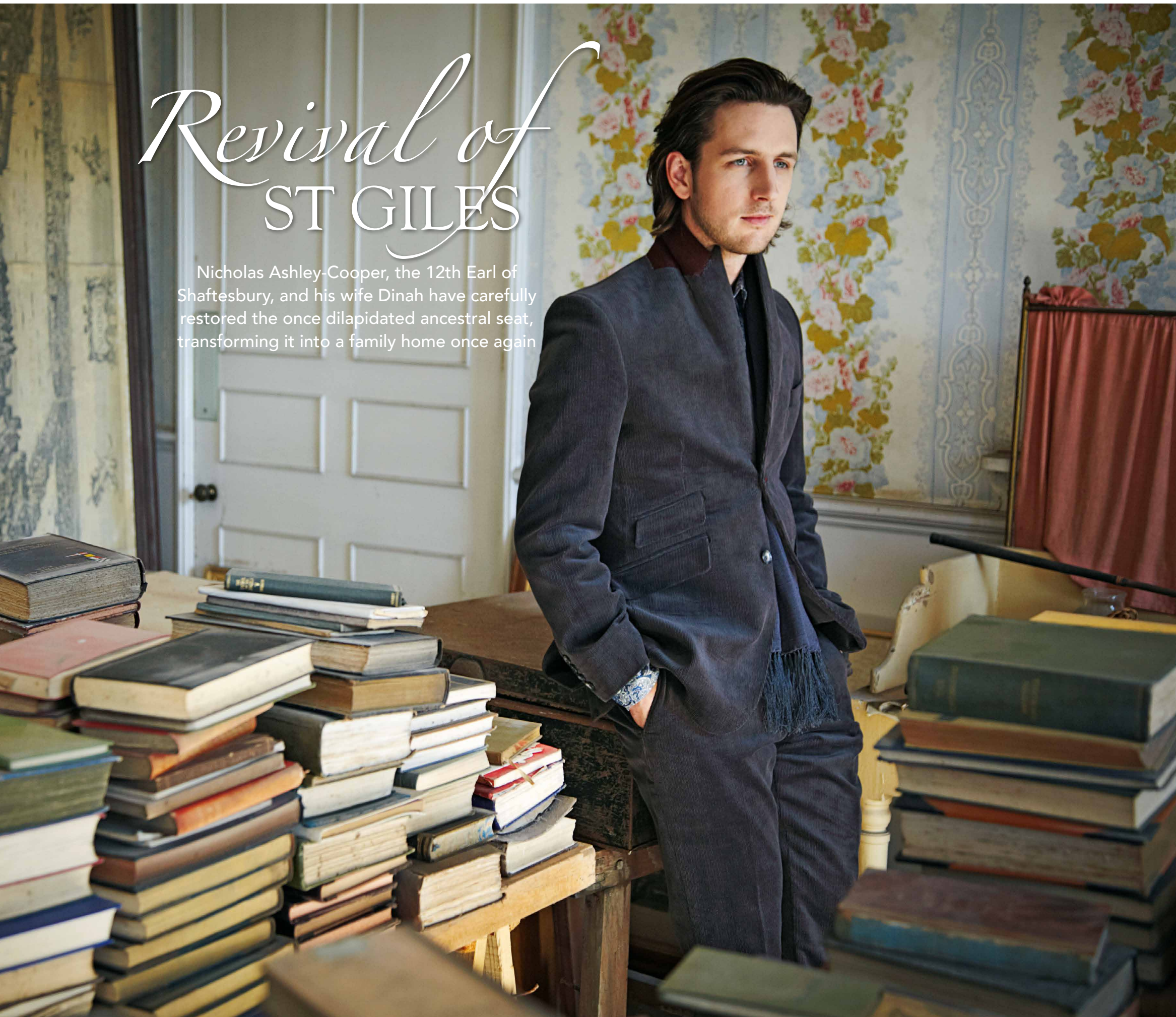


Revival of ST GILES

Nicholas Ashley-Cooper, the 12th Earl of Shaftesbury, and his wife Dinah have carefully restored the once dilapidated ancestral seat, transforming it into a family home once again



Nicholas Ashley-Cooper never once imagined that aged just 26 he would become the 12th Earl of Shaftesbury and inherited the crumbling Grade I listed St Giles House and estate in Dorset.

Nick, as he likes to be known, remembers cycling around the parkland of St Giles, playing in the trees and looking up at the house with his older brother Anthony in the 1980s. “It belonged to another time, another period that had ceased to exist,” he says.

Whilst the boys lived on the estate in the comparatively modest dower house, Mainsail Haule, they seldom visited the dilapidated pile, with its shutters tightly closed against the outside world. Despite his father’s best efforts to restore St Giles in the early 1970s, architectural historians declared it still close to collapse and the house became a family taboo, a topic that was not discussed.

Nick did not ever anticipate that the responsibility of the house would fall to him, as his brother Anthony, two years his senior, was the natural heir. Yet in 2005, after the double tragedy of discovering his father had been murdered and the unexpected natural death of his brother, Nick became the sole surviving heir. At this time he was working as a DJ and club promoter in New York. “My instant reaction was to come back [home] and be as helpful as I could, but I didn’t know what I was going to do or what was involved.” Devastated by loss, he embarked on a five-year journey “finding out about the house and its history, studying at business school in London and figuring out where I was in all of the tragedy, then coming up with a plan.”

The history of the house was first documented when the 1st Earl of Shaftesbury wrote in his diary on 19 March 1650, “I laid the first

LEFT Nicholas Ashley-Cooper, 12th Earl of Shaftesbury in the Handel Room at St Giles House, 2010 before restoration work began.

ABOVE The facade of St Giles with its rebuilt tower and loggia (a later phase of the renovation) shows its current, more inhabitable footprint.



'The house was overwhelming. You'd go into a room and it was full of debris... It was hard to see through to the beauty behind'

ABOVE Two original tapestries hang at the entrance of the kitchen epitomising the family home that celebrates its history.

ABOVE RIGHT The walls of the back staircase in the south wing are covered in a Farrow & Ball wallpaper, based on fragments of the original.

RIGHT The Green Room's flocked wallpaper was recreated by wallpaper specialist Allyson McDermott.

stone of my house at St Giles." The charismatic 1st Earl gave the house its Renaissance north and east fronts with classical facades loosely based on a 1638 design by Inigo Jones, and thus the handsome Georgian symmetry that remains today.

The years that followed saw the colourful generations of Ashley-Coopers both add and subtract from the property. The Earls acquired fine furniture, tapestries and paintings as vibrant and telling of their personal accounts of fortune as well as loss. By the time Nick's father, the 10th Earl, inherited St Giles House it was in poor repair. Having been used as a military infirmary during the First World War and a girls' school evacuated from London during the Second World War, the house needed huge investment to save what survived of an interior ravaged by dry rot and decay. Whilst his father had tried, the task of restoration was gargantuan and came at a time when many country estates "were knocked down or given away," explains Nick.

When it fell to him, Nick felt a dual pull. Whilst proud of the work his brother Anthony had achieved

to find a way forward for the house and open up a dialogue with Historic England (formerly English Heritage) during his all-too-brief time as the 11th Earl of Shaftesbury, Nick felt "an ambivalent attitude" towards St Giles, too. "I saw how it had harmed my father and I felt a certain trepidation," he admits.

Eventually, though, something changed. Instrumental to this was a gift from his half-siblings. They had secretly employed the photographer Justin Barton to document the 70-room house and presented Nick with a book of the photographs. "The house was overwhelming. You'd go into a room and it was full of debris and boxes and stuff that needed sorting out," he explains. "It was hard to see through to the beauty behind, so the pictures came at a time when I really needed some inspiration."

Nick also learnt more about the work his father and brother contributed to St Giles. The more he saw their vision, the more he shared a desire to complete it. "A big part of me has my father and brother along the journey with me and I feel like I'm doing it with both of them. I feel it's a team effort, but also it is the





ABOVE Hettie, a German wire-haired pointer, keeps guard in the family room. The sign above the sofa is from an attempt after the Second World War to help maintain the house by opening it to the public.

continuation of the work that my father started, my brother continued and I've finished," he says.

It was when Nick met Dinah in 2007, who became his wife in 2010, that the project commenced. "When you're in love and thinking of starting a family and a new chapter in your life, you have a sense of adventure," he says. "You don't worry about things so much and it all seems quite fun." The couple decided to create an apartment within the house and live on site. "Looking back, it was an amazing moment," he continues, "because the biggest barrier, psychologically, was not knowing where to begin this huge project."

Nick and Dinah pinpointed the most practical part of the house to develop as an apartment (phase one of

the project). This plan was also more realistic than funding the whole project in one go. "I'd had lengthy and ongoing conversations with Historic England about potential funding sources," Nick explains. "They were challenging discussions and it seemed like it was taking forever to progress, so getting a foothold in the house, we realised, came down to an amount of money that we could actually afford." Self-financing this phase meant that Nick and Dinah could start as soon as they wanted.

The couple moved into the flat in St Giles in March 2012, almost 362 years to the day since the 1st Earl of Shaftesbury had made his diary entry. Nick is resolute that Dinah was an essential driving force, happy to live

with buckets to capture the rain pouring in through the ceiling whilst heavily pregnant with their second child, daughter Viva, and coping with their one-year-old son Anthony (joined in 2014 by daughter Zara). Determined to make the house a family home for the first time since Nick's great-grandfather's time, the couple pressed on with the renovations, surrounded by a fleet of builders.

As the property is Grade I listed the couple had to liaise closely with Historic England on the planning process, designs and intentions for the restoration. St Giles House had been on Historic England's 'Heritage at Risk' register since it introduced the scheme prioritising heritage buildings most in need

of attention in the 1990s. "They were generally very excited and enthusiastic," Nick says. It helped that the couple were not planning major structural changes and employed a building surveyor who Historic England had great trust in. Nick describes the process as "learning on the job" and being fortunate to have been introduced to the right people to guide them from the outset. "The house had so much beauty and character in it, the early work we did was focused on allowing the house to come back," he says.

To create a family home they needed to install a kitchen. (The sculleries had been located in the basement, separated off for staff.) Nick's great-grandmother's private quarters offered the most

ABOVE The fireplace surround in the small dining room was cleaned and regilded. The Earl's coronet was last worn in 1937 by the 9th Earl of Shaftesbury, Nick's great-grandfather, at the coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother.



obvious location. They sited the kitchen in what was her bathroom, incorporating a corridor which once separated this room from her bedroom to create a larger space which leads on to a family room. Whilst there were only three bathrooms in the original layout of the house, the many dressing rooms adjoining bedrooms lent themselves to being converted into en-suite bathrooms more suited to contemporary living.

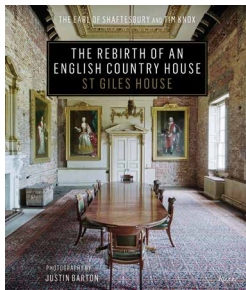
The couple left as many original architectural features and original character as possible, restoring the gilding around doors, decorative ceilings and fireplaces, then added the new essentials for family life. Allowing the original history of the house to be brought back became a constant theme of the restoration as work progressed into phase two (which included the larger state rooms) with minimal intervention and a light touch. They also managed to carefully bring back to life all the ancestral portraits, paintings and tapestries and, with the help and keen eye of antiques specialist Edward Hurst, to salvage many of the finer pieces of furniture for restoration.

As the project has progressed, Nick and Dinah have had to consider making the estate work as a business. On realising that the state rooms could entertain up to 120 people, they added the necessary services – kitchens, a back staircase and a lift (carefully installed with Historic England's consent) – enabling them to host events.

In the wake of many prestigious conservation awards and grants, the couple have continued to work on the house ceaselessly, most recently installing a nightclub. With Anthony now aged seven, Viva, six, and Zara, four, St Giles House is once again a family home. "We realise that we are very lucky to be living in such a magical place. One of the most rewarding parts is to bring up a family here. Of course, a house of this scale is never complete, all I see are the projects to do," says Nick. Yet it is undeniable to see this family's extraordinary achievement over adversity. ■

TOP RIGHT A four-poster bed with the family crest on the headboard was restored for the Marlborough Room – the master bedroom of Nick and Dinah.

RIGHT The newly fitted en-suite bathroom in the Marlborough Suite features eighteenth-century watercolours of St Giles park.



READER OFFER

The Rebirth of an English Country House: St Giles House by The Earl of Shaftesbury and Tim Knox (Rizzoli, £40). Readers of *The English Home* can buy a copy at the special price of £35 (including P&P). To order, call

01235 465577 and quote the code ECHStG.