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## 20 Questions for the Silent Star of 'Downton Abbey': The Castle

In its first interview ever, England's stately Highclere Castle talks about its colorful history and overnight fame

posted by **John Stark**, January 2, 2013 [More by this author](#)



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Highclere Castle featured in the PBS miniseries "Downton Abbey." Season 3 premieres on Jan. 6.

Courtesy of Lord and Lady Carnarvon

*The third season of Downton Abbey premieres this Sunday, Jan. 6, on PBS at 9 p.m. Eastern time (8 p.m. Central time). In advance, I was granted an exclusive phone interview with the real star of the series: England's Highclere Castle, the actual mansion where the drama is filmed. It's located west of London, in the village of Newbury, in the county of Hampshire. Here from my transcribed tapes is our conversation. I was allowed 20 questions, no more. The castle has a very hectic schedule.*

**Hello, Hello, Highclere Castle? Are you there? Can you hear me?**

I can now. I had the wrong end of the phone to my ear. Delighted you called. What is it you and your readers would like to know?

### 1. For starters, may I ask how old are you?

As you Yanks like to say, I'm 334 years young! I'm a beloved historical relic, like Maggie Smith.

### 2. Were you always a castle?

Up until the early 19th century I was your run-of-the-mill Tudor mansion. In 1838, the Third Earl of Carnarvon hired the architect Sir Charles Barry to transform me into a palace that would impress the world. Queen Victoria had just taken the throne. Sir Charles designed the Houses of Parliament. No doubt you can see my Gothic resemblance. My redo, however, took 40 years to complete. Contractors — don't get me started.

### 3. Why are you called an abbey?

Like many of the great English estate houses, I was once the site of an ecclesiastical property. I still retain my "monk's garden." Evelyn Waugh used to call me "Dear Abbey." Amusing chap, but ever the snob.

### 4. How much land are you on?

I am surrounded by 1,000 acres of parkland designed by Capability Brown, the renowned English landscape architect. I had 8,000 acres before downsizing became de rigueur among the aristocracy. But I am still bigger than your Central Park.

#### 5. How many rooms do you have?

No one has ever counted them. It would be impolite. I am guessing two to three hundred. I have between 50 and 80 bedrooms — and not one closet. Sir Charles was all about curb appeal: turrets, towers and crenellations. Yet there is nowhere to hang a tux or ball gown.

#### 6. Who occupies you now?

The Eighth Earl and Countess of Carnarvon. They're called boomers on your side of the pond. To their friends they are known as Georgie and Fiona. Good thing too. His full name is George Reginald Oliver Molyneux Herbert. Try saying that after a few Bushmills.

#### 7. Do they like having a TV show filmed in their home?

As Lady Fiona kindly tells the media, "The best part has been sharing this romantic castle and home with so many people from around the world." But in private she frets about the thick wires, cables, cameras, trollies and white vans blocking the driveway. Her Ladyship likes things tidy.

#### 8. How valuable is your décor?

The mahogany desk and chair in the music room belonged to Napoleon. The gigantic portrait of a man on a horse that is often visible behind Lord Crawley's head in the dining room is a 1635 portrait of King Charles I by Anthony van Dyke. You can see why Lady Fiona is always fussing at the cast and crew. She once corrected a technician for picking up an antique chair the wrong way. "You pick a woman up by her arms, and a chair by its bottom," she told him. She even took away the Dowager's nutcracker before she could do any damage.

#### 9. Are you open for tours?

At Eastertime and in the summer months. Tickets cost £16 each. One must book ahead. Everyone wants to visit me now that I am an international superstar. Some days it is a bloody stampede.

#### 10. You can't blame Lord and Lady Carnarvon for wanting you to help earn your keep. A 2009 story in the Daily Mail said you were falling apart. It said that only your ground floor, with the great oak staircase, and the first floor, remain usable. For the most part, you're damp and cold and have bad plumbing. The article mentioned "the squalor of stinking damp walls and swarms of flies everywhere." Are you really such high maintenance?

Rubbish, all of it! Who at my age does not have a few leaks and cracks?

#### 11. It was recently reported that the Earl applied to the local council to build houses on some of your land to finance repairs. Is it true that one very famous neighbor was so outraged he sent Lord Carnarvon a letter offering to buy you from him?

If you are referring to Andrew Lloyd Webber, he did make an offer. He does get his knickers in a twist. Better I fall apart. It would be far kinder.

#### 12. Do you miss the good old days?

You mean the early 20th century when I epitomized the confidence and glamor of the Edwardian period? When I had house parties full of politicians, innovators and celebrities? When I didn't have a gift shop selling home and garden gifts with my branded image on them, from tea towels to sugar-free mints? Times have changed. No point in throwing a wobbly. I have to keep my hair on, you know. Stiff upper lip and all that. (A word to my fans in the colonies: You can click here to visit my on-line gift shop. I do take Visa and Mastercard.)

#### 13. Word has leaked that in an upcoming episode the Crawleys visit a smaller house that they may move into. The reason for this, I heard, is that it's becoming increasingly difficult to film you due to all the tourists. Some of your rooms are rented out for conferences and

**weddings. How do you feel about being replaced?**

I dare say let them try! Dame Maggie told me she has never worked with a more professional castle, so there you are.

**14. Who is the most famous person to visit you? . . . Hello, are you still there?**

Sorry, having a senior moment. Trying to think of her name. Oh, you know, she wears a crown. Helen Mirren played her in the movie. Queen Elizabeth, that's who! She was a dear friend of the late Seventh Earl of Carnarvon. She was a regular overnight visitor. Oh, those corgis!

**15. How big is the staff?**

I am down to 60 to 80. Still, they do manage to keep things in tip-top shape. This includes gardeners, chefs, farm staff, house staff, office staff, painters, electricians and guides. Before electricity, I had a lamplighter, and up until the early 1900s a maid whose life was spent concocting preserves.

**16. Didn't the Countess just write a book?**

It is titled *Lady Almina and the Real Downton Abbey*. It tells how Lady Almina, who was married to the fifth Earl of Carnarvon, turned me into a veterans hospital during World War I, just as Lady Cora did in Season Two. At first everyone here thought Lady Almina was off her trolley, but she became a skilled nurse. I must say she was quite the looker. The bees knees! Can you keep a secret? Lady Almina was the illegitimate child of Alfred de Rothschild. He left his fortune to her. It's been said that Lord Carnarvon married her so he could pay for my upkeep.

**17. In *Downton Abbey*, didn't Lord Robert, Earl of Grantham, marry Cora for the same reason?**

Fancy that. Only Lady Cora is — an *American*. Nouveau riche, as Evelyn Waugh would say.

**18. What can you tell me about the fifth Earl of Carnarvon? He made world headlines.**

Quite the adventurer. In 1922, he discovered, along with his colleague, Howard Carter, the tomb of the Boy Pharaoh, Tutankhamen. Georgie and Fiona have just opened an Egyptian exhibition in my cellars to celebrate his achievements. Many artifacts from the site are now on display.

**19. A year after opening King Tut's tomb the fifth Earl died of an infection from a mosquito bite. Do you believe in the mummy's curse?**

I do if Andrew Lloyd Webber moves in.

**20. One last question before we hang up: What's to come in season three?**

Sorry, mum's the word! But as everyone who watches *Downton Abbey* knows, there's hardly a dull moment. Just when things are going tibbity boo, a scandal erupts. Everyone here, blue bloods and commoners alike, find themselves in the most precarious pickles.

I must ring off now. I'm wanted in makeup. See you Sunday. Cheerio!