

Photography by *Julian Broad*

Heavenly Houghton

With its bravura interiors and glorious setting, it's no wonder fashion photographers, stylists and artists flock to spend time at the Palladian mansion. *Harriet Quick* gets a very private tour of the ultimate "dream house"



Left: *The Crate of Air*, 2018, by Sean Scully, in front of Houghton Hall in Norfolk. Right: David Chalmondeley and his wife Rose in the Yellow Drawing Room





Always look up” is the aesthete’s adage when seeking out architectural marvels. Gaze upwards in the double-height Stone Hall at Houghton and you will be rewarded with a spectacular pale blue-and-white plasterwork ceiling featuring the Walpole arms surrounded by a deep cove of pudgy putti. “They are all putti boys, save one girl,” says David Cholmondeley, the 7th Marquess of Cholmondeley of the frolicsome frieze. The putti and ceiling are the work of the Artari brothers, the leading stuccodores of the era, who travelled from Italy by horse and boat in the early 1720s to begin the Stone Hall masterplan for Sir Robert Walpole, the first de facto British prime minister. “The brothers must have been quite an exotic spectacle in the Norfolk countryside,” smiles Cholmondeley.

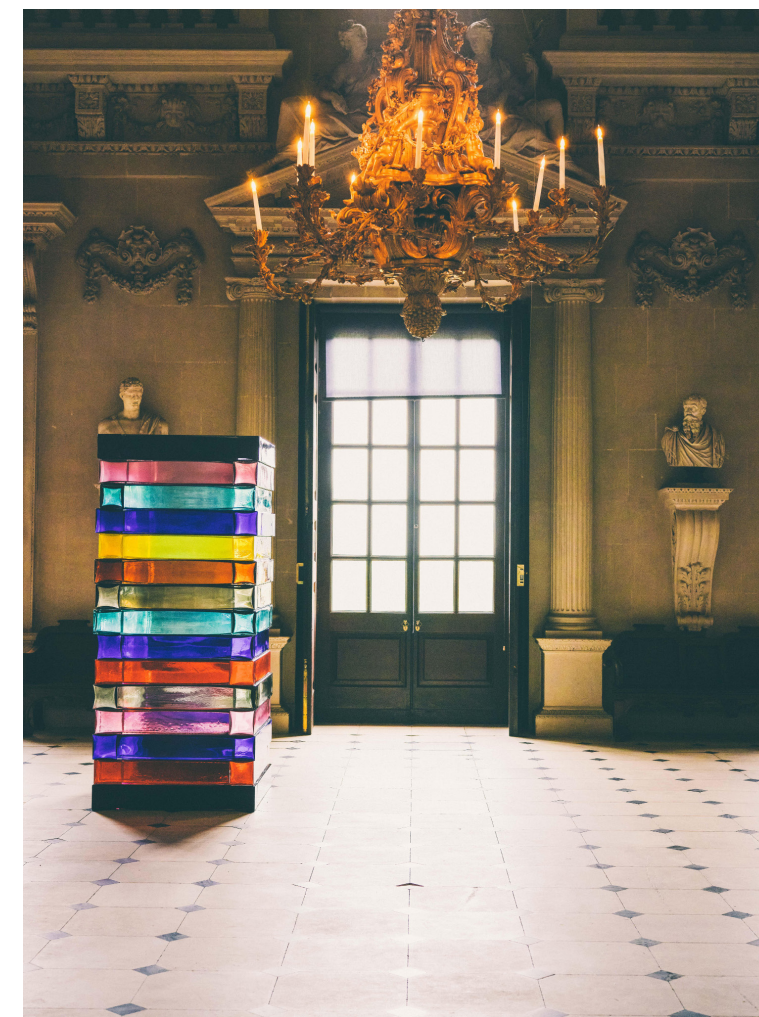
With its black diamond-patterned flagstone floor, fireplaces, niches, pediments and busts by Flemish sculptor John Michael Rysbrack (including Sir Robert Walpole as a Roman in a toga), the Stone Hall would have framed Walpole’s stature, cultural knowledge and worldly vision. It now boasts a newly installed rainbow-coloured geometric glass sculpture by Sean Scully, one highlight in the estate’s ongoing exhibition of the Irish-American artist’s work.

The hall is a peach in the ambitious scheme for Houghton Hall developed by architect James Gibbs and built by Thomas Ripley in the then deeply fashionable Anglo-Palladian style. This was a state-of-the-art residence: Walpole also contracted William Kent, the most sought-after architect of the day – and lavished funds on decorative splendour crafted by an army of European artisans and artists. Given he wasn’t aristocracy, his taste-setting bravado was spectacular. “Contemporaries might have thought of it in bad taste, nouveau perhaps – but Walpole was a show-off, not just with money but his great erudition as a scholar,” says Cholmondeley who inherited the estate in 1990.

Today, Houghton Hall, which is set in expansive parkland and located half an hour from King’s Lynn, appears as a gracious tribute to the enduring appeal of Georgian architecture and English landscape gardening. Inside, the state rooms (which are open to visitors) are a riot of Kent’s decorative opulence. A jovial Yorkshireman, the polymath also designed furniture and picture frames, envisioning the house as a complete whole. It is also a real home to Cholmondeley, his wife, Rose (née Hanbury), and their three children. [Oliver, the younger twin, ditched his T-shirt and skate sneakers for more stately attire when serving as a Page of Honour at the King’s coronation. The Marquess himself will also take on a new role as one of the King’s Lords in Waiting.](#) “I’m really not sure what it will entail,” he offers politely, hinting at the meaning of “in Waiting”.

Over the years the family has welcomed many guests to the estate, including Kate Moss. “I met David when I was 19, and we started hanging out in Paris. He’s a great friend. We would go on holiday to Tuscany – he just knew all these interesting people and I’d be along for the ride. I hadn’t been to his house and then one day I was like, ‘I have to get out of London,’ and he invited me to Houghton,” says the model. “I knew he had a country house, but I didn’t know it was a stately home. When I arrived I was just like: ‘Did I die?’ I was sitting on the lawn with peacocks and white deer, in a Galliano dress, all dishevelled,” laughs Moss.

There are many facets to Houghton that slide through the centuries and bear the trace of families who have lived there. Piping, electricity and an internal phone system were all revamped by Sybil Sassoon and her husband George, the 5th Marquess of Cholmondeley.



Left: *Glass Stack*, 2020, by Sean Scully in the Stone Hall. Below: the bathroom



“I DIDN’T KNOW IT WAS A STATELY HOME. WHEN I ARRIVED I WAS JUST LIKE: ‘DID I DIE?’”



Left: *Wall Landline Uranus*, 2022, by Sean Scully, hanging in the Saloon. Right: a marble fireplace by John Michael Rysbrack in the Marble Parlour

[CA] Note, this will take place 6 May, issue comes out 13 May, but f/c says fair observation/prediction



Far left: one of the bedrooms. Left: the Great Staircase contains a bronze copy of the Borghese Gladiator discovered in 1611. Below left: the vaulted ceilings of the Lower Hall

His grandparents had already tackled the extensive dry rot and a plague of deathwatch beetles that threatened to munch through the priceless carpets, silk, wall coverings and tapestries that decorate the formal state rooms. Thanks to careful preservation, the brilliant opulent colours of the velvet, brocade silk jacquard wall coverings and handpainted chinoiserie wallpapers remain intact. The rooms are veiled in sheets of plastic, with shutters firmly closed as Houghton Hall gets a big dust-down before its annual spring reopening.

Visiting these formal rooms, which include a magnificent marble parlour devoted to Bacchus (created by Gibbs and developed by William Kent) and sumptuous thematic bedchambers, is a sensory overload. As a host of dignitaries, Walpole felt obliged to maintain and refresh the decorative schemes. The investment and costs were sky-high, with Walpole destroying his receipts and leaving a mountain of unpaid bills when he died. By complete aesthetic contrast, Cholmondeley turned a large, fire-damaged room in the north wing (that once served as a gym for his sports-fanatic grandfather) into streamlined, art deco-inspired private living quarters. On marrying, he intended to live in it with Hanbury, but the family outgrew the space, which now serves as a guest house.

The two-storey, two-bedroom apartment, clad in polished, ginger-hued maple wood has all the chic of a sleek 1920s cruise liner. It is decorated with his grandmother's art deco pieces (from their London house) and collectables including the couple's own deco-infused Houghton Collection, established in 2002. Every surface gleams with light bouncing off the glass, mirrors and marble. The walls are hung with Cholmondeley's collection of Scandinavian art, while the open kitchen overlooks a walled garden with a swimming pool. "We are always here in the summer: it is so private," says Hanbury.

The variety of decorative styles at Houghton offers up a cornucopia that spans the centuries. But rather than being preserved in aspic, Houghton Hall has the feel that it is evolving, and lived in. The pair still find surprises, such as an untouched box of Sunlight soaps. Some are unwelcome – like a forgotten wardrobe full of quivering, moth-infested fur coats.

Annual art installations that spill through the grounds and the house keep visitors coming back to see Houghton from a new perspective. Cholmondeley began his sculpture collection inspired by a visit to a James Turrell show in Vienna. He got to know the gallerist and invited Turrell to create an on-site piece. Initial plans for an underground bunker (too costly) were scrapped in favour of an above-ground, wood-clad lightroom perched on stilts that is accessed via a meandering hedge-lined path in a wilderness area of the garden.

Over the years, fantastic site-specific works have been added, including a Richard Long slate circle above the ha-ha and a Rachel Whiteread concrete shed. The works provide (much like Walpole's 18th-century follies once did) a discovery journey through the grounds where hundreds of deer roam freely through the parkland. At this year's show, visitors will be greeted by a monolithic Sean Scully stone sculpture that seems to have emerged from an early civilisation. "I wanted to do something for our times," says Cholmondeley of his commitment to art. He has Moss's approval: "It's a great place," says Moss, who has continued to visit ever since that first escape. "I'm godmother to David's daughter Iris. And I just love that house. I love it. I love him. I love him and Rose. It's just a dream, isn't it? It's a dream house." ■HTS

Sean Scully at Houghton Hall – *Smaller Than the Sky* runs at Houghton Hall until 29 October, houghtonhall.com

"YOU COULD SENSE THAT IT HAS BEEN WELL LIVED-IN AND LOVED"

certain times and we had our own children's dining room. The house was opened to the public in 1975, so back then being able to be in all the private and state rooms was a treat," he recalls. "My grandmother was brilliant about educating you about the house, the mythological stories in the tapestries, the paintings and sculptures – she knew how to get your interest as a child. I remember the smells of old materials and you were immersed in this sense of history. My other grandmother lived in a rambling rectory near the coastline so we would have three weeks here and three weeks there, swimming and playing in the dunes. Twenty minutes by car but a different world away."

The weight of history – particularly when pertaining to the first prime minister of Great Britain who served under both George I and II – can be heavy going, and setting up your family life in a historic house is challenging, intimidating even. Hanbury knows this well: "I was startled by the house on my first visit – it is so beautiful. I suppose I have learnt a lot through living here and through David who is so knowledgeable," she says. Their first projects as a couple included creating a family kitchen from a hallway area, where everyone can relax on big sofas, and restoring the nursery (housed in the cupola) as bedrooms for the children. A gated lift (installed in the 1920s) that rises up through the stairwell proved a godsend for trundling babies up and down. "The house never felt spooky – you could sense that it has been well lived-in and loved," Hanbury explains. Earlier projects included the planting of a formal walled garden, along with original cross-alleys shown on a map from the 1720s. The conversion of the stable block into a gallery space is also on the cards.

Over the years, some of the art and artefacts have been sold to make way for a new chapter in the home's story. "It was very fine but did not really go and I wanted to get the house back to what Walpole wanted," says Cholmondeley, who held a big sale of Houghton Hall furniture and artefacts in 1994 to raise money for taxes and to establish an endowment for the house. There was also the mammoth job of new plumbing and electricity. The sale of Holbein's *A Lady with a Squirrel and a Starling* to the National Gallery boosted restoration funds. "These are hard decisions but you have to make sacrifices, as many families have had to, in order to keep up these houses. Once done, I was able to concentrate on the house and get rooms in order," he says.



Plastic sheeting covers the furniture ahead of its annual spring reopening

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Behind the scenes at Houghton Hall – the new estate of the art

With its bravura interiors and glorious setting, it’s no wonder fashion photographers, stylists and artists flock to spend time at the Palladian mansion

BYLINE: Harriet Quick. Photography by Julian Broad

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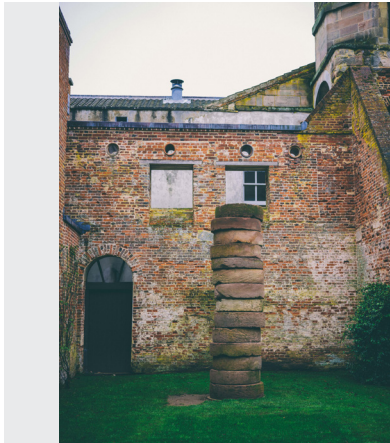
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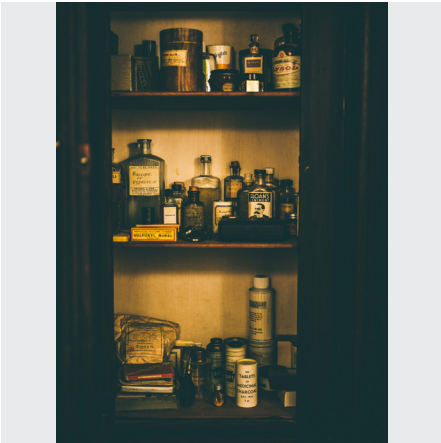
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Brown Miller’s Stack, 2023, by Sean Scully

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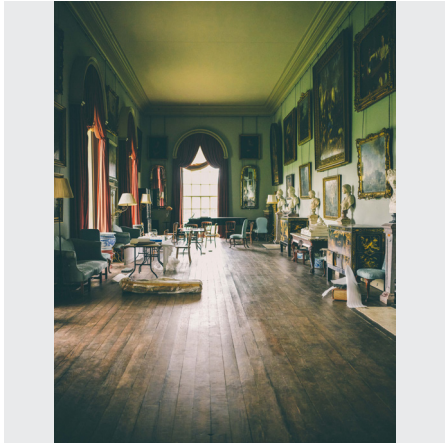
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The model soldier collection

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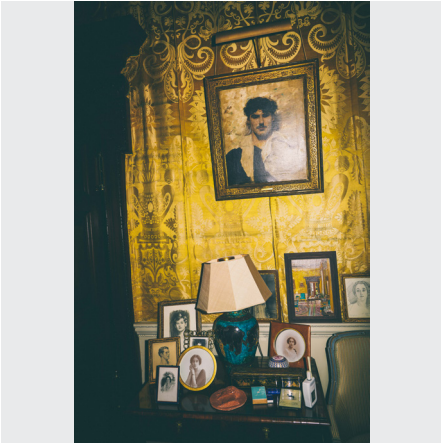
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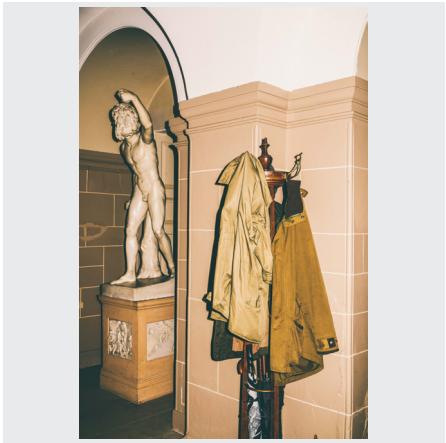
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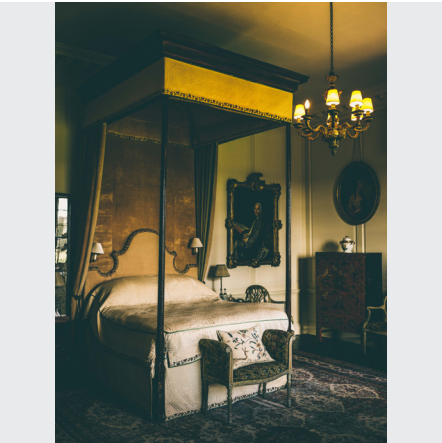
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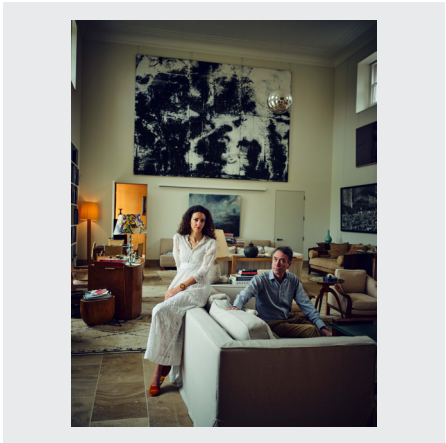
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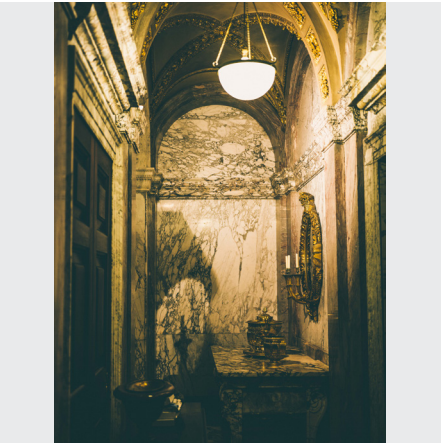
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David and Rose Cholmondeley in the Modern Apartment

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