

National Trust Properties

Lawes Cottage Controversy

Trust Advertises “Catholics-only” Holiday Cottage

A restriction imposed by the pious donor has provoked accusations of discrimination and could soon be illegal, writes Chris Hastings.

The National Trust has been accused of religious discrimination after it advertised a vacant 17th century house as being suitable only for practising Roman Catholics.

The trust says that the advertisement for Lawes Cottage in Dinton, Wiltshire, which appeared in The Catholic Herald newspaper, contains the restriction in order to comply with the wishes of the person who donated the property.

"The memorandum of wishes from the donor family state this property should be let to practising Roman Catholics," the advertisement says.

The bar on non-Catholics has prompted complaints from some who claim it is highly discriminatory and potentially in breach of the provisions of the Government's Equality Bill, which will be published next month and which contains proposals to tackle religious and racial discrimination.

Evan Harris, the Liberal Democrat MP, said the policy of letting only to Catholics was bizarre and he urged the National Trust to reconsider.

"I think this sort of behaviour is morally wrong," he said.

"The trust would not legally be allowed to discriminate on racial grounds and they are morally wrong to discriminate on religious grounds.

"Catholics have been the subject of so much discrimination in this country and it is ironic that something like this is being done on their behalf. I am sure there are many Catholics who would feel uneasy about this."

Terry Sanderson, a spokesman for the National Secular Society, said the advertisement for the five-bedroom property, bequeathed to the National Trust in 1940, was discriminatory and should not be permitted.

"I think it is scandalous that an organisation funded by the general public should discriminate in this way," he said.

"If the advert stipulated that the property was not to be let to Roman Catholics there would be a hue and cry within that Church. But that is effectively what the advert is saying to people who are not members of that particular Church."

Robert Engleheart, the American great-grandson of Mary Engleheart, a Roman Catholic convert who introduced the condition when she left the property to the Trust, said he was surprised that it was still maintained.

"You would never get away with anything like this in the United States," he said from his California home. "It would be against the law. You cannot discriminate on the grounds of race, religion or sex."

"The 'Catholics only' rule was down to my great-grandmother who was quite a fervent convert and indeed quite rigid in her faith. The family now would not mind if the house was let to people of other faiths."

Others, however, supported the National Trust. Roger Scruton, the philosopher and author who is a National Trust member, said that he supported the advertisement, although he added that he could not help but contrast it with the trust's decision to ban hunting on donated land.

"I think the National Trust is morally obliged to follow through the wishes of the original donor so I support the placing of this advert," he said.

"I am, however, struck by the fact that the trust felt able to ban hunting on its land even though some of the donors who had granted the land specifically stated hunting should be allowed."

John Whittingdale, the Conservative culture spokesman, was also supportive. "I think it is admirable and necessary that the trust is following through the donor's wishes.

"If the trust was to ignore the wishes of property owners, then people simply would not donate to it any more."

Clarissa Dickson Wright, a practising Roman Catholic and a former member of the National Trust, said: "This lady could have left the building to the Catholic Church rather than the trust so I think it's only right that her wishes are met."

The cottage, which was once the home of Sir William Lawes, the 17th-century court composer, is one of a group of properties on a 27-acre site which was acquired by Mrs Engleheart and her husband George, a former Anglican clergyman, in 1902.

Mrs Engleheart's subsequent donation to the National Trust also included a 15th-century property called Little Malden and a Roman Catholic chapel, built by the Englehearts on the site of a disused bakery.

The Our Lady of the Pity chapel has not heard mass since 1992 and is no longer in regular use.

The National Trust, which does not attach any similar condition to the other 4,000 properties it rents out, last night agreed that the advertisement amounted to discrimination. It insisted, however, that it was within the law.

A spokeswoman said that the trust was not legally bound to set aside the property for Roman Catholics but was continuing to do so out of respect for the donor's wishes.

"We are not legally obliged to rent only to Catholics because that stipulation was not in the actual deed of gift," she said. "It was, however, the donor's express wish that the property should only be rented to Catholics."

She added that the trust would re-examine the terms of the tenancy if it was required to do so when the equality legislation came into effect.

The Home Office and the Commission for Racial Equality said the advertisement was permitted under existing legislation, but said the new Bill included provisions that would outlaw religious discrimination in the provision of accommodation.

A spokesman for the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales declined to be drawn into the row.

"This is a private matter between the donor and the National Trust," he said.

(The Telegraph 23rd January, 2005)

“Catholics only” Cottage Defended

The National Trust has defended an advertisement stating a holiday cottage in Wiltshire can only be rented to practising Roman Catholics.

The charity was bequeathed Lawes Cottage near Dinton in 1940 and it was the owner's wishes the cottage should only be let to practising Catholics.

A Trust spokesman told the BBC he believed the advertisement in the Catholic Herald was appropriate.

“We will review the situation if the law or public feeling changes.”

“Devout Catholic”

He added he believed the Trust was not breaking the law as it was providing a service rather than offering employment.

“The cottage owner was a devout Roman Catholic and had a small chapel built near the house.”

“It's the first time there have been any objections [to the advert] but if the law was to change or public feeling changed then we'd have to look again at the conditions.”

“However we do need to take into account people's wishes and we try to honour the conditions of the original gift,” he said.

In addition to financial references, those renting the property would be asked to produce a letter from their parish priest stating they were an “active member” of the Catholic church.

(BBC news Tuesday, 25th January, 2005)

Catholic Cottage Advertisement Angers Secularists

The National Trust has faced heavy criticism for advertising a property as suitable only for practising Catholics.

Many non-Catholics are furious that the National Trust could advertise a property - Lawes Cottage, Dinton, near Salisbury – with the condition that it should only be let to dutiful Catholics.

They claim that the restriction breaches the Government's Equality Bill, which will be published next month and looks to tackle religious and racial hatred and discrimination.

Keith Porteous Wood, executive director of the National Secular Society, said the advert reflected “a double standard” in British society. “Just imagine the outrage if the advert had forbidden Catholics,” he said. “But seeing as it allowed Catholics and forbade others, it is treated with comparable equanimity.” Evan Harris, the Liberal Democrat MP, echoed these concerns.

“I think this sort of behaviour is totally wrong,” he told the Sunday Telegraph. “The Trust would not legally be allowed to discriminate on racial grounds, and they are morally wrong to discriminate on moral grounds.” “Catholics have been the subject of so much discrimination in this country and it is ironic that something like this is being done on their behalf. I am sure there are many Catholics who would feel uneasy about this.” Members of the National Trust have defended the advertisement, pointing out that the restriction was the wish of Mary Engleheart, the pious convert who in 1940 bequeathed the property to the National Trust.

“This lady could have given the property to the Catholic Church rather than the Trust so I think it's only right that her wishes are met,” said Clarissa Dickson Wright, a member of the Trust and a Catholic.

John Wittingdale, the Conservative culture spokesman, was also supportive of the advertisement. "I think it is admirable that the Trust is following through the donor's wishes," he said. "If the Trust was just to ignore the wishes of property owners then people simply would not donate anymore." But Robert Engleheart, the great-grandson of Mrs Engleheart, was amazed that the Trust had honoured his ancestor's wishes.

"The family now would not mind if the house was let to people of other faiths," he said.

The Home Office and the Commission for Racial Equality said that the advertisement was permitted under current law, but added that next month's Equality Bill proposes to outlaw religious discrimination in the provision of accommodation.

(Catholic Herald, 28th January, 2005 page 3)

SUNDAY TELEGRAPH LETTERS

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Mrs Engleheart's exclusive residence

You report that the National Trust wants to let a cottage in Dinton, Wiltshire, to Catholics only (News, January 23). In his 1942 diary James Lees-Milne writes: "This dear little Tudor House was given to the Trust in 1940. Mrs Engleheart, the donor, opened the door, dressed in a mauve habit down to the ankles. She is 87 and lives with her gentle down-trodden spinster daughter. I like her, although she cannot be described as a dear lady. She has imposed stringent conditions that we never put in electric light, radiators, or the telephone.

"She is a fanatical Papist, and has a chapel in the garden made of bits and pieces of rubbishy antiques including the cantilever springs from the Penruddock family coach."

Michael Reading, Ash, Surrey

(The Telegraph 30th Jan, 2005)

(Footnote: James Lees-Milne was secretary of the National Trust's Country House Committee in the key period either side of World War II)



Lawes Cottage – Photo courtesy of Andrew Stacey (2006)