

A BRITISH FANTASIA

GC meets the British multi-millionaire who has turned his stately home into a fantasy playground

BY PHILL TROMANS

A mere glance inside his home shows that James Perkins is not your typical entrepreneur. Aynhoe Park, a restored 17th-century country house in the heart of Oxfordshire, is filled with a collection of memorabilia, taxidermy, art and curiosities that make the word eclectic seem woefully insufficient. A stuffed giraffe hanging from artificial balloons adorns the orangery; a lifesize statue of Tintin stands next to the entrance to an underground nightclub; a selection of mounted otters' heads stare down from the gents' bathroom. The main stairwell is guarded by a giant statue of Hercules, wearing a Flavor Flav-style clock around his neck.

In Perkins' own words, his home is part-James Bond, part-Indiana Jones and part-Thunderbirds, and it's a window into a creative, nostalgic and eccentric British mind.

Perkins made his name, and started his fortune, organising a series of popular rave music events in the 1990's, starting in his hometown of Cheltenham. The success of the Fantazia events and a subsequent record label allowed him to pursue other interests. His personal passions for art, architecture and property have fuelled his success and directed his path in business.

"As I've got older I'm doing the things that more suit my age group," Perkins says. "My function in [Fantazia] was finding



British millionaire James Perkins



Inside Aynhoe Park, a restored 17th-century country house reflects the owner's eccentric personality

the most amazing venues and creating an environment that was magical, in the same way that Pink Floyd would have done it. It was the theatre of it that I was all about, which as you can see is carried through in the house.”

Aynhoe Park is in many ways a giant business card – a visualisation of the flamboyant, theatrical nature of Perkins’ businesses. The house plays host to music concerts and is available to hire for corporate events and weddings – celebrities including Jade Jagger and Howard Donald have got hitched here.

It’s also the headquarters for A Modern Grand Tour, Perkins online store named after the traditional European trip that young upper-class British men would take in centuries past. The store sells curiosities from around the world as well as Aynhoe Park artwork that has been both collected and created over several decades.

“I’ve always been involved in businesses that I’m passionate about,” he explains. “I’ve had a bucket list of interests, which has all merged together in what you see today. A Modern Grand Tour reflects my travels around the world, buying and selling things over the last 25 to 30 years.

“In the last 10 years it’s culminated in being able to live in Aynhoe Park and enjoying an eccentric and quite British way of living, in the way one might have done in the 18th or 19th centuries.”

Among the pieces Perkins sells is limited-edition, half-scale working replicas of Aston Martin’s famous 1959 DBR1 race car. The models, sanctioned by Aston Martin, were inspired by a one-off Perkins commissioned for his young son, and later hung on the wall of his office.

“It’s come out of an idea of mine and I’ve wanted other people to enjoy it,” he says. “I guess I’ve always been a bit of a dreamer and an entrepreneur. But money, weirdly, isn’t my main motivator. That sense of adventure is more important,

but you can’t do that without money.”

Perkins is also a successful property developer, focusing particularly on restorations. His latest projects will sit within the grounds of Aynhoe Park – three new contemporary and very exclusive houses, inspired by the ethos of stately homes, nestled within 400-year-old trees and overlooking grounds created by legendary landscape architect Capability Brown. He enthusiastically refers to them as James Bond houses, and has spent eight years perfecting the designs and getting the necessary planning permissions. The new houses reflect a modern approach to the philosophy seen at the main house, but with added pizzazz.

“There’ll be a sunken fire pit area, a hot tub area, a viewing area and a subterranean basement through a secret door where you can park 12 cars,” he enthuses, “then you can come up, Thunderbirds-style, from a lift in the ground.”

It’s not been an easy task, but it’s intended to be the start of an international expansion for the brand that he is building.

“There have been a million and one stresses and strains, but that’s what you’d expect when doing something special. We’re not building boxes here, we’re building something that’s got to stand the test of time.”

With so many of Perkins’ projects inspired by personal interest, rather than pure business sense, is there a danger that emotions could overrule sensible decisions?

“It does make it more difficult to accelerate the growth,” he admits. “I’m doing things organically. When you’re doing something you enjoy you have to be careful that you’re doing it for the right reasons, because ultimately it’s got to make money as well.

“I’m building a brand; that’s the essence of this, the Aynhoe brand. I want people to buy into what I’m doing and I’ve got to deliver.”

