

Since taking over the redevelopment of the world-famous Goodwood estate, Lord March's feet have barely touched the ground as he now adds golf to the countless sporting activities held there. **Anthony Gardner** meets a modern manager in his ancestral home

ONE OF THE problems of working from home, Lord March has discovered, is not getting enough exercise. A while ago, however, he hit upon a solution. He would leave his house after breakfast by the back door, and walk round to the front door. Since the house in question is Goodwood, the magnificent mansion his family built on the Sussex Downs more than three centuries ago, this journey takes about ten minutes. 'It is,' he remarks, 'a great opportunity to organise your thoughts.'

Lately, however, even this excursion has gone by the board, so busy has Charles March been. Since taking over Goodwood from his father, the Duke of Richmond, 12 years ago, he has overseen the restoration of the house's interior, the redevelopment of its famous racecourse, and the reopening of its motor-racing circuit; he has also established two

grateful for it. My four sisters and I were all brought up in that way: we didn't have lots of nannies, and my mother was very concerned about what food we ate, which was pretty unusual for the 1960s. This whole place is full of history, but we're trying to run it as a business, and I don't want to live a life based on nostalgia. What I like is trying to put modern things into a more classical environment – it's exciting trying to mix them up.' So, for example, when he entertains at Goodwood, the guest list is as likely to include rock stars such as Bryan Ferry and Nick Mason of Pink Floyd as fellow aristocrats.

In manner and appearance, too, Charles March straddles the old and the new. For our interview he wears a traditionally cut navy suit and black Oxford shoes, but with an open-necked shirt which is a blaze of pink; his

March of progress

enormously popular motoring events, the Goodwood Revival and the Goodwood Festival of Speed. In his spare moments he keeps an eye on the estate's airfield and aircraft servicing business, a 2,800-acre organic farm, and (as a director of BMW) the Rolls-Royce factory which opened in the grounds in 2003 – not to mention his five children. When the British aristocracy is accused of being decadent, feeble and out of step with the times, it is to men such as the Earl of March and Kinrara that its supporters point as evidence to the contrary. 'My parents were very modern people,' he says, 'and I'm very

Etonian accent carries a hint of mockney, and it is hard to spend time with him without thinking of two of the age's most successful purveyors of the common touch, Richard Branson and Tony Blair. In conversation he displays an alarming command of management-speak, and then conclude with a splendid self-deprecating flourish – 'At least, that's the idea!'

Growing up, he says, he never had a sense of his future responsibilities forced upon him: 'My father never discussed it with me, and if I'd said to him, "I don't want to do it", he'd have said, "Fine". That was genuinely how he felt. But in some ways that's quite clever, because it

means you put more pressure on yourself – so in my mind there was never a choice.'

Before taking over Goodwood, Charles Settrington, as he was known before inheriting his present title on his grandfather's death, pursued a successful career as a photographer.

'I hated school, so I left at 17, and got a job with Stanley Kubrick,' he relates. 'It was just doing the pre-production stills for Barry Lyndon, but I'd go through them with him every night, and that was really interesting. First of all, he was a very good photographer and gave me a lot of helpful hints; but what was fantastic was being around someone





of that calibre and that focused. He was obviously keen to control everything, but the results were sensational. Some have detected a similar desire for control in March himself, though this has not prevented him from building up a loyal team, many of whom first worked for him in his photography business.

His latest project, Golf at Goodwood, epitomises his mission 'to make the best of what we've got here in the age in which we find ourselves'. Golf has been played on the estate for over a century, but until recently the course, designed by the legendary James Braid, was leased out, along with the former

kennels, which served as a clubhouse. March has now taken both of these back, and not only transformed them (the course has become 'much longer and very, very challenging') but used them to launch a new concept – the Goodwood Club. 'This is the ultimate sporting estate. We have the oldest cricket pitch on which the game was played to recognised rules; we have a 200-year-old racecourse; we've got fantastic shooting, a motor-racing circuit and a World War II airfield – and I felt that if we had golf at a very high level too, maybe that would be the glue to bring it all together.'

Membership of the club has been ingeniously divided into tiers to make it at once more accessible and more exclusive. The cost depends on which sport or sports interest you, and how enthusiastically you wish to pursue them. If you would like to bring three friends along for a game whenever you like, fly to a Continental course in a de Havilland Rapide, and host a day's golf and dinner for 36 in the Regency Ballroom, you can pay a joining fee of £2,500 and a subscription of £20,000 to become a Sporting Member for Golf. Most exclusive of all is the Full Sporting Membership, which offers similar privileges in



Previous page: The Earl of March behind the wheel; top: Goodwood House; above from left: aviation, motorsport and racing at Goodwood; below: The Earl and Countess of March with Lord Settrington, the Hon William and Lady Eloise Gordon-Lennox

every one of Goodwood's sports, from a day with a famous racing driver to a private fly-past by a Spitfire. With a joining fee of £25,000 and an annual subscription of £175,000, this is open to corporate clients only so far, though plans are afoot to extend it to individuals.

As for the members' clubhouse, so splendid is the architecture of the Kennels – designed by James Wyatt in 1787 for the Duke of Richmond's hounds – that some hold them to be superior to the house. The interior has now been refurbished to highlight its original Regency proportions and details. However, in keeping with Charles March's old-meets-new philosophy, it has also been given a 21st-century edge, with contemporary furniture and pale wood floors. Ralph Lauren, an enthusiastic visitor to the Goodwood motoring events has been busy creating a shop beside the club.

Upstairs, the Kennels' library serves as a private sanctuary for Full Sporting Members; but, with an expansiveness that would horrify most golf-club committees, Charles March declares that he wants ordinary members (whose basic subscriptions start at £150) 'to come down here for a fab day out: they can bring the family, they can walk the dog on the golf course, they can eat some great food.'

Indeed, Lord March sets much store by an ideal as old and as oft-dismissed as the aristocracy itself: that of *noblesse oblige*. 'Historically and genetically,' he says, 'the attitude has always been that people were allowed in here. "Share" is a bit of a stinky word, but when there was horseracing they [his ancestors] didn't close the Downs, they encouraged everyone to come and watch. And because everyone feels part of it, there's a kind of respect for the place: for instance, we have very little litter at events, and very few problems with bad behaviour.'

PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID JONES



Nevertheless, there have been grumblings from some quarters, particularly regarding the racecourse, where many of the best viewing positions have been given over to sponsors, and noise from the motor-racing circuit. March appears genuinely anxious about the former: 'If people said, "It feels horribly corporate to me," that would be a real worry. I've got to make it work, but in a way which is sensitive to the place.' As for the noise, 'I love it! But a lot of people don't, so we have reduced it dramatically. I don't think it's an issue any more.'

With so much going on, he admits that it is hard to find time to relax with his family. His wife, Janet, is much involved in Goodwood's organic farm and its horseracing. 'It's all-consuming, as you can imagine. But we have good holidays – we go to the Bahamas a bit, and the children like the Maldives very much.' His ultimate dream, though, is a corrective to all those who wish they, too, had inherited a stately home hung with Gobelin tapestries. 'I'd love to build a modern house on the estate,' he says, 'and be able to go up there sometimes, if only for the night. That would be really relaxing.' ■

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