

LIFESTYLE

Lulu Benson lights candles in Neidpath's medieval hall, setting the scene for a festive dinner

Christmas with the clan

In December, LULU BENSON welcomes her extended family to Neidpath Castle in the Scottish Borders, where they celebrate the season with reeling and feasting in the vaulted medieval hall – now a peaceful setting for weddings and parties after centuries of strife

TEXT CHARLOTTE FAIRBAIN | PHOTOGRAPHS DEAN HEARNE

The River Tweed is one of the most beautiful in Scotland, associated with salmon fishing and a certain countrified cloth, and fringed with towns that ring with the sound of gentle Scots accents. Sir Walter Scott and John Buchan had homes along the river, and William Wordsworth and JMW Turner enshrined it in their work.


But the history of the Tweed (which means border in Celtic) is not as meek as its waters, for this region produced some of the meanest fighters in Scots history. Reivers were rife here – raiders whose daring exploits terrorised landowners and smallholders from as far north as Edinburgh to as far south as Lancashire. Apolitical, faithless and blind to allegiance, the reivers had one aim – to take what was not theirs. The countryside they roamed is peppered with pele towers and fortified houses, which were built in the hope of buying a little security from the reivers' attacks.

Of the few tower houses that remain standing in the Scottish Borders, Neidpath Castle has charted this journey from battlefield to site of tourist pilgrimage as closely as any other. In its very beginnings, Neidpath (once known as Jedderfield) was the fulcrum for one of Scotland's most notorious soldiers and some of its bloodiest battles. Today, this dramatic building,

which looms over the Tweed on the outskirts of the town of Peebles, is the scene of weddings and parties, a location for films and a backdrop for photography shoots.

Chatelaine of this contemporary, more peaceable version of Neidpath is Lulu Benson, whose husband Matthew is a property consultant. The castle came into the family through Matthew's mother Elizabeth, a farmer, whose ancestors inherited it in 1810 and whose antecedent Jean Douglas is said to haunt the place to this day. It was Jean who inspired *The Maid of Neidpath*, Scott's poem about lost love.

Neidpath was built in its earliest form around 1190 by Sir Gilbert Fraser, an ancestor of Sir Simon Fraser, a suitably ruthless cohort of Sir William Wallace. It was Sir Simon, known as 'The Patriot', who cornered 10,000 English in the valley of Roslin, ambushed and slaughtered most of them, making sure that there were enough sufficiently shell-shocked survivors to go and spread the news of the horror they had witnessed and of the savagery of the Scots foe. For his troubles, he was executed – in 1306, a year after Wallace – and his castle burnt to the ground. The barony and the lands passed to the Hay family (later the Marquises of Tweeddale) who rebuilt Neidpath, then occupied it for over 300 years. During their time, Mary Queen of Scots is said to have stayed with them for a spot of hunting. She came alone on her first visit in 1563 ▷



Built in its present form in the 14th century on the site of an earlier castle, Neidpath is an imposing stone tower house that overlooks the River Tweed just outside Peebles

Lulu and her daughter Isabel gathering winter foliage from the arboretum
with Lulu's working cocker spaniels, Truffle and Twiglet

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THICK WALLS and SKY-HIGH TURRETS. *In this atmosphere,*
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ABOVE Lulu in the Laigh Hall with her co-designer Peter Laird, whom she describes as 'a styling impresario'. A long trestle table is set for a Christmas celebration. BELOW Peter creating a table decoration with greenery from the arboretum



RIGHT Lulu with her mother, Sally Usher, standing in front of Barns Tower, now part of the Neidpath estate

and possibly with Lord Darnley a few years later – legend, they argued terribly. In 1686, Neidpath passed to the Douglas family.

And while Scott chose to immortalise the place in *Neidpath*, Buchan, too, kept a close interest not only in Neidpath but also in neighbouring Barns Tower. Once owned by the Bums, the tower is now part of the Neidpath estate. *John Bums* was Buchan's second novel – a worthy antecedent to the unforgettable stories of *Prester John* and *The Thirty-Nine Steps*.

So theatre lurks in this beautiful countryside. If the past is long gone, the sense of a bloodier time lingers. Barns Tower and Neidpath sit proudly, oblivious perhaps to their past, speaking of it with their thick walls, their sky-high towers and architectural connection to a completely different era. In this atmosphere, curated by Lulu and her remarkable co-designer Peter Laird, the stuff of dreams can be perpetuated.

Lulu herself has always worked in the visual. She was introduced, young, to Patrick Douglas-Hamilton, a photographer and musician. With a child on the way (Isabel, now 28, and studying to be a portrait painter in New York), she taught herself picture framing, having bought some machinery second hand from her uncle Eric Grounds of Swallow Frames in London. For 10 years, she framed – for Flying Colours Gallery, Francis Kyle Gallery and the artist Stephen Mangan. In 1997, Lulu and Patrick having divorced, she married Matthew. The couple have two children: Sophie, now 21, and Rex, 18. The family was by now based in the Lothians and in 2001, Lulu became the co-owner of a boho boutique in Edinburgh called Arkangel. With her business partner Janey Dalrymple, she trawled the fashion shows, particularly in Paris, looking for young designers. Their discoveries included Ilse Jacobsen, Issa and Erotokritos. Arkangel quickly became a must-visit shopping destination in the New Town.

Of her time there, Lulu says, 'Janey and I had a blast. We were bringing colour to Scotland. We wanted to have affordable well-cut French labels, to make a look that worked in our weather and landscape. It was a fantastic adjunct to family life.'

Arkangel closed in 2010, to the chagrin of its many devotees. Lulu, always game for a challenge, briefly took up the mantle as a chutney guru and, in October 2011, ran the One World, One





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Isabel is studying painting in New York, but returns to Neidpath for Christmas. Lulu used to work as a framer and still provides them for artists including Mungo McCosh and Phoebe Cope. With Truffle and Twiglet by the castle arch. Isabel, Lulu and her son Rex by the bonfire. The tree is decorated with handmade and collected baubles





ANTICLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE A portrait of Isabel's grandmother Betty hangs above the chimneypiece in the hall of the Sawmill, where Lulu and her family now live. An antique four-poster bed dominates Queen Mary's Chamber at Neidpath Castle. Family portraits, including one of Matthew and Lulu by Jonathan Freemantle above the chimneypiece, hang in the dining room at the Sawmill



Chutney festival at Neidpath. By now, she and Matthew have moved into the old Sawmill, which sits in the lea of Neidpath and Barns Tower. Peter – who had become part of their lives when he organised their wedding – came into his own as a set designer for the castle. ‘Peter is a fantastic party organiser, a styling impresario, a magician,’ says Lulu. ‘He has that gift of walking into a room and making people feel better and places look better.’

Ask Lulu what her current job is and she hesitates over the answer. She runs Neidpath as a venue, Barns Tower as a holiday let and the estate as a living enterprise. She has a large family – Bensons, Ushers, Fairbairns and the rest – who converge regularly, for Christmas in particular. When they cannot all fit into the Sawmill, they spill over into Neidpath, decorating trestle tables with tealights, holly and long lines of oranges before settling into venison stew under the gaze of the amazing battle panels depicting Mary Queen of Scots created 20 years ago by the artist Monica Hannasch, a friend of the family. In that same room, on Christmas night, the tables will part to make way for sleeping bags, which eventually the dozens of cousins will fill.

Boxing Day is just as exuberant, a chance for locals, staff and friends to pile into the vaulted hall and reel. Kilts or turbans or anything goes – the Neidpath parties are the stuff of legends.

The Tweed may meander past Neidpath more peaceably than it once did – but if you wish to listen to the echoes of history, to marry or film or photograph or stay in the most romantic of apartments, with Lulu in charge and Peter on tap, you can ☐

Neidpath Castle: neidpathcastle.com

Lulu with Twiglet in the drawing room of the Sawmill. The elaborate swag-and-tail curtains were created by Edinburgh-based interior designer Sara Whitby, inspired by a John Fowler design

