

Stable presence

As part of the restoration of St Giles House in Dorset, the Earl and Countess of Shaftesbury have transformed the seventeenth-century stables into striking and characterful accommodation for guests

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EXTERIOR A view of the handsome former stables (known as the Riding House) from St Giles House. The close relationship between the two buildings is part of what makes the estate special



DINING ROOM Elements of the stalls and looseboxes have been deliberately retained on the ground floor. The pendant light is from Skinflint, which supplied many of the vintage lights for this project and the main house





DINING ROOM Some of the wooden partitions were adapted so they appear to be pushed back into the wall. The chairs are in Pierre Frey's 'Cheyenne' linen in mordoré. The carved elm urns are newel posts from the original seventeenth-century staircase in the main house, since replaced.

ENTRANCE HALL The walls are lined with 'Budapest', a linen-mix velvet by Fadini Borghi, from Pierre Frey





TOP ROW FROM LEFT An arresting bronze of a horse's head by Stephen Pettifer makes a dramatic statement in the hall. The sensitive restoration of St Giles House has won several accolades, including a Georgian Group Architectural Award in 2014. Specialist David Mendel spent two weeks painstakingly restoring the paint on the dining room walls.

MIDDLE ROW Exposed, weathered roof beams stand out against the grey-blue paintwork and accentuate the soaring ceiling in the sitting room, where saddles on the wall provide quirky decoration and reference the building's history. Most of the furniture in the first-floor sitting room (also known as the club room), was scavenged from the attics of the main house. Several hides from Howe were sewn together to make a curtain, behind which is the crank for the hoist, once used to raise sacks of feed to the feed store above.

BOTTOM ROW The original wooden fixtures and mellow brick floor establish a rustic feel in the dining room, which is connected to the hall by a door in the panelling. The bar in the corner of the sitting room was once a lead-lined feed store and now has a run of cupboards with worktops made from reclaimed slate. The early seventeenth-century Riding House is part of the Grade II*-listed home farm buildings



BEDROOM A corner manger has been converted into a slate-topped bedside table in this ground floor bedroom, which has its bathroom in an adjacent loosebox. The blind is in 'Kashida' by Zoffany – a crewelwork design in wool on heavy cotton, used in several of the bedrooms, and the iron four-poster is by Francis Russell



BATHROOM In a different room, a bathroom and bedroom are located in adjacent stalls. The clawfoot bath is from Drummonds and the George III mahogany cheval mirror was found in one of the attics of the main house





TOP ROW FROM LEFT The stables' original wooden partitions and panelling have been retained to create idiosyncratic features in the ground-floor bedrooms and bathrooms, which are linked by a rich, earthy palette of browns and greens.

MIDDLE ROW The bedrooms on the first floor (in former grooms' accommodation) and their en-suite bathrooms on the new mezzanine level have painted or fabric-covered walls in strong colours. In one of the bathrooms, artworks and mirrors have been grouped together on dark purple walls to eye-catching effect. Pierre Frey's geometric print 'Country' has been used in the bold boisé colourway in one of the bedrooms to create a striking focal point.

BOTTOM ROW Antique dealer and interiors guru Edward Hurst sourced many interesting pieces to give the Riding House its own distinctive look. These include, in the red-painted main bedroom (*below left and below right*), a Twenties triptych mirror by Parisian company Miroir Brot, which hangs above the desk beside an eighteenth-century screen made by a French prisoner of war incarcerated at Sissinghurst Castle. In another bedroom (*below centre*), dark purple walls have been combined with Pierre Frey's 'Jardin d'Hiver', an opulent floral patterned cotton



You may well have heard of St Giles House in Dorset and the remarkable restoration project that its owners Nick, the 12th Earl of Shaftesbury, and his wife, Dinah, have undertaken there. The building has won several conservation awards and is now the subject of a glorious book, *The Rebirth of an English Country House: St Giles House* (Rizzoli, £40), which Nick co-wrote with Tim Knox.

The project itself – saving a near-derelict house that Nick never thought he would inherit – was a Herculean feat. What is more, the approach that he and Dinah have taken, along with a team of experts, is inspired. While being acutely respectful to the building itself, it feels completely relevant to now. As the historian Simon Thurley wrote in his review of the book in the October 2018 issue of *House & Garden*, ‘The finished result is beautiful and traditional, yet also strikingly modern in execution and finish.’ And the grounds, which also underwent a major overhaul, are spectacular, too.

Most recently, Nick and Dinah have turned their hand to the stables with just as much energy and originality. The main house is now a highly sought-after wedding venue, but it is also a home for the couple and their three children and they felt strongly that it needed to remain as such. They decided to transform the early seventeenth-century Riding House, part of the home farm buildings, to create deeply stylish and very comfortable accommodation for wedding guests and anyone wanting to gather a house party for the weekend.

With the Riding House, although they were confined by the constraints of the building’s Grade II* listing (and undertook extensive research into its history and evolution), creatively they were freed by the fact that there were no expectations of what the decoration should be – unlike in the main house. Nick explains that they were also more confident, having had the experience of reviving St Giles. ‘We had a proper understanding of how to work with history, reveal it and yet modernise it.’ For Dinah, who is German, and never in her wildest dreams thought she would be living in stately grandeur in rural England, ‘it was incredibly exciting to be allowed to be courageous’. This was to be her vision.

The team she and Nick worked with on this project had all collaborated on the restoration and decoration of the main house: Philip Hughes as architect; Ellis & Co as the builders; and the antique dealer Edward Hurst, who has become a great guide, mentor and, ultimately, friend. ‘Edward is our interiors guru and our diplomatic mediator,’ says Dinah. They also brought in the interior designer Annabel Elliot, a family friend (her husband, Simon, is Nick’s godfather), for her expertise in working on large projects and to a tight deadline and budget. Annabel describes herself, self-effacingly, as the ‘older and bossier’ member of the team. While each had strong ideas – none more so than Dinah, who admits she is ‘incredibly opinionated’ – it is obvious that it was a happy collaboration, with everybody respecting the way each other worked.

The building is magnificent in its own right and both Nick and Dinah were keen to preserve its character; Dinah talks of ‘the magic’ of its dereliction and its history. They were also all in agreement that, as it was to be a party house where most guests would stay only a few nights, it was important it should feel like an experience and be exciting. In Edward’s words: ‘We didn’t want it to be polite – it needed to be brave, but not gimmicky.’

And they have succeeded in their vision: it is far from what you

would expect from country-house wedding accommodation. Through a large central door, you enter a hall lined entirely, floor to ceiling, with a seventeenth-century-style velvet from Pierre Frey, hanging on wrought-iron poles, and a huge bronze sculpture of a horse’s head by Stephen Pettifer on a plinth at the end. The theatrical tone is set. On the ground floor is the large dining room where the horses’ stalls would have been. The original wooden partitions maintain a sense of the building’s history; several of them have been ‘pushed back’ into the walls to make space for the dining table and chairs.

Also on this floor are the two largest bedrooms – one of these has a bed in one loosebox and an en-suite bathroom in another. Corner mangers have been given thick slate tops to create bedside tables and the bed is an elegant wrought-iron four-poster made by Francis Russell, whose workshops are now on the estate.

Upstairs is a large sitting room, known as the club room, with a soaring ceiling. There is a bar in the corner, in what would have once been a feed store, lined with lead to keep the rats out. Also on this floor, in former grooms’ accommodation, is the main bedroom and five small but cleverly conceived bedrooms, each with its own bathroom on a newly inserted mezzanine level.

With the decoration, the idea was, in some ways, to make it appear as if very little had been done and to let the uniqueness of the building shine through. Annabel introduced them to David Mendel, a specialist painter and colourist. David was to prove instrumental in the ground-floor rooms, enabling them to keep as much of the old paintwork as possible and painstakingly patch in the new with the old. He spent two weeks in the dining room, where he was able to conceal huge patches of new white plaster and tone down what was a horrid acid yellow on the upper part of the walls. The existing brick floor at this level was scrubbed ‘to remove 400 years of horse’.

Much of the furniture was from the St Giles attics – the long table in the dining room came from the old servants’ hall – and the criteria for anything they did buy was that it must feel as if it came from the house. Dinah scoured Ebay and country auctions, using Edward as her ‘quality control’. He was also responsible for the picture hangs, suggesting that they be arranged in groups for a more striking effect, rather than dotted about.

But in other ways the new interiors of the Riding House are very designed. ‘We talked about boldness a lot,’ says Nick. Dinah was adamant that she wanted ‘strong, sumptuous colours’. Here David brought her ideas to life. The main bedroom is a vivid red, while the other bedrooms are varying shades of aubergine, brown, red, dark green and ochres – all bold, rich and warm. Warmth was key to Dinah’s vision – she talks of ‘the colours wrapping you like a cocoon’. She is also not keen on expanses of white ceiling, hence the brown ceiling in the dining room.

The smaller bedrooms all have fabric wallcoverings, which give each one its individual character and ‘texture’ – something that was also important for Dinah. ‘I don’t like wallpaper; it’s too one-dimensional,’ she says emphatically. If she had completely got her own way, she would have even tented the ceilings in the bedrooms.

The Riding House was finished in June, the water turned on just a few hours before the first guests arrived. But work in the main house continues – there are still parts waiting to be restored – and one gets a sense with Nick and Dinah that there will always be another project, and no ordinary one at that □

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The Riding House is available to rent; stgileshouse.com.

Philip Hughes Associates: pha-building-conservation.co.uk

Edward Hurst: edwardhurst.com

Annabel Elliot: annabelelliottlimited.com