

News

Conan Doyle campaigners fight to save house of the Baskervilles

Ben Hoyle Arts Correspondent

To Sherlock Holmes enthusiasts Undershaw in Hindhead is a national treasure. To Waverley Borough Council it is a ruin ripe for redevelopment.

Undershaw is the Surrey house where Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wrote *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, and where he nursed his dying wife and played host to prominent guests such as J. M. Barrie and Bram Stoker.

However, as a letter published in the *Times* today attests, the building is now in a terrible state with "no security, little water-proofing" and several smashed stained glass windows.

The letter calls on Jeremy Hunt, the Culture Secretary, to block "insensitive" plans to break Undershaw up into several private homes. Signatories, who include Sir Christopher Fraying, the former chairman of Arts Council England, Gyles Brandreth, the broadcaster and former MP, Uri Geller, the spoon-bending entertainer (Conan Doyle had a great interest in the paranormal) and various members of Conan Doyle's family, want Mr Hunt to review the local council's decision to permit the redevelopment and to upgrade its listing in accordance with its literary significance.

They argue that "the house is unique in that it remains one of the few examples of a literary home that was built to the writer's own ideas and design".

The present owners, Fosway Limited, bought the house in 2004 and, according to the letter writers, have neglected it ever since.

Undershaw happens to fall inside Mr Hunt's constituency of South West Surrey. Before the general election Mr Hunt said that he was "disappointed" with the council's verdict and would "seek listed status for parts of the house and hope that this will help preserve some of this extremely valuable".

The letter writers feel that since taking office he has done nothing to back this promise up.

Conan Doyle bought land in Hindhead after he discovered that his wife Lousia had tuberculosis and was likely to live for only a few months more.

The author Julian Barnes, who has campaigned for the house, wrote in his novel *Arthur and George* how Lousia's illness prompted the building of Undershaw in 1897. Conan Doyle hoped that the fresh Surrey air would stimulate a recovery and, in conjunction with the architect Joseph Henry Bell, he designed a family home with huge windows to let in maximum sunlight.

It appears to have worked at least partly because Lousia battled on for



Undershaw has lain empty and been vandalised since a developer bought it



another nine years, succumbing in 1906 at the age of 49. By then Conan Doyle is believed to have written *The Hound of the Baskervilles* at the house in 1902. His regular routine at the time was to rise at 6am and write until lunchtime, before asking his family for criticism. After he moved out in 1907 Undershaw became an hotel and a magnet to fans of his writing. Campaigners now hope to preserve it as a single building. **John Sutherland, page 22**
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PHOTOGRAPHS CHRISTOPHER BLEGER FOR THE TIMES

Sherlock's TV creator hails it as reason to save licence fee

Ben Hoyle, Patrick Foster

In the second episode of *Sherlock* tomorrow night the brilliant detective tackles a mysterious case of graffiti that appears to have the power to kill.

However, after a week in which BBC One's new modern take on Sherlock Holmes registered spectacular viewing figures, sparked an internet frenzy and was discussed in the House of Commons, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's most famous creation has now been enlisted for a much more complicated struggle offscreen.

Steven Moffat, the series' co-creator and lead writer for *Doctor Who*, yesterday brandished *Sherlock* as evidence of why the BBC should be defended from a mooted licence fee cut. "If you want shows like *Sherlock* and *Doctor Who*, you are going to need the BBC," he said.

Sherlock was the most viewed programme on television last Sunday attracting a peak audience of 7.7 million viewers.

Critics purred over Benedict Cumberbatch's portrayal of the detective, in which he has abandoned the fabled pipe and deerstalker for nicotine patches, a mobile phone and a website called The Science of Deduction. In the House of Commons Jeremy Hunt, the Culture Secretary, called it "a very good example of the BBC at its best, investing in new programming".

However, that same day Mr Hunt also abolished the UK Film Council, which distributes public funds to the film industry, having given its chairman and chief executive only three days' notice. Earlier this month he said that he could "absolutely" envisage a cut to the licence fee which funds the BBC. Moffat argues that the instant success of *Sherlock* shows why the BBC needs to be well funded.

"It's a quite phenomenal service," he said. "How else would we have done *Sherlock* or even *Doctor Who*? Who would have done any of these shows? These shows are expensive and difficult and require huge amounts of backing and huge amounts of nerve, particularly on the part of the commissioners."

Teenagers given life for 90-second murder

Four teenagers who murdered a "wholly innocent" man when they went "hunting" on a rival estate received life sentences at the Old Bailey. Moses Nteyoho, 22, died in the knife and hammer attack on the Thamesmead estate, southeast London, in October last year. The court heard that the gang arrived by taxi, attacked Mr Nteyoho, then returned to the taxi 90 seconds later and made off. Osman Amin, 17, Ahmed Ghele, 17, and Liban Ali, 16, must serve a minimum of 14 years. Burhan Yusuf, 17, was given a minimum term of 12 years.

Medical research chief

Sir John Savill has been appointed chief executive of the Medical Research Council. Sir John, 53, will succeed Sir Leszek Borysiewicz in the post in October. He has been head of the College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine, at the University of Edinburgh, and since 2008 has worked as Chief Scientist for the Scottish Government Health Directorate.

Fatal police chase

A teenage boy died in a car crash while being pursued by police. Officers tried to stop the 17-year-old as he was allegedly speeding in Oldham at 145am yesterday. As police followed the car, which had no lights on, it hit a tree and caught fire. Greater Manchester Police said. The incident has been referred to the Independent Police Complaints Commission.



18 murderers at large

Eighteen murderers are on the run despite being recalled to prison for breaking the terms of their release on life licence, according to Ministry of Justice figures. Twelve rapists and attempted rapists are among 30 sex offenders at large. Overall, 914 out of 106,000 prisoners recalled between 1999 and March this year had not been returned to custody by the middle of this month.

£3m for steam rail line

Steam railway enthusiasts have been promised £3 million to help a link with the national network broken almost 40 years ago. Swanage Railway secured the funds from Dorset and Purbeck councils for resignalling work to let trains run from Wareham to Corfe Castle and Swanage. Six miles of the line, closed in 1972, were rebuilt by enthusiasts and carry 200,000 people a year.

Chinese treasure

A pair of Chinese vases kept on a bedroom shelf in a retired couple's modest home have been sold for £500,000 at auction. The 10in-high Qianlong dynasty porcelain pieces were a wedding present, but no one in the family knew their value. A foreign buyer bought the vases, sold at Duke's auction house in Dorchester, with a telephone bid. The pre-sale estimate was £40,000 to £60,000.

BBC refuses to let watchdog see its accounts

Patrick Foster Media Correspondent

The BBC is refusing to allow the spending watchdog full access to its accounts, a decision that is likely to hasten the departure of the corporation's chairman.

The BBC Trust, the governing body, will shortly respond to proposals by Jeremy Hunt, the Culture Secretary, for a swift overhaul of how the BBC is governed that would give the National Audit Office (NAO) unfettered access.

Sir Michael Lyons, the BBC Chairman, and Mark Thompson, the

Director-General, have met senior politicians to gauge the mood among the coalition partners. BBC sources said that although the two men can tolerate the proposed governance changes they were still refusing to let in the NAO.

Sir Michael has met Ben Bradshaw, the former Labour Culture Secretary, and is understood to have made tentative inquiries as to whether the party would back him if he fought the proposals. Labour sources said, however, that he was unlikely to find support.

The chairman's four-year term



expires in April. The Tories let it be known that his ability to make changes they want will figure in deliberations as to whether he should be reappointed.

The BBC fears that allowing the NAO carte blanche, and for its findings to be published to MPs on the Public Accounts Committee, would under-

mine its independence from government. "The NAO is an economic watchdog — it doesn't understand the creative process," a senior BBC source said.

At a private meeting last month, Mr Hunt asked Sir Michael to consider renaming the governing body the Licence Fee Payers' Trust and create a post of non-executive chairman, to work alongside Mr Thompson.

A spokesman for the BBC Trust said: "Any arrangement between the BBC and NAO needs to safeguard the BBC's independence and editorial freedom." **Leading article, page 2**