



The Perfect Place to Write

Lydia Syson

THIS IS THE PLACE I GO BACK TO in my head, whenever I need to now: when a yapping dog has woken me at first light, and my neighbour's obsessive throat-clearing and endless sawing is getting on my nerves, when other people's zoom calls are intruding in my thoughts, when another knock and another delivery have pulled me from my laptop yet again. . .these are the times I return myself in my imagination to a modest top-floor room called 'Evelyn', reached by a winding stone staircase and a book-lined landing. The door shut behind me, I sit on a slightly rickety chair, cushions arranged to get me to the right height for a small, scrubbed pine table in front of a dormer window, framed by faded green brocade curtains on folding brass rods. As I look out, a whirl of snow obscures the dark and misty pines beyond, and white flakes begin to settle in the topmost stones and crevices of the oldest part of the castle — a rusticated, mostly ruined wing, warm pink, rising above a lawned courtyard. Yes, I am in a castle. Behind me there's a high and narrow bed, with a counterpane that reminds me of visiting my granny's friends' houses in my childhood, and I have a heater pulled up close and a hot water bottle tucked under my jersey. There's a lively wind howling in the chimney, but I find it quite companionable. Other than that...silence.

Because that's the rule, from 9.30 until 6pm. This is a place that's perfect for writing, because it's been designed purely for that purpose. Mrs Drue Heinz, the benefactor who bought Hawthornden Castle many decades ago, thought of everything when she and her trustees designed their residential fellowships. Their main principle was that writers need to



have – if only for a month every five years – absolutely nothing to worry about except their writing. Everything else is taken care of. Your only responsibility is to be equally thoughtful about the other writers sharing the castle. And that was a pleasure.

Open the door at lunchtime...there's a Fortnum and Mason's hamper outside, with homemade soup in a thermos, and sandwiches and carrot sticks. You can eat it when it suits you. At coffee time and tea time, freshly baked cakes or scones or biscuits appear as if by magic on the tray by the kettle in the linen room. As for supper...no need to shop, or cook, or even think. Every evening promises another delicious meal, candlelit conversation, sometimes games or poetry reading, or a long soak in a generous bath. Even your laundry is taken away and returned in a tartan bag each week.

When I first looked up Hawthornden Castle on an Ordnance Survey map, I worried about the lack of footpaths. Where would I walk and run, while thrashing out my thoughts? Wouldn't I get cabin-fever? I had forgotten the Scottish right to roam. The perfect place to write isn't only also the perfect place to read, it's the perfect place to wander and explore in body and mind, gathering your ideas in woods and on riverbanks, along disused railway tracks and ancient ramparts, discovering a mossy ruined cottage in a snowdrop glade, a clifftop cave, a chapel, with woodpeckers and deer and waterfowl for company. And – but only when you feel like it – other writers too. Such meticulous nurture. Such a *rare* bliss.