

All manor of beautiful things

Ashby Manor House in Northamptonshire is a distinguished estate with a fascinating yet chequered 900-year history. Previously transformed by Sir Edwin Lutyens in a grand Edwardian style, it is now enjoying a new lease of life as a much loved home for the latest generation of a family to fall for its charms

TEXT FIONA MCCARTHY | PHOTOGRAPHS PAUL MASSEY | LOCATIONS EDITOR DAVID NICHOLLS

MUSIC ROOM Henry and Nova Guest's collection of family portraits includes a painting of Lady Alice Wimborne by Sir John Lavery. A B&B Italia sofa is teamed with cushions made by Rhona Valentine using vintage Fortuny fabrics. The marble-topped coffee table is from Rose Uniacke. The fire surround is decorated with family crests



LUTYENS HALL Henry and Nova inherited the antique dining chairs, which were re-covered in the Sixties. Peonies from The Land Gardeners at nearby Wardington Manor are displayed on an oak dining table made by Gillows of Lancaster



LUTYENS HALL Neo-Jacobean plasterwork decorates the barrel-vaulted ceiling. Framed architectural drawings of the various Guest family houses hang on the wall. An 1880s Louis XVI-style mahogany desk from Hampshire-based antique dealer Hugh Leuchars is paired with an early 19th-century cane and rosewood bergère chair



LUTYENS HALL (*opposite*) Two ottomans from Sofa.com have been pushed together. The Rose Uniacke sofas have loose covers in a washable white linen from Romo and cushions in a mix of fabrics from Fermoie

STONE HALL (*this page*) Lantiques in Petworth made the bespoke pine table. The Hans J Wegner dining chairs are from Nest. Nova has used paintings by indigenous Australian artists to add colour to the space – *Emu Dreaming at Alhalkere 2007* by Kudjitji Kngwarreye is seen on the upstairs landing



STONE HALL (*above left and right*) On the wall, a framed map of Northamptonshire is grouped with an old encyclopaedia entry about the county. An antique French rectory table is used as a console. The marble sculpture of Henry's great-great-aunt Flora Bigelow Dodge Guest came from a distant cousin on the east coast of the US, where a branch of the family lives. The **table lamp** was made by The French House from an old stone baluster. At the other end of the room, pale discreet **kitchen units** – designed and crafted bespoke by Schimmer Child in Gloucestershire – were installed when the house was renovated by its previous owner, Henry's cousin Ivor

Ashby Manor House has been many things in its 900-year history. Its owners have included knights, rebels, socialites and viscounts, and its timber-framed gatehouse is thought to be where dissenters Robert Catesby (whose mother owned the house) and Guy Fawkes conceived the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. It boasts elaborate, ornate interiors by Sir Edwin Lutyens, and Ashby St Ledgers – the medieval Northamptonshire village in which it is located – merited a mention in the Domesday Book.

Today, it is a warm and welcoming home for Henry and Nova Guest, filled with the noisy bustle of their three boys – Freddie, nine, Patrick (known as Patch), seven, and James, four – and, at weekends, a constant flow of family and friends. A generously proportioned house with its Hornton-stone southern wing dating back to 1652, the 60-acre estate features 10 bedrooms, several entertaining spaces, numerous outbuildings and impressive grounds incorporating wide lawns, a walled garden, stone statuary from the 1700s, a yew- and box-hedged parterre and a canal garden that feeds into an idyllic ornamental lake.

In recent years, however, the house – originally bought by Henry's great-grandfather, Sir Ivor Churchill Guest, 1st Viscount

Wimborne, in 1903, a year after his marriage to Alice Grosvenor – was not always thus. Henry's uncle, the 3rd Viscount, sold it all and moved to France in the Seventies. It was only by chance that Henry's cousin Ivor, now the 4th Viscount, heard the house was up for auction in 1998 and decided to buy it.

Ivor restored the fine, sculptural details that the 1st Viscount Wimborne had created with Edwin Lutyens. 'Ivor meticulously oversaw all the painstaking work on the house,' says Henry of the way his cousin faithfully repaired the roof, repainted walls, restored masonry and woodwork. He laid simple sisal rugs and runners on floors and stairs, fitted a discreet kitchen (in Bath stone and American walnut) at one end of the stone hall and positioned deep, free-standing bathtubs in the middle of each bathroom so guests could fully appreciate expansive views of the garden and lake while they soaked.

When Ivor decided to sell in 2015, Henry and Nova stepped in to buy it. Already in love with the area – the couple were married in the adjacent medieval church and had been renting the estate's Lodge house as a weekend home – taking over Ashby Manor House was Henry's chance to help look after the place where his father Charles had grown up. 'He enjoyed a wonderful childhood here and I love that I am living in the same rooms. It feels very grounding,' he enthuses.

Today, the estate remains an extraordinary testament to Henry's great-grandfather's ambition of turning what had been a small



STONE HALL In the area between the kitchen and the dining table, a leather-upholstered club chair faces a George III **armchair** reupholstered in pink velvet by Axel Vervoordt for a Belgian collector whose estate was sold at Christie's. Two reproduction footstools were covered with kilim rugs. The **floor lamp** is from Rose Uniacke



OAK ROOM A Regency sofa from Ron Green is covered in plain calico, in contrast with the Eighties tablecloth. BEDROOM The chest of drawers is from Hugh Leuchars. A floral screen has been repurposed as a headboard. BATHROOM The free-standing tub is from French specialist Jacob Delafon. MIDDLE HALL Now used as a playroom, this former kitchen has an antique mahogany table from Alston & Ashton. EXTERIOR (opposite) In front of the house, garden designer Daniel Combes has revived Lutyens' planting with box, bay, gaura and salvia



manor into a grand Edwardian country house. The medieval core with Tudor and Jacobean additions had been modified significantly in the mid 17th century and the 1st Viscount's partnership with Lutyens lasted for more than 30 years. First, the elegant music room, with its dark ebony floor and miniature stage (the perfect size for a three-piece ensemble), and the elaborate Lutyens hall, with its neo-Jacobean plasterwork barrel-vaulted ceiling, were added. A few years later came the magnificent double-height stone hall, with its dramatic dark-beamed roof and raised fireplace, around which much of daily life in the house still revolves. And, to the architect's chagrin, Lord Wimborne insisted that they add the Ipswich wing – a half-timbered Tudor building, dismantled from Carr Street in Ipswich and purchased at the Franco-British Exhibition in White City in 1908 – to run north of the new great hall.

Working with Ivor's pared-back, muted interiors, Henry and Nova have slowly created a home that celebrates the many generations of Guests before them. The couple have brought together an assortment of furniture, paintings and memorabilia (including letters and diaries), which had been dispersed among family members after the 3rd Viscount sold the estate in 1976. One such piece, a portrait of Henry's great-grandmother Alice, painted by Sir John Lavery, now hangs in the music room. 'It feels as though she's just turned to look as you enter,' Nova says.

Walking through the vast labyrinth of rooms, up and down a great warren of stairs, it is easy to see how the house 'just swallows up furniture', as Nova puts it. To the eclectic mix of inherited pieces, Nova has added wardrobes and armchairs, consoles and side tables from her favourite antique dealers, including Sybil Colefax & John Fowler and Julia Boston in London, as well as Hampshire-based Hugh Leuchars. She looks for patina rather than any particular period – handsome writing desks and grainy

chests of drawers, curvaceous Regency sofas and interesting mirrors that span many centuries.

In Nova's easy-going, Australian way, she has also introduced modern touches, including 'Wishbone' dining chairs designed by Hans J Wegner for Carl Hansen & Søn. High-backed armchairs are teamed with kilim-upholstered footstools and paintings by indigenous Australian artists, which add splashes of colour. Contemporary sofas from Rose Uniacke in the Lutyens hall echo the snowy alabaster fireplace in the adjacent dining room.

Despite the house's history and scale, 'there are no rules,' says Nova. Dogs scamper in from the garden with muddy paws and children are allowed to run through all the rooms. The Guest boys sit at a beautiful 19th-century desk in the Lutyens hall to do their homework, and the middle hall – once a medieval kitchen – is now their playroom. When friends come to stay, Saturday nights start in the music room, with 'the fire blazing and the champagne on ice', says Nova, before they move into the dining room (which can accommodate anything from three couples to trestle tables laid for 30). Everyone ends the evening around the open fire in the kitchen, which crackles from morning to night.

The resulting atmosphere is calm and carefree, providing the perfect setting for a weekend escape. Everyone has their own space and there is plenty to do, with beautiful walks through the fields, a heated pool and a tennis court. Tucked into the attic of the house, there is even a room dedicated entirely to dressing up. It is the antithesis of a grand house maintained as a living museum. 'Nothing stays in the same place for long – everything gets changed around,' Nova says. 'I want everyone who enters to feel instantly welcome and completely comfortable' □

Ashby Manor House is available to rent (weddings by special request); for more information, visit ashbymanorhouse.com

