



Above and top right
Henry and Clara Ford in the grounds of Fair Lane,
their house for over three decades, with grandsons
Henry Ford II and Benson; and the house now, just as
the much-needed restoration work gets underway.



HENRY'S HOUSE

100 years ago, newly wealthy from the success of the Model T, Henry and Clara Ford moved into a new house. Now it's under restoration – and Octane was given exclusive access

WORDS David Lillywhite // PHOTOGRAPHY Matthew Howell

THIS IS WHERE Henry Ford lived and died. It's the house that he designed and built, funded by the then-recent success of the Model T, and it's where he and wife Clara entertained guests such as Thomas Edison and naturalist John Burroughs. As such, it's one of the most important houses in the history of the world's industrialisation.

So you might be surprised to hear that the roof has leaked for years, ornate chandeliers have been replaced by fluorescent strip lighting, the swimming pool filled in, son Edsel's personal bowling alley stacked high with old documents and magazines, and the bedroom in which Henry passed away used as an office. How could this be?

Henry's great-grandson Edsel II wondered the same, and it's largely thanks to him that the house, named Fair Lane, is now undergoing extensive restoration. After six years as offices for the Ford Motor Company, followed by 56 years as a centre for the University of Michigan Dearborn Campus, the house, gardens and Henry's workshop and garage have been taken over by a new charitable board, part of the organisation that looks after

the well-preserved Edsel & Eleanor Ford House 25 miles away in Grosse Pointe, on the shores of Lake St Clair.

The restoration work is only just beginning, and it's a huge task. There's 31,770sq ft of interior space (and that doesn't include the power house and laboratory, which we'll come to later), some of which hasn't yet even been cleared of the administrative detritus of the previous few years, and there are areas that have had to be roped off due to their dubious structural integrity.

'This place was open to the public for years,' says Vice President for Historic Resources, Mark Heppner. 'There were weddings and events almost every day – that's a lot of pressure on an historic home. At the Edsel & Eleanor House we give a more traditional tour but here we want visitors to really *feel* the house, to learn about the people and their stories. There are places that tell pieces of Henry's story but we want this to be the place where people start. He was a complex son of a gun...'

Sure enough, there are a few hidden surprises at Fair Lane that reveal some of the many facets of Henry Ford's character. Indeed, even the location does that, because Detroit's most wealthy tended to build their houses in →



the Grosse Pointe area, and Clara was keen to do the same. Henry, who came from a simple farming background, thought differently, and chose instead a 2843-acre plot in Dearborn, then a purely agricultural area, alongside Rouge River and close to the Ford factory.

The build started in 1914, overseen by Henry, who was as distrustful of architects and builders as he was of his designers and engineers at the factory. By this point the Model T, introduced in 1908, was already a success, and Fair Lane would be a rare indulgence of the wealth that the pioneering car had created. Henry, Clara and son Edsel, then 21, moved in during late 1915 and early 1916, and enjoyed the tranquillity that the estate provided.

The house was very much Clara's domain, while Henry, ever-restless and creative, would slip away to the neighbouring power house, to visit his garage, workshop and magnificent hydro-electric power generators. Sometimes he'd have strolled from one to the other through Clara's immaculate gardens, but it's more satisfying to think of him striding along the long, kinked access tunnel that connects them, to emerge in the heart of the power house and unlock the high-security door to the workshop above. At other times he would have headed into the turntable-equipped garage, where up to 12 vehicles were kept, including Clara's electric cart.

Meanwhile, what was Edsel up to? His parents had created a photographic darkroom for him, a billiards room, a swimming pool and a long, narrow bowling alley. They were keen to keep Edsel within the fold but Edsel had different ideas, mixing with the Detroit society crowd that Henry shunned and distrusted. Within a year of moving into Fair Lane, Edsel was off to marry socialite



Eleanor Clay, niece of the Hudson's department store founder. Over later years, Henry's attempts to control his son became ever more manipulative, and their relationship grew publicly hostile at times.

The bullying was an inherent part of Henry Ford's character, but you wouldn't suspect it from Fair Lane. Everything points to a calm, relaxed existence, from the peaceful sun room overlooking the terraces down to the Rouge River and the woods beyond, to the porch on Henry and Clara's bedroom, in which Henry would often sleep with windows wide open for the fresh air. The couple would indulge in birdwatching from here,

Top and above
This is how the living room looked in 1919, long before the dark but intricately engraved woodwork was painted over at Clara's request. Note the latticework panels on the left, which are shown (above) in current painted form. It took over ten hours to strip the paint from the small missing section.

their hobby taking such a hold that Henry imported over 100 species of bird from the UK (most of them promptly flew away, never to be seen again) and engaging conservationist Jack Miner and naturalist John Burroughs to aid them in their studies. They were fascinated by nature, and installed over 500 birdboxes on the estate.

In later years, the house would provide a playground for Edsel and Eleanor's four children. Here, again, the popular image of Henry Ford as harsh and remote is confounded, for Henry and Clara were doting grandparents, and built hideaways, a Santa's workshop and even a miniature farm – complete with scaled-down farming implements – for their beloved grandchildren.

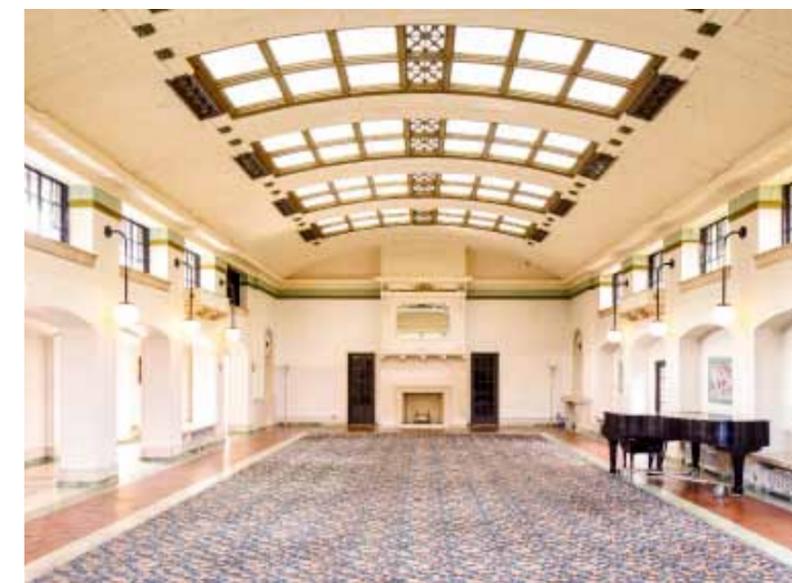
Back in the house, just off the hallway, much time was spent in the library; Clara reading a book, Henry the newspapers. In the basement, Henry created his 'field room', a man-cave in which he enjoyed the company of his three closest friends, Edison, Burroughs and Harvey Firestone, founder of the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, often planning their next camping trip. They referred to themselves as The Four Vagabonds and are immortalised by wooden carvings commissioned by Henry, one in each corner of that room.

Here was refuge from the chaotic industrial world that Henry had helped to create but which he increasingly disliked. Fights with investors and employees took their toll on him, and he became ever more dogmatic, outspoken and resentful of outside influences.

By the mid-1920s the Model T was becoming outdated, but Henry refused to countenance a new model. Eventually he gave in, and his reaction was to bury himself in the old world of agriculture and simple living,

Above
When Edsel left home, the billiards table was removed from the billiards room, as was the marble fireplace surround. The plan is to restore the room for its original purpose – and perhaps allow major fundraisers to play billiards in there.

Below
The swimming pool was filled in when the Ford Motor Co took over the house and used the area for storage of company archives. Rumour has it that the pool was filled with a mix of concrete and old company paperwork.





Above
The field room, Henry's 'man cave', was reconstructed by the university. It's a dark, eerie room, with carved figures of Ford, Burroughs, Edison and Firestone in the four corners.

Top right
The books in the library are replacements, although the originals are in the nearby Henry Ford museum. The ceiling was reclaimed from a house in England.

Middle right
Henry and Clara's bedroom had two separate bathrooms, and dressing rooms for Clara – and a safe disguised as a wooden cabinet, reflecting Henry's distrust of banks.

Bottom right
The bowling alley was later used by the Ford Motor Co to store books and magazines; the huge chandelier for the entrance hallway was discovered in the workshop.

spending more time farming at Fair Lane and creating the nostalgia-heavy Greenfield Village, a collection of historical buildings painstakingly dismantled from around the world and rebuilt on a 240-acre site next to the Ford factory. Greenfield Village still exists as a tourist attraction just a few minutes' drive from Fair Lane.

By the 1940s Henry's health was deteriorating, and he finally stepped down from running the company in 1945. Two years later, on 7 April 1947, fierce storms caused the Rouge River to break its banks and flood the power house, cutting the electricity to the house. Henry went to investigate, to find that the freezing flood waters were rising ever closer to the red-hot boilers, with potentially catastrophic results. The boilers were shut down and disaster avoided – but later that night Henry passed away in his bed of a cerebral haemorrhage.

That same night, grandson Henry II came to the house, and it's thought that (with Clara's knowledge) he removed the large stashes of cash that Henry kept around the house; Henry had harboured a deep distrust of banks, particularly after the Wall Street Crash. There's still evidence of this in Henry and Clara's bedroom, in the form of a wooden (apparently) cabinet that is actually a cleverly disguised lead-lined safe, weighing 3000lb, which hasn't been opened since the 1980s.

Clara died three years later, bequeathing Fair Lane to the Ford Motor Company, and the house became a corporate retreat. This continued until 1957, when Henry II oversaw the donation of the estate, 210 acres and \$6.5 million to the University of Michigan, to create a Dearborn campus, which continues to this day. The house became an events centre for the university, its bedrooms used as offices, and the swimming pool room converted into a canteen, run from the original kitchens.

Meanwhile, great-grandson Edsel II, concerned at the wear and tear the house was being subjected to, began to investigate ways of raising money for its restoration. Unlike the Edsel & Eleanor Ford House, which is still financed by a covenant arranged by Eleanor before her death in 1976, there was no funding allocated to Fair Lane. However, in June 2013, the university gifted the house, power house and 14 acres of land to a newly formed non-profit organisation.

'Since then we've been overcoming a whole series of problems,' explains Mark Heppner. 'We needed separate [from the university] water and electricity supplies – the house didn't even have its own address. There were life-safety issues – the riverbank was collapsing and the wiring was frayed – and we had to stop water leaking into the house. Now we can move onto the fun stuff!'

Henry and Clara's much-loved sun porch will be the first room to be restored. Mark and his team think that its flat roof had leaked from day one, and it's only recently that it's been made watertight. The original chandeliers were still intact, but it was a surprise to everyone when cleaning revealed beautifully coloured enamelling beneath the grime.

The sun porch is one of nine key areas that the first stages of the restoration will concentrate on, the others being the adjacent living room, billiards room, dining room, music room, library and hallway, the basement field room, and, upstairs, Henry and Clara's bedroom.

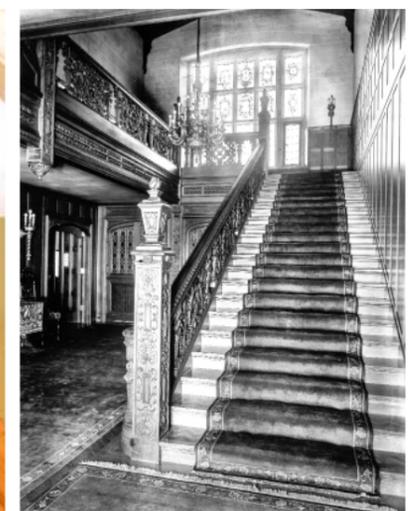
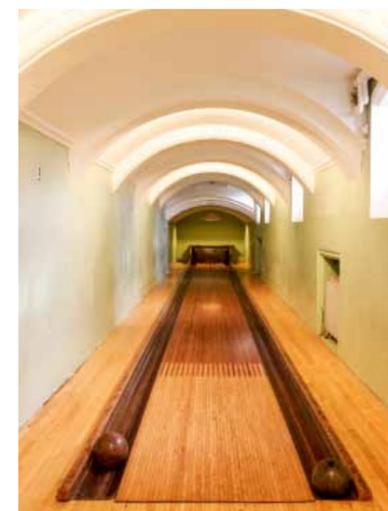
'The big question was which period should the house be restored to,' says Mark Heppner. 'We're working on circa-1919; it will go back to how Henry and Clara would have recognised it. We have archive pictures of many of the rooms from that period, and there are still receipts for everything – right down to the door hinges.'

'Henry came home to discover the interior decorators merrily glossing – and forbade them to continue'

From this research material the team knows that, for example, the furniture in the living room was Chinese Chippendale, with an Estey organ at one end. The walls were panelled in walnut, with inlays and stencilling, and the floor was polished oak – but many changes were made over the years, as Clara enjoyed giving the rooms makeovers, and at one point brought in interior decorator Charles of London. The result was wall-to-wall carpeting, new lighting and updated furnishing. In 1941 she had the wood panelling painted over – now that paint, and the layers since applied, are being removed, with great care being taken not to destroy the stencilling beneath.

The music room suffered the same fate but the story goes that Henry came home to discover the interior decorators merrily glossing – and forbade them to continue into the dining room as Clara had planned.

In the magnificent music room, archive pictures showed three chandeliers, but they were presumed lost – until they were found in the attic, having been stored there since the 1920s. The room's piano is original, a





Above

In the power house, a water wheel connected to huge generators powered the main house, while boilers provided heating and hot water.

Left

A service tunnel runs between the house and power house, with pipes for hot and cold water (both softened and unsoftened), heat and power.

Below

Situated above the generators, overlooking the Rouge River, is the laboratory where Henry Ford did much of his thinking.



Steinway that was customised by Sidney Houghton (who also designed Henry and Clara's famous Fairlane railcar, in which they travelled across the United States).

Other rooms, most notably the field room, the library and the master bedroom, were recreated some years ago by the university, and to a reasonable standard, but there are still problems – in the field room, for example, the floor has been sanded to within an inch of its life, and is now so thin that it will need to be strengthened or replaced before tours can take place. And in the library, while the English-made ceiling is still intact, the original book volumes are now in the Henry Ford museum.

Actually, though, it's the less obvious features that really stand out, and demonstrate the thought that went into Fair Lane. We were allowed unprecedented freedom to wander around, and discovered a 'fur room', lead-lined to protect Clara's coats from moths and rodents; the cocoon-like 'English room' in which Edison stayed; complicated communication system panels; and ornate, high-quality fittings throughout. Some mysteries too, such as why there appears to have been a door through Edsel's wardrobe into the next-door guest room...

Oh, and the bathrooms! The ladies had tubs, the men had remarkable all-enveloping showers, and all came with taps not just for regular hot and cold water, but also for softened hot and cold, along with an outlet marked 'air', used to aid drying, when towels just weren't enough.

And, of course, we couldn't resist going back and forth through the tunnel to the wonderful power house, and climbing the stairs to the workshop, where one of the greatest industrial pioneers spent so much of his time.

When Fair Lane is finished, it will come alive again, with tours, demonstrations and lessons – and not before time. Henry and Clara surely would have approved. **End**

FOR MORE INFORMATION or to contribute to the Fair Lane restoration fund, visit www.henryfordestate.org.