

The Arts

Never mind the portraits, feel the genteel good taste

EXHIBITION

Clarence House, SW1

Nick Hackworth

CLARENCE House, home to the Queen Mother for almost 50 years and now the official residence of the Prince of Wales and the Princes William and Harry, opens to the public for the first time today. For the princely sum of £5 you will be taken on a short, guided tour of the five main rooms on the ground floor of the house, used to entertain official guests.

Left largely unchanged from the Queen Mother's time, the rooms are intelligently and harmoniously decorated. A domestic and private, rather than a formal, air is maintained by the predominance of light background colours and the highly personal collection of furniture, art and objects in the rooms.

The Garden Room is particularly delightful with its profusion of freshly cut flowers, fine Gobelins tapestry and doors that open on to the garden, creating a pastoral feel that adds to overall lightness of the rooms on the tour.

Beyond the fresh flowers, however, one of the major attractions at Clarence House should be the art, for the Queen Mother had a justified reputation for being a judicious collector of paintings on a domestic scale. On show here are works by some of the most significant 20th century British painters, including Graham Sutherland, Walter Sickert, Augustus John and John Piper.

Unfortunately the works cannot be counted among the finest work in her collection.

The Sutherland portrait of the Queen Mother that hangs in the Morning Room is one of the worst he ever painted and is deeply unflattering. The Sickerts are dull and the Augustus John portrait fey and unfinished.

However, not all who visit will be interested in the art. They can comfort themselves with the knowledge that the Duke of Clarence, for whom the house was built in the 1820s, felt much the same way.

Casting an eye over an Old Master painting that belonged to his brother, George IV, the Duke, a career sailor with no pretence to cultural sophistication, observed: "Aye, it seems pretty. I dare say it is. My brother was fond of this sort of knick-knackery."

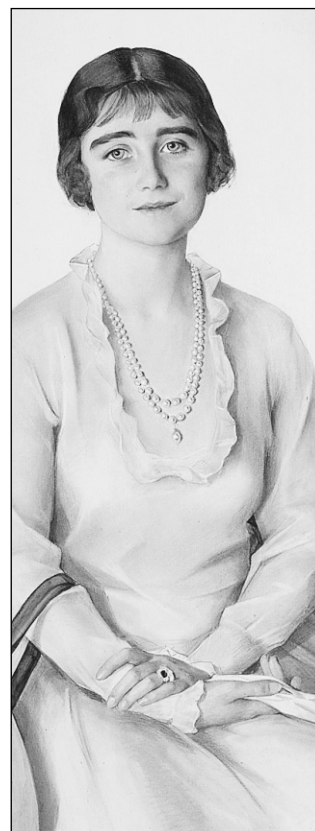
In this non-knick-knackery appreciating category, alongside the tourists and dedicated royal fans, will be those interested in an intimate tour of a living relic of Britain's aristocratic past.

Clarence House is the last great aristocratic town house to be maintained in use for the purpose for which it was built. The upheavals of the last century quite suddenly did for the rest of them and the dominance of the families that owned them. So perhaps it would be foolish to pass up a chance to see this symbolic survivor.

● Open to the public until 17 October. Tickets must be booked in advance: 020 7766 7303.



The best and worst: the delightfully pastoral Garden Room; top right, Savelly Sorine's fine 1923 portrait of the Queen Mother, then the Duchess of York, and, bottom right, Graham Sutherland's deeply unflattering effort



Ghostly band has a great body and soul

JAZZ

Woody Herman Band

Ronnie Scott's, W1

Jack Massarik

HERE'S A US "ghost band" that seems to be enjoying its afterlife. Maybe that's because its popular founder was never a clarinet martinet like Benny Goodman, but a fun-loving, Swing-era adventurer happy to enjoy the ride as his band morphed into a roaring post-bop power machine.

Solo strength was always the key to the Herman herd, something its present leader, tenorist-clarinetist Frank Tiberi, understands. Alan Broadbent's Parkerian blues, Reunion at Newport, was his opening choice and a statement of intent, with nearly every soloist in this 16-man outfit stretching out.

The band's overall quality stressed how tough today's labour market is for jazz jobseekers. All the soloists, particularly the duelling trombonists John Fedchock and Paul McKee, were technically far superior to their predecessors of the Forties and Fifties, yet individuality remains at a premium. Tenorists Dave Rickenberg and John Nugent, for example, did well by the sax-section classic, Four Brothers, but the legendary Stan Getz, Al Cohn, Zoot Sims and Serge Chaloff still prove an exceptional act to follow.

The out-chorus here, with a new trumpet counter-riff, was nevertheless a thrilling improvement and other favourites survived searching updates. Apple Honey, taken at warp speed — "What the heck we do after that I don't know," gasped Tiberi — featured amazingly clean articulation by Chip Stephens, a pianist too good for big-band anonymity, and a wild trumpet chase by the pony-tailed Barry Ries and the excellent John Bailey.

World On A String featured the only original member, trumpet veteran George Rabbai, who played and sang with an easy charm that recalled Los Angeles hipster Jack Sheldon. Body And Soul starred Ries on flugelhorn and Tiberi with some remarkably erudite post-Coltrane tenor sax. The Band That Plays The Blues still packs a sophisticated punch.

● Until Saturday. Box office: 020 7439 0747.

Evans saves Strauss from the scrapheap

RICHARD Strauss has done well out of this year's Proms. Not even Beethoven has two complete evenings devoted to his music, but after last week's concert performance of Elektra, here was another all-Strauss programme.

And a bitty affair it was. Charles Mackerras opened with the Symphonic Fragment concocted by Clemens Krauss from Strauss's opera Die Liebe der Danae. It started tumultuously, with thundering brass answered by rustling strings and whining woodwind; but the storm in an eggcup soon passed. In attempting a musical précis of the opera, Krauss's "fragment" proved exactly



PROMS 2003

BBCSO/Mackerras

Albert Hall

Nick Kimberley

that, an insubstantial shard. Stephen Cleobury conducted the BBC Singers and a posse of choristers from King's College, Cambridge, in an over-extended choral offshoot

of Strauss's opera Daphne. Sadly, neither set of singers got to grips with the Albert Hall acoustic, so high voices sounded sour, low voices slid around uncomfortably, and textures were sludgy.

Two works derived from opera, one without voices, the other without orchestra: not an entirely satisfying first course. What followed proved more substantial, Mackerras returning to conduct excerpts from Der Rosenkavalier. Mackerras had selected well: which is to say, he had omitted the character of Baron Ochs altogether,

clearing the stage for the female voices that give the opera its point.

No doubt the whole performance was conceived as a showcase for Anne Evans, and why not? Her voice may no longer have the bloom of youth, but she lives every role. The perfectly controlled crescendo on the word "Schatz" (treasure) spoke of exquisite sadness, echoed when she contemplated the snows of yesteryear, and even the fleeting moments of shakiness fitted the character. It helped that the other

voices fitted round hers so well, individual timbres always on the verge of becoming one, but always remaining distinct.

Katerina Karnéus's Oktavian was physically and vocally imposing, while Rebecca Evans's Sophie precisely mixed diffidence and impetuosity. Mackerras shaped the accompaniment with his usual alert attention to the singers' needs.

Fittingly, Evans, acknowledging the applause, presented him with a single bloom from her well-earned bouquet of red roses.

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