of the Treaty of Exeter which had taken place at Poltimore on 9th April, 1646. This was a joint venture by Poltimore Parish Council, CCANW and Poltimore House Trust, and proved to be a highly successful event enjoyed by over 700 visitors. A photographic exhibition was held in Poltimore Community Hall the same afternoon, covering the history of the House in pictures, also displaying the new architects' plans for the development of the house by Richard Murphy and Simpson & Brown for CCANW. The owner of the woodlands adjoining the Poltimore arboretum opened up the path from the House to Poltimore Church, which was also open to the public all day. This 'open day' was a pointer to what could be achieved for future public access to the house and grounds. In January 2001 CCANW submitted an application to the Arts Council for £2,500,000 from a total capital scheme of £11,170,000. In the event of this application being successful, East Devon District Council Lottery Funding Working Party recommended a grant of £461,000 as partnership funding to CCANW. A separate application by CCANW (inter-dependent with the Arts Council application) to the Heritage Lottery Fund for £4,872,720 to be used for the historic building out of the total capital scheme of £11,170,000 was made in April 2001.

In June 2001 the Arts Council announced that 60 capital projects worth £90 million had been admitted to their programme, but the South West was amongst the three lowest regions in England to benefit, and only two capital projects in Devon, Somerset and Cornwall were to be supported—and Poltimore House was not one of them. As a result, CCANW had to withdraw its inter-dependent application to

ABOVE

Scenes from the Wardour Garrison's enactment of 1646, April 2000

the Heritage Lottery Fund and in December submitted a new one for £6,800,000 towards restoring the historic parts of the house and the new build part of the regeneration plan. For various reasons, mainly financial ones, this application was turned down by the HLF in July 2002.

The problems faced by CCANW in obtaining funds from the Arts Council and Heritage Lottery Fund were not helped by the long delays between consultations. The strategy of the Arts Lottery in particular changed from support for something as bold and imaginative as CCANW's plans for Poltimore to avoiding anything where there was a risk, especially concerning financial viability. Poltimore House Trust meanwhile continued to regard CCANW as the only visible end-user for the house, although the Trust was powerless to influence the outcome as far as the Lottery bodies were concerned.

The end of 2002, however, brought a ray of hope for Poltimore. BBC2 commissioned Endemol, a well-known production company, to produce a new BBC2 series entitled *Restoration*, highlighting the plight of thirty historic buildings 'at risk' in the UK. For the series, which was to be shown in the summer of 2003, the country was divided into ten regions with three buildings in each region, the

BELOW

The house in its landscape, 2004



RIGHT*A working day with the Friends*

programme being in the form of a competition to be decided by public vote at the end of the series with a money prize dependent on the number of votes cast. On the advice of English Heritage, Poltimore House was chosen to be one of the three contestants in the South West, along with Arnos Vale Cemetery in Bristol and Whitfield Tabernacle in Somerset. Griff Rhys Jones was the overall presenter, and he spent a day at Poltimore with a group comprising representatives of both schools and both hospitals together with members of Poltimore House Trust and Simpson & Brown, the conservation architects. Each building also had its own 'champion' and Joan Bakewell CBE was chosen to fly the flag for Poltimore House. She subsequently became Patron of the Friends of Poltimore House.

Although Poltimore received enough votes (69,000) in the first round of voting to get a place in the final, the triumph of the Victoria Baths in Manchester over all other contestants was probably a foregone conclusion. The final took place at the Tower of London in mid-September and was attended by enthusiasts for the cause from Devon, together with Derek Button and Alan Payne, Chairman and Secretary of Poltimore House Trust and supporters from London and Edinburgh. Nevertheless, in spite of missing a financial reward,

the programme put Poltimore House in the spotlight in no small way. Added to this, the Trustees had already decided to open as much of the house to the public as was deemed safe, and for eight Sunday afternoons up to the last day of voting, hundreds of visitors queued in brilliant sunshine (or, on one occasion in pouring rain) for a chance to view the interior of a house that for the last twenty years had been locked, shuttered and hidden from public view. Over 2000 names were recorded in the Visitors Book during this period.

During 2003 it became gradually clear that, saving a miracle, the strategy of inter-dependent Lottery bids applied for by CCANW was not achieving its goal. The amounts of money available were becoming less and the policy of the Arts Council had not favoured innovative, but undoubtedly costly, projects such as CCANW at Poltimore House. Had Poltimore House been a winner in the Restoration programme, there could have been a different result, and it was by reason of the timing of the BBC programme that the final decision on whether CCANW should withdraw from the project or not was postponed until after the competition ended in September 2003.

The enormous interest generated in Poltimore House in part by the Restoration programme led to the formation of the Friends of Poltimore House in 2004. The core of the Friends has been formed

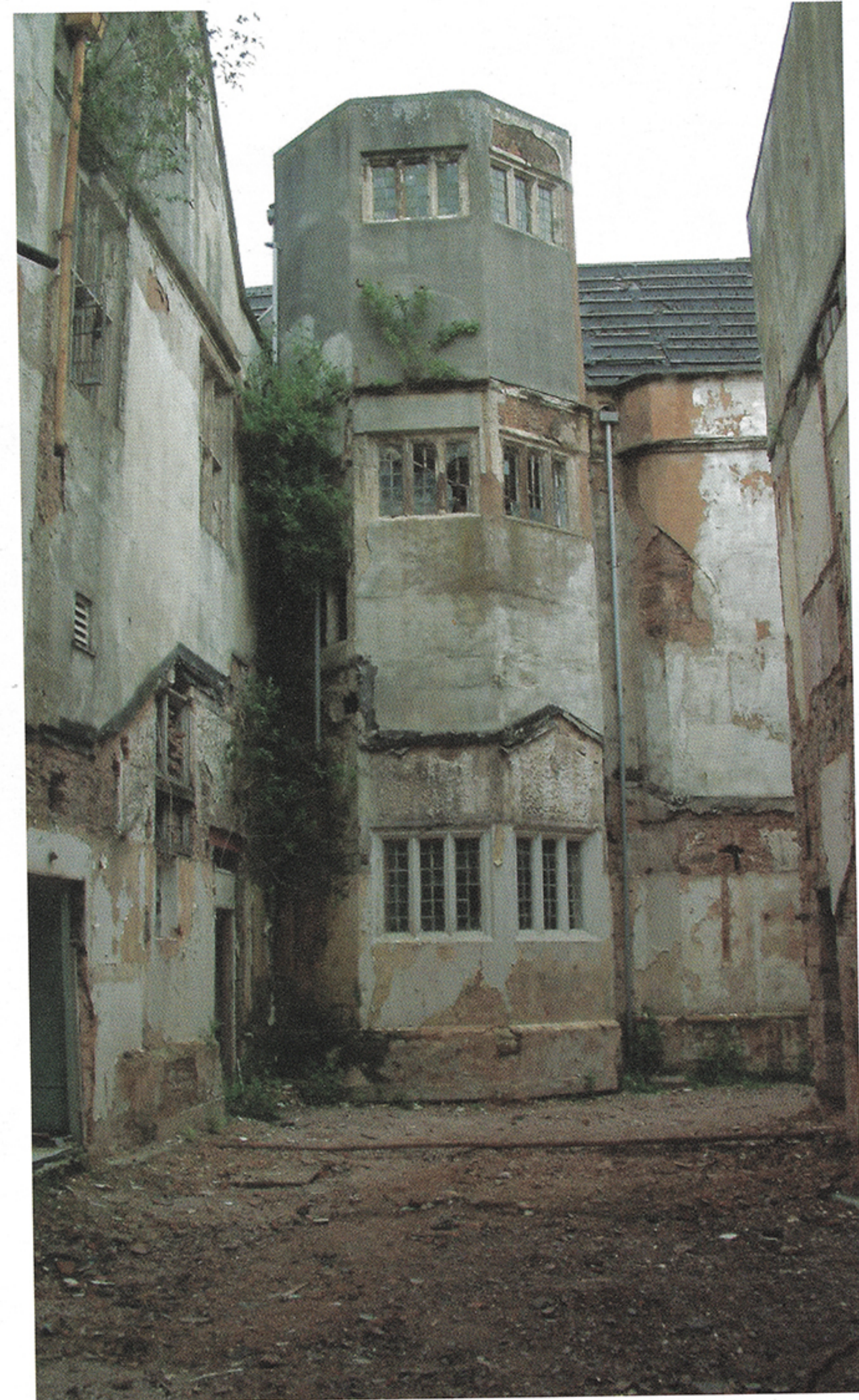
from those already mentioned who had some long standing interest in the House itself, and they have been joined by many Devon and Exeter residents who are specifically interested in the conservation of this historic building and its environment. An informal meeting was held at Broadclyst on February 14 chaired by Councillor Trevor Cope, and on

**BELOW***The Friends in the garden*

BELOW
The 1908 kitchen block

a Saturday morning very soon after this a group of enthusiasts met at Poltimore House for an inaugural working party in the grounds. A committee of Friends was soon formed under the Chairmanship of Keith Weedon, with a Secretary and Treasurer, and much of the work hitherto carried out by the Trust, such as the circulation of the quarterly Newsletter, was taken over by the Friends. This volunteer group has continued to carry out sterling work in the grounds, clearing the tangled areas around the house, pruning and cutting, topping and mowing the grassed areas and making new pathways. Because of continued break-ins it has also been necessary to renew security shuttering and boarding in many parts of the house, and in this work the carpentry skills of a dedicated group of Friends have been invaluable. This was particularly so after a serious bout of vandalism occurred in October 2004. A very comprehensive photographic record of the house since the formation of the Friends has been put together by Rikky Apps, and new ideas for fundraising are constantly being sought.

A great deal of the outdoor work was completed in time for a one day



LEFT
The 17th-century stair tower. Photograph Rikky Apps



Plant Sale held in the grounds in April and which proved an enormous success—for the 20 specialist nurseries from Devon and Cornwall who took part, for the 1500 visitors and for the Trust and Friends of Poltimore House. This event encouraged the Friends to hold Open Days on Sunday afternoons in June, July, August and September. Because of its present derelict state the house could not be open to the public. This was not a deterrent; the arboretum laid out in the 19th century with its now mature, fine trees, its wildlife—the unexpected flash of a jay’s wing, or the white rump of a roe deer (for they now live freely in the environs of the house) and its air of general tranquillity, has brought scores of visitors, some for the first time, to the realisation of what lies behind the now ruinous facade of this historic house. Much may be discovered, or re-discovered by future generations. Shadows of the 17th century formal gardens remain under the

ABOVE
A Russian T34 tank in the filming of Ten Days to Victory, with Poltimore as the Reichstag

lawns where games were played in modern times. Influences of the Enlightenment, so telling in the fabric of the mansion house, seem to have faded in the ‘outdoors’, or are still to be found. The obligatory flower borders of the Victorians, turned over to cabbages in 1940 were later returned to Nature, and since then the gardens have mercifully escaped the tweakings of 20th century horticultural fads and fancies.

There is at present no successor to the CCANW plans which foundered in 2003 and Poltimore House remains a ‘building at risk’. For more than two decades the ravages of Man and Nature have been unkind and severe. But the Friends of Poltimore House are now a real, physical presence in both the grounds and the building, and actively engaged in fundraising for major works of preservation shortly to be undertaken. The Trust is firmly committed to the regeneration of the building and the restoration of its historic parts for the public good. The great house of the Bampfylde which put the little village of Poltimore on the map four hundred years ago has yet to play its ultimate role in the life of Devon and the West Country.



LEFT
Keith Weedon, chairman of the Friends of Poltimore House, with the author, 2004