

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS



[*Above and right*] The John Adam-designed mansion sits in 80 acres of woods and parkland on the banks of the Tweed, just outside Berwick-upon-Tweed. [*Below*] An elegant anteroom with three Chippendale card tables. The door on the left was a window in the original house – it now leads to the Regency extension. The door on the right takes you to the drawing room





What the Georgians did for us

With its Raeburn portraits and Chippendale furniture, Paxton House in Berwickshire, now restored and open to the public, is a fine example of graceful 18th-century living

Words Adam Campbell Photography Jim Gibson



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It's the 1770s. You're a Scot spending a lot of time in London and abroad developing your business interests and getting seriously rich. You've also just bought a Georgian mansion in the Borders whose interiors, apart from some stunning rococo plasterwork in the hall, are largely untouched. Who do you turn to? These days, you might hire a top interior designer and leave the entire project up to them – right down to the loo-roll holders.

Well, *plus ça change*: back in 1773, Ninian Home, busy managing his sugar plantations on the Caribbean island of Grenada, did just that. He turned over the job of decorating Paxton House – the John Adam-designed mansion near Berwick-upon-Tweed that he had just acquired from his cousin Patrick Home, the original owner – to the renowned firm of Chippendale, Haig & Co.

"This sounds flippant," says John Home Robertson, a descendant of Ninian and Patrick, who inherited the neo-Palladian house in 1979, "but it can probably be compared with overpaid

footballers today. There was lots of new money, thanks to the empire, and they wanted these places to impress their friends."

Thomas Chippendale had long taken on large-scale commissions for wealthy clients and not only provided Paxton with the furniture for which he was famous, but also advised on decor and supplied much of the upholstery, wall and floor coverings, curtains and mirrors – even the wine coolers in the dining room. The result is that Paxton House, given over by John to the Paxton Trust in 1988 to be renovated and opened to the public, has one of the pre-eminent collections of Chippendale furniture in Britain.

From towel rails to chaise-longues, card tables to dining tables, armchairs, sofas, beds, pier tables and tallboys, Chippendale provided over 100 items of furniture. "They look delicate but they're actually quite robust," says John. "It's lovely furniture but it's utilitarian Chippendale – chairs that are meant for sitting on. And generations of kids, including me and my children, have crawled all over it. It's well made and it has survived." ►

[Below, left] The picture gallery – the largest private gallery in a country house in Scotland. [Below, right] A George III mahogany tallboy by Chippendale from 1775, with a selection of Chinese pictures. [Right] The magnificent square piano by John Broadwood in the drawing room





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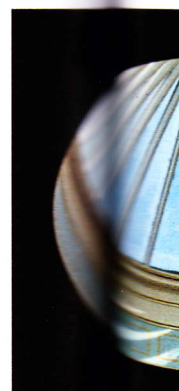


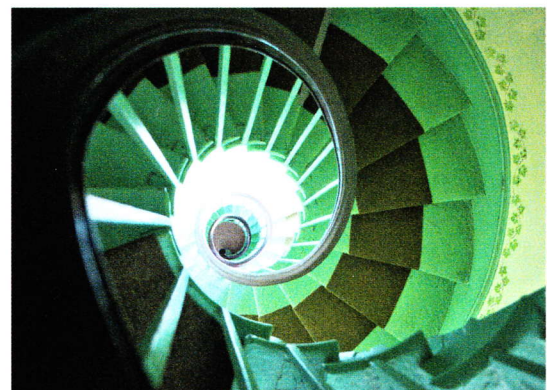
We are in the drawing room, which is dominated by a magnificent square piano by John Broadwood. The walls abound with family portraits, including one of Patrick Home's mother, Lady Home of Billie, who was murdered by her butler up the road in Linthill. The intricate ceiling decorations, added by Ninian, are the work of John Adam's more famous brother Robert.

Probably the biggest change to the original Adam design came after Ninian was killed in a slave uprising in Grenada. His brother George, who has acquired a stack of paintings, books and objets d'art, decided to add a library and picture gallery in the 1810s to show them off.

The new gallery, in the Regency style, resembled a stone temple inside, says John – "but later the Victorians thought this was terribly boring and did it much more flamboyantly". It is still the largest private gallery of any country house in Scotland and was renovated, as part of the Paxton Trust, in its Victorian incarnation. At the same time it became a partner to the National Galleries of Scotland and houses several important works by the likes of Alexander Runciman and Henry Raeburn.

But John also remembers it as it was when he was a child when the original roof had started to give way and part of it had to be propped up. "My parents got religion and the bit that was all right was partitioned off and formed into a Catholic chapel where the local parish priest came and said Mass." Irish farmworkers and Polish ex-soldiers also came along to the services.





[Clockwise from top left] Rococo plasterwork in the entrance hall; the former stables are now a café; the servants' spiral staircase; a detail of one of the fireplaces; the picture gallery's glass dome was added on the advice of Raeburn; its impressive columns and vaulted ceiling

Today, it is once again a spectacular room with decorative Ionic columns and pilasters, a magnificent vaulted ceiling and a huge domed roof light that was originally included on the advice of the painter Raeburn. By coincidence, it was also discovered to have excellent acoustics, and since 1996 has played host to chamber music events under the Music at Paxton banner. What began as a weekend festival now extends over ten days, this year bringing internationally acclaimed artists to the Borders to play pieces by Brahms, Mozart, Ravel and others.

Opening the house to the public was really just another stage in its evolution, explains John, whose own home is now in what was the garden shed when he was growing up. At that time,

the house itself had been divided into flats with a number of families living there – and what was the stable block is now the café. “It’s the original timber. You can still see where it has been kicked by the horses.”

But how does it feel to have so much that is personal to him – the beds he jumped on as a child, the rooms he played in, the furniture he sat on and even the crockery he used – on show to the public? “I love seeing people about the place. It’s meant to be enjoyed. The guy who designed it and built it meant for his friends to come in and be impressed, and that’s what is happening now. I’m quite happy.” ■

Music at Paxton Festival, 18-27 July 2014, www.musicatpaxton.co.uk