

BENTLEY

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF BENTLEY MOTORS...SUMMER 2013...Issue 45



BENTLEY



CULTURAL EXCHANGE

70 MASTERPIECES FROM THE HERMITAGE WILL BE BACK ON SHOW AT HOUGHTON HALL IN NORFOLK FOR THE FIRST TIME IN 234 YEARS. CAROLINE PHILLIPS RECOUNTS A TALE OF SCANDAL, DEBT AND RESTITUTION – AND ACHIEVES A DRIVING AMBITION OF HER OWN



This is the story of the Marquess, the Old Masters and the Bentley. The tale of masterpieces by Van Dyck, Velázquez and Rubens being returned from Russia to Britain after 234 years. The tale of an exclusive 48-hour trip to blaze the trail for the return of these priceless works collected by Britain's first prime minister, Sir Robert Walpole, and sold scandalously in 1779 to Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia, to adorn the walls of the Hermitage, St Petersburg.

Happily, the 7th Marquess of Cholmondeley, Sir Robert's descendant, has pulled off a major coup. He's secured 70 of the best pictures back from Russia and is reassembling them in their original home of Houghton Hall near King's Lynn in Norfolk – the grandest of Palladian stately piles and his family seat. The exhibition, *Houghton Revisited: Masterpieces from the Hermitage*, runs May 17 to September 29. Our story takes in St Petersburg and a private tour of the Hermitage, one of the greatest museums in the world; a rare conversation with the very private marquess; and a private behind-scenes visit to Houghton to see the preparations for the exhibition.

It's also about my cunning plan to get behind the wheel for the first time of a car that's made in Heaven by way of Crewe and is used at State occasions by the Royal Household. I have a secret. I'm someone who spends her professional life reviewing six-star hotels, sleeping in 700-thread-count sheets and trialling beauty products filled with unicorn's breath and caviar – but I've never driven a Bentley. There! I've said it.



Let's wind back. Sir Robert Walpole amassed a splendid collection of Old Master paintings – from Rembrandt to Poussin – and in the 1720s built Houghton specifically to house them. He was a bon vivant who entertained his Westminster cronies lavishly and strategically. (He spent £1,118 in just one year on Chateau Margaux and Chateau Lafite.) After his death in 1745, the spendaholic PM left £40,000 of debts (£6.6 million today).

The situation was worsened by his profligate grandson, the 3rd Earl of Orford – a spendthrift who even gambled away a stone staircase from Houghton. So – helped by his uncle, Horace Walpole of Strawberry Hill fame – Orford secretly sold 204 of the paintings to Catherine the Great for £40,500. James Christie, founder of the auction house, brokered the hush-hush deal.

When the news leaked, it provoked a national outcry. On hearing of the stir, the crowing Empress wrote to a friend, 'I would no sooner give up the paintings than a cat would give up a mouse.' Since then most of the works have hung in the Hermitage, surviving the Russian Revolution and Stalin largely intact. (Nicholas I and Stalin disposed of some of the pictures; six were ransacked by Nazis; and the fate of 36 is still unknown.)

But our story starts at 5pm, March 27, 2013 in St Petersburg. I'm driven from the airport in a Mulsanne. It's the size of a French commune. It's also modern. Powerful. Sculptural. 'Notice my engineering and technological know-how,' it purrs, as we move off.

The queues, Ladas and Zil official limos have gone from the streets since I was last here in 1989, and the advertising hoardings and designer shops have come. Soon we're gliding past lime, citrus and sky-blue palaces, Orthodox churches with onion roofs and grey bastions of officialdom under a vast slate sky. The Mulsanne poses prettily as snow flakes dust her in Nevsky Prospect, St Petersburg's premier street.

Twice when we stop, passers-by photograph the car. It looks gorgeous outside – but inside it smells so good, I want to bottle it. (Parfum du Cuir et Placage: that's scent of leather and veneer.)

There's enough space to consummate a marriage; seats that massage and heat you to perfection and probably will make you a cup of black Russian tea; doors that don't shut with a clunk but a gentle, aristocratic click; and oh, and detail, such detail, you can't imagine it... (Whoever heard of an in-car wi-fi hotspot? A Bentley-designed phone? And as for the sophistication of the seat adjustment options...)

10am, Thursday March 28: After a smoked halibut and Russian rye bread for breakfast, we arrive in stately four-wheeled splendour at the emerald and gold palace that is the Hermitage. Inside the private entrance, a brass band is playing: anniversary celebrations of the Russian police, explains our guide. There are men wearing fur hats and others in medals and Lenin caps. "Until 1866," she explains, "the dress code for the Hermitage was tail coats and military regalia." She leads us through rooms that are gloriously empty – save for works by Michelangelo and Leonardo. Outside, people are walking on the frozen Neva River under the low melanoid sky.

There are 400 rooms with 3 million treasures. Soon we're amid candelabra and a frescoed ceiling, Nicholas I Imperial floor lamps and vases of semiprecious stones. It's here that we're among pictures labelled: 'Acquired in 1779 from the collection R. Walpole'. A Soviet-era woman – helmet hair and grim expression – guards them. She looks as if she should be selling pickled cucumbers. Nearby, Orthodox priests in black robes, Rasputin beards and pill box hats survey the oils admiringly. Immaculate conceptions, flights into Egypt, portraits... majestic and awesome canvases soon to come to England.

5pm: On the flight home, I sit next to the Marquess of Cholmondeley. (The name is pronounced 'Chumly' and his courtesy title is Earl of Rocksavage.) He's a man widely regarded as the grandest hereditary peer in the land. (Background: he was Page of Honour to the Queen at age 14; and Eton and Sorbonne educated.) He's Lord Great Chamberlain, for which he's required to dress in a red-and-gold tailcoat, carry a white wand and had, until recently,



TOP LEFT

The Mulsanne's elegant, aristocratic lines attract attention, even when the backdrop is the neoclassical grandeur of Palace Square, St Petersburg.

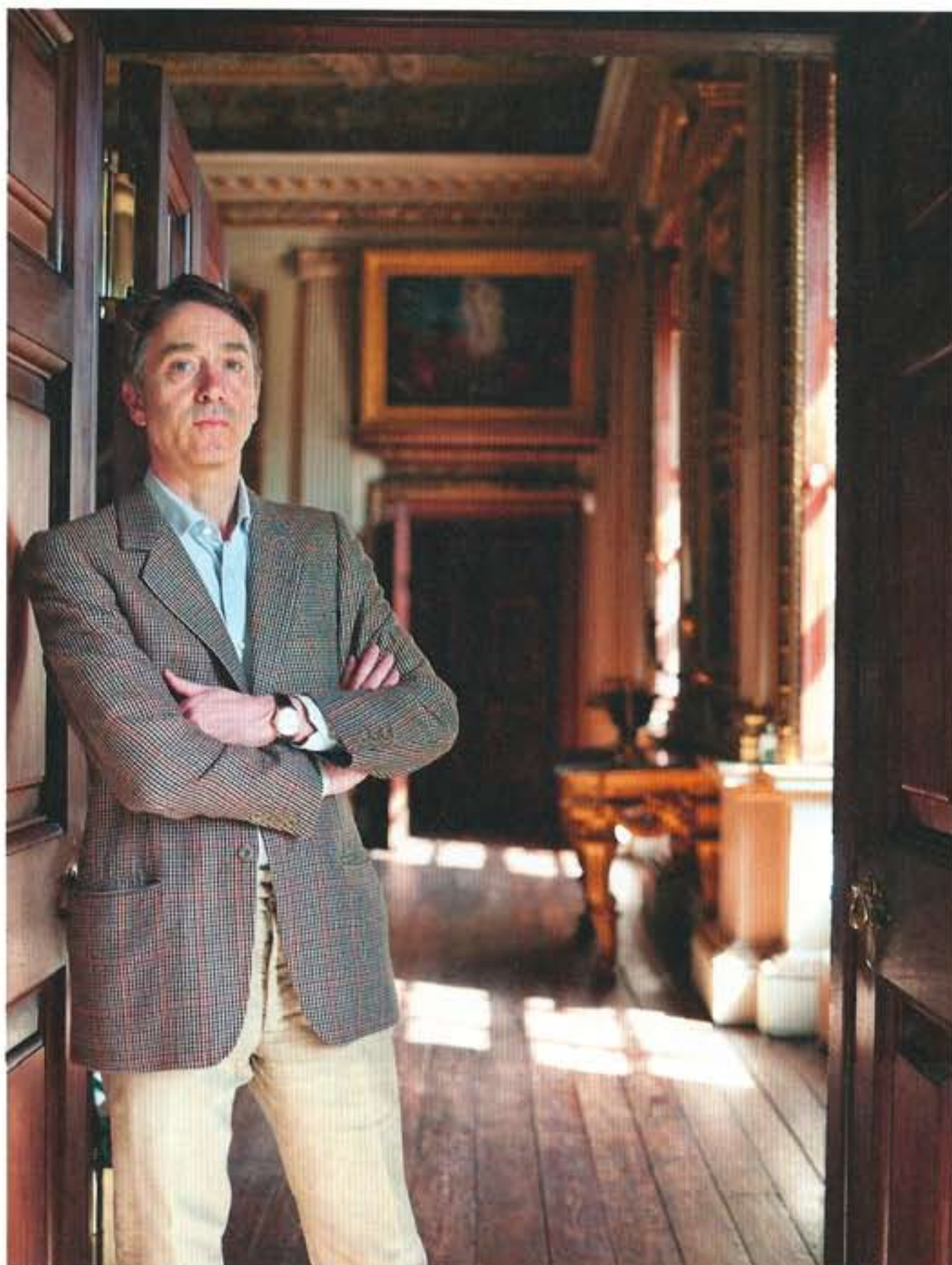
ABOVE

Houghton Hall retains much of its 18th-century features and furnishings. The architect, William Kent, had designed the rooms around the paintings, which will be returned to their original places for the first time since 1779.

RIGHT

Originally the Winter Palace of the Russian Tsars, the Hermitage today is home to 3 million works of art.





LEFT

The 7th Marquess of Cholmondeley at Houghton Hall, the family seat. His ancestor, Sir Robert Walpole, amassed a magnificent collection of Old Masters which were later sold to Catherine the Great of Russia. Houghton Revisited: Masterpieces from the Hermitage runs from May 17 to September 29.

strewn with 1950s toys – priceless pictures are stacked in palettes. The beguiling marchioness, Rose née Hanbury, David's wife and 23 years his junior, passes by with their three-year-old heir and a spare.

We move to the Great Staircase with its carved mahogany balustrade and grisaille-painted canvas walls. It's so cold inside that I'm still wearing my sable coat. "It's always chilly," says Frank Watson, the house manager. Heating is a problem, of course – by the time Sir Robert died, there were 106 rooms. ("It was possible to make up 110 beds at an hour's notice," says Frank. "But there are only three cleaners now.")

We enter the Common Parlour – one of the original 'family rooms'. "The Queen had lunch in here last month," says Frank. The wall paintings are being taken down. Gone already is Sargent's portrait of Lady Sybil Cholmondeley; normally it's on an easel.

Even the Stone Hall with its double-height plasterwork ceilings and gallery, reliefs, putti and busts looks today like a jumble sale. There are antiques everywhere. Plus rolled-up rugs. Extraordinarily, 16th and 17th century Turkish carpets from the rooms are being covered in digitally photographed vinyl copies (composed of thousands of photographs). You wouldn't know the difference if you didn't touch them.

In the White Drawing Room the remarkably unfaded and exquisite brocaded silk wall hangings are being taken down, replaced with the original green silk velvet. There's also an empty space where the full-length portrait of Catherine the Great – which she sent as a thank-you – usually hangs in the red-damask-lined Saloon.

The pictures have borne witness to Napoleon's invasion, the Russian Revolution, two world wars, the collapse of the Soviet Union. What next? The return of works to the country of origin and heirs?! I broached the subject earlier with David.

"Have you thought of keeping the pictures?" – the UK government has provided indemnity from seizure – "They really should stay in Houghton, shouldn't they?"

"It has crossed my mind," replied the mischievous marquess, echoing my feelings about the Mulsanne **B**

to walk backwards in front of the Queen at the State Opening of Parliament. (The demise of which tradition he mourns.) We chat. "I don't like talking about myself," he says reluctantly.

By coincidence, I'm reading Rupert Everett's excellent autobiography, *Vanished Years* – which proves to be a banana skin to a marquess. Especially one so whimsical, genial and sensitive.

"Oh my goodness, look, he's written about you," I say. David surveys his capsule of Long Life milk disconsolately. "I haven't read it," he replies. "He says you're 'very dishy'....," I offer helpfully. "It's my mum who really cops it," he replies shyly. Indeed.

At Houghton, David has made a contemporary sculpture park; has an award-winning five-acre walled garden and 4,000 acres. He also inherited Cholmondeley Castle, Cheshire, its 7,500 acres and a £118 million fortune when his father died in 1990. And he directed *Other Voices, Other Rooms* – a well-received movie based on a Truman Capote novella. This would be enough to keep most fiftysomethings occupied until Doomsday and beyond. But not him. It's amazing that he's helping create a blockbuster exhibition.

10am, Friday 29: I sweep into my mobile palace, ready for my inaugural spin behind the wheel to drive to Houghton. I drink in the design details that make this an empress among cars. The steering (it requires a mere touch), the suspension (it's like driving on a pink cloud). It fires from 0 to 50mph in a nanosecond. It slips effortlessly through the traffic, drawing the sort of admiring glances I'd expect for a resurrected Audrey Hepburn, Chanel clad with a Kelly bag.

1pm: Houghton has changed little since the 1700s – for a century it was virtually abandoned, which also meant it was never altered and retained in excellent nick almost all its original furniture and decoration. But the Houghton we see is one in transition.

The magnificent decor by 18th-century superstar architect, William Kent, is being returned to its 1740s specifications. The pictures are also being hung in their original positions in the State rooms, following a plan the marquess found in Sir Robert's desk. (Kent paid particular attention to the art, creating a cleverly integrated scheme with the decoration.)

Today in the Arcade – the entrance hall where entertaining took place on hunt days and now

Caroline Phillips is an award-winning journalist www.carolinephillips.net who has contributed to most of the better nationals and glossier glossies and also does PR, mostly for luxury brands.