

In c1744, Henry Flitcroft created the white-and-gold Palladian decoration in the Great Dining Room. Ravaged by dry rot, the wall was partially stripped back to its bare brickwork in the 1970s, and has been deliberately left as it is





BACK FROM THE RAVE

Ten years ago, Nick Ashley-Cooper – DJ, events organiser and 12th Earl of Shaftesbury – unexpectedly inherited St Giles House. Without missing a beat, he returned from the New York club scene to save his ancestral home from terminal decline. Today, reports Tim Knox, it hosts a mix of weddings, festivals and even the odd disco. Photography: Tim Beddow



The Third Earl of Shaftesbury's books line the walls of the 20m-long library, with family portraits hung against plum-coloured velvet. Thomas Cundy modernised the room as part of general alterations to the house between 1813 and 1820





SINCE MY LAST VISIT, things have moved on quite a bit at St Giles House, the ancestral home of the earls of Shaftesbury in the picturesque Dorset village of Wimborne St Giles. When I knock at the side door, labelled ‘Estate Office’, Nick Shaftesbury – the current earl – sticks his head out of a first-floor window and shouts: ‘Go round to the front door, it’s working again now!’ And so it is: a handsome new door, sheltering under an imposing loggia of freshly cut stone, once again provides a fitting entrance to one of Dorset’s grandest and most historic country houses. Three years ago, this was the stub of a demolished wing roughly filled with breezeblock (*Wol* Aug 2012), the legacy of an aborted attempt to cut St Giles House down to size in the early 1970s that left it a boarded-up ruin for almost 40 years.

Nick Ashley-Cooper, formally known as the 12th Earl of Shaftesbury, inherited his title in 2005, aged 25. He hadn’t expected to come into the family estates and the crumbling house, which languished on the ‘Buildings at Risk’ register. Indeed, he was carving out a successful career as a DJ and events organiser in New York, but family piety drew him back. An MBA at the London Business

School gave Nick time to decide what to do: ‘I used to take the train down and walk about the derelict house, getting to know it – my brother and I had never lived here when we were young, so it wasn’t really part of my childhood.’ English Heritage helpfully sponsored a report that unscrambled the complex architectural history of the house and estate, and assessed its parlous condition. They also introduced Nick to Philip Hughes, who has since

acted as an inspirational project manager and architect to the restoration project. Then Nick fell in love with Dinah Streifeneder, a Bavarian veterinary surgeon. They married in 2010 and now have three young children. ‘Moving down to Dorset to restore and live in St Giles House seemed like a natural evolution,’ says Nick, ‘and my past experience of running events in New York has actually been enormously helpful.’ Dinah adds that: ‘The locals were probably a bit disappointed that the first few events we held in the park were a marathon and a dog show, rather than an all-night techno rave.’

The transformation began with the exterior. Nick’s father had begun to remove various Victorian excrescences from the mainly Caroline house in the early 1970s. These in-



Top: the Shaftesburys use the Green Drawing Room – which incorporates a comfortable mix of seat furniture and Victorian and Edwardian ancestors – as their private sitting room. Above: enough family portraits survived the sales in the 1970s and 1980s to furnish the restored state rooms. Opposite: the flock wallpaper was carefully copied from unfaded sections of the original early 19th-century paper that once hung here





Top: a portrait of Mr Hastings, an eccentric, sports-mad neighbour in the 17th century, presides over the White Hall. Above left: the east wall of the White Hall, with all its panelling and plasterwork, had to be entirely reconstructed in the recent restoration. Above right: a marble bust of the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, who campaigned vigorously for better working conditions for the Victorian poor, has now returned to the new entrance lobby



Top: this view of St Giles House, seen from the southwest, shows its mellow brickwork now free of grey cement stucco. The new entrance loggia is situated to the right. Above left: Lord Shaftesbury's study is lined with an assortment of family photographs and engraved portraits. Above right: two strips cut from a rare tapestry portrait of the bewigged Augustus III, King of Poland, hang either side of a door in the Shaftesburys' private apartment



cluded bay windows, a large service wing and two huge towers with mansard roofs of vaguely French inspiration. Attempts had also been made to remove the grey cement that smothered the original pinkish brick. The problem was that nothing had ever been finished, leaving the house open to the elements. Patching up the building and restoring the ravaged brickwork has been a painstaking task, but the house has been given back its dignity – presiding over the restored parkland from its newly built terraces and formal garden.

Much more needed to be done inside. Lord and Lady Shaftesbury have created a substantial private apartment for themselves in the east wing, entered by the new portico, while the former state rooms of the house, which have been carefully restored in order that they can be let out for events, are accessible via a grandiose doorcase in the centre of the north front. This enables the house both to be fully used and pay its way, while maintaining the privacy of a family abode. As Nick says, ‘If it ever stops being a home, something has gone wrong.’

Inside the new front door, the lobby is dominated by a colossal marble bust of the philanthropic Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury,

presented ‘by the Operatives of the Manufacturing Districts of the North of England as a token of Esteem and Regard’. It’s a sort of mascot, a symbol of the change of fortunes at St Giles House. Sold in the 1970s, the bust was bought by Nick’s kinswoman Mary Anna Marten for nearby Crichel House. Her children gave it back after their mother died in 2010.

Then comes the White Hall, which had a wall missing and massive holes in the floor and ceiling. The early 18th-century plasterwork has been carefully restored, while Nick’s mother generously returned its original chimney piece and other furniture. Nick and Dinah now use the Green Drawing Room next door as their living room, its arsenic-green-and-gold flock wallpaper – a scrupulous copy of the original, printed from specially recreated blocks by Allyson McDermott (*Wol Dec 2006*) – providing a splendid foil for the full-length portraits of Nick’s late-Victorian ancestors. Most of the furniture came from the house’s seemingly inexhaustible storerooms and merely had to be repaired and reupholstered, but Nick and Dinah have commissioned two stylish marquetry cabinets – consecrated to music and drink – from a local craftsman, James Winby.



Top: the Shaftesburys’ kitchen was once the bathroom of Nick’s great-grandmother, the ninth countess. Above: made c1870 in a French Neoclassical style, this chimney piece in their dining room was regilded by Humphries & Jones, who also restored the ceiling and giltwood details (opposite). The George II mahogany chairs are upholstered in green baize and the portrait, by Harrington Mann, is of Anthony, Lord Ashley – Nick’s grandfather – in 1904





For advice on decorating and furnishing the house, the Shaftesburys have relied on their ingenious neighbour Edward Hurst (*Wol* June 2015), who also settles disputes over colours. ‘Edward has saved our marriage,’ jokes Dinah.

The old breakfast room now serves as Nick and Dinah’s private dining room, but for really grand occasions they use the Great Dining Room – one of the six state rooms that are let out for events. A magnificent Palladian space, it was part of a mid-18th-century aggrandisement of the house for the fourth earl. Devastated by dry rot, almost half the room was ruthlessly stripped out in the 1970s, and the Shaftesburys have chosen to leave it in this state – making a virtue out of the startling collision of naked brickwork with its white-and-gold woodwork. The full-length portraits of successive earls and countesses of Shaftesbury narrowly escaped being lost – Nick remembers a family friend talking his father out of selling them. However, between the windows are ghostly outlines where elaborate mirrors used to hang, reminders of a celebrated set of Rococo furniture – known as the St Giles House suite – that was once the great glory of the estate.



The other state rooms – a tapestry room, two huge drawing rooms hung with greenish-gold damask and the 20m-long library, lined with the books of the philosopher third earl – are sparsely furnished so they can be used for events. So far these have included weddings, concerts and the Festival of Thought, organised in association with Bath Spa University. Particularly admirable is the way that, wherever possible, original surfaces have been left untouched.

The Staircase Hall preserves expanses of a fatigued, blue-striped moiré wallpaper, while upstairs, the faded décors of former bedrooms make perfect backdrops for fashionably *triste* photo shoots. ‘Location scouts really perk up when they come upstairs,’ explains Nick. But there is even more potential in the Stone Hall, at the core of the house. Originally a courtyard, it was converted into a vast domed ballroom with columned galleries by Thomas Cundy in c1820. ‘It makes a perfect disco,’ Nick declares, opening a cupboard to reveal a huge mirrored disco ball that can be suspended from the chandelier ■
 St Giles House, Wimborne St Giles, Wimborne, Dorset BH21 5NA. To enquire about hiring St Giles House for weddings or events, ring 01725 517214, or visit shaftesburyestates.com

Top: a lace hanging worked with the Shaftesbury coat of arms serves as the headboard for the bed in the master bedroom. Above: a doorway on the first-floor landing leads to the Handel Room, named after the composer, who often visited the house. The fourth earl was his patron. Opposite: the private bathroom is furnished with pieces found in the attics and restored. The 18th-century watercolours depict the surrounding St Giles Park

