

From The Sunday Times

May 11, 2008

Britain's 10 best country houses to rent

Want to throw a grown-up country-house party? Stanley Stewart has the best rental options available

Stanley Stewart:

My country-house parties have always suffered from one slight problem – I don't have a country house.

I do have a cottage in Dorset, but several factors make it less than ideal. I will gloss over the fitful heating, the single shower, the mountains of books that could bury the unwary guest. Size is the problem.

In my house, four guests are a crowd, six are mayhem and eight require a marquee in the garden.

I once had 16 to dinner. The dining table, extended with desks, tea chests and a laundry basket, seemed to run from the front door to the back. My chief memory of the evening was of women in inappropriate skirts climbing over the table to get to their seats. I wondered what kind of thoughtless moron had done the seating plan, before remembering the thoughtless moron was me.

It was high time, I felt, for the grown-up version of the country-house party, one that takes place in a proper country house,

ASSYNT HOUSE, Ross-shire, Scotland (sleeps 16) As befits a Scottish estate, woodwork is one of the great features of Assynt House. Both the drawing room and the dining room are lined with the gorgeous light-coloured wood paneling that gives the house so much of its warmth. Skiing at Aviemore is only 30 minutes away. The famous Royal Dornoch golf course is close by, as is the Moray Firth. Grouse, pheasant and clay-pigeon shooting can all be arranged, as can salmon and sea-trout fishing.