

A Home and a Business

An Interview with Rachel Emma Manners, Duchess of Rutland, Chief Executive Officer, Belvoir Castle



The Duchess in Belvoir Castle's Rose Garden (above) and horseback riding with the Castle in the background (below)

EDITORS' NOTE Emma Manners was schooled at Ellerslie School, Malvern, and then trained as an opera singer at the Guildhall School of Music. After leaving opera school to train to become a land agent in Southampton, she worked for a time marketing properties in London before becoming an interior designer. Today, the Duchess runs the commercial activities of Belvoir Castle. She has also produced a book about Belvoir Castle.



CASTLE BRIEF Dating back to 1066, the Belvoir Estate has been passed down through 36 successive generations. Belvoir is one of the country's finest Regency castles. The estate's landscaped garden was restored in 2016 from Lancelot "Capability" Brown's 1780 original designs. The restoration of the 18th century buildings at the foot of the castle allowed the "Engine Yard" to become the heartbeat of the local community and a center of excellence for local food, drink and artisan shopping. The Engine Yard is open seven days a week and includes a cocktail bar, the Balloon Bar, the Fuel Tank restaurant which is open for breakfast and lunch, and The Duchess' Gallery featuring a collection of interiors, clothing and much more curated by the Duchess of Rutland herself.

Will you provide an overview of Belvoir Castle?

Belvoir was built as a hunting lodge with enormous rooms for entertaining. We live in this castle very much as a home and I would say that in the 21st century it is truly about keeping it a home while also focusing on making it a viable business. It is critical in doing that

to protect the fragile artifacts and respect the history, while appealing to visitors and special groups from around the world who come and stay by invitation. It is a delicate balance. We have to be open to the public for at least 100 days a year based on our agreement with the government. With such a large property that has 250 rooms, you often won't see any visitors or members of the public due to the size of the property.

It has been my priority to find a balance between being a home and a business which has been incredibly difficult given that when we first arrived, we had four small children. You have to be willing to share your lives with others so there is not much privacy, but I believe it is very important that families like ours live in these buildings to keep them alive so that they have a heartbeat.

How accessible is it to visit Belvoir Castle?

We have our own private airstrip in front of the castle and East Midlands Airport is 40 minutes from the property, so it is very accessible for groups and visitors from all over the world.



Belvoir Castle (above and top right)



"The Engine Yard" at Belvoir Castle



The dining room at Belvoir Castle

How has Belvoir Castle had to adapt its business to address the global pandemic which caused tremendous strain on the hospitality industry?

We have had to pull down the shutters and shut the rooms. During the first lockdown, the family really struggled to come together as a group. In the second lockdown, we have become much better at respecting each other's boundaries. As a business, we are working to find a way to still allow people to come and walk around the grounds so they can get a reprieve from the stress of the times and experience a positive impact on their mental health. We have kept our restaurant, The Fuel Tank, open for takeout. We have had to think on our feet and be creative to try to provide visitors the level of service and experience we are known for while following all safety protocols.

How do you focus your efforts as chief executive of Belvoir Castle and what do you see as the keys to effective leadership?

I focus my efforts on running this private heritage but must do the dull bits as well such as concentrating on costs going out and monies coming in. If you do the dull bits well, the rest will follow. Effective leadership is sharing a vision, encouraging your team and leading from the front, like going into battle each day.



Chinese bedroom (above) and another Belvoir Castle bedroom (below)



It has always been my priority to find a balance between being a mother and being a business leader. I think that working mothers always have an element of guilt about what they do because it is hard to do it all and I have had that guilt.

What are your priorities for Belvoir Castle as you look to the future?

One of my priorities for Belvoir Castle moving forward is to further establish my American Friends Foundation, enabling people to gift money to support restoration projects and hence having their name on the door. I would like to make this heritage secure for future generations of my family and so the public will be able to continue to enjoy Belvoir. Moving forward business-wise, we will look to maintain a delicate balance of not over-commercializing what we do and still respecting the history. My chief priority will continue to be keeping the lights on.

What advice do you offer to young women beginning their careers?

I believe in women always being true to themselves and never asking others to do anything they would not do. They should write down their vision and share it with their team. Record your successes along the way because no one else will and always retain a woman's feminine charm – don't take on the mantle of men. ●



Two views of The Regency Gallery at Belvoir Castle