

A future for St Giles

Nick Ashley-Cooper is the 12th Earl of Shaftesbury, current senior member of one of our great political dynasties. But in 2005, he was a music promoter and DJ in New York with no expectation of returning to the UK, let alone of embarking on the biggest restoration of an important English country house this century at St. Giles House in Dorset.



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Nick and Dinah Ashley-Cooper, the Earl & Countess of Shaftesbury at St Giles today.

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The restored South Front, stripped of early 19th century render, shows the beauty of the 17th century brickwork. New bricks for the restoration had to be sourced in Suffolk, where clay from the other end of the same clay beds as the originals were fired in a traditional oak-fired kiln to achieve a perfect match.

My wife and I moved into St Giles House as new parents just before Christmas 2011. We had become slightly obsessed with the idea of moving back before the 50th anniversary of the house being abandoned. We managed it by only a couple of days. Since then we have expanded from a bedsit in one corner of the then derelict house to a group of habitable, indeed lovely, rooms at one end, and the family has expanded with the birth of our second baby. Now we are beginning to restore the main rooms for events but we don't feel driven to live in them. It will be great to enjoy using those rooms, just as other people will but we now have a comfortable family home and are recreating part of the main Victorian entrance that was knocked down to give us a separate access.

Restoring a house this neglected is a massive undertaking. Nothing had been touched since Victorian times. Our ambition was to re-establish the relationship between our family and the house which had begun as far back as the 14th century. It was the spark of an idea built around the feeling that I did not want the house to fall down on my watch.

The house was in a pretty terrible state. The roofs leaked and dry rot had savaged many rooms in the house destroying large sections of plasterwork. But we were lucky. Miraculously, some of the remarkable 17th century decorative plasterwork ceilings had

survived, even in the Dining Room where much of the room around had disintegrated. This ceiling gave us hope. In certain areas we found supporting beams that were nearly 50% rotten; we knew we were intervening just in time.

The St Giles House that is emerging from the scaffolding is roughly the house built by the 1st Earl of Shaftesbury in 1650. Parts of it belong to an earlier 16th century manor house; parts of it are much later and date from the larger house which stood here until the 1970s. But as a whole it conveys the character of a family house where every generation has added or subtracted something.

I was aware of the house as I was growing up - my father, the 10th Earl, moved the estate office into the basement - but it was a shuttered house, empty since 1961. My father was consumed with the problem of what to do with the house. His own father had died when he was 8 and he spent much of his time with his grandparents at St Giles. These grandparents, my great-grandparents, were born in the 1870s and lived through the final flowering of the English country house. From the Edwardian heyday to the period after the Second World War came massive social change, the sale of other family properties and the advent of death duties. The world inhabited by my great-grandfather at his death in 1961 was a very different one from his inheritance in 1886. I have



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The double Drawing Room retains much of the remarkable 17th century plasterwork commissioned by the 1st Earl of Shaftesbury, founder of the Whig party.

Controversially, the Dining Room, where only the ceiling, doorcases and overmantel survive will be stabilised in its current state rather than reconstructed, putting back the pictures and bringing the room alive and remembering not only the glory of the original interior but also the years of neglect, dust and grime that interceded.



The Green Drawing Room which revealed an original red as well as green wallcovering beneath the layers. For the new generation, being able to make choices about which original scheme to follow is a chance to exercise personal task.



Much of the 18th century landscape garden designed by the 4th Countess and Henry Flitcroft survives and is being restored with help from Natural England.

the impression that the house had become a series of grand rooms stuffed with furniture which had outlived their usefulness. For my father, it must have been impossible to imagine a modern role for a house like St Giles. I have a sense that his was the generation caught in the middle and he could only see that places like this had lost their purpose.

He took two major decisions. The first was drastically to reduce the size of the house by knocking down part of the south wing and the entire north wing as well as many of the Victorian embellishments. It was clearly difficult for him and he never talked about it but his careful photographic documenting of the work suggests a view to the future. He also removed the 1820 render, which was austere and trapped moisture, revealing the mellow 17th century brickwork.

He sold around 80% of the contents of the house, keeping examples of furniture, paintings and tapestries that would represent the house and the family history. Even so, when we arrived, the rooms were filled with debris; we moved 60 bags of rubbish from above the ceiling of the South Drawing Room. The Library was the first room we tackled. It was painful to see books dating back to the philosopher 3rd Earl scattered all over the floor, but thankfully their condition was relatively stable. We thought our first plans were ambitious, but we have done far more than we thought possible already. We didn't think we'd be seeing the Brussels tapestries rehung in The Tapestry Room; but it is nearly ready for them again.

My personal connection with this place now is

stronger because I have made a choice to embrace it and discovered the house and its history for myself. Most people have to deal with their parents' plans. For me, it was all fresh. We are a more pragmatic generation and can get stuck in in a way my father's generation never could and we have new technologies to make it all cheaper to run. We have begun to solve the problem of heating and lighting this big house with the help of a ground source heating system which employs several kilometres of piping under the lake.

For the future we are learning from how other people have revitalised great houses. We like bringing people together in this beautiful secluded setting and we have some strong family themes to follow: philosophy, politics and social reform. I am passionate about running so we organised the first Grand Shaftesbury Run in 2013. We had 600-800 people in park this year and would like 10 times that number. In the house, we want to host weddings, parties, bespoke events, dinners and group visits though we have no plans for general public opening. We do everything ourselves. My wife Dinah is a vet and we are very much a team, and she has embraced all the uncertainties with open arms.

My children will never know life without this house and will be the first generation to grow up here since my great-grandparents' time. When I put myself in my father's shoes, I sympathise with the decisions he made. The work he undertook must have taken as much energy as we are now putting into restoring the house but at the end, the house still had no future. It is a huge satisfaction that we are now able to give it one.



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The Triumphal Arch once formed part of a route through the pleasure grounds and an eyecatcher across the lake.



The Sunken Garden (above), a creation of the 9th Earl, is now restored and looks to a long beech avenue which may one day be finished with a memorial to Nick Ashley-Cooper's brother Anthony who died unexpectedly in 2005. Centre stage will be a copy of the statue of 'Eros' from Piccadilly Circus, erected in memory of 7th Earl, whose social reform programme transformed Victorian working conditions. The statue (left) is one of 10 cast found in the V&A from the original mould.