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### Inside the brilliantly bonkers Wintershall nativity

Sisters Charlotte de Klee and Henrietta Fiddian-Green have staged a festive pilgrimage on their estate for decades. It's a thing of wonder

Sharon Smith. Photography by Mark Shearwood NOVEMBER 16 2024

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The story of the Wintershall plays began in the 1980s when Charlotte de Klee, now 68, sat next to a priest at a wedding. "I didn't know anything about priests except they're celibate. He said to me, 'I've just come back from Medjugorje in Bosnia and the Christian story is true. Go there.'" She had never heard of Medjugorje, a village where, in 1981, six children and teenagers reported seeing an apparition of the Virgin Mary on a hillside. Nor were she, her parents Peter and Ann Hutley, brothers Nicholas and Edward or her sister Henrietta Fiddian-Green particularly religious. "We went to church at Christmas and Easter," she says. Henrietta, 59, nods in agreement: "On holiday, Mum would take us into churches and we'd light candles. She had rosary beads knocking around, though she didn't know what they were for."



From left: Henrietta Fiddian--Green and Charlotte de Klee with Sam the donkey and a lamb © Mark Shearwood

But the priest intrigued Charlotte, so much so that she and her mother decided to visit Medjugorje in 1986. Henrietta made her own trip soon after “because of persistent nagging” and to recover from her best friend’s death. “I went because Mum said she’d pay for us. I said to Tim, my friend who came with me, ‘We can say we went, take a picture, then go to the beach.’” Instead, they attended Mass. “I walked in and there was this tiny priest from the Bronx with a beard down to his tummy. He read the gospel and gave the sermon and it was as if my ears had been unblocked,” she says of her epiphany.

## Ivan had been such a difficult baby I knew he'd be no good as Jesus

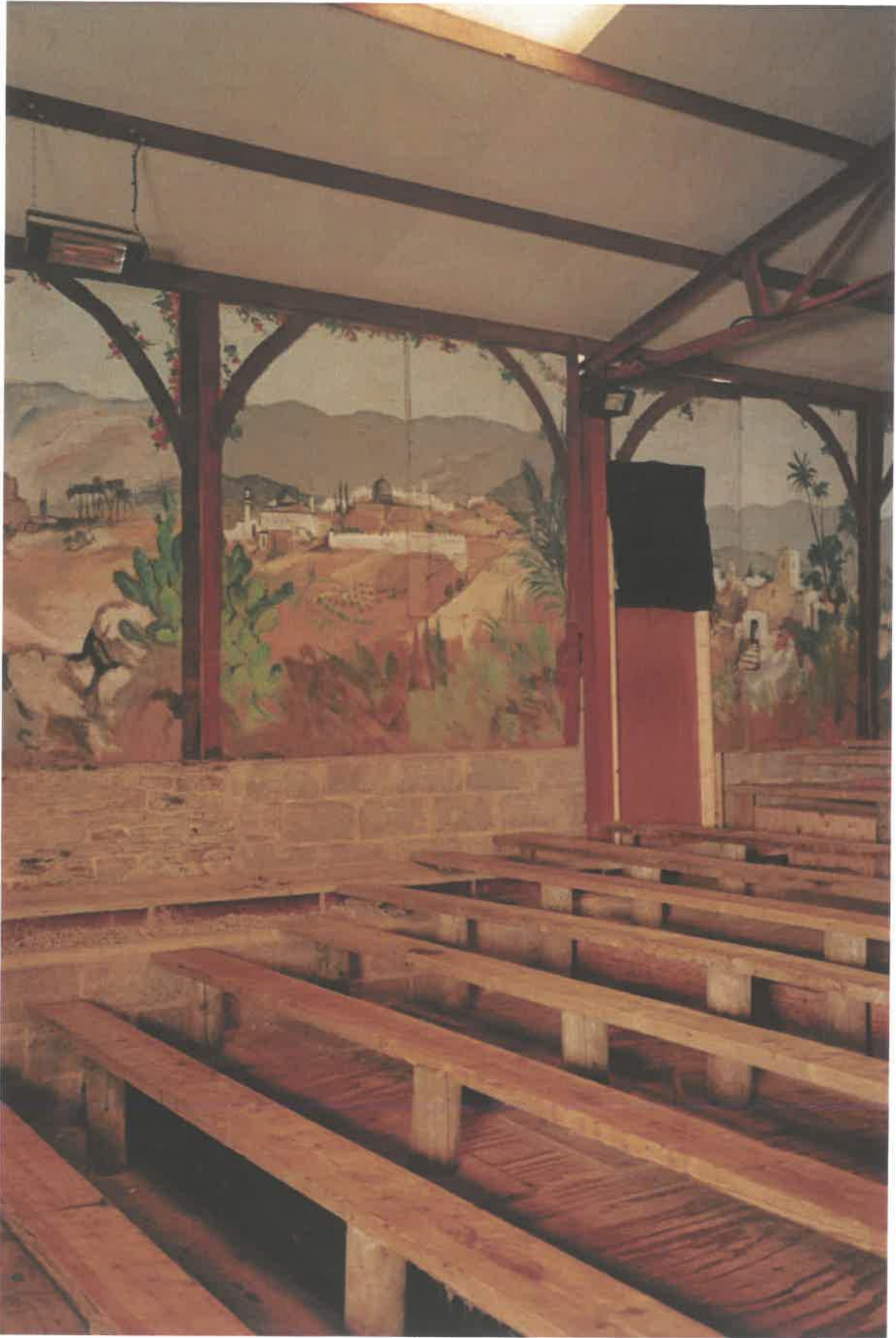
Charlotte de Klee

In 1989, Ann decided to stage a nativity play at the family home of Wintershall – a picturesque 1,000-acre estate in the rolling countryside of Bramley, Surrey. She had already installed the Stations of the Cross, a series of 14 sculptures depicting Jesus's journey to Calvary and his crucifixion, installed on the estate, which formed a starting point for the experience. The works – two of which were created by the sculptor Nic Fiddian-Green, Henrietta's then friend and now husband – have become an integral part of the annual Wintershall nativity. The pilgrimage, which finishes in an 18th-century barn, is an immersive lamplight experience featuring a donkey, sheep, lambs and horses. And while early performances featured a cast and audience of family and friends, it now brings in around 4,000 visitors a year.

“In the early days there wasn't a choice about not being in it. We just walked up that hill,” says Henrietta. Family friend Ashley Herman, who now co-directs the plays, was Joseph. The baby Jesus was played by Charlotte's son Ivan. “He had been such a difficult baby that I knew he'd never be good. But then my godson Hugo, who was supposed to play Jesus, got ill, so Ivan had to go on,” Charlotte says. Was he any good? “No,” she says, flatly.



From left: Charlotte de Klee's husband Rupert and Joss Stoddart, Henrietta Fiddian-Green's son-in-law, as two of the kings, with animal carer and handler Joanne Parry © Mark Shearwood



The pilgrimage finishes in an 18th-century barn © Mark Shearwood



Lambs in the cast for the nativity © Mark Shearwood

That first year, Charlotte's role was to "stand by the gate taking tickets, while Mum was handing out rosaries". Henrietta chips in: "I led the donkey about." Ordinarily, Henrietta oversees one of the estate's farms, so nativity animal husbandry was perhaps inevitable. Charlotte nods vigorously: "Henry's always been good with animals." The first nativity, says Henrietta, was attended by about 50 people. "We wandered around the barn with a few hay bales and a donkey. It was completely chaotic and brilliant." Both assumed it would be a one-off, but word spread quickly and it gradually became more and more popular. The sisters' late father, Peter, became the production's official "author of plays" and, encouraged by its success, wrote other plays in the Wintershall cycle: Easter's *The Passion of Jesus*, which is now staged annually in Trafalgar Square; and *Life of Christ*, a summer production at Wintershall. He was awarded an OBE for his charity work in 2013 and died in 2023.

The nativity remains a major draw and in 2011 the Wintershall team received a Queen's Award for Voluntary Service. Family members have played several roles over the years, although Henrietta is still a reluctant participant. "It makes me terribly nervous because I'm naturally shy," she says, preferring to remain an "animal handler". She relishes the role: "I love doing it. The animals bring a smell, a presence, a wildness and a realness to it."



From left: Mike Keane, Henrietta, Joss Stoddart, Rupert de Klee, Sam the donkey and Charlotte © Mark Shearwood

Charlotte took over as producer of plays from her father in 2014. She divides her time between Wintershall and her home in Scotland. Her own acting roles, however, have been limited and fairly infrequent. "I was in the Passion play but sounded like Prince Philip," she says. "They said 'Cut' and I was shovelled off. I've never been in the nativity..."

Henrietta objects: "You must have been a shepherd. Everyone's a shepherd."

Charlotte corrects herself. She has indeed played a shepherd.

The sisters get on, despite Charlotte admitting being a trifle "bossy". Henrietta is diplomatic: "Dominant, in charge," she says kindly. Charlotte smiles. "Henry's more creative, while I'm practical." To that end, Henrietta is preparing to overcome her stage fright as she will appear in this year's nativity as the only adult family member in the 50-plus cast of volunteers, who are made up mostly of locals. Many of the cast have participated from the beginning. "They joined when they were young and now they're old," Charlotte jokes. There will, however, be at least 10 great-grandchildren, all aged under eight, in the play, while Charlotte's husband Rupert and Henrietta's husband Nic are on stand-by for no-shows.



The Dozulé Cross on the Wintershall estate © Mark Shearwood



Other family members will be kept busy: there is the sound, lighting, costumes, choir, props, car parking and catering to organise. The sisters love that the audience includes those who first came as youngsters, and return with their own children and grandchildren. Do they still enjoy it? Yes, but Charlotte finds fundraising a challenge. The £80,000 production breaks even (but *The Passion of Jesus*, which is free to spectators, costs £125,000 to stage). And there are health and safety regulations: Wintershall provides a team of chaperones for the children in the play, and Jesus is played by several babies.

“We can no longer just shove our children on at the last minute,” says Charlotte, who, like Henrietta, is a mother of four. “That’s how it began,” Henrietta agrees. “Stuffing our children into costumes and on they go. Here’s a lantern, run across that field and say, ‘There’s the star, follow the star. Go.’ They just did it and they loved it.”

For Charlotte, the plays fulfil a spiritual need, reminding them all what Christmas is about. And there are flashes of ecstasy, says Henrietta: “It’s snowing and it’s the nativity play and I’m taking the donkey up the hill. It’s beautiful.”

*Wintershall Nativity Journey, Bramley, Guildford, Surrey GU5 0LR, 11 to 16 December; [wintershall.org.uk](http://wintershall.org.uk)*