



## To the manor REBORN

Reputed to be one of the prettiest houses in England, this magical seventeenth-century manor is now home to the man who grew up there



### AT HOME

Al Ward and his girlfriend Mel Fall, live in Cornwell Manor, Oxfordshire, which has origins dating back to the sixteenth century. Set in Italianate gardens and renovated by celebrated architect Clough Williams-Ellis in 1939, this is where Al grew up with his sisters. He inherited the house in 2011 following his father's death.

Downstream from the village of Cornwell, near Chipping Norton, Cornwell Manor is reputed to be one of the prettiest houses in England. It is home to Al Ward and his girlfriend Mel Fall, a documentary film producer. "It's such a beautiful place in an incredibly friendly village and a lot of people I knew as a child are still here," says Al, who grew up at Cornwell Manor in the sixties with his older sisters, Rachel and Tracy. Both Ward girls were celebrated for their beauty; Rachel went on to become a film star after her role in *The Thorn Birds*, later marrying actor, Bryan Brown, and moving to Australia. Tracy, now the Marchioness of Worcester, is a well-known environmental campaigner.

Unlike his sisters, Al never strayed for very long. He is a self-confessed rural boy with a passionate love of the countryside around his home: "As children we spent most of our time outside. I loved the farm, playing in the hay bales, all the sheep, horses – and most of all the wildlife. My sisters rode a lot. It was a proper country childhood." Though he left home, he kept a house on the estate and, after his father died in 2008, moved back into Cornwell ▶



Al and Mel retained the colouring of the red hall as the bold hue provides a warm welcome for guests. An occasional table, covered with an Indian textile, is laid with a Spode coffee set.

FEATURE CHARLOTTE METCALF  
PHOTOGRAPHS ANDREAS VON EINSIEDEL

The red hall is used as a place for socialising and parties as well as for shoot teas. Amongst the Ward-family furniture is a gilt mirror dating from around 1735.



Manor in October 2011 with Mel, his two children and his former nanny, now in her late eighties. “My parents used to be in London during the week so most of our life was spent with Nanny Ward in the nursery. She’s been with us since we were all babies. She’s Scottish and very Presbyterian and strict, but over the years we slowly broke her in,” he jokes.

From its perfectly proportioned, elegant façade, wide, shallow steps descend between structured box hedges to an ornate pond and decorative wrought-iron gates beyond. Behind the house is a lake. The stone statues and urns, pleached fruit trees, topiary and carefully planned vistas make the gardens feel more Italian than English. “My mother, Claire, was a keen gardener but so was my grandfather, Giles Baring and his brother, known to us as Uncle Simon. They helped my mother plan the front garden and were largely responsible for its being so Italianate today.”

In fact, the entire village is Italianate. The original house, belonging to the Penyston family, was built on proceeds from the lucrative Cotswold wool trade. It remained staunchly Jacobean before an American, Mrs Anthony Gillson, bought the house before the second world war. She wanted to renovate and beautify both house and village so brought in Clough Williams-Ellis, the architect who created the Italianate village, Portmeirion, in north Wales. He made substantial alterations to the house, perfecting its Georgian façade, and transformed the village, channelling a natural stream to run through it and giving the gloomy Jacobean cottages pretty Georgian-style windows. Sadly, Mrs Gillson never made Cornwell her home; the house was turned into a hospital during the war and she sold it soon afterwards.

Al’s father, Peter, known as ‘Wardy’, the younger brother of the Earl of Dudley, grew up in the

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Midlands near Dudley where the family businesses were based. His older brother fought in the war, but Peter was packed off to America, a country to which he formed a life-long attachment. He married Claire Leonora Baring in the late 1950s and he and his new wife bought Cornwell as the perfect family home.

As a child, Al’s favourite room was the dining room with its original Jacobean panelling. “There’s a Penyston portrait above the fire that’s always been part of the house and he seems to follow ▶

**ABOVE LEFT** The portrait above the fireplace in the drawing room is of Rachel, Countess of Dudley, and her son Roderick Ward, who was Al’s great uncle.

**ABOVE RIGHT** The front door opens onto the terrace, which was added by Clough Williams-Ellis.



you with his eyes. The room has an incredible sense of history. There may even be a priest hole behind the painting," says Al.

Al and Mel use the dining room when they entertain their guests at weekends, but when alone during the week, and not in London working, they mostly eat in a private sitting room directly below their bedroom, which contains an Aga, sink, larder with a fridge as well as a big, comfortable sofa, a television and a fireplace with a club fender. When they moved back in, they wanted to ensure that their own rooms were calm and comfortable, having made the decision to keep the majority of the house intact.

The house underwent a change during the seventies when his father remarried and Al's stepmother set about 'modernising', bringing brighter colours, typical of the time, into some of the bedrooms and the kitchen. As a contrast, Mel chose a soothing natural palette for their own bedroom, helped by her friend, decorator, Rachel Hamel Cooke. Throws from The White Company and accessories from Oka help to give the room a sleeker, more contemporary look than the main guest bedrooms, and their



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT** With its original Jacobean panelling, the dining room is the oldest room in the house. The nineteenth-century painting of the piebald pony is by W Elstob Marshall. Portraits and busts of family members from the past cast

their gaze over proceedings from the vantage of the staircase. The main painting is of the Countess of Dudley and to the right of the window are portraits of Al's mother Claire and her father. Al's stepmother Liz redecorated the kitchen

during the seventies but it has been modified more recently to turn what was a large working kitchen into a pretty, informal dining room. The blue-and-white theme provides a backdrop for the large collection of distinctive striped Cornishware.



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bathroom has recently been refurbished to accommodate a large walk-in shower.

Al has two children, Jasmine, 23, and Archie, 20, by his first wife, and two half-brothers, Jeremy and Benjie, who live on the estate. “I hope and believe Cornwell still feels very much like a family home for us all,” says Al. “We used to play kick-the-can and hide-and-seek all over the house. One Christmas some cousins came to stay and we were given bows and arrows, which we shot through some of the more valuable pictures in the hall – I was caned for it!”

Al hopes that the house will be full this Christmas, as it used to be. “The first year we moved back in, my sister Tracy came with all her children, as did Mel’s sister Kate. Sixteen of us sat down to Christmas lunch, so I’m trying to keep the tradition going,” ▶

**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT** A neutral palette has been used in the main bedroom including a tasseled bedcover from Pygmalion Interiors. Curtain fabric is from Zimmer + Rohde and the sofa has been covered in a throw from The White Company and cushions brought from India. The bathroom includes a handmade basin unit with a marble top from Pygmalion Interiors, a mirror from Station Mill, with a bath and taps from CP Hart.



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP** The blue bedroom is dominated by a magnificent Regency carved bed. Snow enhances the Italianate vista.

The large cupboard came from Al's father's family home of Himley.

he says. Thinking of winter approaching, he begins to reminisce: "There seemed to be a lot more snow when I was a child. I remember winter power cuts and my maternal grandmother reading us *The Jungle Book* by candlelight."

There may no longer be power cuts, but Cornwell Manor certainly retains its magical atmosphere, lush with vivid family memories and history. ■