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# A KIND OF MAGIC

Every two years, Rosie Pearson fills her home and garden with sculptures, which cast a spell on the stunning location and turn it once again into the talking point it was in the 1920s, when the young Mitfords ran up and down its corridors

Words Karen Darlow | Styling Pippa Blenkinsop | Photographs Kasia Fiszer

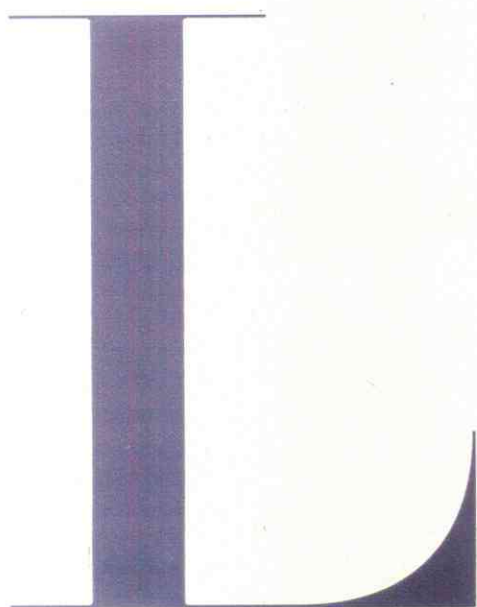






Rosie extended the kitchen, adding the bay window and adapting a cook's table from Badminton House to make a huge preparation space. On the shelf above the Aga are a sculpture by Guy Stevens and frescoes by Muirne Kate Dineen, while the face mosaic on the wall is by Rosie. The curtains are from Robert Kime





Looking for somewhere a bit special to turn into a home for herself and two young daughters, Rosie Pearson called off the search when she found Asthall Manor, a solid

Cotswold home in rolling, rural Oxfordshire. It had been home to the infamous Mitford sisters and their parents in the roaring 1920s, and their presence – and the distinctive blue woodwork paint they chose – still makes itself felt around the house.

'The estate agent advised me not to bother with a viewing. It was outside my budget, was a huge job and had far too much land. So I went to see it,' says Rosie. 'The girls had spent the first years of their lives in this staggeringly beautiful green valley in Jamaica, and I was looking for somewhere that had some kind of magic. I walked round and I could just picture lots of good things happening here, although I didn't really know what.' The house was sold at auction and, as predicted by the agent, the winning bid left Rosie far behind. A few months later, however, Rosie had a second chance to buy the house at a more affordable price with a small fraction of the 270 acres. 'The buyers had only ever wanted the land, so I moved into the flat above the ballroom and started to turn the house into something that would work for us,' she adds.

Rosie admits that the property wasn't terribly welcoming. 'It was rather stark and foreboding, the garden was overgrown and there wasn't even a front gate – its reclusive previous owner preferred it that way,' she says. 'Before I even got an architect, I was put onto Julian and Isabel Bannerman, known for their garden designs but brilliant with interiors too, and they helped me come up with a plan, along with architect Robert Franklin.'

First an unsightly single-storey extension was demolished at the back of the house. In its place, a sheltered outdoor seating area now overlooks an angled knot garden designed by the Bannermans to make the most of a steep slope facing the back of the house. 'I was all for leaving the garden until after we'd finished the house, but Isabel and Julian convinced me it was far better to start the garden at the same time.' So while the garden was taking shape, a poky kitchen was being transformed into

a warm, bright family space, with Robert Franklin's plans to extend it and bring in more light. A warren of back rooms were opened up, the back stairs were relocated, and the kitchen was extended out into the garden, with a dramatic oversized bay window.

Nineteen years on, and good things have indeed been happening at Asthall Manor, which has earned itself quite a reputation for its biennial sculpture exhibition, On Form. Pieces by stone sculptors from around the world cast their spell on the garden, ballroom and the main house, against a backdrop of the most magnificent roses – an Asthall speciality.

Rosie's love affair with sculpture began almost by accident, as she considered ways of turning the new front gateway to her home into a real statement. 'Anthony Turner, an old school friend, had some sculptures on the back of his van when he came to stay, which he called plumpkins. And as soon as I saw them I knew I wanted something along those lines for the gateposts. It's like a vegetable, but with a living character, I was never going to choose something ordinary.' From this, Anthony and other sculptors persuaded her that Asthall would be the perfect place to showcase new work, encourage people to look at sculpture in a new way and relax around the pieces, feeling the smoothness or roughness of the stone for themselves. 'I said, let's give it a go – I couldn't live in this enormous house without finding some reason for it,' adds Rosie.

Two years later Rosie and co-curator Anna Greenacre were welcoming visitors back, and for 2018 Asthall will open those perfectly adorned gates to its ninth On Form, with plans to exhibit in the adjoining ballroom, furnished for the occasion by Lorfor's Antiques. The collaboration with the antiques specialists is all part of Rosie's vision to help people to feel more comfortable around sculpture, and see it as something they can live with in their homes. So what advice would Rosie give to a first-time sculpture buyer? 'Don't worry too much about where to put it. If you've fallen in love with it, buy it. Just put it down somewhere and live with it... Trust yourself and listen to it, too – really get to know it.' Rosie practises what she preaches and her daily life at Asthall Manor is lived alongside sculpture, not in a stuffy, high-end gallery way, but in a part-of-the-furniture way, and she often finds herself absent-mindedly touching a piece as she passes it. 'That's what they're for, not for setting on a plinth in a big empty room.' 

[onformsculpture.co.uk](http://onformsculpture.co.uk); 10 June – 8 July 2018

*Clockwise, from top left: The front of the house at the last On Form, with Achilles Heel by Jordi Raga; Rosie at the kitchen table; Anthony Turner's gatepost sculptures; Giles Wood's painting of the kitchen, which hangs in the Mitfords' former schoolroom; a piece by Anthony Turner in the meadow; refreshments in the kitchen; St Nicholas Church, viewed from the garden, with Sibylle Pasche's Traccia di Vita on the left; the garden door*





## THE STORY

**Owner** Rosie Pearson (pictured above) lives here, and co-curates On Form, a biennial sculpture exhibition at the property ([onformsculpture.co.uk](http://onformsculpture.co.uk))

**Property** Asthall Manor in the Windrush Valley, Oxfordshire, built in the early 1600s in Cotswold stone with many additions over the centuries. It served as a convalescent home during the First World War

**What she did** Rosie added a front drive, relocated a staircase, added a new bathroom and extended the kitchen. The garden has been landscaped







Above: In the kitchen's new bay window, an Australian fruitwood table is teamed with bold, contemporary chairs. The two sculptures on either side of the window are by Anthony Turner. On the table are freshly gathered flowers from the garden  
 Right: Paddington – so-called because he's a handsome marmalade cat – snoozes in the kitchen on an early-20th-century bamboo chair, one of four Rosie unearthed in an antiques shop; for similar, try Raj Tent Club





## Jacobean Manor House



*Below:* In the living room, the original ceiling corning is highlighted in striking claret; for similar, try Little Greene's Theatre Red. Isabel Bannerman bought the blue dresser for Rosie's kitchen at auction, but it didn't fit the space. Luckily, Rosie is happy to use it here. On the table in the window is a striking sculpture by Guy Stevens. For a similar denim sofa, try Sofa.com. The cushions and curtains were made by Joanna Smith-Ryland in Jane Churchill's Elephants fabric

*Left:* Above the fireplace is Rosie's great-grandfather's coat of arms









*This page:* This oak-panelled room would once have been the manor's main hall. The Howard sofas are from Hares Antiques in Cirencester. On the table is a mushroom sculpture by Ben Russell, and one by Luke Dickinson. The Portuguese rug was Rosie's mother's  
*Opposite:* On the piano are two pieces by Guy Stevens, while on the stool is a work by Anthony Turner. The tapestry stool, just seen, belonged to Rosie's mother

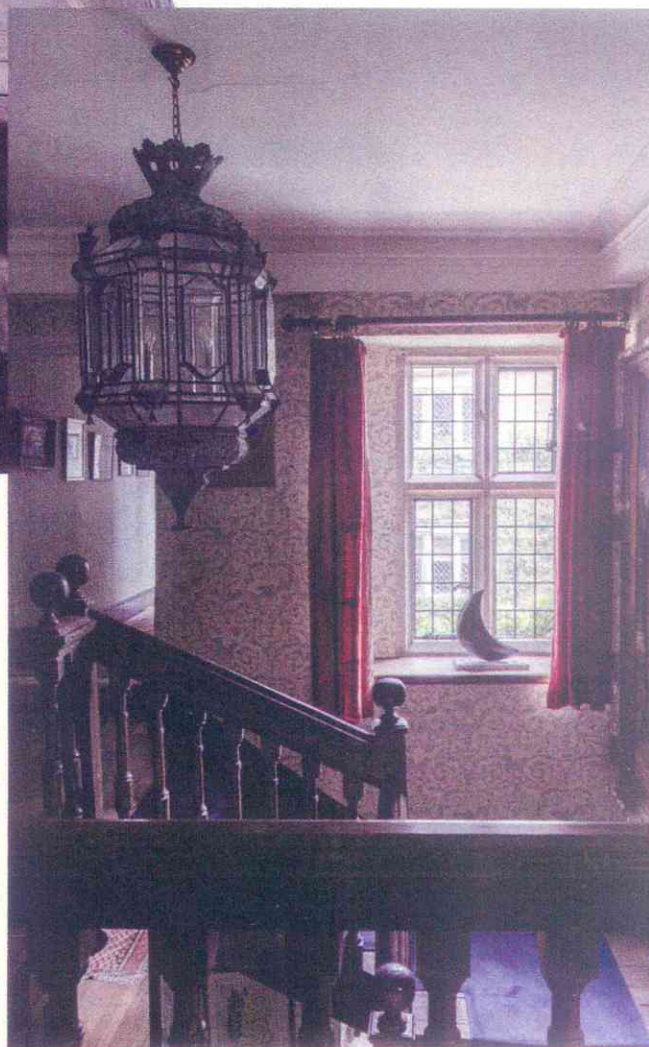






Above: The grand staircase, with a folksy painted chair (probably Russian), a quirky tapestry found in Stow-on-the-Wold, and wallpaper by Designers Guild

Right: A beautiful lantern, that the Bannermans found in Turkey, lights up the stairs. On the window ledge is a sculpture by Aly Brown, entitled Dark Moon



Right: Rosie bought the wicker pram from one of Lyon Oliver's auctions, which, says Rosie, were 'always full of eccentricities'. The upholstered shutters in the Manor's main hall were designed by Rosie's cousin Joanna Smith-Ryland, as a way of keeping in the heat, without spoiling the look of the leaded windows and panelled window seats







Right: Rosie added this yellow bathroom as part of the alterations to the house. Architect Robert Franklin encouraged her to make it a spacious room. The blind is made in Sweet Treat fabric by Kravet. The sculpture on the window ledge is called Hathor, by Jason Mulligan

Below: The patchwork quilt in the spare bedroom came from a junk shop in Witney. The headboards were made by Lucy Harrison Interiors, fabric as above, and the curtains and Roman blind in Manuel Canovas 'Bahamas' fabric. The chair is from Habitat. For a similar traditional cast-iron radiator, try Period House Store. Flowers supplied by Daylesford

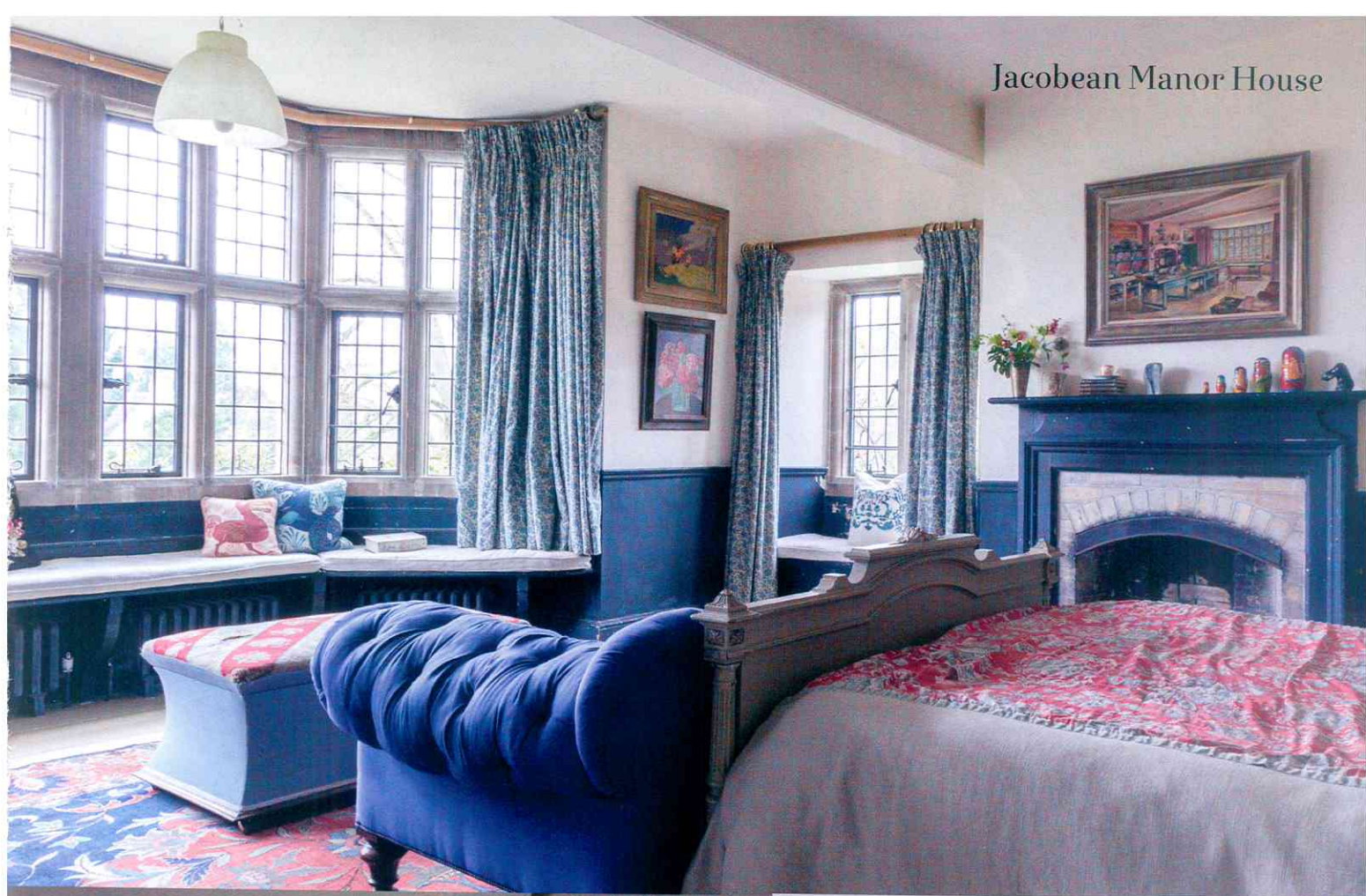
Opposite: This bedroom was once the Mitfords' schoolroom. Their governess used to shut the curtains if a funeral was taking place at the church opposite. The bed is from Seventh Heaven and was Rosie's first internet purchase in 1999

Opposite, bottom left: The sculpture by the fireplace is by Aly Brown, and by the window is a tapestry stool that belonged to Rosie's mother

Opposite, bottom right: A second bathroom, with Rosie's father's weighing scales









990 wood-fired range with  
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Penny Morrison

Fern Stripe Chintz  
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Shanxi Green vintage  
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# MANOR HOUSE BRIGHTS

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