

NOBLESSE OBLIGE

One of England's finest Palladian houses, Houghton Hall was neglected and abandoned in the 19th century, but is now a much-loved family home for the 7th Marquess and Marchioness of Cholmondeley, who have preserved its heritage while ensuring its future through a bold introduction of contemporary art. By Catriona Gray

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PHILIP SINDEN

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Houghton Hall
in Norfolk





Above: the 7th Marquess and Marchioness of Cholmondeley



Deer grazing in Houghton Hall's parkland. Above: the pediment of the house, bearing the coat of arms

AS YOU TRAVEL UP THE LONG DRIVE AND CATCH A FIRST GLIMPSE OF THE HOUSE, IT'S HARD TO SUPPRESS A GASP

For such a rural county, Norfolk has more than its share of beautiful houses. Sandringham, Anmer Hall, Holkham, Felbrigg, and fairest of them all, Houghton Hall. Home to the 7th Marquess and Marchioness of Cholmondeley, the property has seen many a gathering of the county's 'turnip toffs', and now that the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge have their country home on the neighbouring Sandringham Estate, this corner of Norfolk has become smarter than ever.

As you travel up Houghton's long, winding drive, past acres of ancient parkland cropped short by herds of snow-white fallow deer, and catch a first glimpse of the house itself, it's hard to suppress a gasp. Vast and magnificent, it is flanked by colonnades, topped by domes, and at the centre, above the imposing front door, is a gigantic coat of arms, carved in stone.

Today, Houghton is closed to visitors, but nevertheless it is a hive of activity. Grass is being mown, the gardens tended, hedges clipped. The heavy front doors are shut, but this formal entrance is rarely used by the family.

Instead, there's a separate door – formerly a servants' passageway – marked 'Private', and when you step through this, you arrive at the real heart of the house, the family quarters, where a cavernous, stone-flagged hall is lined with an assortment of gumboots and gym shoes. A small scooter and a yellow hula hoop, belonging to the couple's seven-year-old twins Alexander – known as Xan – and Oliver, lie abandoned in a corner, while two sturdy prams, presumably intended for the conveyance of one-year-old Iris, are parked next to an old-fashioned rocking horse.



Lady Cholmondeley in the Stone Hall, on a William Kent bench from 1745



An 18th-century velvet-draped four-poster bed in one of the bedrooms

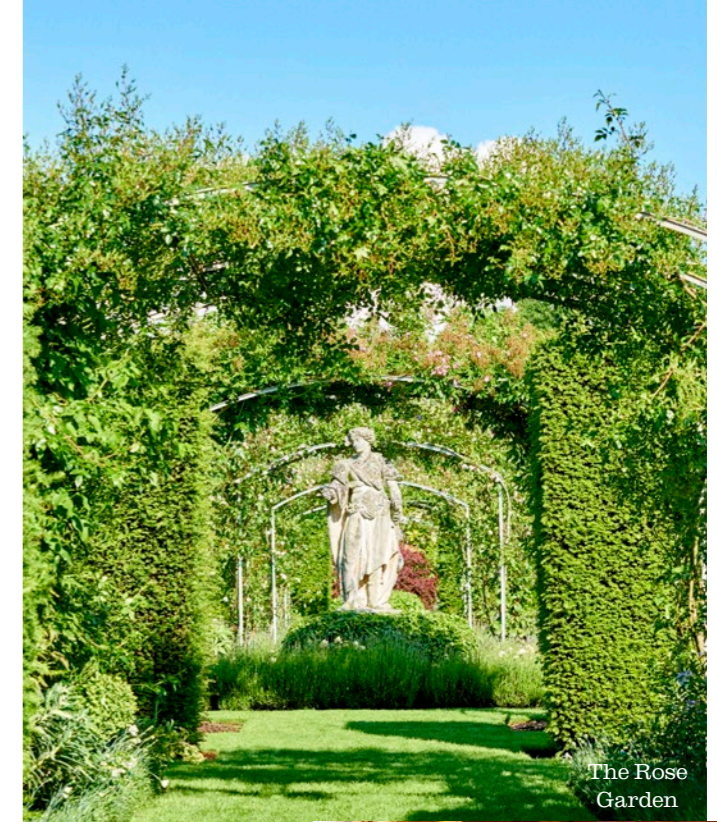
Yet all this homely clutter of family life can't impinge on the grandeur of the surroundings; the antlers hanging above the priceless furniture, the solemn tick of the grandfather clock. And the owners, as it turns out, are as imposing as their house. Formerly a model and socialite who worked as a parliamentary researcher before her marriage, the Marchioness is famed for her beauty, and it's easy to see why. Tall and slender, she is wearing a long vintage gown, her cloud of dark hair loose, her feet bare, looking like a Pre-Raphaelite muse. Her husband, standing beside her, is understated and dapper in an expensively tailored suit. The pair of them are effortlessly, impossibly elegant.

'We don't normally dress like this,' he insists. Although they are attired for the *Town & Country* shoot, he's keen for the pictures not to appear staged, to reflect the fact that they don't spend their lives floating around in eveningwear. However, as Lord Great Chamberlain, the Marquess is required to attend a bevy of formal functions, including the State Opening of Parliament at Westminster, for which he wears a scarlet and gold ceremonial uniform. The thrones used by the Queen and Prince Philip on this occasion return to Houghton for the rest of the year, and are just one example of the house's many treasures.

Most of Houghton's spectacular rooms are now open to the public, so the private quarters have been fashioned out of the less august areas of the house; the cosy kitchen where we sit, for instance, was previously a gloomy passageway. It's now a friendly, bright room, painted yellow, with a deep sofa and kelim-covered ottoman at one end, a big farmhouse table and an Aga at the other.

'We do use one or two of the formal rooms, like the Great Saloon,' says Lord Cholmondeley. 'It's quite an easy place to live in, because the private apartments are on the ground floor and top floor, and there's a lift between the two.'

'The boys learnt to use the lift terrifyingly early,' adds his wife. 'They were only toddlers, but because there were two of them, they could team up and drag a chair across, so they could reach the button.' Family life is important to her. She grew up at Wembury House in Devon, where her parents, Tim and Emma Hanbury, created an atmosphere of relaxed, star-studded conviviality – their annual cricket match regularly attracts well-known faces, from Hugh Grant to Zac Goldsmith. Meanwhile, her older sister Marina is married to Ned Lambton, the Earl



The Rose Garden

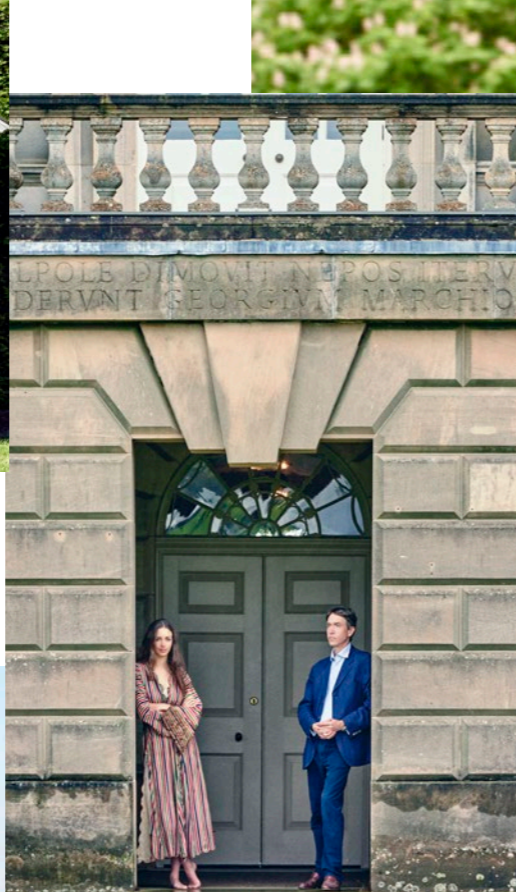
THE THRONE USED BY THE QUEEN AT THE STATE OPENING OF PARLIAMENT IS ONE OF THE MANY TREASURES



of Durham. Although the family now live in different parts of the country, they remain close, often holidaying in Cetinale, a spectacular 17th-century villa in Tuscany that was bought by Marina's father-in-law in the 1970s – subsequent visitors to the idyllic hideaway have included Mick Jagger and Jerry Hall, Tony Blair, and Kate Moss.

The Cholmondeleys make weekly visits to London, but for the most part, they can be found at Houghton, which they have turned into a cheerful family home. 'London's not easy when you've got children with a lot of energy,' says Lady Cholmondeley. 'Before they could speak, the twins were up to no good. I remember when they took some huge bags of flour and poured them all over the hallway because they wanted to see "snow" inside. I thought the ceiling had collapsed!' 'It wasn't just flour,' her husband remembers. 'They covered the floor with coffee too, because they said it looked like snow on mud. It was much stricter here when I was growing up. You were only allowed downstairs at certain times.'

Having spent his childhood at Houghton, he is keen to



Left: mahogany bookcases in the library. Right: the couple outside the East Front. Below: *Full Moon Circle* by Richard Long



Lady Cholmondeley in the Rose Garden

Below, from left: the greenhouse. Hand-painted chinoiserie wallpaper and a bed with embroidered Chinese drapery



The Walled Garden. Opposite, left: *Scholar Rock* by Zhan Wang



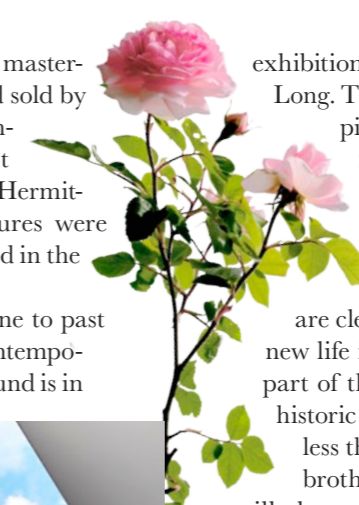
pass on his deep knowledge of its history to his sons. 'It's important to get a feeling for the house from a young age,' he says. In this he has succeeded: the twins arrive back from their local school, and in a whirlwind of energy, they're immediately keen to volunteer information about their home – and its original owner, Robert Walpole. 'He needed a big fat horse, because he was a big fat Prime Minister,' says Xan, hovering joyfully next to his mother. 'He weighed 20 stone.'

The twins are direct descendants of Walpole, generally regarded as Britain's first de facto prime minister, who commissioned Colen Campbell and James Gibbs, two of the finest architects of the day, to design the Palladian mansion as a manifestation of his power and wealth, and employed William Kent to provide the lavish interiors. Lord Cholmondeley inherited the title and property in 1990, shortly before his 30th birthday. Since then, he has reinstated a number of 18th-century features, such as the avenues of pleached limes, the brick ha-ha and the formal walled garden to the south-west of the stables. The latter was planted in memory of his grandmother, Sybil Sassoon – a distinguished heiress and member of the Rothschild dynasty – who was instrumental in restoring the house to its Georgian glory when she arrived in the 1920s.

He has also made Houghton a showcase for art – he helped facilitate the temporary return, in 2010, of 75 European masterpieces, originally collected by Walpole and sold by his financially straitened grandson to Catherine the Great to furnish her palaces in St Petersburg. A document discovered in the Hermitage Museum describing where the pictures were originally hung enabled them to be replaced in the same spots.

However, the house is not merely a shrine to past masters – it also celebrates and exhibits contemporary works. Lord Cholmondeley's background is in

THE HOUSE IS NOT MERELY A SHRINE TO PAST MASTERS – AN EXHIBITION OF RICHARD LONG SCULPTURES HAS JUST OPENED



Skyspace Seldom Seen by James Turrell

HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY AMY BRANDON, USING BOBBI BROWN AND L'OREAL PROFESSIONNEL. STYLIST'S ASSISTANT: TILLY WHEATING



Lady Cholmondeley wears her own Erdem dress

film-making and he has a particular interest in fostering creativity. A light installation by the American artist James Turrell is among the recent works that stand in the grounds, and the estate has just opened a major exhibition honouring the British sculptor Richard Long. Throughout the summer, dozens of the artist's pieces can be seen dotted about, created using natural materials such as local flint and tree stumps taken from the parkland.

Lady Cholmondeley is as interested in art as her spouse, and although there are 24 years between them, the two are clearly kindred spirits, dedicated to breathing new life into a country house that spent the greater part of the 19th century empty. As well as being a historic monument, it is now a lively home. Doubtless the little Lady Iris will be joining in with her brothers' merriment before long, but for now she still sleeps peacefully in her pram, in the midst of the magnificent estate that has sheltered this family for so many generations. □

'Earth Sky: Richard Long at Houghton' (www.houghtonhall.com) is on until 26 October.