

***Restoration* launches on a firm foundation as Griff Rhys Jones invites viewers to save the nation's heritage**



Griff Rhys Jones is building on a firm foundation as he prepares to open the doors for a second time to BBC Two's major campaign and series, *Restoration*. Last year's first series cemented itself into public consciousness by presenting viewers with 30 at-risk buildings across the country and asking them to vote for the one they wanted to save for future generations.

The nation has lost approximately one historic building or monument every day since the end of the Second World War, despite the fact that, on a typical weekend, more people visit these

edifices than go to football matches; and, as these ancient walls crumbled and fell silent for ever, *Restoration* helped people find a voice and speak out for the preservation of the past.

Griff, himself a national comedic treasure through such hit series as *Alas Smith And Jones*, is delighted to be back on the battlements for *Restoration*. A BBC Two programme on 8 May launches the new series and, later in the season, seven programmes showcase 21 at-risk buildings; this is followed by a series highlighting heritage stories the same night on BBC Four.



Details of how viewers can get a free campaign pack entitled *So You Want To Save An Historic Building* is given in the launch programme. Viewers in the Nations and Regions can see regional BBC programmes tailored to their area and the nation will decide the winner in a live final.

“The first series was an enormous success,” Griff states enthusiastically. “People from completely different walks of life watched it, paid attention and voted. Lots of people were saying things like, ‘My husband has never, ever voted for anything on television before, but he insisted that we vote on this.’”

Griff’s dogged determination to campaign for a better environment is well documented and he’s joined today by his chocolate Labrador, Cadbury, in his Grade I listed home – formerly offices – in London’s West End, where he lives with his wife, Jo, and two teenage children.

Once settled in the bookworms’ utopia of his study, where leather armchairs invite you to curl up with a tempting tome, Griff relates an anecdote which illustrates how *Restoration* brought down the drawbridge on class and culture.

“Walking near home I passed two guys who looked particularly tough – their knuckles were tattooed and all that,” he recalls. “They said, ‘Oi, Rhys’. I thought, ‘Oh dear, hello, here we go’. Then they said, ‘We’ve got a swimming pool down our way; what are we supposed to do about it?’

“That proves,” affirms Griff, “that a lot of people watched it across the board, which is good – good for the series and therefore that’s a good reason why there should be another one.”

The 21 buildings selected to be thrown a lifeline in *Restoration* are chosen by a combination of factors. Griff explains: “The buildings have to fulfil certain qualifications:

they have to be historically and architecturally significant. Then it’s very important that we cover the entire country, so we go to various districts. There are hundreds of buildings in most areas but we have to spread it around. And, finally, it’s important that people feel they can help these buildings.”

All the buildings have been chosen in consultation with heritage bodies across the UK and the Heritage Lottery Fund and the range of buildings in the new series embraces an old palace, a beautiful tower and a copper mine.

Says Griff: “There’s a whole range of buildings across the country which are the ugly sisters, if you like, but do have fabulous future uses. I’m a great believer in the use. A building cannot be a whitened sepulchre or it very quickly becomes a white elephant. It’s very important that people look at the continuity of a building and that they are flexible about the use of it, because not everything can become an arts centre.

“I would urge people,” he stresses, “to get involved and think as planners from a heritage point of view. They need to make choices exactly as planners would: they want to save a building because it has a future use, it has a function, it will continue to play a role in the community and it’s also architecturally important.

“The decision shouldn’t be just because it’s beautiful,” he adds. “A lot of these buildings are hugely attractive – it’s one of the reasons why people want to save them. There’s a tendency for academic bodies to become very picky about buildings – to assume, in some way, that what we’re trying to do is utterly to preserve things in aspic. I don’t believe that. I believe that flexibility is very important.”

The new series is accompanied by a campaign pack which will encourage the viewing public to get involved, and help volunteer campaigners as they appeal to the nation to save their favourite building. “I don’t particularly want to



get involved in a telethon,” declares Griff, “but these buildings do need money.

“There are two aspects,” he explains. “It’s a long game – you have to be prepared to take time. You also have to make your case adequately – you can’t just go to people and say, ‘Give us the money’, without actually proving many things, including your own sense of responsibility. But it can be done. So it isn’t just Heritage Lottery money, although that’s a big part of it.”

Griff describes fund-raising for threatened buildings as “a Sisyphean task” and he speaks with authority on becoming involved in preserving the nation’s heritage. Some six years ago he agreed to front the campaign to save Hackney Empire in East London, partly because he mistakenly thought he’d performed there. “Well, I knew I’d been there and seen lots of things there,” he smiles. He’s worked like a Trojan and, although there is still some work to do, the theatre re-opened in January this year, after a £17m labour of love.

It was his tireless work for this Edwardian treasure – its spotlight has shone on Marie Lloyd, Stan Laurel and Charlie Chaplin, followed, in more recent times, by Jo Brand, Ben Elton and Ralph Fiennes as Hamlet – which led to Griff’s involvement in *Restoration*.

He’s also cared passionately for a long time about buildings in general. “I’ve always liked to see imagination and care and thoughtfulness in buildings,” he explains. “I’ve always been worried by what I would call the Fascist tendency, which is a very 20th-century thing. We have to be a multicultural, pluralist society, where people have different views to accommodate.

“But we have certain areas of the arts – and architecture is one of them – where there is still the most extraordinary orthodoxy, an orthodoxy which is out of date and is contrary to most aesthetic thinking. I worry

that people don’t spend enough time thinking about aesthetics in architecture as much as they do about cleaving to certain rigid principles, such as functionality, etc.

“If you walk round London, it doesn’t take long before you start to pass new buildings which have been plonked down on to the street and you feel menaced by the building itself. Around where I used to live in Clerkenwell most of the new building was atrocious in this regard, while most old building was accessible and human in scale.

“That, it seems to me, is one of the reasons why we need to do what we can to preserve our buildings. In simple terms, old-building stock is often better and more economic, and certainly more environmentally friendly, to preserve, than it is to smash everything down and start all over again.”

He adds ruefully: “Our record in smashing everything down and starting all over again is not good. That’s not to say I’m an enemy of modern architecture – I’m certainly not. I absolutely adore certain types of modern architecture; I just don’t have a hankering after failed experiments.”

Griff, who believes strongly that an idea similar to *Restoration* will be running “200 years from now”, didn’t have a favourite building from the first series, which was won by Manchester’s Victoria Baths in a spectacular live final from the Tower of London. “I thought they all had character,” he says tactfully.

He adds: “I’m not so sure that, in the great scheme of things, we should be so concerned with individual buildings. I think we should be concerned with areas. There’s a tendency within the conservation movement for all ancient buildings to be owned by the public, but the public cannot afford it. We can’t afford to own every single worthwhile piece of architecture. Architecture is there for



everybody and if everybody was interested and involved in it, we would probably live in increasingly beautiful areas, which is why public involvement is so vital.”

Griff has two targets in his sights which he blames for despoiling the capital, in particular, and he fires off a round of verbal bullets.

“One of the messes in London is street signs,” he stresses. “Some traffic signs make no sense, they’re just stuck up where people think they might be of some help or no help at all. ‘The North’,” he barks, strongly emphasising each word. “What on earth does that mean in the middle of London? It’s just a piece of rubbish. And why, in the centre of London, in a conservation area, do they still allow developers to put up huge hoardings covered in advertisements which then stay there for 20 years?”

He immediately answers his own rhetorical questions: “Some of the laws about improving our environment are toothless. It’s often site owners who want to redevelop and can’t get planning permission for whatever they want to do, who hang on to a building for ever and ever. As Michael Heseltine said, the first thing that should happen is that people should be forced to sell a building if they don’t have a use for it, or if they are claiming they can’t do anything with it; it should go on the open market, because they won’t harm themselves to sell it.”

He continues: “I wouldn’t be allowed, and nor would you, to put advertising hoardings on the side of your house, but because it’s a sort of quasi building site, they apply, they get permission, they put them up.

“So individuals feel slightly powerless,” he adds. “They don’t quite understand why they should live in a shitty Britain.

“I do hope,” he says earnestly, “that we continue to be a reasonably campaigning programme.”

Viewers can obtain a free copy of the campaign pack, *How To Save An Historic Building*, by calling 08700 100 150 or by logging on to the website www.bbc.co.uk/restoration