

For two decades, he was at the head of national institutions, firstly as Director of the National Portrait Gallery (the youngest ever), before moving to the Victoria and Albert Museum. Heavens – what craziness prompted the Establishment to put someone so stylish, so unconventional and so learned in charge? Surely such repositories of public treasures need managers and accountants, not mercurial and brilliant overseers? Or am I deluded by the current zeitgeist...?

“I would absolutely hate to run any institution now,” Sir Roy shudders. “I mean, what is your ethnic quota? How many are disabled? Everything is simply awful. Not that I’m against any of those things; they just seem to me to ignore the fundamental vision, the eccentricity. I always protected at the V&A those members of staff who were incredibly wayward but who had an originality. They drove you up the wall, but they looked at things in a way that made you think: Someone’s throwing up something new and exciting.”

Flamboyant, confident, unconventional, never boring... A one-man band. No committee, no matter how brilliantly composed, could ever have taken the decisions that he took; led public taste; gone bravely out on a limb; doubled the numbers flocking to the V&A with extrovert shows.

“I was able to do things that would be the unthinkable nowadays. When you think of the great exhibitions on country houses, on the future of church buildings, and on the garden... None of those could be staged any more. When one put one’s weight behind the crafts – weaving, glass, ceramics – all that was for a cause. I didn’t put on another Monet show simply because that would have them all coming in at the door.

“The role of the Director, I consider, was to lead taste.”

Perhaps that’s why he’s so taken Westonbirt to heart. Normally reticent about interviews, he’s nevertheless agreed to talk about the project today. In fact, he’s absolutely bowled over by the house that, until recently, he knew nothing about.

“I had no idea that a mid-Victorian house of such magnificence existed,” Sir Roy says. “I was astonished by the richness of the wood, the metalwork, every single detail.”

The great house and garden were the conception of another idiosyncratic character: Robert Stayner Holford, born in 1808 to a family that had made a fortune supplying London with drinking water. Holford inherited the estate, three miles south west of Tetbury, at the age of 30 from his father, George – but his ideas were all his own. Employing the architect Lewis Vulliamy – a pupil of Sir Robert Smirke who designed the British Museum – he began to build the elaborate neo-Elizabethan mansion we still see today, which he filled with art treasures and manuscripts, including a First Folio. Around the house were 40 acres of pleasure grounds and the 600 acres of Westonbirt Arboretum, now owned by the Forestry

“This is an amazing house, not greatly known, and it should be more greatly known”



Commission, which housed his impressive collection of trees from around the world.

George, his only son, carried on his father’s work but, on his death, the estate went to a nephew who sold the house in 1928 to an independent girls’ boarding school, the successor to which, Westonbirt School, remains there today.

“One thing about Westonbirt is that it was done by a single human being, unsaddled by a load of legislation and a load of committees. It’s somebody’s passion.

“It’s that taxonomic thing the Victorians had where they wanted to nail everything down and put it in order, like an encyclopaedia. Holford didn’t

differentiate much, I think, between planting a tree and buying a Rembrandt. It represents an intellectual whole of a kind that doesn’t exist any longer, which I think is important and interesting.

“It’s a Victorian mind, during a period where it was thought possible to comprehend a large part of known human knowledge and base it around yourself, if you had enough money.”

Money, of course, is an issue in the 21st century. The trust is aiming to raise enough, from major foundations, grants and private donations, to restore it authentically; indeed, the work has already begun. The overpaint is being stripped back to reveal the intense

Victorian colour we associate with Pre-Raphaelite paintings – strong and vibrant; the silks on the walls – where each woven row required a different pattern card to give it an intense fluidity of line and curve – will be painstakingly recreated. And the pleasure grounds, which follow the painterly style advocated by W S Gilpin, a watercolour artist-turned-landscape gardener, will also be restored.

“The wonderful thing about this whole appeal and resurrecting this side of the road is that it provides the context into which the arboretum fits. The major part of the jigsaw lies inside and around that house, and the arboretum is a part of it. They reflect each other; and they’re absolutely integral to each other,” Sir Roy says.

Of course, there are all sorts of reasons why £3.36 million is not going to be easy to find. Firstly, it’s an eye-bogglingly large sum. Secondly, it’s made even more eye-watering by a recession. And thirdly, it won’t be easy to ask investors to contribute to the fabric of a privileged girls’ school, especially when access to the public will be limited mainly to school holidays.

So why is it so important that we preserve houses such as this? In fact, why do we need to dwell on the past at all?

“It’s that whole business of relationship to history,” Sir Roy says. I mean this government in particular has wiped out virtually the teaching of history in schools. Children have no idea of whether a reign was before or after Queen Victoria. They just learn a bit about the Tudors.

“The Government have now decided they have got to have someone who teaches the Holocaust in each school. The Holocaust was an appalling thing but this is absolutely ridiculous. They stick to the First and Second World Wars and that’s it. People don’t know why we’ve got Parliament, why we’ve got the monarchy, why we’ve got the church. If you don’t know all those things, how can you, as it were, really understand your own country – or anything at all?

“If you destroy people’s knowledge of the past, you can do anything with them that you like.”

So is he saying it actually robs them of an understanding of what’s happening now?

“Of course. A pertinent example is: we’ve had extremely repressive measures passed in the last few years and proposals that every single telephone call and email should be open to access; and then they wanted to detain people for a very long time. Those are far in extreme of the worst repressive measures taken in this country after the outbreak of the French Revolution – and then, of course, there was an enormous reaction in society. But this time it all just sailed through.”

He sighs. “I don’t want to sound like a dreary old man.”

Far from it. He’s a man with a huge amount still to teach the country – something he’s done, over the years, in various ways. Aside from his work at national institutions, he’s written extensively – both lightly and academically. And he’s provided a lasting legacy in the form of his published diaries – from 1967- ►