

RIDING TO THE RESCUE

How the Earl and Countess of Shaftesbury are overcoming tragedy and embracing the future to save a peerless stately home. By Charlotte Brook

Dinah Ashley-Cooper, the Countess of Shaftesbury, with one of her dressage horses

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PHILIP SINDEN

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Nick Ashley-Cooper, the 12th Earl of Shaftesbury at home at St Giles House in Dorset with Hettie the pointer

THIS PAGE: NICK WEARS SHIRT, £390; HOLLAND & HOLLAND; JUMPER, £680; SHOES, £750; BOTH GIORGIO ARMANI TROUSERS, £110; FARROW'S; OPPOSITE: DINAH WEARS JUMPER, £70; BELT, £145; BELT, £295; ALL ETRO; HAT, £120; WILLIAM & SON



Clockwise from left: Nick and Dinah in the Great Dining Room beneath portraits of the 4th Earl and Countess. The house seen from the drive. A bed in the Japan Room. Restored original chinoiserie wallpaper in the Japan Room. The Sunk Garden with a modern replica of the Eros statue from Piccadilly Circus, itself a tribute to the 7th Earl



NICK WEARS BLAZER, £1,100; SHOES, £720, BOTH GIORGIO ARMANI. SHIRT, £54.95, THE OXFORD SHIRT COMPANY. TROUSERS, £119, FARLOWS. DINAH WEARS DRESS, £2,990, GABRIELA HEARST. HEELS, £475, MALONE SOULIERS

Driving over Cranborne Chase, Dorset's rolling chalk plateau, I turn off the quiet lane at a small sign almost entirely obscured by cow parsley, reading 'St Giles'. The drive winds past the River Allen through arable fields and around a walled garden, before the house appears through a panoply of gently swaying beech-trees. With a weathered pediment above the front door and white roses clambering up the faded red-brick walls, the Georgian mansion has a gracious majesty that speaks of centuries of peaceful, settled privilege. Surveying the scene, one would never guess a thing about the house's recent troubles, or the heartache of the family who have owned it for nearly 400 years.

I am met in the airy lower-ground-floor estate offices by the 12th Earl of Shaftesbury. Practically dressed and pragmatic, he seems to wear the grandeur of his title and home lightly. 'Hi, I'm Nick,' he says, shaking my hand. Accompanied by a bounding Hettie, his beloved wire-haired pointer, he calls out to me to mind my head as he lopes upstairs under the outsized disco ball suspended above the stairwell. Presently we arrive at a particularly handsome, south-facing long gallery, filled with streaming sunshine and books ranging from leather-bound 16th-century texts to British parliamentary papers, gilt-edged bibles, John Peel's memoir, Angela Carter's *Wise Children*, *L'Etranger* by Albert Camus and *The Essential Spike Milligan*.

The breadth of volumes seems to reflect the diverse threads from which the Shaftesburys' story is woven. Today, Nick and his wife Dinah, the Countess, live in one section of this Grade I-listed house in relaxed splendour with their three young children, opening up the rest of the property to visitors to make it pay its way. In recent years, the freshly revived state-rooms and grounds have entertained a Festival of Thought, a two-day celebration of chillis, several weddings and a growing number of increasingly energetic parties. One Saturday night earlier this year saw the Freemasons cross paths with the staff of the Box, Soho's notorious cabaret club, on the drive at midnight – one leaving, one arriving. But on this warm, breezy morning, all is bucolic calm. Shoulder-height white foxgloves sway in the flowerbeds, gleaming Hanoverian horses stamp in the yard, the kitchens hum with activity and the halls reverberate with the sound of purposeful conversations. The estate breathes with a quiet sense of enterprise, hard work and a tentative optimism: to anyone who knew the house 30 years ago, it must seem like something of a miracle.

The heart of the original building was constructed in 1651 by the first Earl of Shaftesbury, a co-founder of the Whig party who was immortalised in the Dryden political satire *Absalom and Achitophel* as 'Sagacious, bold and turbulent of wit/Restless, unfixed in principles and place.' (He was called Anthony, like every eldest son since.) Over the 300 years that followed, new west wings, a pavilion devoted to Shakespeare, a shell grotto and two Victorian towers were added. Serving as a hospital for the wounded in World

War I and a girls' school in World War II, St Giles seems to have thrived throughout the early 20th century both publicly and privately, with the 9th Earl and Countess adding a school, pub and cricket green to the village, and the estate hosting shoots, house parties and the annual Hunt Ball.


But 1947 saw the start of a troubled, and eventually tragic, period in the Shaftesbury family history. The 9th Earl's heir died suddenly, survived by his wife and son. Death duties necessitating the sale of the family's Irish estates and nearly 10,000 of St Giles' 15,500 acres took the wind out of the Earl and Countess' sails, and after living in fewer and fewer rooms of the house, they eventually moved out altogether.

Following the Earl's death in 1961, his grandson Anthony – Nick's father – became the 10th Earl at the age of 22. He was determined to return the family seat to its former state of efficiency and elegance and, having demolished the bay windows, two wings and a tower, he set about reviving its original aesthetic, chipping off the smooth Victorian render to expose the soft-red Georgian brickwork beneath, planting an extraordinary one million trees on the estate and creating several award-winning wild-bird habitats. But for all its beauty, the sprawling edifice of St Giles House proved too great a challenge. 'It is sad – my father launched into it with great energy, but eventually realised that if he carried on he would risk bankrupting

not just himself, but the whole estate too,' Nick says. 'He was defeated by it. I remember St Giles as crumbling, really. There were lots of scars left from the demolition, and gaping holes that had been very hastily covered up... The house was like a wounded animal.'

Meanwhile, Nick and his elder brother Anthony, the heir to the earldom, grew up with their parents in a modest, very pretty dower house in the village. Then, in 1999, their father's beloved mother died. Floored by her death and overwhelmed by the burden of St Giles and his seeming inability to fix it, the Earl divorced the boys' mother Christina, handed the estate over to his eldest son, who was then 23, and moved first to Hove, then France. His mental health seems to have spiralled unhappily in the following years – depression was exacerbated by alcoholism, and he fell prey to fortune-seekers. In the autumn of 2004, the Earl went missing. The following April, his body was discovered in a ravine near Cannes; his then wife, Jamila M'Barek, a Tunisian former call girl from whom he was by that point estranged, was later convicted of being an accomplice to his murder.

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The Riding House,
behind the trees, was
converted from the
17th-century stables,
and can provide
accommodation for
up to 18 guests

A month after the tragic discovery of their father's body, Anthony, now the 11th Earl, flew out to visit Nick in New York, where he was pursuing a career in techno music. Horrifyingly, one morning Anthony, then just 27, suffered a fatal and wholly unexpected heart attack. 'I knew intuitively and immediately that the New York thing was done,' Nick says reflectively. 'I wanted to come home and be here. To be someone people, especially my mother, could rely on. To try to step up to the plate.'

St Giles was never meant to be his; he had not imagined becoming the Earl and had always enjoyed the freedom he was allowed to pursue his own destiny – but suddenly he was the only surviving heir of the Shaftesbury family. 'Anthony was always thinking about this place... Having that responsibility is very intense mentally,' he says. 'I always felt, "Well, Anthony's got this one sorted" and that he wouldn't want me around cramping his style, so I'd better go my own way.' Fortunately, while he acknowledges having been 'probably quite wild', Nick had still concentrated at school (Eton) and university (Manchester): 'There was a part of me always telling myself to take the right steps. Until that point in 2005, it had sent me in the direction of my one love – music – and now it was sending me back.'

Having returned to London, Nick decided to take a two-year MBA at the London Business School in the hope that the locals would take a floppy-haired, tattooed, 26-year-old DJ and electronic-music promoter from NYC more seriously. At weekends he would drive down to St Giles to explore the boarded-up rooms and read up on his family's history. Shuttered, damp, covered in dust with no in-built electricity or heating, the home had a melancholic feeling, Nick recalls, but always, still, a certain enchantment: 'It never had a bad energy,' he says. It was during this time that he met Dinah, a Bavaria-born vet, through mutual friends. Straight-talking, sparkly eyed and a woman whose sense of humour is similarly close to the surface, she wasn't daunted by her husband's dream to revive his ancestral home. 'It was the dereliction that excited me... I found it magical, and I loved the peeling paint,' she says, laughing. 'Tackling the project was a challenge, but never seemed overwhelming.'

By this point, rescuing St Giles House was a national cause célèbre: during the 10th Earl's tenure, the property had been added to the Heritage At Risk register, and architectural historians had virtually consigned it to the stately-home scrapheap. Nearly 10 years and £5 million – a mix of inheritance, grants and bank loans – later, Nick and Dinah have managed to bring what they estimate to be just over

three quarters of the house back to life: first turning one part into their private five-bedroom family home, and then reviving and repurposing the state-rooms and one formal bedroom upstairs into venues for hire.

Nick credits Dinah with getting the show on the road and keeping them going throughout. ‘Her enthusiasm gave me the confidence to take such a leap of faith,’ he says. ‘It seemed a romantic idea,’ Dinah tells me, adding: ‘And then we had 30 builders moving in while I was eight-months pregnant!’ That was March 2012; she gave birth here a few weeks later to a daughter, Viva, a sister for their son Anthony (later followed by a second sister, Zara).

According to the couple, Nick is the one with the big-picture vision, while Dinah is all about colour, texture and detail. The result in their section of the house is a glorious harmony of contrasts: scrolling gilt mouldings border walls painted in Farrow & Ball paints, in hues from off-white to deep apricot; inherited 18th-century tapestries cohabit with contemporary photography by the Dutch-Italian artist Paolo Woods; minimalist globe pendant lights hang nextdoor to Regency chandeliers. The old 1950s painted sign reading ‘St Giles’s House: Tea Rooms & Car Park’ hangs in the family’s sitting-room; Banksy coasters protect the family dining-room’s original mahogany table from ring marks. Vinyls are stacked up among the marble busts of Nick’s ancestors in his study, and the couple recently converted a cellar into a club, complete with state-of-the-art lighting, speakers and decks. ‘We still know how to have fun,’ says Dinah with a smile.

It would be inaccurate to say that the state-rooms have been refurbished to their former glory: rather, they have evolved into new, reimagined and spectacular spaces, where the past meets the present, and is subtly fortified for the future. The most striking salon is the Great Dining Room: the ceiling and sections of the walls are dressed in immaculately painted cream panelling, edged by gold cornicing, which gives way at several points to jagged brickwork. Rigorously restored yet revealing the romance of ruins in places, it is the Shaftesburys’ pièce de résistance.

Several rooms are still awaiting attention. For now, though, the pair are concentrating on creating a stud – Dinah specialises in breeding top-flight dressage horses – and on holding retreats at Riding House, the old 17th-century stables, which they have transformed into a beautiful, bohemian eight-bedroom bolthole that is

available for rent. As this was not a historic restoration, the Shaftesburys had comparative creative freedom here, and it shows: a palette of mustard, olive, scarlet and turmeric-yellow prevails; there are contemporary four posters in the loose boxes, while each of the former grooms’ lodgings in the eaves has a free-standing roll-top bath.

‘Opening the place up to other people is one of the greatest things about taking on St Giles,’ Nick tells me, echoing the sentiments of his ancestor, the philosopher 3rd Earl, who instructed his housekeeper to offer hospitality to all strangers who came by. While clearly a liberal and alternative thinker, Nick does seem to have inherited some family traits: one ancestor was a music devotee, hosting Handel in Dorset several times, and his father served as chairman of the London Philharmonic Orchestra for 25 years; so, in fact, the current incumbent’s interest in beats is also not without precedent. He is mindful of the achievements of those who came before him – particularly the 7th Earl, a pioneering campaigner and philanthropist who is commemorated with the winged Eros statue on Piccadilly Circus. ‘When you

know about the good work your family has done over history, it does affect your mindset,’ he observes. ‘It makes you want to try your best.’

Nick has written a book about the project of restoring St Giles, which he has dedicated both to his brother and to his father, whose efforts to save the house he only came to truly value once he took it on himself. It is a story of a collective triumph: how the efforts of many – members of the family, the local community, experts, specialist crafts-people and friends – brought one of Britain’s most beautiful architectural jewels back from the brink, in the face

of almost overwhelming adversity. ‘It’s felt a bit like it has been our life’s calling to be here and to try to make it work,’ Nick says. ‘And to me, once you’ve stepped on a certain train, it feels like you’re strapped in and the only way is forwards.’ The couple have an open-minded outlook for the long-term future: they hope St Giles will thrive and remain, with any luck, a family home.

Lord and Lady Shaftesbury leave the library, chatting and checking their phones for estate-business emails (him) and news on a horse with toothache (her). The sounds of preparations for a 40th-birthday party that evening float through from the Stone Hall and the drive’s gravel scrunches with the sound of the junior Shaftesburys returning from school. Left alone, I examine another bookcase at the far end of library. Alongside Roald Dahl and a Bowie biography, there is *The Art of Possibility* by Zander and Zander, *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway* by Susan Jeffers and *Surprised by Joy* by CS Lewis. They all bode well. □
St Giles House (www.stgileshouse.com). ‘*The Rebirth of an English Country House: St Giles House*’ by the Earl of Shaftesbury and Tim Knox (£40, Rizzoli) is out now.

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Nick and Dinah beneath a portrait of the 9th Earl

NICK WEARS SHIRT, £110, OLIVER SPENCER. TROUSERS, £119, FARROWS. SHOES, £720, GIORGIO ARMANI. SOCKS, HIS OWN. DINAH WEARS DRESS, £550, SALONI. BOOTS, £335, FAIRFAX & FAVOR





NICK WEARS SHIRT: £350 • HOLLAND & FOSTER'S: £200 • OLIVER SPENCER: BROGUES: £480 • CROCKETT & JONES: DINAH: NEAR DRESS: £1,495 • ROKSANDA: HEELS: £475 • M/LOVE: SHOULERS: SEE STICKISTS FOR DETAILS • HAIR AND MAKEUP: BY ALEXIS DAY AT PREMIER HAIR • MAKEUP: USING MONTAGUT HAIR CARE AND SUQQU



This page, clockwise from left: Nick and Dinah in the Library. Family photographs in Nick's study. The Riding House. The Japan Room's ensuite bathroom. The family's private staircase. Opposite: borders in the Sunk Garden

