

Banffy Castle

10 September

Our plane had hardly landed at Cluj airport before we were whisked off in a coach for our first visit, to the ruins of what had once been one of Romania's most splendid grand estates, Banffy Castle near Bontida, dubbed the Versailles of Transylvania. Frankly that would have been an exaggeration at any time, but with some imagination one can certainly see that this was once an opulent fortified house, while photographs and plans reveal a former landscape of parks and parterres, now all gone. Although there appears to have been a castle on the site since medieval times, the current buildings date from the 16th-19th centuries and were home to the Banffy family - aristocratic wealthy landowners. The estate reached its peak in the 18th century when the castle was largely reconstructed in the baroque style, adding a riding school, stables, coach house and service wings in the form of a double courtyard. The gardens were laid out in the romantic English style in the 19th century.

Much of the estate's buildings, contents and grounds were destroyed or severely damaged by retreating German troops in the Second World War. Since then, political instability has hampered attempts to conserve or restore the castle, which is on the World Monuments list of 100 most endangered sites. It is now leased from the Banffy family by the Transylvania Trust and, in partnership with the UK's Institute of Historic Building Conservation, a training and restoration centre has been established, funded by the EU and other supporters, including the Headley Trust, Prince's Trust and Getty Foundation. The programme is led by an English project director, David Baxter, who explained to us the history of the site and the work being undertaken by heritage conservation students from all over Europe as part of their training. One of the recent projects was the restoration of the chapel. Increasingly the castle is being opened to the public for events and exhibitions, helping to raise income for further phases of restoration. It is a slow and painstaking effort.

David Dewing

Banffy Castle, view of the chapel and the main part of the house

