

# Augmenting a masterpiece

*Houghton Hall, Norfolk*  
*The seat of the Marquess of Cholmondeley*

The environs and interiors of one of England's most celebrated country houses are undergoing an exciting revival. Marcus Binney reports on this remarkable undertaking

Photographs by Will Pryce





Fig 1 previous pages: The east entrance front with its stone domes, newly restored. In the foreground is Richard Long's *Full Moon Circle*.  
 ↑ Fig 2 above: Georgian side table once owned by Sir Philip Sassoon flanked by Ancient Roman busts with Burne-Jones's *Sleeping Knights* above

SIR ROBERT WALPOLE, Britain's first Prime Minister, would look down approvingly on his great house and estate in Norfolk as it stands today (Fig 1). It is true that the acreage of its surrounding estate has shrunk from 14,000 to 4,000, and that his great picture collection, sold to Catherine the Great of Russia, can never grace the walls again. Yet since the house reopened after a major overhaul 16 years ago, Houghton has witnessed a sustained and creative revival under the direction of David Cholmondeley, the present 7th Marquess, who succeeded his father in 1990.

The *tout ensemble* of his achievement is best seen in a bird's-eye view from the top of the roof (Fig 4), looking over the statue of Justice down the great avenue that stretches 1¾ miles to the west and strides across a public road invisible in the distance. The avenue now begins with rows of pleached limes, two deep on each side, stepped in perfectly twice to align with the cut through the distant woodland. The limes are planted as they are shown on an estate plan of 1720 by Thomas Badeslade. The ha-has have also recently been excavated and rebuilt, reinforcing the formal lines of the landscape.

Visitors can relish the thrill of this

prospect as they emerge from the saloon to stand at the top of the immensely grand stone steps rebuilt by Sybil, widow of the 5th Marquess, in 1973. From there, it is also possible to glimpse, between the main house and its flanking wings, the north and south avenues.

The past four years have seen a major increase in the size of the park. The whole western park had been ploughed during the Second World War, but is now back to pasture with English Longhorn cattle and Norfolk horn sheep, and on the eastern side, the park is still grazed by the famous herd of white fallow deer.

Among Lord Cholmondeley's most exciting introductions is a series of sculptural installations, with a new one set up most years. Two of the most remarkable are by

the Californian James Turrell. One is a light sculpture, which is set in the Palladian water tower built in 1731–33 to designs by Lord Pembroke, with loggias inset on two sides. You enter the ground-floor chamber of the water tower and feel your way, in utter darkness, towards an inner chamber. As your eyes adjust to the light, the faintest trace of walls and floor becomes visible. There, as you wait, silent and motionless, a faint rectangular panel of pink light becomes steadily more apparent in front of you. By degrees, the panel glows more, not because the light is growing stronger, but because your eyes are able to see more in the dark. Finally, when your night vision has stabilised, you stand up and walk hesitantly towards what looks like a giant panel of coloured glass. But

### The remarkable domes of Houghton

Houghton is given a distinctive outline among England's country houses by the four domes that crown its corner turrets. The domes are evidently inspired by contemporary Baroque palace and church designs on the Continent. Each possesses a weather vane, which are variously dated between 1725 to 1729. In the course of recent restoration work, the domes have been repointed and the vanes gilded. The domes are not solid, but enclose large, vaulted rooms.



↑ Fig 3: The anteroom has been rehung in a flowered blue silk from Bennison. The picture gallery beyond has been rehung with recent acquisitions and Old Masters that had been in store, such as a Wootton found in the attic and a Marco Palmezzano from Compton Wynyates

when you stretch out your hand to touch it, there is nothing there, only a void.

Mr Turrell's second installation, *Sky-space* (Fig 8), is a substantial square pavilion approached by a ramp winding round each of its four sides. Lord Cholmondeley describes it as a Modernist tree house raised on stilts. Inside, it is open to the sky—a distant echo of the Pantheon in Rome or the great staircase designed by

Lutyens for Viceroy's House in New Delhi.

The benches, ranged around the four walls, tilt back to encourage you to look at the sky. It is like a three-dimensional painting by the Belgian Surrealist artist Magritte. The sky, because it is framed (Fig 9), becomes much more intense in colour, and, when wispy clouds scud across it, becomes a motion picture. 'It's best at dawn and dusk,' believes Lord Cholmondeley.

Mr Turrell's first idea had been to create a sunken chamber set in a slight hillock, but that could have been cold and dank. By elevating the box, he shuts out the surrounding trees, presenting a completely abstract image of colour and light. Interestingly, birds don't fly in.

The artist Anya Gallaccio likes to work with natural materials. In the adjoining wilderness garden, inspired by Sybil Cholmondeley's





**Fig 4 previous pages:** Justice with her gilded scales surveys the newly planted pleached-lime avenues framing the great vista to the west of the house. The planting continues on the far side on public road—in all, extending for 1¼ miles. **Fig 5 above:** Stephen Cox's *Interior Space*, an abstract temple inspired by Egyptian tombs formed of polished slabs of breccia marble from Hammermat in Egypt

handwriting, she has planted a beech hedge like a maze in the form of her signature.

Stephen Cox's *Interior Space* (Fig 5) is set in woodland and inspired by the Serapeum, the tombs of the Apis bulls at Sakara near Cairo. He has used the dark, seaweed-coloured Fouakir breccia, flecked with bright multicoloured pebbles. It is quarried in the Wadi Hammamat, in the desert between Kuft, on the Nile, and Kousir, on the coast of the Red Sea.

The walls of the 13ft-long sculpture are cut from a single block. The slabs are 4in thick, and the rough, six-ton lids are the natural crust of the block that were once the desert floor. 'These Egyptian quarries are the most ancient for decorative stone in the world. This is evident from 4,500-year-old graffiti dating from Predynastic and Pharaonic times,' says Mr Cox. Part of the illusion is that the sculpture at first looks like solid rock, with the narrowest of clefts for an entrance. In fact, the slabs are held together by stainless-steel bolts concealed

beneath virtually invisible caps. The faces are interrupted by the natural quartz vein that shot through the block and has been arranged to form a perspectival pathway framing the door.

The walled garden has been handsomely planted by Lord Cholmondeley and his head gardener, Paul Underwood, with giant wave hedges, and has recently been delightfully embellished by Julian and Isabel Bannerman (May 13, COUNTRY LIFE). The focal point is a primitive temple with tree-trunk columns and a trophy of Houghton antlers in the pediment. There is also a timber structure that looks like an octagonal aviary—it is, in fact, a fruit cage designed to keep the birds out rather than in.

This year's sculptural addition has been made to a compartment in the walled garden: the flame fountain by the Danish artist Jeppe Hein. A puff of gas is ignited and born aloft in a rising jet of water. As the jet gets taller, it becomes ever more tremulous. Then it suddenly tumbles, extinguishing the flame so

that the whole process can begin again.

Richard Long's *Full Moon Circle* (Fig 1) consists of a large circle formed of shards of black slate. Working with three Houghton woodsmen handing him the slates, Mr Long completed the installation in a day. Below, a plastic membrane stops weeds growing through the stones. Because of their colour, the slates absorb the sun's warmth, and, in cold weather, the deer like to sit on them.

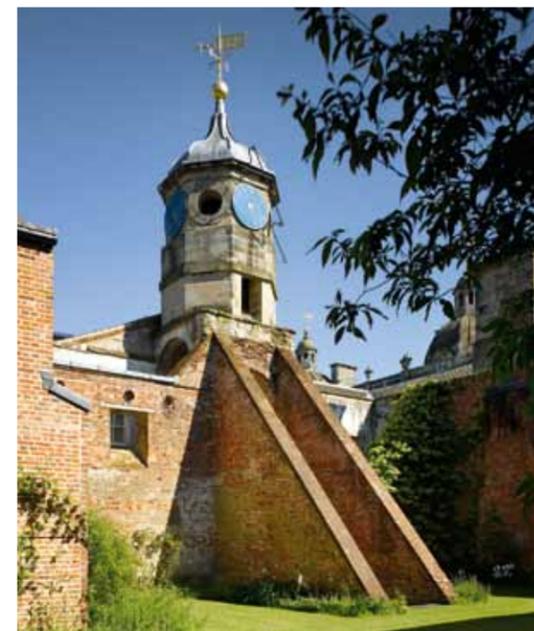
The house itself presented major challenges. The cupolas at each corner of the main block look hewn from solid stone in best Roman Baroque manner. Each has been carefully repointed and its finial restored. The cupola tower with its enamelled sundials over the north wing has also been repaired (Fig 7). The only kiln large enough for the new sundial faces was in Mexico.

Inside the house, Lord Cholmondeley has arranged the contents to lay greater emphasis on the age of Sir Robert Walpole. The State Rooms are now shown to thrilling advantage. Visitors enter the long vaulted and pillared



**Fig 6 above:** The Tapestry Dressing Room, with a section of the Mortlake tapestry woven with five royal portraits. Visible here are James I, Anne of Denmark and Charles I. All the images are copied from important portraits; the last, for example, is taken from Van Dyck's *Great Piece*. The dynastic imagery of the tapestry may suggest that it was created for a royal patron and was designed to hang in a particular place or to be displayed on a certain occasion.

**Fig 7 below:** The restored cupola and sundial, with raking buttresses inserted after a fire destroyed the laundry and brewery.



## 'Houghton has witnessed a sustained and creative revival, including a continuing series of sculptural installations'

ground-floor hall and ascend the great stair dominated by Le Sueur's dramatic bronze version of the antique Borghese Gladiator. This is a dark space wrapped around with William Kent's grisaille murals.

The spectacular double-height Stone Hall is filled with busts, reliefs and Classical vases. The harmony of the colours is breathtaking, here and in every other room. In the Marble Parlour or dining room, the grapes on the newly reinstated mirrors match those that festoon the marble chimneypiece, and the ceiling. The gorgeous bed hangings in the embroidered bedchamber, complete with Walpole's Order of the Garter, are set off by Brussels tapestries and a radiant painted ceiling. Beyond, the Tapestry Dressing Room is hung with one Mortlake tapestry with portraits of James I and Charles I and their queens, and Christian IV of Denmark (Fig 6).

These tapestries and the main state beds were transferred to the V&A as part of a tax settlement and, thanks to superlative conservation treatment by the Textile Conservation Centre at Blickling Hall, have regained much of their lost brilliance. Subtle new lighting by Bickerdike Allen and Partners, which worked wonders at Waddesdon Manor, further enhances the effect.

The Green Velvet Bedchamber is dominated by Kent's soaring state bed with vast inset Venus shell. Everywhere, dazzling lustre is added by the gilding of cornices and ceilings and the carved elements of oak doors and window shutters. In the White Drawing Room, the delicate sheen on the brocaded silk hangings, English versions of a Louis-Seize pattern, is set off by the floral tapestry on chairs and a richly coloured 17th-century Isfahan carpet. The climax is the Saloon, ablaze with crimson velvet hangings and upholstery.

Recently, Lord Cholmondeley has reinstated the former orangery as a picture gallery. Sir Robert Walpole first transformed this space into a gallery when he moved out of Downing Street and brought his paintings to Norfolk. The gaps left here by the sale of his collection to Russia were partly filled by Horace Walpole, who sent paintings from Strawberry Hill once he knew Lord Cholmondeley had won his lawsuit against the Walpoles of Wolterton Hall, who were disputing the succession. The gallery also contains handsome sculptures, includ- ➤



↑ Fig 8 above: James Turrell's *Skyspace*, a Modernist tree house raised on stilts and reached by ramps. ↓ Fig 9 below: Abstract picture of the sky, framed by an oculus in the roof

ing Locatelli busts of Roman gods and a reclining Venus also by Locatelli. Fabrics, curtains and colours were chosen with advice from the late John Cornforth of *COUNTRY LIFE* and Tom Helme.

The gallery is approached through an ante-room (*Fig 3*) hung with a pretty blue floral silk from Bennison. The large, arched windows of the gallery cast a glowing light on the double-banked pictures, which include a newly acquired Burne-Jones of sleeping knights, part of his Briar Wood series (*Fig 2*). This is the first version of one of the group now hanging at Buscot. Other paintings include a Wootton found in the attic and a Marco Palmazzano from Compton Wynyates.

Previously, the gallery served as a museum for the 6th Marquess's remarkable collection of model soldiers and battle tableaux. These are now handsomely displayed in the stables.

Every recent year has brought fresh reasons to revisit Houghton and, with the news of Lord Cholmondeley's forthcoming marriage to Rose Hanbury, the excitements look set to continue. 🐦

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