

THE DUSTY, rutted track that leads to the remote village of Viscri in deepest Transylvania is an obstacle course of knee-deep pot-holes. Left unrepaired for generations, it has been churned up by 700 years of horse-drawn carts, cows, dogs and geese.

It couldn't be further removed from the immaculately-kept private driveways of Highgrove, Clarence House and Birkhall. But it is here that Prince Charles is adding to his property portfolio.

Visiting Viscri, in central Romania, is like journeying into the past — to a medieval landscape and existence that has been bypassed by all things modern. In this pre-industrial land of myth and legend, of vampires and the blood-sucking Count Dracula, the Prince is said to have found 'a personal serenity'.

However, many of Viscri's inhabitants are feeling far from serene about his arrival. Rumours about their new neighbour have



from **Bob Graham**

IN VISCRI, TRANSYLVANIA

transfixed the locals in recent months. A woman working in the fields, a hoe in her calloused hands, says: 'He's building a secret castle.' But she is interrupted by another worker, whose face is wrinkled from decades of sowing and weeding: 'It's not a castle,' she announces. 'It's a palace — somewhere he will bring his princess when it is completed.'

However, according to those villagers 'with their ears to the earth', Charles has, in fact, already bought his new home in Viscri — and it bears little resemblance to either a palace or a castle.

'I have seen the documents,' confirms Mezei Paraskiva, the village gossip. 'I cannot tell you

about it because it is a secret — but I know he has bought a house. He has donated it to the church and will use it when he comes to visit.'

'He comes here to escape the madness of the world,' continues Mrs Paraskiva, who claims to have had many private conversations with the Prince during his four visits to the village — the last in May. 'Here, he has real neighbours and can walk along the street like an ordinary man. Whereas, in your country, he cannot do that.'

'I see him often when he is out walking. He is always smiling and always greets me. We accept him as an ordinary man here.'

Mrs Paraskiva dismisses the idea of Charles building a secret palace as the blathering of those 'who spend too long in the fields'. The Prince, she says, has purchased Number 63 — there is no need for a street name as part of his new address, because there is only one road in Viscri.

A converted barn, built in 1900 and recently renovated, its walls are washed in a Wedgwood-blue emulsion and it has six sparsely-decorated rooms — a main sitting and dining area, a kitchen and four bedrooms.

Outside, there is a bathroom, neatly tiled and equipped with a septic tank. It sits in a separate block, formerly a barn used to house a menagerie of pigs, geese, chickens and guinea-fowl. Like most of the houses in Viscri, it has its own courtyard, too.

With grand residences in central London, the Cotswolds and the Scottish Highlands at our future king's disposal, such talk of him buying such a simple dwelling in Romania could be dismissed as the optimistic fantasy of a people desperate to bring attention to their benighted region.

But a Clarence House spokesman has confirmed that the Prince wants to promote sustainable tourism in the Transylvania region, 150 miles north of Bucharest.

He is the royal patron of the Mihai Eminescu Trust (a UK charity set up to restore the cultural heritage and skills of the area's Saxon villages), which is based in the remote village of Viscri. Other patrons include Zac Goldsmith and the writer Lord Norwich.

The trust's success — supported by Charles's belief that the village can serve as a model for other threatened rural communities — has ensured that Viscri will remain one of Europe's last surviving medieval landscapes.

Its unspoilt fairytale vista features a 14th-century fortified church overlooking a tiny, traditional village surrounded by orchards, hay meadows that are scythed by hand, hornbeam and oak woods filled with roe deer, wolves and bears, and lush pastures bursting with orchids, poppies, pinks, cuckoos, butterflies and crickets.

Just like in 18th-century England, there are no fences or walls dividing the farmland, the surrounding hills are common land and the villagers share the tasks of herding the cattle and harvesting crops.

As long ago as 1934, the writer Sir Patrick Leigh Fermor wrote of this and the other nearby villages built by

Farm workers weed rows of potatoes by hand

Saxon settlers from the Rhine in the 13th century: 'It seemed a miracle that they and their towns and hamlets and their skills and language should have weathered the past eight centuries of commotion with so little damage.'

Many naturalists marvel at the survival of flora and fauna, which is the result of the area's remote location, as well as the primitive farming techniques.

The sight of men and women farm workers weeding rows of potatoes by hand is a typical example of the bygone era that has now been replaced in virtually every other country by intensive farming methods, and where wildlife has been decimated by herbicides and pesticides.

In a bid to preserve this medieval village, the Mihai Eminescu Trust has been working since 1999 to help refurbish many of the houses in Viscri — some of which are intended to be used by tourists.

Five years ago, it also helped the villagers fight a plan to build a

Dracula theme park that was cooked up by regional councillors based in the nearest city.

Bram Stoker, the author of the 1897 horror novel, based his bloodthirsty vampire character on two local figures, the 15th-century prince Vlad the Impaler and Countess Elizabeth Bathory who, according to legend, murdered more than 600 young women during the 16th century and dipped her bread in their blood.

The theme park would have wiped out the village's entire oak forest.

Prince Charles' great-grandmother Queen Mary, consort of George V, was a descendant of Vlad the Impaler, which may help to explain his decision to buy Number 63.

His purchase is intended to inspire sustainable tourism in the former communist state and it could also help to prevent a possible exodus of Romanians from the region when the country joins the EU in January.

However, Charles is yet to stay in his new home, according to locals.

'I don't think the Prince has slept there yet,' says Florin Balica, the owner of the village's only bar. 'When he comes here, he always has two or three men with him. I think they are

'It is not good for us, this arrival of the Prince'

his guards and they stay in another area, a former kindergarten which has also been renovated. There is more room for everyone there.'

'I have seen Prince Charles walking past here,' adds regular customer Constantin Boholtean, 74, who moved to Viscri more than half a century ago from the nearest large town of Rupea, but is still considered an outsider.

'He is a good man, I can tell from his face. He finds quiet here. He smiles the smile of a man who is at peace.'

'I keep a special bottle of palinka [a heady, home-brewed clear brandy] for the Prince,' grins Balica. 'When he comes in, we'll discuss our common interests. I have a wife called Camilla and his wife is called Camilla. I have a son and he's in the Army; he has two sons in the Army.'

However, there are many residents of Viscri who aren't so eagerly awaiting Prince Charles's next visit.

Outside Balica's bar, on the bumpy track that is the main street, there is a commotion between a local man in a horse-drawn cart and four tourists who have dared to drive a car into the village, in order to visit the 15th-century walled church that towers over the village.

'You fool, you are blocking the road,' shouts Giurgiu Vasilaki, as he remonstrates with the bemused driver. 'Do you not understand that the horse comes first here?'

Vasilaki is one of a group of men in the village who are deeply angered by the arrival of the man they call 'The English Prince'.

'He comes here and soon others will come — tourists and people who want to buy our houses because they know Prince Charles has a house here,' explains the 54-year-old subsistence farmer. 'It won't bring any work for me but it makes everything I have to pay for more expensive.'

'Things are changing for some people who live here and the Trust has provided work for men with traditional skills. But it is only a small number of men — maybe 15 or 20. There is not enough for us all.'

Alongside Vasilaki on the cart, which he has filled with wood cut from the nearby forests, is his 20-year-old son Ioan.

'For me, life will not be the same as it was for my father and his father,' ponders Ioan. 'When the work to renovate all the houses is completed, outsiders will buy them, rich people will come and purchase our land and we won't be able to afford to stay here.'

It was a morning's work to fill the cart with logs for the local postman, and the father and son will be paid just \$1 for their hard labour, plus two bottles of beer.

At the other end of the village, Matei Gabor and his two friends Mariane Russo and Ioan Costa are also

HIGHGROVE IT AIN'T



Hostile natives, medieval poverty and a local count called Dracula. Will Charles really find serenity in his new home in Transylvania?

Horse power: The main street in Viscri, where Prince Charles has bought a house

heading to the forest to gather firewood. They all agree with their neighbour's gloomy predictions. 'It is not good for us, this arrival of the Prince,' glowers Gabor, an axe swinging gently in his hand. 'I am a metal-worker and Prince Charles came to see my workshop. He told me it was good that I use old-fashioned methods and that I should continue to do so. 'But I cannot make a living at the

moment. I wanted an asphalt road to be laid here, so that I can get my products to a market where I can sell them. I don't want this place to be always cut off from the outside. 'We have to be part of a modern world that has modern prices and I need to earn modern amounts of money to be able to pay for them.' Costa, a shepherd, and Russo, a carpenter, nod in agreement.

Russo, the 30-year-old father of a young child, adds: 'You must understand that we are very, very poor. We live by subsistence farming and any small changes to the local economy hurt us all. 'These people think they are improving our lives by refurbishing our buildings. 'That is a good thing but they are also bringing people, like Prince Charles, who want to buy houses

and now the balance has changed. It hurts us all.' Ana Langa, an 81-year-old widow, has watched different people come and go from the window of her crumbling cottage. She remembers the Fascists storming into the village during the Thirties, then the Communists, and now she is keeping an eye on what she calls 'the dreamers'. 'From this window I've seen it all

and I've learned that things always change eventually,' she says. 'I've seen Prince Charles walking by, deep in his thoughts. I've seen the changes they're making and it will help some and hurt others — that's life. 'I know that if I live long enough I will see others come, too. Although everyone says things never change here in Viscri, I know they will. They always do.'