

# I inherited a whole pile of trouble!



*Growing up in a glorious country house was an utter delight for Clare Sage. Taking it on again as a crumbling wreck definitely wasn't*

Love and loyalty, three generations divided by duty and a young woman's vow to save the majestic family home she grew up in. They sound like the ingredients of a Catherine Cookson novel, but far from being romantic fiction, this was the real-life drama facing Clare Sage, the heir to Abbey Dore, a crumbling Hereford mansion.

What greeted the 27-year-old when she first returned to the house she had so adored as a little girl, was a scene of dilapidation and neglect. Huge gaping holes in the roof meant that rain poured into the 11 bedrooms below. Buckets collected the worst of the showers, but huge damp patches on the walls showed that the damage was widespread. Downstairs, in the once-grand drawing room, a devastating flood had destroyed ornate plaster work and stained walls and flooring.

Her grandmother, Charis Ward, had bought the house and grounds in 1967, and it was here that Clare's mother, Sarah, raised her children: Clare, Julian and Hannah. 'It was the most beautiful place I had ever seen. The house was so welcoming that we would forget about the size. Each room had a different character, and a different feel. The sense of excitement about being in this wonderful house stayed with me throughout my childhood.'

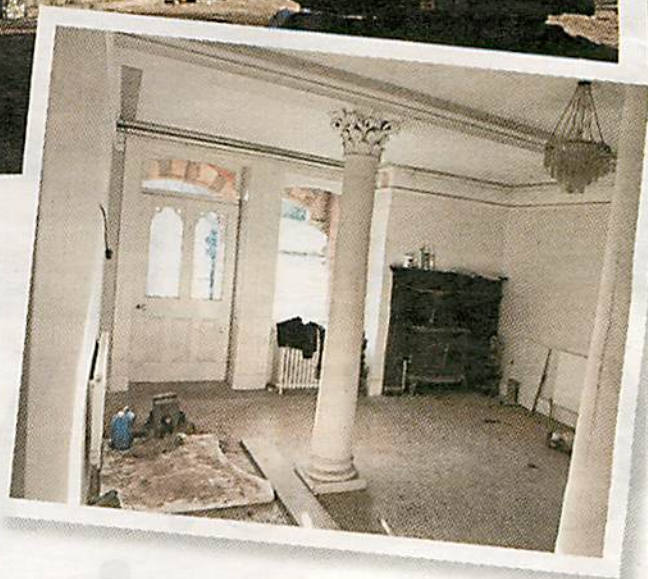
But, by 2000, those wonder years were in the past. Obsessed by working tirelessly on her garden all day, Charis felt unable to cope with the big house. One day, she literally shut the front door and moved into the three-bedroom gardener's cottage in the grounds. Meanwhile, Clare's mother,

Sarah, had remarried and moved to Guernsey, and Clare and her siblings were away at university. After decades of being filled with laughing children and grand parties, Abbey Dore stood silent.

Clare didn't know what to do with the house – the family didn't want to sell it and it would cost them a small fortune to repair and rebuild. That's when Clare called in Ruth Watson. A formidable millionaire hotelier and businesswoman, Ruth presents Country House Rescue, visiting crumbling country piles around Britain in an effort to save them from ruin – and Abbey Dore was just such a challenge.

Ruth's initial verdict on Abbey Dore was damning, 'Are we safe?' she asked incredulously, as Clare showed her around the house. 'I think this defines dilapidation.' But it wasn't the holes in the ceiling or leaking pipes which were to prove Ruth's biggest challenge – it was the formidable 81-year-old lady of the manor. And it soon became obvious that Charis wasn't going to take to any advice. 'I don't really mind what happens to the house,' she said, 'as long as it doesn't intrude on the garden.'

A renowned hotelier and restaurateur of almost 30 years, Ruth is used to tricky customers, but even she found Charis a challenge. 'It was very sad to see such a glorious house so neglected, and yet so frustrating that Charis had such blind optimism that something would just magically turn up. The truth was that unless



Clare outside Abbey Dore and, inset, the dilapidation inside is clearly visible

somebody did something with the house, it would simply fall in to rack and ruin.'

Ruth suggested running the house as an upmarket B&B, but Charis vetoed it. 'My grandmother didn't like the idea, and she made that perfectly clear. She thought it would be far too much work for me to manage on my own. She did clash with Ruth, because she disagreed with her suggestions. But that is my grandmother – determined, hard working and not afraid to tell people exactly what she thinks.'

However, the family has taken to Ruth's idea of running the house as an exclusive holiday let, and have raised money for central heating, a new roof and rewiring, and Clare has just ordered carpets and curtains. Scaffolding is up and the builders are in. Walking among them every day, is a tiny grey-haired figure, refusing to wear a hard hat and rapping out orders. After a decade of exile, Charis is mistress of Abbey Dore once more – and loving every minute. ■

*Amanda Cable*

*Country House Rescue is on Thursdays at 8pm on Channel 4.*