GREAT ENGLISH INTERIORS

DAVID MLINARIC AND DERRY MOORE

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A contemporary watercolour of the Lower Library at Chatsworth (pages 59–71), showing the Regency scheme before the room's redecoration in the 19th century by John Gregory Crace.

INTRODUCTION

The White Rabbit put on his spectacles. 'Where shall I begin, please your Majesty?' he asked.
'Begin at the beginning,' The King said gravely, 'and go on till you come to the end: then stop.'
– LEWIS CARROLL, ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND, 1865

Like all the best tales, the story of interior design and decoration in England is long and winding. It has many chapters and a cast of riveting characters, and demands a canny narrator. David Mlinaric is just that person. He has been creating beautiful rooms in historic interiors for more than half a century, and, like the king in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, has been asked by plenty of White Rabbits, 'Where shall I begin?' This book is his answer. While these buildings and the rooms within them may be lavish, vast and of another era, they are also ingenious, timeless and packed with inspiration. Moreover, they are repositories for terrific stories.

Derry Moore's photographs showcase the glorious potential of architecture and decoration across the centuries, because for as long as David has been conjuring magnificent rooms, Derry has been capturing them on camera. They are a formidable pair who share a well-honed sense of what looks good where; David's somewhat ascetic tastes counter Derry's penchant for more luscious things. They have curated this book accordingly and recorded these places before the inevitable day when they change beyond recognition. David and Derry both possess an artist's eye, boundless curiosity and a deep-rooted historical knowledge. These are skills that have served them well throughout long careers, but perhaps most important of all is a shared ability to grasp the character of a building and immediately understand its previous life and its potential. As David says, 'A journey into the past can help make sense of the present.'

David was born to an English mother and a Slovenian father, and his exacting approach to design, decoration and architecture is that of a self-confessed outsider. As the architectural historian John Cornforth wrote, 'He has always looked at the English tradition with the appreciation of detachment.' In the 1950s David attended Downside, the Roman Catholic boarding school in Somerset. He and a handful of friends were allowed to skip games lessons in favour of art, and would cycle through the surrounding countryside in search of beautiful places. Family holidays were spent by the sea where he shunned buckets, spades and sandcastles in favour of studying the houses that lined the shore. Despite his headmaster's insistence that 'interior decoration' was not 'a real profession', and that there was room for only about three people to do it in London, he advised him to attend an architectural school. So, off David went to The Bartlett School of Architecture, part of University College London, and in doing so he became one of the few practitioners of his generation to be formally trained. 'I gave the impression of having a frivolous attitude because I didn't want to be brought down by responsibility, but really, underneath it all, I was deadly serious,' he says. 'Good jobs and interesting people tumbled into my orbit from day one, and I felt encouraged by that.'

One particularly interesting person who tumbled into David's orbit and – as this book will attest – never tumbled back out of it was Derry. In the late 1960s Derry was commissioned by *Vogue* to photograph David's dining room in Tite Street, and so began more than 50 years of collaboration, with Derry photographing countless projects by David, including all his own houses. Derry studied painting at Oskar Kokoschka's School of Seeing in Salzburg (Die Schule des Sehens), which, he says, 'opened my eyes', but it was while working with David that he 'learned how rooms should look'. In the years since beginning his career as a professional photographer, he has documented some of the most extraordinary buildings on the planet – a few of which feature in this book.

Just as Lewis Carroll's king suggests, *Great English Interiors* begins at the beginning – or, at least, at the beginning of the end of fortification: the fifteenth century. Firstly, the reader comes to Haddon Hall, home in the sixteenth century of Dorothy Vernon, who, trussed up in her ballgown, escaped into the night to elope with her lover. Skip forward a little and we find Knole, sensitively renovated by Thomas Sackville and later described by the architectural conservationist James Lees-Milne as 'having a perennially romantic history and seeming to be immortal'. Hatfield House was home to the man who had thwarted the Gunpowder Plot. There was Sir Robert Walpole, who built Houghton Hall, his vast Palladian masterpiece – for how else could he demonstrate his wealth and power? And, later still, the 'Bachelor' 6th Duke of Devonshire, so enamoured by his inheritance, Chatsworth, that he added and added to it with increasingly grandiose schemes; the house and its estate became his life's work. Later, Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild had the confidence, verging on audacity, to create a French chateau in Buckinghamshire; he named it Waddesdon Manor and held fabulously extravagant house parties there. Less than a century later, Nancy Lancaster fastidiously oversaw the mixing of the perfect glaze by John Fowler for her Yellow Drawing Room in Mayfair; it remains one of London's best-known interiors of its date. Meanwhile, the Bloomsbury Group were liberally daubing their distinctive brand of bohemia on the walls of Charleston, their Sussex home.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of the best rooms in England, or indeed of the best architects and decorators, and I suspect the selection process was a painful one for both David and Derry. However, every interior featured in this book has influenced the pair in some capacity, and by default will have had an impact on those of us who have looked to David and Derry for inspiration over the last half-century. Put simply, there are some things that work and some things that do not, and these interiors are fine examples of the former. It is a rarity for someone to create a room that is entirely different from those that came before; in fact, it is almost impossible. But in the scarce instances where this does happen and the room in question is beautifully designed, they tend to stand the test of time.

While David is the first to concede that his children's birthdays and the names of close acquaintances slip his mind with frustrating ease, his memory for architectural detail is impeccable. Who else would think to compare the fan vaulting at Heveningham Hall with the sculpted columns at the Apollo Victoria Theatre? As Neil MacGregor, former director of the National Gallery, astutely observed, 'Everyone comes to the gallery to look at the pictures. Everyone except David – he's looking at the cornices.' And really, that's what it all boils down to. Just as a writer takes notes and an artist draws, David and Derry look and look and look again.

Great English Interiors is their invitation to the reader to do just that: to look at the houses and buildings that have endured over the centuries and shaped a nation's sense of style. Each one is a physical record of not just history and tradition, but also the beliefs and aspirations of the people who designed, commissioned and lived in it. This book is not concerned with decoration trends; as David says, 'They might brighten up a room, but eventually they'll disappear in the quicksand.' These interiors are unified by their extraordinary quality, innate Englishness and, in many cases, staying power.

So, what next? 'More architectural interiors', says David. Larger budgets are enabling architecture to take the lead over decoration, since people aren't simply applying a lick of paint and adding a new bookcase, they are digging down, building out and opening up. They are taking their lead from commercial spaces, such as Norman Foster's Apple Store on Regent Street, John Pawson's Design Museum and Kings Place by Dixon Jones, all in London. In fact, it is wholly conceivable that these architectural heavyweights sought inspiration from the bricks and mortar illustrated in the pages ahead.

The interiors in this book span the gamut of design and decoration, from austere to frivolous, jam-packed to pared-back, ornate to streamlined, but a sense of spirit unifies them. There is plenty here to inspire, for surely there can be no greater pleasure for the curious soul than stepping – if only for a moment – into an unknown room.

Emily Tobin, Arts Editor,* House & Garden *magazine

Duncan Grant in the studio at Charleston, Sussex (pages 192–95), in 1971.

FIFTEENTH CENTURY

The End of Fortification

The story of domestic interiors in England starts in the fifteenth century. Until this time houses, as well as castles, were built with the primary purpose of withstanding sieges. The medieval ethos was one of security, not comfort. There were moats, portcullises and crenellations, but with the invention of gunpowder and the cannon such precautions became obsolete and signs of fortification became decorative rather than practical.

Although very few secular and domestic buildings survive from this period, England is unparalleled when it comes to medieval parish churches. These buildings pre-date the division of western Christianity and contain within them an entire social and architectural history. Most are relatively unaltered, and very beautiful. They appeal to our sense of the picturesque, which in England can be more powerful than the academic approach.

Haddon Hall (pages 14–25). The chapel, originally built in the 12th and 13th centuries. The view on entering from the courtyard shows part of the Gothic arcade, a Norman pillar and font, a Jacobean font cover and part of the fresco secco.

HADDON HALL

DERBYSHIRE

Genesis of the Private House in England

Haddon hall is one of few English houses to survive in near original condition from the late Middle Ages. As anyone who lived through the second half of the twentieth century will know, the hand of the destroyer has been as active in times of peace as in times of war. The house owes its survival and its retained character to four key facts. The first is neglect: between 1700 and 1920 no one lived at Haddon; the roof was kept intact and the windows kept firm, but it was without occupants for more than 200 years. Since the house was not the family's primary residence, they could afford to leave it untouched. The second is religion: the chapel at Haddon, which was primarily built in the early fifteenth century (although it incorporates twelfth- and fourteenth-century elements and a Norman font and column), was and still is the consecrated, and therefore sacred, parish church at Nether Haddon (the village has since gone). The third is the fact that the house and estate have never been sold; they have passed from one owner to another by marriage or inheritance since the twelfth century. Finally, Haddon survived because it was classified by John, Earl of Mortayne (later King John I), in the 1180s as a fortified house, not a castle. It was therefore never garrisoned, and avoided destruction during the Wars of the Roses and the Civil War.

The earliest record of a house at Haddon is in 1180, when a marriage settlement brought it to the Vernon family. The last heiress, Dorothy Vernon, married Sir John Manners after (allegedly) eloping with him in 1563. The story goes that Dorothy fled a party celebrating the engagement of her sister Margaret; still wearing her ballgown she slipped into the night and ran through the garden, over a packhorse bridge to where Sir John Manners waited for her. If indeed this tale is true (most suspect it of being a nineteenth-century yarn), the couple were soon reconciled with Dorothy's father, Sir George, because they inherited the estate upon his death. Haddon has remained in the Manners family ever since. Sir John and Dorothy built the Long Gallery and the early Renaissance terraced garden.

The house has been added to as needed, but always in the vernacular style, which means parts of it can be difficult to date. What we see today is a composite building of different dates from the late twelfth century to the early seventeenth, all built around two courtyards with at the centre the Banqueting Hall, where life would have been focused since the early fourteenth century.

The house, its contents, the setting and the garden combine to make Haddon an exceptionally romantic place. The 9th Duke of Rutland, John Manners (1886–1940), spent his life restoring the buildings with great care and sensitivity, while his wife, Kathleen, oversaw the garden.

The view towards the entrance of the Chapel at Haddon Hall. The stone seat on the left was for impoverished parishioners who through bad luck had 'gone to the wall'.

The first chapel at Haddon was built in the Norman period, although the major part of the existing building is medieval, as is the surviving stained glass. The walls of the chapel were painted with fresco secco (dried fresco) in the early fifteenth century, but were plastered over during the Reformation and then rediscovered and restored in the early twentieth century. They would once have been brightly coloured, but, despite their faded hues, they provide a powerful insight into medieval ecclesiastical decoration. The pulpit and pews are Jacobean. There is a marble effigy of Lord Haddon, son of the 8th Duke of Rutland, who died aged nine in 1894. It is a copy of an original sculpted by his mother, Violet, Duchess of Rutland, which is in the chapel at Belvoir Castle, Leicestershire.

The Banqueting Hall and Long Gallery are two of the largest rooms in the house. In the fourteenth century the Banqueting Hall would have been used not only to receive guests, but also for the entire household to sleep and dine in.

The wooden screen, gallery above, stone floor, high table and furniture all share a muted tonal palette, in contrast to the faded blues and yellows in the Mortlake tapestry, which is part of a set of five 'Senses' tapestries commissioned by Charles I and sold to the Manners family after his death. One of these hangs in the minstrels' gallery. Another tapestry, which hangs behind the dais table, depicts the Royal Arms of England and was reputedly given by Henry VIII to George Vernon.

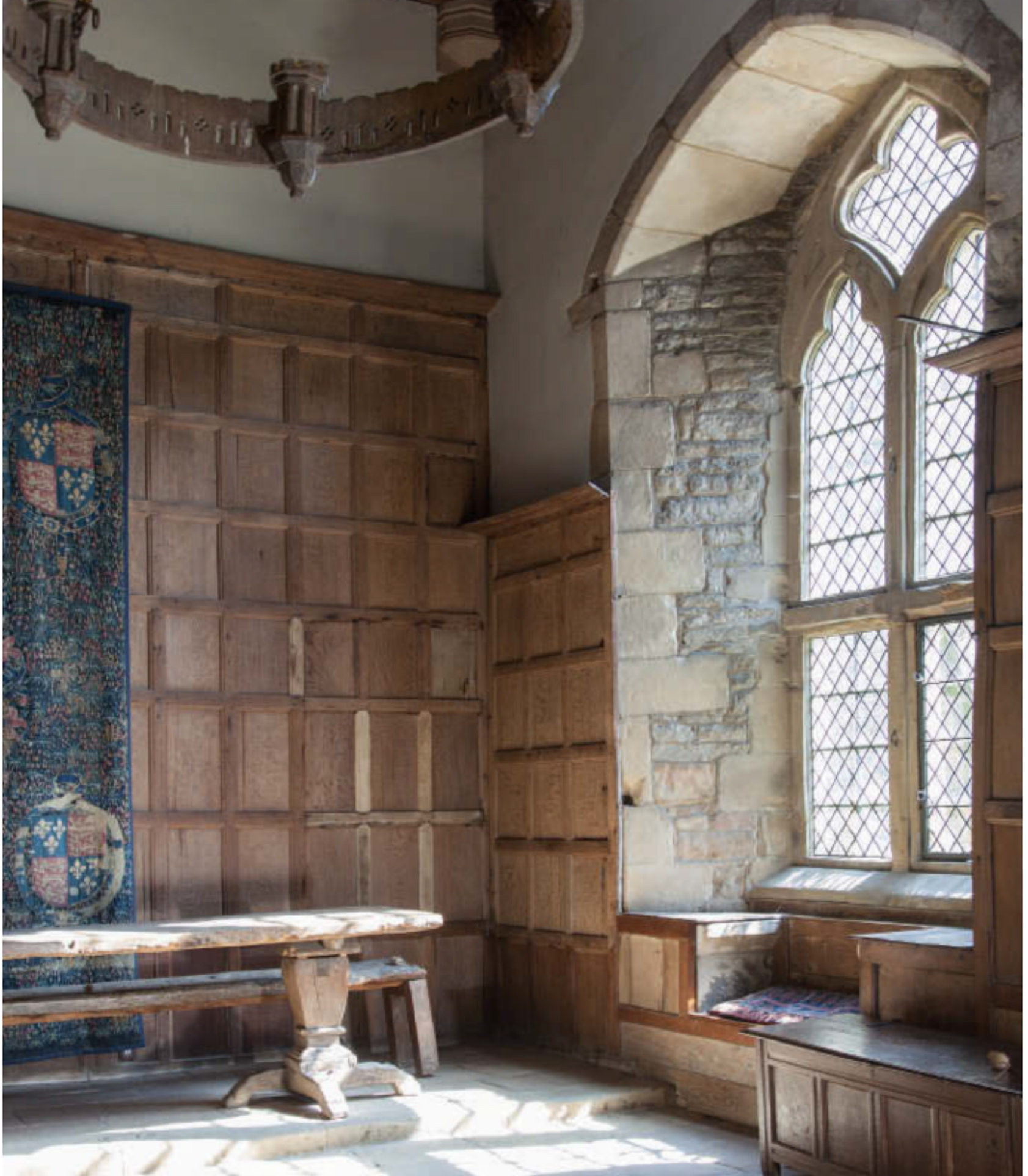
A staircase with a seventeenth-century dog gate at the top of the first flight gives access to the upper-floor rooms, including the Long Gallery. Here the walls are panelled and carved, and again the tonal harmony is noticeably complete. Traditionally, a long gallery in an English house would have been used mainly for exercise in bad weather. When one looks at the elaborate clothes of the period, especially for women, one can see why they might avoid outdoor exertion. The furniture is of different dates, from a fifteenth-century dowry chest to ten Daniel Marot-style seventeenth-century chairs. In 1933 the 9th Duke commissioned Rex Whistler to paint Haddon in its landscape. His painting is set over the fireplace and is a fine example of the English Romanticism so popular between the two world wars. Although this is an idealised rendering of a house with figures in the landscape, Haddon is just as beautiful in reality as it is in Whistler's picture.

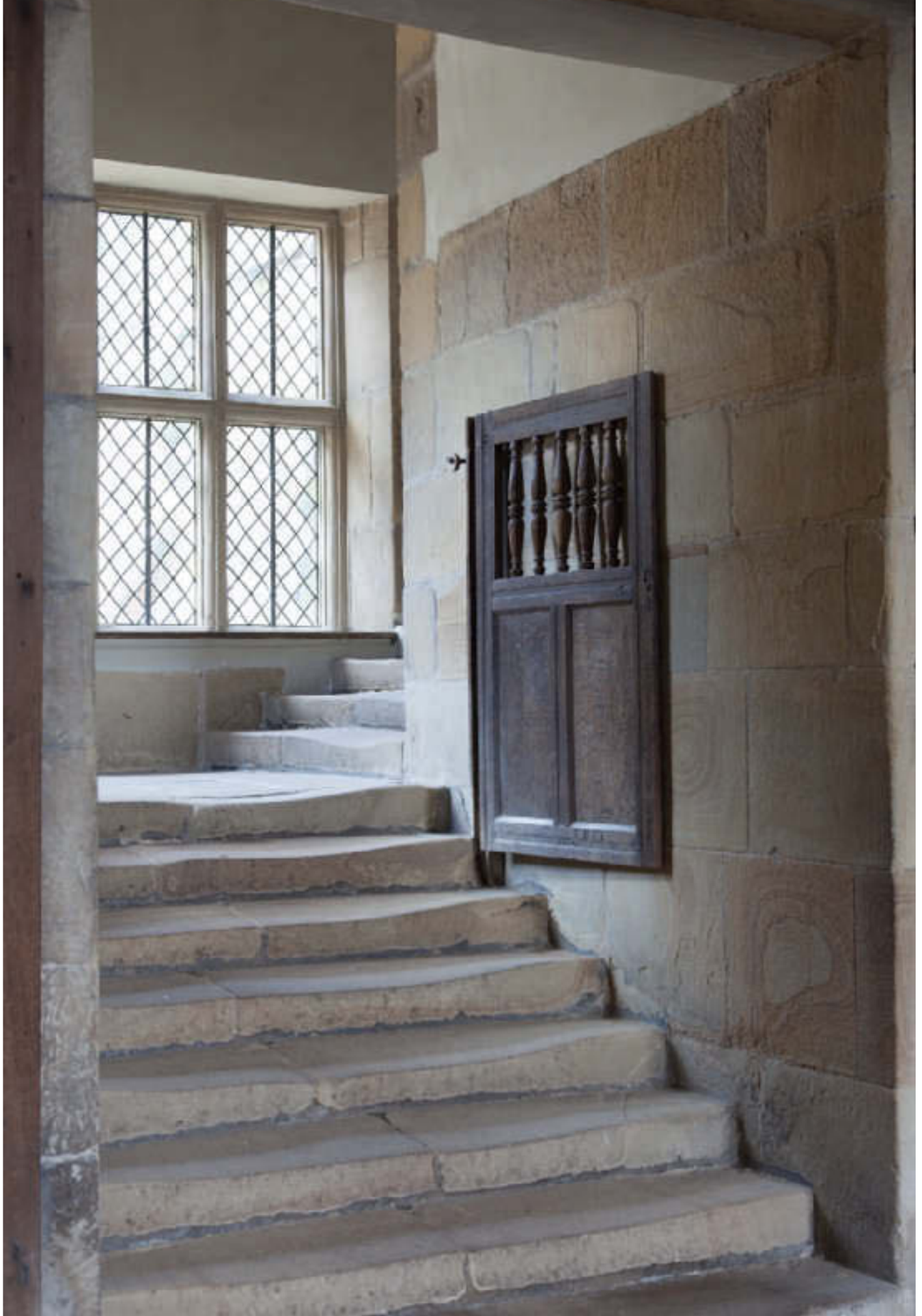
This is a house that has always been, and still is, loved by its owners, even in neglect. Although James Lees-Milne reminds us that when Princess Victoria, later Queen Victoria, visited she found that 'it did not please though thought singular'.

Detail of fresco secco of St Nicholas calming the storm in the Chapel at Haddon Hall.

LEFT *A surviving part of the medieval screen and entrance door of the Great Hall. Note the random stonework walls and centuries of wear on the pavement.*

OPPOSITE *In the Great Hall, the high table is on a dais. On the panelled wall behind hangs a French tapestry showing the royal arms of England, probably given to the Vernon family by Henry VIII.*





OPPOSITE *The leaded panes of glass in the windows in this corner of the Long Gallery were fitted irregularly, to catch the sunlight and create sparkle.*

RIGHT *The staircase to the Long Gallery, showing half of its dog gate.*

The Long Gallery displays a union of natural surfaces: wood, stone and plaster with no added colour, creating a dry beauty. Rex Whistler's painting, a romantic vision of the house in its landscape, is on the left above the fireplace.

The garden made by Dorothy Vernon in the 16th century, close to the house. This is a rare surviving example of what must have been many such gardens, swept away by Lancelot 'Capability' Brown's 'improvements' in the 18th century.