

*Pippa Shirley with the
Christian van Vianen standing
cup (1640-1641) from The
Rothschild Collection*

*Photograph: Stuart Bebb © The
National Trust, Waddesdon Manor*



This month's castaway is spoil for choice when it comes to the object she would like to find washed up on the shore of our desert island. Pippa Shirley is head of collections at the glorious Waddesdon Manor, near Bicester, built by Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild.

In 1957, James Rothschild bequeathed the property and its contents to The National Trust, and it is now managed by The Rothschild Foundation. Waddesdon is one of the National Trust's star performers, welcoming more than 350,000 visitors each year.

Pippa oversees 20 staff whose task is to preserve and research Baron Ferdinand's magnificent collections.

But what led Pippa to Waddesdon?

She explained: "I was born in Worcester in 1963. My father, Malcolm Shirley worked for the Forestry Commission, so we moved around a lot. My earliest memories are from Dorset but my strongest impressions of childhood were from the years we spent in Nepal."

Pippa's father was sent to southern Nepal, near Lumbini, in 1970 as part of an aid project. Areas of the foothills of the Himalayas had been deforested for agriculture or for fuel, causing erosion in the foothills with the consequent silting up the rivers.

"For him, the most enjoyable part of his work was tree-planting but there was a distressing aspect," Pippa said. "Settlers would move in and clear great chunks of the forest and he would have to come with a team of elephants and persuade them to leave."

So it is perhaps not surprising that the first object Pippa mentions is a spectacular reminder of those amazing animals.

Opposite the fireplace in Waddesdon's East Gallery is an extraordinary musical automaton in the shape of an elephant. These complex automatons were used as gifts to impress emperors and to encourage trade.

Pippa said: "Baron Ferdinand bought this one to impress the Shah of Persia. The Prince of Wales was a regular visitor to Waddesdon, and the Shah was expecting to meet him there. When the prince did not arrive as expected, Baron Ferdinand thought he had a diplomatic incident on his hands.

"But he wound up the elephant and the Shah watched its eyes roll, its ears flap, its trunk lift and the scenes at the base revolve and more. It is completely over-the-top but a technical *tour de force*. The Shah forgot his disappointment and asked for it to be played over-and-over again," Pippa said.

The automaton was made in London in 1774 by a French clockmaker called H Martinet.

"Despite the magic of digital technology, children visiting Waddesdon today are just as fascinated when they see it working," Pippa said. "My children certainly are, so if I took the elephant to the island, I could easily imagine them watching it work. The only problem would be that if sand got into the mechanism it would be a disaster, and since my job is about conserving it as well as telling its story, I may have to consider something else.

"In Nepal I was home-schooled for the first six months because there were no schools in the area. After that I had three happy years in the British Primary School in Kathmandu. There were just two classes – an infant and a junior class and the pupils were of many

Keeper of the Rothschild treasures



Sylvia Vetta talks to Pippa Shirley, head of collections at Waddesdon Manor

different nationalities. It was a little bit of England in South Asia. But they encouraged us to understand the country in which we were living, including religious festivals, and my parents were interested in Nepalese culture.

"I have a vivid memory of the funeral of King Mohendra. We followed the procession and I was very struck by all the male members of the family dressed in white, the Hindu colour of mourning. The king was cremated at the holiest shrine in Kathmandu, and although foreigners were not allowed at the ceremony itself we could cross the river and watch from there.

"I remember an ornate palace in a square in the old city and seeing a young girl my age looking wistfully from a window. She was the living goddess Kumari, who was chosen, rather like the Dali Lama is found, as a divine incarnation but was not allowed to leave the palace until she reached puberty. She was like a bird in a gilded cage"

Pippa and her family returned to England in 1977. "I missed the sun, my friends, my dogs and my cat, and above all our leopard cub."

A leopard cub? I assumed that was an unusual household pet, even in Nepal.

"During our Easter holidays in Nepal, we

would trek in the Himalayas. Returning from one of these expeditions we called at an experimental farm.

"The couple working there were looking after an orphaned baby leopard. They were about to return to Scotland and did not know what to do with him. They asked us if we would look after him. My mother, Lilian, said 'yes', without hesitation.

"When we left Nepal my parents arranged for him to be transported to Rotterdam Zoo where they had a breeding programme."

So Pippa found herself leopard-less in York, where she attended the local grammar school, Mill Mount Grammar School for girls.

"My inspirational history teacher, Narda Dobson, encouraged me to apply to Oxford. I got a place at Merton College.

"Lovely memories of Oxford include inspirational tutors, including Professor Robert Gildea and the celebrated British architectural historian Howard Colvin, for my special paper on architecture. Reading history was only part of it, I did lots of drama, summer productions, rowing and partying. It is good to be living near Oxford again," said Pippa, who now lives on the Waddesdon estate.

Continued on page 11

From page 9

To evoke her time as a history student in Oxford, Pippa showed me another possible choice for the desert island.

"Ferdinand de Rothschild collected 17th and 18th-century book bindings. There are lots of very large, grand editions, but this one is very special. It is the young Louis XV's geography project," she explained.

"This boy, born to be king, had to write an essay on the rivers of France, but unlike most children's essays, his was beautifully bound. The inner covers are decorated with delightful small fishes and water creatures stamped into the leather. I love it because it is personal – holding this is like holding history in your hand."

After Oxford, Pippa travelled in Europe while she decided what to do next.

"I applied to law school, but a friend said 'Why law school when what you really love is art history?' I had not thought that I could have a career doing something I would do for pleasure. I took her advice and looked at the courses available at The Courtauld Institute of Art in London, and spent two years there studying for my MA in mediaeval architecture."

Afterwards, Pippa headed back to India and Nepal for a few months, but once back home in London had to decide what to do with the rest of her life.

"I worked for a while in a shop to make ends meet, but then rang a friend in the British Museum and asked if I could do some voluntary work for him. He agreed and I catalogued medieval heraldic pendants but then got a job in publishing. I worked on *The Grove Dictionary of Art* which, for a while, seemed to employ a huge swathe of art historians in London. Then I had a call from the department at the British Museum where I had done the voluntary work offering me a temporary contract."

This experience convinced Pippa that she wanted a curatorial life.

"As well as an academic and intellectual pursuit, it has very practical aspects, and, for me, it's about making objects and their histories come alive for people. That is what I love. I was fortunate because, in 1991, a post came up at the the Victoria and Albert Museum and I applied and got it.

"I worked there for eight years in the metalwork, silver and jewellery department. Life was very varied – I worked on a re-hanging of the decorative ironwork collections, and on a re-display of the English silver galleries."

Pippa took me to Waddesdon's smoking room to show me a piece of silver which would remind her of her years at the V&A.

"This piece is unique. Christian Van Vianen was a distinguished goldsmith in Utrecht and Charles I was determined to bring him to London.

"This cup made by Van Vianen is hallmarked 1640, but it looks almost Art Nouveau with its swirling curves and putti. Astonishingly, it is made from one single piece of silver which required exceptional skill."

Above the cup hangs a portrait of a boy painted by the Dutch artist Bartolomeus van der Helst in 1657. What is surprising is that he holds this particular silver cup. Since appearing in that portrait, the cup was gilded in the 19th-century taste. Another case of an antique with a story to tell.



Pippa in the East Gallery with the Musical Automaton (1768-1772) from The Rothschild Collection

Photograph: Stuart Bebb © The National Trust, Waddesdon Manor

Pippa said: "If I were to take a painting from the collection to the island, I think that would also be the work of a Dutchman of the same period – *The Game of Skittles* which Pieter de Hooch painted in about 1665.

"I love the way the Dutch delighted in scenes from everyday life. But behind seemingly simple scenes lies complex allegory."

"When he was little, Jack used to call the house 'Mummy's Manor'. Even now they think of the gardens as their playground."

While in Oxford, Pippa met her future husband, Giles Clifford, who was also at Merton reading history.

Giles became a lawyer and, until recently, worked in Oxford. They married in Yorkshire in 1991 and their son Jack was born in 1999. Pippa was on maternity leave from the V&A when the job at Waddesdon came up.

"At the V&A I had worked under Philippa Glanville, who was director at Waddesdon. She alerted me to the post of head of collections. I was very happy at the V&A and probably

would not have been able to tear myself away if I had not been on maternity leave. The distance helped.

"I had always wanted to work with a collection in a historic house, as opposed to a museum – indeed, after leaving the Courtauld, I had applied to the National Trust, but had been turned down."

Two years later, in 2001, a second son, Patrick, arrived – so both boys (now 11 and 13) have grown up at Waddesdon.

"When he was little, Jack used to call the house 'Mummy's Manor'. Even now they think of the gardens as their playground."

What are the main differences between working in a museum environment and a stately home?

"The main difference is that things are not in cases. They are displayed as if in a home, albeit a rather grand and glamorous one. That accessibility creates lots of opportunities, but it also makes conservation challenging," said Pippa.

"Some objects are light-sensitive and others are affected by humidity. It is more difficult controlling the environment than in a museum. One object I have been considering for the island is a textile. One of our current

Continued on page 13

From page 11

exhibitions is called *Sacred Stitches* and is about the way in which the Rothschilds collected early ecclesiastical textiles, but to use as furnishing fabrics.

"Textiles, of course, are particularly vulnerable to light and can fade and disintegrate if not properly protected. But the exhibition is also about how objects were accumulated and used and I have learned so much from our textiles curator, Rachel Boak. It is one of the things I love about this job – you can never know everything. I learn something new every day," Pippa added.

"In the exhibition there is a Renaissance panel embroidered in a grotesque style. It would have been part of the valance on a bed. Its colours are fresh and bright but it is fragile and light-sensitive, and so has to be in store most of the time. It is lovely to have it on display and it is such an intimate object that it makes me feel close to the past.

"One of the two ceramic items I would like on the island has exceptional provenance, but Baron Ferdinand was not precious with it. Originally it was in the dairy."

Pippa took me to the Breakfast Room and showed me two impressive Meissen porcelain models one of which is of a nanny goat suckling her kid.

In 2007, when I wrote a series for this magazine called *Every Antique Tells a Story*, I began it with a tale of kidnapping, alchemy and the race to imitate the Chinese marvel. Augustus the Strong was passionate about porcelain and Meissen situated near his court in Dresden was the first European factory to win that race.

"These monumental figures, commissioned by Augustus were unprecedented. Even the oriental factories had not made anything like them. They would have been painted but not fired again because of the risk of them breaking in the firing process. So the paint has been washed away leaving the fine white porcelain surface," said Pippa.

"Waddesdon is also famous for its Sèvres and, from that collection, my favourite is the pot pourri vase which was Ferdinand's first purchase, aged 21.

"It took him two years to pay for it in instalments and so is a symbol of his hunger to acquire the best. Madame de Pompadour was the factory's greatest patron. Only ten examples of this shape are known to exist and of them Waddesdon has three of them."

"Life is different here to in a museum because of the charitable foundation, the Rothschild Foundation, which runs it. This can give greater flexibility in operational terms – for example if we want to acquire something, Lord Rothschild heads the foundation and brings terrific drive, energy and perfectionism to the place.

"He is also interested in contemporary art and that has opened a whole new world for us. One example of this is the commission of an extraordinary contemporary chandelier by the designer Ingo Maurer for the Blue Dining Room. It is called *Porca Miseria*, and it is a kind of frozen explosion of white porcelain, suspended in mid-air. It would definitely come with me to the island if only I could work out how to hang it up!

"There is also a stunning Bruce Munro light installation, *Cantus Arcticus*, in the Coach House and an artist called Philippa Lawrence is

Pippa in the West Gallery next to a combined clock and cabinet (France, 1761-1765) from The Rothschild Collection

Photograph: Stuart Bebb © The National Trust, Waddesdon Manor



working on a new project for the garden called *Darning the Land*. One of her ideas is a skein of wild flowers, like threads, inspired by the textiles collections which will wind down the hill on the approach to the house," Pippa said.

"We do not only acquire contemporary art, though. Another recent addition was a wonderful 18th-century painting by Chardin, *Boy Building a House of Cards*.

"The foundation is now based at Windmill Hill, which was purpose-built to house the Waddesdon archive and is open to the public. Anyone can call and make an appointment.

"On Friday afternoons anyone can view it or use the reading room. It also has work by Anish Kapoor, Sarah Lucas and other well-known contemporary artists.

"Since I have been here we have developed more wide-ranging exhibitions. I write articles, give lectures and guided tours. We are even

involved in meetings to do with things like car parking because we curate the history of Waddesdon in its broadest sense, including the garden and historic buildings on the estate as well as the collections."

So what will Pippa's desert island choice be? "I think it has to be the Christian Van Vianen cup," she said. "I would be concerned about breaking the Sèvres and Meissen and the book and textile would be damaged in heat and in tropical storms but the cup can survive almost anything and is practical too.

"Drinking from it would put me in touch with Waddesdon, the V&A – and the 17th century."

■ For more information about Waddesdon Manor visit the website: www.waddesdon.org.uk