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If a house could talk

DEBORAH STONE recounts the story of a landmark building's restoration and its former owner, "Mr Saffron Walden"

SOME homes are just as interesting as the people who have lived in them, with a fascinating storyline that belies their calm exteriors. That's certainly the case of Grade II Listed Hill House, which has been restored to its former glory.

A landmark in Saffron Walden, Essex, Hill House had fallen into disrepair after being used as a Royal Mail sorting office during the Second World War then converted into 17 bedsits. But originally it was one of the medieval market town's most beautiful homes.

It was built in 1821 on the site of the old Recorder's House and ancient ducking pond but when "Mr Saffron Walden", George Stacey Gibson, bought it in the 1840s he extended the house and created 11 acres of garden and grounds that ran all the way to Audley End estate – the palatial Elizabethan stately home now owned by English Heritage.

Gibson – a Quaker, banker and the town's mayor from 1875 to 1877 – was nicknamed "Mr Saffron Walden" because of philanthropic acts such as donating to almshouses, extending the town hall and founding an orphanage. He also bought books for what became the town library and bequeathed it his personal collection of 4,000 volumes and their mahogany bookcases on his death in 1883.

Hill House has been converted into 11 luxury one and two-bedroom apartments and developer Domus Homes has incorporated little touches as a tribute to Gibson, such as communal bookcases used for a residents' book-sharing

scheme. The apartments have been styled by a team of local interior designers to marry the building's charm with modern living. Emma Folland of The Design House explains: "Our treatment of the Hill House show flat demonstrates how a beautiful 19th-century building with high ceilings and large arched windows can come to life with a more contemporary style of living.

"The sleek grey kitchen sits comfortably in the open plan living area; the retro feel of the leather sofa and chair gives a warmth and relaxed feel to the room. Bursts of green add colour – and a very current vibe – to the space without diminishing any of the period features."

The apartments have sold quickly, with only two still available: a two-bedroom ground floor flat at £450,000 and two-bedroom second-floor flat at £335,000 (01799 523656; cheffins.co.uk). They feature individually designed kitchens with integrated appliances, gas central heating, video entry, high-speed fibre optic broadband and cable television.

GIBSON was also instrumental in bringing the railway to the town, a two-mile branch line from Audley End. Although that closed in 1964 the Audley End station has regular trains to Cambridge, 15 miles away, and London Liverpool Street, which is one of the reasons for the town's popularity with commuters.

Another is its lovely architecture, a mix of half-timbered medieval, Georgian and Victorian houses. There's a twice-weekly market and a parish church – paid for by the medieval wool trade – and one of the country's oldest purpose-built

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museums. Many of its treasure chest exhibits were donated by Gibson.

Saffron Walden is also a 30-minute rail journey from Stansted Airport and just over an hour's drive from the Essex and Suffolk coast.

"Hill House is the most exciting new development to come to the Saffron Walden market in recent years," says Bruce King, director at selling agent Cheffins.

"We expect these apartments to be of interest to young professionals and downsizers who look to make the most of the lifestyle in Saffron Walden and the quick commute to London and Cambridge."



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TIMELESS CHARM: Understated styling abounds behind the elegantly restored Georgian architecture of Hill House



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MELLOW: Period features sit happily beside modern pieces in the airy expanse of Hill House