Rosie Waller meets the delightfully eccentric owners of Langley Castle in Northumberland on one of their rare visits.

THE Lord and Lady of Wollaston had yet to meet when he acquired a medieval English castle on their behalf. He hadn’t intended to buy one, hadn’t even so much as toyed with the idea of becoming a titled English lord, or to be a castle owner. A well-known American computer professor, life was one big round of talks on the international circuit. Also, as a secondary pursuit, he had established himself as one of “quite a number” of high-tech businesses which placed him comfortably in the big bucks league. He really didn’t need to do more to make his mark.

Lord Wollaston is an affable American, comfortable enough in his shoes to have long left behind the need for dressing up, and self-effacing enough to derive entertainment from his place as the owner of a real-life fairytale castle at Langley, near Hexham. He is obviously very bright - in that easy American way which leaves you intrigued at just how intelligent they must be rather than plain intimidated - and has played the game of life marvellously well.

The only people he strikes fear into the side of the Atlantic are his staff, who know an American boss when they see one.

Standards at the castle he has converted into a hotel are high and precise. Things are on time and of top quality and Langley seems onto high alert when he and his glamorous wife Yvonne make one of their tours or five-time-a-year visits.

On his business card and to his friends - indeed, to everyone really - Lord Wollaston is Stuart Maddick. The title was offered after he bought the castle and it was a case of being in for a pound. The kind of thing Americans love. It may be a crude assumption, but the reaction of many North Easterners on discovering that the beautiful Langley Castle is owned by an American couple - albeit one whose female half is originally from Brittany - may not be wholly charitably. Americans of a certain age have not done themselves great favours in this old land of ours - York and Edinburgh being full of baseball-capped American retirees whose discussions of family feuds are always so much louder than everyone else’s.

But Stuart and Yvonne are refined and properly attired with their castle. They are constantly making spectacular improvements which add greatly to the pleasure of visitors - see the pretty new topiary garden and refitted restaurant - and are committed to maintaining it for prosperity. They have just, for example, spent £100,000 having the exterior re-pointed, a job no-one will notice, but which will protect it from the elements for some decades to come.

They’re putting money into lots of it - as well as taking it out. And boy, they sure are onto a nice little earner when you look at how business is booming. “More through good fortune than good business, I suspect,” says Stuart.

Memento

Also, Stuart and Yvonne are nice. I know, I imagine everyone is nice, but they really do seem very pleasant. She, for example, ran round at the end of our chat this morning with a tray of chocolate for me, my son and my sister who were on emergency babysitting duty while I was interviewing them. She also gave me a framed picture of Langley Castle as a memento.

“We spend quite a lot of our time travelling,” she says in a French accent.