

Bob Parsons

American who spent three decades restoring a country house

BOB PARSONS, who has died aged 79, was an American who made his home in England and devoted the last 30 years of his life to rescuing and restoring Newark Park, a National Trust property — part Tudor hunting lodge, part James Wyatt country house — perched on an escarpment above the Vale of Bristol.

Robert Parsons was born on August 2 1920 in Oklahoma and raised across the border at Wichita Falls, Texas, where his father was an oil prospector who never struck oil. Although Bob Parsons lost much of his accent in later years, he never altogether relinquished his gentle Southern drawl.

After school, Parsons studied architecture at Harvard University and, although he never practised, his studies informed his great knowledge and love of buildings. During the Second World War, he served with the US Army 65th Fighter Wing in the European and Middle Eastern campaigns.

It was during spells of wartime leave in England that he discovered the world of England's historic buildings. Armed with letters of introduction from the English Speaking Union, he bicycled around the West Country, visiting country houses. He was much drawn to the English way of life, and in 1950 returned to England as a civilian.

He set up a successful business buying antiques in England and selling them in America. He then took up property development, acquiring houses in London and converting them into flats. He moved in an artistic circle, and was befriended by the stage designer and artist Leslie Hurry.

In 1970, on one of his regular meanders round the country, Parsons came across Newark Park. Although owned by the National Trust, the house was in a state of neglect, having been used for a time as an old people's home and then left empty. The Trust was delighted to grant Parsons a repairing lease.

Camping in the cold, dark house, he set

about the long work of restoration. Over the next years he poured his energy, time, knowledge and money into the work, restoring the fabric of the house and re-awakening the spirit of the place.

Although knowledgeable about the history of Newark, Parsons was not concerned simply to recreate an authentic period look. The decorative schemes he employed were often daring, even eclectic. Tongalese Tapa cloth was stretched over the wall of the Tudor drawing room, psychedelic Michael Szell wallpapers lined the Regency bedroom suite, and pieces of 18th-century furniture were upholstered with Parsons's own "Bargello-work" embroidery.

Parsons also brought order and beauty to the tangled 10-acre wilderness of the grounds. He discovered a Gothick summerhouse, a serpentine-walled garden and a lake, all quite overgrown and forgotten. He constructed a little mock Gothick folly of his own, to guard one of the gateways.

His neighbours in south-west Gloucestershire included Bruce and Elizabeth Chatwin, Sally, Duchess of Westminster and James and Alvilde Lees-Milne. The hospitable and drily witty Parsons enjoyed entertaining friends with gossip and home-made cakes. He was also generous in making Newark Park available for local charity events.

At the beginning of the 1990s, although greatly helped by his assistant and companion, Michael Claydon, he found his energies waning. In 1993 he was told that he was suffering from Parkinson's Disease. Reluctantly, he decided to give up Newark Park and retire — with his three Great Danes — to a flat in London.

But in 1994, during a routine medical check-up, it was discovered that Parsons was not suffering from Parkinson's disease, but from the effects of a large tumour on his brain. This was successfully removed and, much restored to health, Parsons returned home to Newark in 1997.



Parsons in front of Newark Park, Gloucestershire, with his Great Dane, Max