





# A triumphant return

*St Giles House, Dorset, part II  
The Seat of the Earl  
of Shaftesbury*

An acclaimed restoration has brought an outstanding house back to life. In the second of two articles, John Martin Robinson explains this achievement

Photographs by Paul Highnam

**W**HEN COUNTRY LIFE last covered St Giles House, in 1943, it was the home of the 9th Earl of Shaftesbury and seemed a survival from a vanished world. The Earl, Lord Chamberlain to Queen Mary, had inherited the estate in 1886, married a Grosvenor and carried out works of enhancement to the house before the First World War, including creation of a small private chapel by Ninian Comper and the construction of a new formal garden. He had also redecorated the interior and displayed its contents to fine effect.

The photographs show the rooms with all their splendid Georgian furniture intact and seemingly with an air of Edwardian well-being still pervading. In fact, the house was occupied for the war by a girls' school, Miss Faunt's Academy from London. Lord Shaftesbury was serving in the Home Guard and the family only lived in a small portion. The prospect seemed bleak. He wrote in his notebook: 'What is to become of the old family house where successive generations have lived so long is impossible to foretell.'

After the war, like many of his generation, he found it difficult to manage the place with little or no staff: 'Domestic servants are practically unobtainable. Girls nowadays will not have anything to say to domestic service and footmen no longer exist—with the result that these large houses are no longer practical propositions to live in.' Nevertheless, he soldiered on alone and ➤

*Fig 1: The restored dining room turns the scars of the dry rot to good effect*



*Fig 2 above:* The outline of a mirror of the dining room wall. *Fig 3 above right:* The Tapestry Room hung with its recently-restored tapestries

the main rooms were regularly opened to the public in the 1950s.

When the 9th Earl died, aged 91, in 1961, he was succeeded by his grandson Anthony, then only 23, fresh from Eton and Oxford. He had a strong interest in music and was chairman of the London Philharmonic Orchestra for 25 years. He was also a strong conservationist and planted more than a million trees on the estate. Despite a great love for St Giles, however, he was daunted by the deteriorating condition and unwieldy scale of the house. As a result, he never lived in the building. Instead, the Dower House in the village became the family home, with the big house shuttered and disused for 50 years apart from the estate office at the back.

Nevertheless, around the time of his marriage to Christiana Montan (a diplomat's daughter) and the subsequent birth of two sons, Shaftesbury started to plan to restore the place and to adapt it for modern family living. The aim was to reduce St Giles to its historic core by demolishing the western service wings and Victorian entrance tower. The Classical 17th-century and Georgian character was to be restored by stripping cement render from the brickwork and removing mid-19th-century bay windows from the south front, as well as cutting out dry rot. The works were begun in 1971 and continued for several years.

Sales of furniture, paintings and works of art in June 1980 helped pay for this work, but the project proved too ambitious, faltered and then the restoration stopped. Shaftesbury moved abroad in 2000 where he was murdered in the South of France four years later. This family tragedy was compounded soon afterwards by the sudden death of his eldest son, Anthony, from a heart attack at the age of 27. His younger brother,

Nicholas, was working as a DJ in New York at the time. Suddenly, he found himself the 12th Earl of Shaftesbury and, as he put it himself, he had 'to step up to the plate'. The terrible circumstances strengthened his determination to save St Giles and to finish the job his father had started.

## ‘The 10th Earl was daunted by the deteriorating condition of the house’

He came back to England and enrolled to study for a MBA at the London Business School, ready to take on the management of the estate. He married in 2010 and, the following year, he and his new wife, Dinah, moved into the old south-west family apartment, installing a modern kitchen. From this foothold, they embarked on a four-year restoration of the whole building that has already been acclaimed and deservedly won the whole gamut of conservation prizes in 2015: the R.I.C.S. National Building Construction Award, the HHA/Sothebys Award, the Georgian Group Award and the Historic England Angels Award. All these cited not just the heroic character of the programme and excellent craftsmanship expended, but also the sensitivity to the character of the place with which the work has been carried out.

Philip Hughes, a specialist conservation surveyor who had been a SPAB Scholar, has overseen the work and the principal contractor was Ellis & Co, a leading traditional West Country building firm. The development of the proposals was a joint effort between

the Shaftesburys and their team and the scheme has been a very personal one. Great efforts have been taken not to dissipate the romantic, fragile quality of the place; old paint surfaces and old wallpaper have been retained in several areas and some of the 1970s stripping-back has been left to show old structural fabric behind. This type of conservation approach can seem mannered, but not here, where the touch is sure and the overall visual impact aesthetically harmonious as well as historically literate.

The connection of Mr Hughes with St Giles goes back to 2003, when the family trustees employed him to prepare a detailed condition report and undertake emergency repairs to the fabric in collaboration with English Heritage. At that time, Suzie Barson and John Cattell of English Heritage (now Historic England) also prepared a report on St Giles based on archival research and detailed study of the structural fabric, the latter made possible by the partial stripping of the interior. As well as providing a scholarly underpinning for the restoration, this also garnered new information about the history of the house, as was discussed last week.

The work, carried out between 2011 and 2015, comprised a series of overlapping projects. First was the need to make the building weatherproof. The mid-Victorian roof structure was on the point of collapse, with rotted beams and joists, and had been weakened by the removal of all the internal partitions during the 1970s work, leaving one large U-shaped open space at the top of the house. Steel girders were inserted to strengthen the retained old structure. All the outer slopes have been re-slatted and lead flats renewed. The new gutter and pipes have lead rainwater hoppers made



**Fig 4: The central hall was created in 1813 by roofing over the main internal court of the house**

by Ellis & Co to the company's own design, with the date of the restoration.

No attempt has been made to reinstate the old attic-room partitions. Instead, the whole roof structure old and new remains visible. A ping-pong table and stored furniture speak of a relaxed pragmatic approach to use of this evocative open space.

Externally, the repair of the house was a complex process. The elevations were a patchy mess, its soft 17th- and 18th-century brickwork damaged by the removal of cement render and bearing scars of the 1970s demolitions.

A triumph of the restoration is the way in which the elevations have been repaired so as to retain a soft patina. Only the most damaged bricks have been replaced and the lime pointing has been toned to match. Stone dressings have also been repaired with matching Chilmark and Portland Stone; the window architraves were a particularly painstaking task. When the west wings were demolished in 1973, some of the materials were salvaged and stored and, where possible—for instance, in the parapets—these have been reused. Overall, the replacement of grey rendering has greatly improved the outward appearance of the house.

Internally, interventions have varied in scope from the light redecoration of the library, to the full re-creation of the 18th-century decorative scheme in the White Hall. Although retaining 17th-century features, the interiors of St Giles are largely Georgian and comprise a fine continuous sequence of rooms with stuccowork and marble chimney pieces mainly designed by Henry Flitcroft who worked for the 4th Earl in the 1740s. The glory of the Flitcroft rooms was their integral furniture and fittings, with magni-

ficent carved and gilded pier tables and glasses and spectacular seat furniture. These were sold in 1980, but the family portraits were retained—many with splendid architectural frames—as were the books in the library and tapestries. Retained furniture has been augmented by gifts, bequests and retrievals from other members of the family.

Those rooms used regularly by the family along the west side, including the new entrance hall, White Hall, Green Room and Small Dining Room are fully furnished. By contrast, the central hall (**Fig 4**), library and two drawing rooms are arranged so that they can be used flexibly for concerts, dinners, receptions and other public events. The two drawing rooms have been hung with the same Pavia pattern silk and cotton damask of a faded green-gold made on narrow looms by Humphreys Weaving in Suffolk. In the Tapestry Room (**Fig 3**), the Brussels tapestries have been washed and restored by a specialist firm in Belgium.

The most unexpected and original approach has been adopted in Flitcroft's Great Dining Room (**Fig 1**). It is the most important room in the house, with white-and-gold wall panelling, a two-tier pedimented chimney-piece and high coved ceiling, very similar to Flitcroft's contemporary dining room and saloon at Woburn. Missing sections of the wall panelling and the plaster coving have not been replaced, but left, revealing the construction and old walls underneath. The chimney-piece and overmantel have been reinstated and everything that survived put back, with the integral full-length portraits cleaned and rehung on the walls.

It is a poetical statement that speaks of the recent troubled history of the building,

yet still conveys the grandeur of this major Palladian interior. Most movingly, the outline of the lost oval pier glasses can still be read on the walls (**Fig 2**).

The fourth major stage of the restoration was the replacement of the demolished Victorian north entrance tower with a new two-storeyed porch block that repeats the scale of its lost predecessor and restores the symmetry of the overall composition when seen from the east, as depicted in 18th-century engravings and Hutchins's *History of Dorset* (1777). It is built of matching soft red brick, with Portland crenellations reused from the demolished ranges.

The ground floor is a rusticated Doric *loggia*, which serves as an impressive main entrance. The new porch contributes a contemporary Classical feature to the care fully conserved structure of the main house.

Work is now proceeding on reviving the guest bedrooms, while retaining their character with old paint and restored late-Victorian wallpapers. It is also planned to restore the Jacobean stables, which form a romantic foil to the undemonstrative Classicism of the main house. The restoration of the park—an ambitious Rococo layout of the 1740s—has gone hand in hand with the repair of the house and on an equally ambitious scale: dredging the lake, reinstating the east avenue and formal garden—with a replica of Eros (**Fig 5**) from Piccadilly Circus (the memorial to the 7th Earl) as the centrepiece—and the repair of many 18th-century garden buildings, not least the spectacular grotto by Sally Strachey in 2014. Viewed as a whole, this is one of the most original and successful country-house restorations of recent years. 🐦

**Fig 5: The newly installed replica of Eros from Piccadilly Circus**

