

WEEKEND

## Art's at heart of

Within the stately walls of Newark House, near Wotton-under-Edge, is a collection of modern and classic art to dazzle the senses. **HELEN BLOW** tells the story behind it

**I**T'S a passion which might be nearing its end. Michael Claydon has spent 20 years amassing a stunning collection of artwork for his home, Newark Park.

Even he's forced to admit there's little room left on the walls. The eclectic collection at the National Trust's imposing manor house near Wotton-under-Edge ranges from period oils and landscapes to modernist paintings and Aboriginal dot art.

Alongside the pictures are a dazzling array of tapestries, sculptures, ornaments and statues. Standing above the unspoilt Cotswold Valley, grade I-listed Newark Park is the centrepiece of a 700-acre estate. It was built in about 1550 as a hunting lodge before architect James Wyatt arrived and turned it into a house.

On a clear day looking south, you can see both the Mendip Hills in Somerset and the Malborough Downs. It's an awesome sight.

The view is all the more remarkable because there are no modern intrusions – no pylons, roads and very few buildings. It looks much the same now as it has done for hundreds of years. Michael's love affair with the place started in 1982 when he came to visit his Texas friend Robert Parsons. He never left.

Robert had already started Newark's renovations in 1971 and Michael felt he had to see the job through.

And he's well qualified to do so, boasting a fine artistic pedigree. Before taking over the reins, he worked in theatre management, with stints in Exeter and at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden.

"When Robert died in 2000 I had to choose whether to move out or continue his work," says Michael. "I decided not only to stay, but to increase the number of visitors."

Until then, Newark had seen just 1,000 guests walk through the doors each year, but that has increased to a staggering 11,000 following a publicity drive.

"Even when the house is closed during the winter months, people can enjoy walks through the Cotswold Valley," says Michael. "I'm surprised there aren't more who do this. You could spend the day enjoying the



Michael Claydon with a painting of Newark Park by Rob Collins of Wotton-under-Edge

scenery and views and, chances are, not meet another soul."

Although the property belongs to the National Trust, most of the contents have been collected by Michael.

Open to the public between April and October, the house has a team of 50 volunteers, closed-up to tell visitors all about the amazing collection of art around them.

"I have so little room left on the walls that I only buy new pieces if I really like them now," says Michael, laughing.

An upstairs room is devoted to the work of Robert's close friend, artist Leslie Hurry, who painted several portraits of the former tenant at "various stages of his life."

"He went through many stages in his painting career and many genres, including landscapes, a dabble in Cubism and abstract," says Michael, 53.

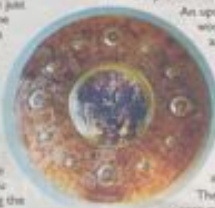
There are also paintings of the costumes and stage sets Hurry designed for high-profile London productions.

Another artist with several works in the house is Rob Collins, who also produced portraits of Robert, one of which presides over the grand entrance hall.

Among the more unusual pieces is a circular clock in the Garden Hall, which looks as if it has been fashioned from beaten copper but is made of wood.

There are several landscapes by northern painter Christopher P. Wood, which catch the eye thanks to their sheer size and drama.

"The landscape which overlooks the



One of the Aboriginal dot art paintings

“

I have so little room left on the walls that I only buy new pieces if I really like them.

Michael Claydon

Garden Hall window mirrors the fabulous view across the valley," says Michael. "In a way it helps keep me down to earth so I don't get complacent about the amazing views here."

Aboriginal paintings can also be found in Newark. They came from a gallery in London belonging to an Australian friend, Rebecca Hosack.

Rebecca features in a stunning work in the second floor Gallery Room – a modern painting of her and Michael with a background of vivid pink.

Michael has embarked on a series of collections, including ornaments and pictures collected with his Leo star sign, and a chest of drawers topped with flocks of china swans.

But he doesn't like to live alone at Newark. By his side over the years has been a succession of Great Danes. The ninth – and perhaps last in the line – is Boston.

Now graying and almost blind, Boston laments about the house as if she owes it. But even her massive presence cannot draw your eyes away from the remarkable art collection at the heart of this splendid manor house.