



# A MANOR HOUSE CHRISTMAS

For the Guest family, Christmas is a time to come together and deck the halls in this enchanting English setting filled with history

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**ABOVE** The original entrance facade of Ashby Manor House with its mullioned windows and handsome gables.

**RIGHT** The Lutyens Hall, the heart of the historic family home, is seen here decorated for Christmas. A pair of Rose Uniacke sofas covered in Roma linen and topped with Fermoie cushions mingle with George Smith armchairs.





*“Decorating the house for Christmas is pure joy and almost anything goes”*

**ABOVE** The Lutyens canal bed, seen here in the garden view of Ashby Manor House, has recently been redesigned by Salisbury-based garden designer Daniel Combes.

**LEFT** Nova stands at the garden door, which leads into the kitchen area, with the family’s dogs, Toy Cockapoo Mabel under her arm and French Water Dog Mimi by her side.

**C**hristmas at Northamptonshire’s Ashby Manor, ancestral home of the Guest family, is a festive gathering surrounded by the past but with a healthy dash of the contemporary. Owners Nova and her husband Henry, a financier, together with their two children, relish the chance to deck their historic house with traditional baubles and fill the rooms with music and laughter. “Decorating the house for Christmas is pure joy,” says Nova. “We listen to all kinds of Christmas albums and haul out boxes of decorations from the cellar. I am usually fairly minimalist, but all that changes at Christmas and almost anything goes – except for tinsel, which is *verboden*, much to my children’s dismay!”

Nova, who is originally from Perth, Australia, recalls her first glimpse of her now-home – which was previously owned by Henry’s cousin, Ivor Guest, 4th Viscount Wimborne – as being a memorable one. “I’ll ▶



In the formal Lutyens Dining Room, the scene of many festive dinners, Nova has draped a Victorian leafed dining table with old house linen and added flair with William Yeoward Iona crystal glassware and vintage silver. The 20th-century reproduction dining chairs are covered in velvet by Rogers & Goffigon.



*“I was blown away. It was quite simply unlike any house I had ever visited”*

**ABOVE** Snowy-white B&B Italia sofas lend a contemporary air to the Music Room, with its Kilkenny marble coffee table from Rose Uniacke and carved fireplace with family crests. The cushions are vintage Fortuny fabric by Rhona Valentine.

**LEFT** In the old Entrance Hall, the leather-topped library table from Alston & Ashton antiques holds the guest book, which boasts names from an array of glittering pre- and post-war house parties.

never forget the first time I was driven through the front gates,” she says. “It was 2007, and Henry had said we were going to stay with his cousin for a night. He had told me nothing about the house, and so, of course, I was completely blown away. It was quite simply unlike any house I had ever visited.” Fast forward several years to 2015, and Ashby Manor came up for sale. The couple were looking for a country base after years in London, so it seemed right to take the plunge and “keep it in the family.”

The golden-stoned mansion was first built in the Middle Ages, and has rubbed shoulders with some of the great events of English history. Temporarily confiscated in 1485 by Henry VII when the owner, Sir William Catesby, was executed after the Battle of Bosworth Field, the estate went on to remain in the family for several hundred years. The Catesbys became infamous for hosting meetings for the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 in the Gatehouse.

At the turn of the 20th century, Ivor Guest, 1st Viscount Wimborne, purchased the house and

engaged renowned architect Sir Edwin Lutyens to modify it. Having made a fortune in Welsh ironworks and railways, the Guest family’s ascendancy saw them married into the Spencer-Churchills of Blenheim Palace and become owners of Wimborne House in St James’s (now part of the Ritz Hotel). They also counted a Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland, a Vicereine of India and fashion icon C.Z. Guest among its members.

Nova has taken to the adventure of marrying into such a storied tribe with typical aplomb. Both capable and warmly personable, she has become known as one of the most charismatic chatelaines in the county. “I long to have met Henry’s grandmother, Lady Mabel, who grew up with Holland Park as her garden, and to ask her questions about our garden, especially the trees she planted. An admired dendrologist, she was also well known for her very down-to-earth approach to running a country house. Apparently, she would ask guests in advance how many potatoes they would eat at dinner as she couldn’t stand any waste,” smiles Nova.

Decorating such a hallowed space might be daunting, but the couple have approached it with gusto and are unafraid of bold choices. The arching Lutyens Stone Hall is where the family spends the most time. However, it suffered from a lack of natural light. “We repainted the room in Farrow & Ball’s ▶

**ABOVE LEFT** A second Christmas Tree dominates the entrance hall. The Persian rugs are from Ron Green and the antique Gainsborough chairs are from Axel Vervoordt.

**ABOVE RIGHT** The galleried Stone Hall is used for informal dining. Wishbone chairs by Hans J Wegner are teamed with a table from Lantiques in Petworth.

**RIGHT** The sleek Bulthaup kitchen, chosen for its form and functionality, is where Christmas feasts are conjured up, with the couple’s children contributing their own touches to the festive menu.





*“It is a family home because we have filled it with the things we love ourselves”*

**ABOVE LEFT** Nova and Henry engaged De Rosee Sa architects to design this guest bathroom. The roll-top bath is from Jacob Delafon.

**ABOVE RIGHT** The Oak Room is given a feminine flourish with a ruffled tablecloth in a Colefax and Fowler chintz. The Hillsleigh table lamp from Julia Boston Antiques is topped with a Fermoie shade.

**LEFT** An antique roll-top writing desk in the Oak Room is the epitome of English country house style.

Wimborne White, which immediately brightened the whole space,” explains Nova. They also upgraded the lighting to new LED fixtures at the same time. Another contemporary note is the sleek and unobtrusive Bulthaup kitchen at one end of the hall. “It allows every inch of cupboard space to be utilised to its full capacity,” says Nova as she prepares festive garlands to be hung across the huge stone fireplaces strewn through the house.

Apart from maximising light, another priority was, in Nova’s words, “A sense of abundance – comfortable chairs, many by Rose Uniacke, fabulous books, striking textiles, children’s toys and fresh flowers from the garden.” A playful take on the classic Lutyens layout has seen the old Medieval kitchen transformed into a playroom with pirate shacks and table tennis, and which at Christmas is also the setting for a second beautifully decorated tree, while the formal panelled dining room has been given vim with a collection of Fornasetti plates, trays and candles alongside the Guest family silver and a ▶

Nova has kept the Oak Room lightly elegant to complement the limed oak panelling. A 19th-century linen throw from Guinevere Antiques on the bed is teamed with tapestry cushions from Peta Smyth Antique Textiles. The Louis Vuitton trunk at the end of the bed was owned by Lady Alice Wimborne, a noted society and political hostess.



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roaring fire. “It is a family home because we have filled it with the things we love ourselves.”

Nova’s love of antique textiles is evident throughout the rooms. “I love 17th- and 18th-century tapestries and textiles,” she reflects. “Peta Smyth Antique Textiles and Katharine Pole have been great sources for glorious cushions to go on plain linen sofas. Rhona Valentine is a one-stop shop for old Fortuny fabrics and wall hangings. Her cushions brought our Music Room to life.”

Life is certainly never mundane at Ashby Manor. The couple have poured their energies and talents into the business of continuing the restoration and improvement begun by Henry’s cousin in the late 1990s. The estate is a lyrical setting for beautiful weddings and fashion week events, among many other happenings. “It is so important to us, realising the privilege of living here, to give back,” says Nova. This year’s world events have also brought some very

welcome houseguests in the form of a Ukrainian family of seven via the Homes for Ukraine scheme.

Christmas this year will be a slightly more comfortable one than the first celebration at the house, which, according to Nova, “was magical, but we didn’t have much furniture, so we set up trestle tables in the dining room and draped them with house linen. Thank goodness my mother came over from Australia to help, as I was heavily pregnant and gave birth three days after Christmas!” Cooking family recipes from Down Under helps keep the family linked to Nova’s roots, while the 1,000-year-old Norman church on the estate is an atmospheric setting for a December calendar highlight, the children’s nativity play.

Charades in front of the fire, long walks through the estate, a roast Christmas lunch, all the hallmarks of an English festive time, with much merriment and, of course, the dogs joining in the fun. Where better to celebrate than this timeless and deeply loved house? ■

**ABOVE** Lady Wimborne’s Boudoir features a 19th-century Orientalist room divider repurposed as a headboard, a chest of drawers from Hugh Leuchars and an antique Heriz rug from Gallery Yacou. Cushions from Chelsea Textiles, a throw from Guinevere Antiques and a lamp and shade from James McWhirter Antiques complete the look.