

Sir John's continued attempts to depose him and restore Henry VI to the throne.

"After receiving a pardon in the 1470s, Ebrington was returned to Sir John and he lived there quietly for the rest of his days."

Much of the estate's historical records had been lost during two fires over the years, but thanks to her father's sharp recollections, and with a "sleuth" historian on the job, restoration plans were put in place and a budget allocated. The back-of-house former servants' quarters, a four-bedroom red-brick cottage covered in pebbledash, would be home to the couple and their children, now aged 14 and 11, while the main house, with its eight bedrooms and grand reception rooms, would be income-producing.

Structurally, the limestone house was in remarkably good condition with all the original features retained including decorative plasterwork and wood panelling and beams.

But with seven new bathrooms to be installed (an en suite for every guest room), the gravity-fed plumbing from natural springs installed by the Americans during World War II, when Ebrington was used as a flak house for combat-weary United States Air Force officers, had to be entirely redone. As did the heating.

"All the pipes were blocked by the limescale we get here in the Cotswolds, so we had to start again," says Fortescue. "It was winter, during Covid lockdowns. The children were being home-schooled and we had two builders living on site because of the travel curfew. Only three radiators were working."

On the upside, with nothing else for the builders to do, work continued apace, and the whole project was completed in six months. Another advantage: being forced to project manage the works themselves delivered the couple considerable savings.

The house had been rented out periodically, but many of the rooms hadn't been renovated since the war. Conveniently, each bedroom had an annexe that was probably a valet's room, making the installation of the new bathrooms in those spaces relatively simple.

Some rooms were filled with stuff that had to be sorted through to identify any items of personal or heritage value. Overall, 22 skip loads of rubbish were removed.

Many of the existing furnishings could be reused with a little repolishing or new upholstery. "One room was completely filled with paintings," says Fortescue, "and we used those throughout the house."

Still, styling of the rooms required an expert's eye. "We were lucky," says Fortescue. "My father was a director of Christie's in the UK for years – he'd bought things, stored them and has fantastic taste. There was a lot we found that we could use, and much of the rest we bought at auction, under his advice."

Among the "amazing finds" was a fireplace surround in antique Dutch delft tiles that had been concreted over. Their famous blue-and-white pattern inspired the decor of a bedroom known as "the blue room".

"One big find was a Flemish tapestry from the 1600 or 1700s, left in a black bin liner and totally forgotten," says Fortescue. "It's now hanging in the drawing room, opposite the fireplace."

"We also found – beautifully preserved, in a tin trunk – the robes worn by our great-great-grandfather, one of the four Knights of the Garter, as he held the golden canopy over the late Queen Elizabeth for her coronation

DRAWING ROOM (RIGHT)

Sofas, from Offbeat Interiors (offbeatinteriors.com). Rug and ottoman, from Timothy Oulton (timothyoutlon.com). Fire guard, from OKA (oka.com). Table lamp, from Ralph Lauren (ralphlauren.com). Walls and fireplace, by Rupert Charles-Jones Interiors (@rcjinteriors). Painting of Venetian scene, by a follower of Francesco Guardi, bought at auction through Dreweatts (dreweatts.com)

DINING ROOM (FAR RIGHT)

Wall treatment by Rupert Charles-Jones Interiors. Portrait, Hester Fortescue, 1596. French polished-mahogany dining table, a wedding gift from estate staff to Alice Fortescue's great-grandfather, Denzil Fortescue (6th Earl). Chairs, from her grandfather Richard Fortescue's house, elsewhere in the Cotswolds. In alcoves, replica armorial porcelain bearing family crest, by Yuet Tung China Works (porcelainware.com.hk). Curtains, installed by Fortescue's parents, Charles and Julia (the current Earl and Countess Fortescue), 47 years ago

HALL (BELOW, RIGHT)

Portrait of Chichester Fortescue, by James Northcote RA (1746-1831). Vase between windows, from Sum Ngai Brass (sumngaibrass.com). Drum, by Timothy Oulton. Persian rug, bought at auction by Fortescue's parents

PANELLED ROOM (BELOW, FAR RIGHT)

French gilt bed, from Offbeat Interiors. Lamps, by Laura Ashley (lauraashleyusa.com). Portrait of Hugh Fortescue (3rd Earl Fortescue; born 1818). Painting of flowers and floral needlepoint, both circa late 1800s

in 1953. Those are still under our bed at the moment – we haven't yet decided what to do with them."

Also in the design mix are treasures the couple brought back from Hong Kong. On display in the formal dining room are hand-painted copies of the original armorial porcelain that bore the family crest.

"Only a couple of the original plates still exist," says Fortescue, "and so Yuet Tung China Works in Kowloon [one of the few remaining hand-painted porcelain factories in Hong Kong] copied these to make a set."

Beside the guest books in the reception room are Chinese calligraphy brushes from the jade market in Yau Ma Tei and a vase crafted by Sum Ngai Brass in Kam Tin.

A Timothy Oulton rug from the couple's Clear Water Bay village house has a new home in the Ebrington drawing room. Upon it, the Timothy Oulton ottoman that left Hong Kong bearing the Union flag has been upcycled as an upholstered coffee table.

Today, the custodians and their guests are not the only ones privy to the many charms of the storied Ebrington.

Post-Covid, the property has also been the setting for commercial photo shoots as well as BBC television crime series such as *Father Brown* and *Shakespeare and Hathaway*.

The couple admit they'd expected to find "gremlins", unknowns that might delay the work schedule, or blow out the budget. Happily, nothing untoward happened.

If the house has any skeletons, however, they remain well kept. "Rob was convinced he'd find secret rooms," says Fortescue. "He got very excited when we uncovered what looked to be a hidden door."

"It turned out to be a chimney." ■

