



Pink power: Bodiam Castle may host gay ceremonies

# National Trust offers a classier gay wedding

THE gay wedding has found acceptance in one of the great bastions of traditional England. The National Trust, renowned for its conservative green welly membership, has agreed to offer its country houses for "pink" ceremonies.

The Temple of Venus in Stowe, Osterley Park in west London, Norfolk's Blickling Hall, Bodiam Castle in East Sussex and Hanbury Hall in Worcestershire will host the so-called commitment ceremonies.

The first is expected to be performed early in the new year. If it proves successful, a further 200 managers who lease out trust buildings for private functions will be asked to con-

sider accommodating gay weddings.

The trust's decision to join forces with Pink Weddings, a company that organises gay marriages, will be seen as a reflection of increasing tolerance towards same-sex unions.

But insiders say the move may prove unpopular with many of the trust's 3m members. "A lot of members will be choking on their Oxford marmalade when they read about this," said one senior trust employee. "But they have to accept that the trust is an inclusive organisation and times are changing."

The government plans to introduce "civil partnerships" for gay couples next year, ena-

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bling them to receive pension and property rights.

Alison Henderson, a spokeswoman for the trust, said it welcomed the chance to host such ceremonies. "We are a charitable organisation which was set up to help preserve, but our ethos is 'for ever for everyone' and we do not discriminate against anybody," she said. "Our properties are such wonderful places and we want everybody to enjoy them."

At present 44 National Trust properties are available for heterosexual weddings but the gay ceremonies can, in theory, take place at a much wider list

of venues because they do not require a licence.

There have been an estimated 200 ceremonies since the first gay marriage was recognised by the signing of a register at the Greater London Authority's headquarters two years ago.

Michael Thomas, a 46-year-old nurse who "married" Antony Howlett, 31, at Richmond register office in southwest London earlier this month, welcomed the trust's move. He said: "It is progressive and it shows an organisation which historically has been very conservative is becoming very liberal."

His enthusiasm was not shared by the philosopher

Roger Scruton, who recently stood unsuccessfully for the trust's board. "It's not something the mass of supporters of the National Trust will approve of," he said. "It is a typical little urban frolic, characteristic of the kind of people who are running the show. It is trivialising."

"The purpose of the National Trust is to maintain some kind of picture of what the English countryside and properties were like, and one thing they were not like is that."

One period property to have already hosted a ceremony for two gay men is Chavenage in the Cotswolds, attended by what the owners describe as "chi-chi Londoners" in March

last year. Rona Lowsley-Williams, who owns Chavenage with her husband David, said the wedding was "so funny" and "they couldn't have been nicer". David agreed to the ceremony "provided they didn't consummate it" on the premises.

Pink Weddings can now advertise on the trust's website and use its logo in promotional material. Gino Meriano, its founder, said: "This is an amazing development for us and we couldn't be happier having the National Trust involved, especially as we often have a big problem finding venues. You would think that discrimination doesn't happen much in today's society, but it does."

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