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FARINGDON hits you like a fanfare as you sweep round the gravel drive beneath its clustering elms. In the house's 1930s heyday, Osbert Sitwell applauded this "spacious, arcaded villa in the Palladian taste". More recently, a visitor from the New Yorker confessed himself captivated by this "doll's house lowered from heaven".

For nearly 20 years, Faringdon House was the home of the wealthy eccentric Lord Berners. In this lush, pastoral landscape west of Oxford, he created an exuberant, raffish social salon for his huge circle of friends and acquaintances. Berners himself was a Renaissance man, a composer in the modern style (Stravinsky visited and admired his music), Dadaist painter and writer.

He was also the original gay lord, who lived openly with his lover and painted his parties as pink as his pet fantail pigeons. He dyed their feathers in various pastel shades to create what Nancy Mitford described as "a cloud of confetti in the sky". With the arrival of Berners, Faringdon erupted into one long house party, arrested only by the outbreak of the Second World War.

Smart Bohemia, the great, gay and good flocked there: Beerbohm, Beaverbrook, Siegfried Sassoon, Evelyn Waugh, Osbert and the other Sitwells, Cecil Beaton, Dali, Fonteyn and H G Wells all churned their creative juices within its elegant walls, exchanging epigrams and bon mots.

It was Berners himself who described T E Lawrence as "always backing into the limelight" and Vita Sackville-West as "wry Vita". The journalist and politician Tom Driberg considered Berners "one of the wittiest men I have ever known".

Witty yes, pretty no. Even as a young man, he looked middle-aged, short and dumpy. Camp Beverley Nichols found him "remarkably ugly - swarthy and simian". Berners was so bald that, by his own admission, "when he was annoyed he looked like a diabolical egg".

When he was nearly 50, he fell in love with Robert Heber Percy. The young man of 20 was handsome and gentle-eyed, but he was also possessed, says Berners's biographer, Mark Amory, of "an electrifying wildness, the suggestion of danger, the dash that earned him the nickname of 'the Mad Boy' ". After a disastrous first weekend at Faringdon, Heber Percy offered to leave. "Don't go," Berners pleaded. "You make me laugh. I don't mind about the other."

Schooled at Stowe, Heber Percy flunked a career in the cavalry, acted as a Hollywood extra, was sacked as a waiter for sloshing soup over a customer, and helped run a notorious London nightclub before being adopted as the protege of the 14th Lord Berners in 1932. He inherited Faringdon when Berners died in 1950, and maintained and enhanced the exotic atmosphere of the house and grounds.

Heber Percy's granddaughter (he married, briefly, twice) is Sofka Zinovieff. She was a 25-year-old student studying in Greece for a PhD in anthropology when she inherited the estate on his death in 1987. Becoming chatelaine of Faringdon "altered the course of my life a lot". Sofka now lives in Rome with her Greek husband and two daughters, and lets out Faringdon House. A smitten Texan family who took it for a year have just moved out. Tenants pay £8,000 a month for the eight-bedroom house and grounds.

The present house was built in 1780 for Henry James Pye, execrated as the worst poet laureate ever and whose ghost is supposed to walk the grounds. The architect, a Mr Wood of Bath, designed a graceful double staircase for the cool, white entrance hall that Pevsner later found pleasing, with pillars, decorated plaster ceilings and classical chimney pieces.

Nancy Mitford, a frequent guest, was charmed by Faringdon ("plain and gray and square and solid, sober and restrained"), and made it the model for Merlingford in her 1945 novel, *The Pursuit of Love*. During her sleepless

nights of fire-watching in wartime London, "the place I longed to be in most intensely," she recalled, "was the red bedroom at Faringdon, with its crackling fire, its Bessarabian carpet of bunchy flowers and above all its four-post bed."

Berners bought Faringdon House in 1919 and gave the house to his mother for her lifetime, with tiny quarters for himself. He spent most of the 1920s in London (he had rooms off Piccadilly) and led an amiably flamboyant existence composing music, especially for the ballet, and being chauffeured in his Rolls-Royce, which had been fitted with a small, stencilled keyboard.

With the death of both his mother and stepfather in 1931, Faringdon House beckoned. The house, in writer Peter Quennell's phrase, was built for harmony. But that wasn't what Berners wanted. "It was not at all glamorous," explains Amory. "Berners set about transforming it and created his masterpiece."

He was an inveterate joker. When the Marchesa Casati arrived in tight satin trousers with a live boa constrictor, Berners entertained her at dinner by wearing a false nose. He tilted at Faringdon's dignity, pinning joke notices around the house. "Mangling Done Here" was a prominent one, and "No dogs admitted" was posted at the top of the stairs. On a nearby hill, Berners built a folly. A notice warned: "Members of the public committing suicide from this tower do so at their own risk."

On the walls of the house, Berners hung Corots, Constables and Matisse. The 54ft drawing-room offered views through five French windows beyond the fountain to one of the longest vistas in England, extending (it was said) 22 miles across a patchwork English landscape. But the mischievous Berners couldn't resist a tease, assailing his own idyll by inviting Penelope Betjeman's Arab stallion Moti to join them in the drawing-room for afternoon tea.

As Amory discovered, the Betjemans were neighbours, hated the smart life but enjoyed dipping into it at Faringdon. "Gosh, she was an attractive woman," Penelope declared of Dali's nymphomaniac wife. "Never stopped talking about fur-lined wombs."

Berners buried all the entertaining rooms in flowers. He loved rich food ("loathesomely rich," complained Beverley Nichols); from Paris, Vera Stravinsky sent special powder to help him make blue mayonnaise. Even in the austerity years that followed the Second World War, Faringdon's kitchen garden was among the most productive in Britain. "When every sort of luxury has been forever banned in England," declared Cyril Connolly, "Lord Berners will somehow manage to maintain a secret melon house."

"Faringdon always feels as though I have stepped into another world," says Sofka Zinovieff. "What I like about it is its mixture of obvious beauty and its classical links. My grandfather's style was very quirky and that appeals to me."

During her time at Faringdon, she has restored and renovated, redecorating the drawing-room last year with ochre walls and the adjoining music room "a dark, mysterious sort of British Racing Green". She wants the house to retain its vibrancy. "I wouldn't want to rip everything out," she explains, "but I don't want a museum, either. I want to do things in the spirit of what went before."

- Faringdon House is available to rent at £8,000 a month. Contact Jeremy Hulme, Faringdon Estate Office (01367 240240)
- 'Lord Berners: The Last Eccentric', by Mark Amory (Chatto & Windus)