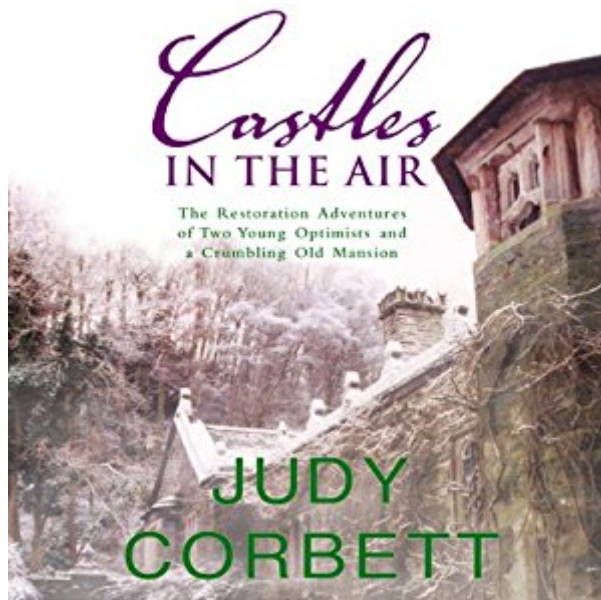


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# Castles In The Air



## Synopsis

Castles in the Air is a beautifully written, autobiographical story of rescuing an ancient mansion. Gwydir Castle was inhabited by ravers and rats until Judy Corbett and her husband Peter Welford found and acquired this 500-year-old house mouldering in the foothills of Snowdonia. Despite the toads, strange smells and squatters, they decided to mortgage themselves to the hilt to bring the castle back to life. This is an evocatively written and genuinely moving book and is infused with an extraordinary sense of place. The couple's adventures in a gothic wonderland lead them through plots both supernatural and historical. In a museum storeroom in a Bronx warehouse they find a missing room, in the castle's Solar Tower the ghost of a young woman appears and from the far edges of the woods a silent man called Sven emerges to befriend the couple and their beloved castle.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In northern Wales, 11 miles south of Conwy and 4 miles north of Betws-y-coed, across the bridge from the village of Llanrwst, on the floodplain between the River Conwy and the B5106 road, lies Gwydir Castle, the ancestral home of the Wynn family. Largely of 16th century construction, it's actually what remains of a more extensive Tudor courtyard manor house, and is the finest example of such in Wales. Peter Welford and Judy Corbett, an architectural historian and a bookbinder respectively, pooled their meager life savings and a substantial bank loan to buy the place in the early 1990s. CASTLES IN THE AIR by Corbett is the utterly charming story of the pair's labors to restore Gwydir from its abysmally ruinous condition at purchase to something resembling its former

glory. The book offers a little something for everyone. There are the restoration adventures, of course, and also romance; Peter and Judy subsequently marry in an ancient chapel on a nearby hilltop. There's a fairly convincing supernatural ingredient that involves Peter being the unfortunate focus of animosity coming from the ghost of Lady Margaret Cave, a 17th century mistress of the manor, which resulted in his being struck on the head with a spade. There's hidden treasure, in this case the original carved wooden paneling stripped in totality from the dining room and auctioned off as a single lot in 1921 to (as it turned out) the American millionaire William Randolph Hearst, and later bequeathed to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, which still had it stored in the original packing crates in a warehouse on the rough side of town. Throughout the narrative runs Judy's dry English wit, such as when she describes the visit by an impeccably dressed representative ("Please, just call me Bill") of The Met, who was so impressed by his first view of the castle that: "... he didn't look where he was going and stepped into the biggest pile of peacock guano you have ever seen. Peter silently directed him to a patch of rough grass where he endeavoured to remove the vile-smelling substance from the stitching of his fine Italian shoes." Above all, *CASTLES IN THE AIR* is the story of the pair's love affair with and dedication to something old, historic, and worth saving in the face of seemingly impossible odds. And it would seem they've succeeded beyond their wildest dreams; the recovery and reinstallation of the Dining Room paneling brought a visit by the Prince of Wales himself, though his shoes did stick to the floor varnished only hours before his arrival. Judy describes herself and Peter as socially reticent almost to the point of misanthropy. Therefore, the fact that they accept paying B&B guests as well as hire out the ground floor halls out for weddings - see the official Gwydir Castle website - is indication of the financial strain imposed by the ongoing refurbishment of the manor house that continues to this day and into the foreseeable future. The Welford's affection for the ancient pile is evident in Judy's words: "... to walk in the moon-washed shadows of the yew trees and to see the ancient profile of the house silhouetted against a cloudless sky was to feel oneself suspended out of time, as though in that moment we were living in parenthesis. Sometimes, if the night was cold enough, the trails of yesterday's peacock tails would be cast in frost across the patches of lawn we had managed to scythe the day before ... We would walk down to the bottom of the garden and sit on the massive slate bench ... with the sounds of the night rustling and chirruping around us." How incredibly rewarding the lives of these two must be!

I had the absolute pleasure of 'finding' Gwydir Castle on a trip to Northern Wales in May of 2010. Completely unaware of this castle, we were driving by and saw a peacock on the top of the stone

wall. To my amazement, and totally off the beaten path of our itinerary, we stumbled upon this beautiful place. Upon getting out of the car and going to the huge wood gate, we noticed the hours of visitation were almost over. I wanted pictures of the beautiful peacocks and asked if pictures were allowed. The caretaker was gracious enough to let us in and wander about and spend as much time as we wanted to look around. I was not aware of this book until I returned to the US. I immediately ordered it! Judy had taken me back through every room of that castle and the grounds. I looked through her eyes as if I was there visiting again with the same amazement and awe that I had seen with my own eyes! This 'find' on my trip was probably the most beautiful and unexpected experience of my life. I will never forget it and it will always remain in my heart. I am thankful that the author's experience was like mine and she had the sense to write about it!

Overall, I mostly enjoyed this pleasant little book. (It was full of both very humorous and very boring parts, so it was a mixed-bag). The restoration stories were entertaining, but I think this couple certainly must have a screw loose to live in such horrible conditions while they renovated their "castle"! I do agree with another reviewer who said that she found it appalling how this couple took money from the Welsh government and then wouldn't answer the door for the agreed-upon visitors. (If you have to borrow money with conditions attached to it, then you have to live up to your word, regardless of your personal annoyance!) I am glad to have read this memoir, although I gave it away to my local library since I am not interested in reading it again someday.

"Restoring the sixteenth-century Gwydir Castle" on the back of this book caught my interest as I've so enjoyed reading Sharon Kay Penman's Welsh HF books. There's a "romantic aura" to the idea of actually buying and restoring a "crumbling old stone mansion". Also, it brought back memories of my first house that required a significant amount of remodeling. Although my husband and I did knock down a wall with sledge hammers and do most of the other work ourselves it in no way compared to this historical undertaking (we're talking about 40 rooms here). I mention this only because if you've done some DIY projects, you'll be amazed at their accomplishment. In America, I've no doubt these "ruins" would have been razed decades (if not centuries) ago, such was the disrepair. In northern Wales, this young couple faced squatters, bats, and rodents. They found skeletons, reported ghosts, and met some incredible challenges from nature. There were chapters where I thought, "this is where I would have bailed out". Judy Corbett writes her narrative as if she's sitting opposite you sharing a cup of tea. Every component of the restoration is fascinating. Her description of bone-chilling damp cold had me pulling up the comforter and I felt her exhaustion after 18-hour days

of toil and grit. There's humor when fund raising needs bring paying visitors, the suspense of a surprising deal with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and even a sojourn with royalty. I'm glad she decided to share the "adventure". One negative...I craved more detail, most chapters were disappointingly too short. The plus... they have a website describing the rooms they rent, weddings they host, and a general history of the former occupants.

Wonderful charming tale of twists and turns of restoring the distant past, much like the shape of the castle itself. You will feel you know Judy well at the end of her experiences. You will want to see Gwydir Castle for yourself too, as I did. DO! The castle is as wonderful as the book.

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