

THE HILLES ARE ALIVE

From William Morris and Isabella Blow to Alexander McQueen and Bryan Ferry, Hilles House has played host to Britain's creative influencers for over a century, as **Lucie Muir** discovers



FROM ABOVE: Hilles House, near Stroud, is a unique Arts and Crafts creation; Detmar Blow; the grounds are as inspiring as the architecture

Detmar Blow is on pothole patrol. Halfway up the tree-lined approach to Hilles, the magnificent Arts and Crafts house in which Blow resides, he stops to chat with the builders charged with filling in any rogue holes, and invites them to help themselves to a beer from the fridge. They politely decline. After all, it's only 30am and they are wielding heavy power tools.

The pothole inspection is all par for the course for Blow, who launched his luxury wedding venue business a year ago. Today, civil ceremonies are held beside the cavernous fireplace in the Big Hall, under the rather apt *Beati Pacifici* ('blessed of the peacemakers') coat of arms that dates to James I, while the reception is held in the grounds, inside the impressive Grand Palace yurt. From afar, the Mongolian-inspired yurt, handcrafted and exquisitely infused with Arts and Crafts details by local artisan William Templeman, presides majestically above the hill. For a house that

has seen its fair share of tragedy and heartache over the years, it is a welcome addition. Indeed, hosting wedding parties over the summer months has given Blow, and the family home his grandfather built over a century ago, a whole new lease of life.

Detmar Jellings Blow, the grandfather after whom Blow is named, trained at the South Kensington School, now The Royal College of Art. In 1888, aged just 21, he won a Pugin travel scholarship to France. There, he met the intellectual thinker and art critic,

John Ruskin, who advised him to give up formal education and train as an architect. So Blow promptly upped sticks to accompany Ruskin for six months around Europe, working along the way. The roving architect then met William Morris, a leading figure in the Arts and Crafts movement, forging a lifelong friendship that would see Blow among the few to join his bedside vigil the night he died in 1896.

In 1913, Detmar Jellings Blow purchased a small sheep farm for the grand sum of £1,000. Comprising 67 acres of land,



including the field upon which Hilles is built, it was part of an auction held by Knight, Frank & Rutley on Hanover Square. His grandson, who loves the criss-crossing nature of life's synchronicities, notes that decades later his late wife, the fashion editor Isabella Blow, was working in Vogue House on the opposite side of the square.

Blow senior was a Fabian and his back-to-nature principles were put into practice during the construction of Hilles. His eclectic circle of associates, including Morris, Augustus John and Rodin, no doubt influenced his Arts and Crafts aesthetic. As a result, elements of nature and light, together with natural materials like wood, stone and thatch, were blended seamlessly throughout the house and grounds.

Today, Arts and Crafts gems can be seen at every turn, although the 40ft x 20ft original William Morris carpet from Clouds House, Wiltshire, purchased by Blow's grandfather from a sale of Morris artefacts in 1926, is absent from the Big Hall today. Asked about this, Blow replies: 'Oh, it's having a little holiday in Homerton.' In other words, it's having a deep clean by specialists in East London.

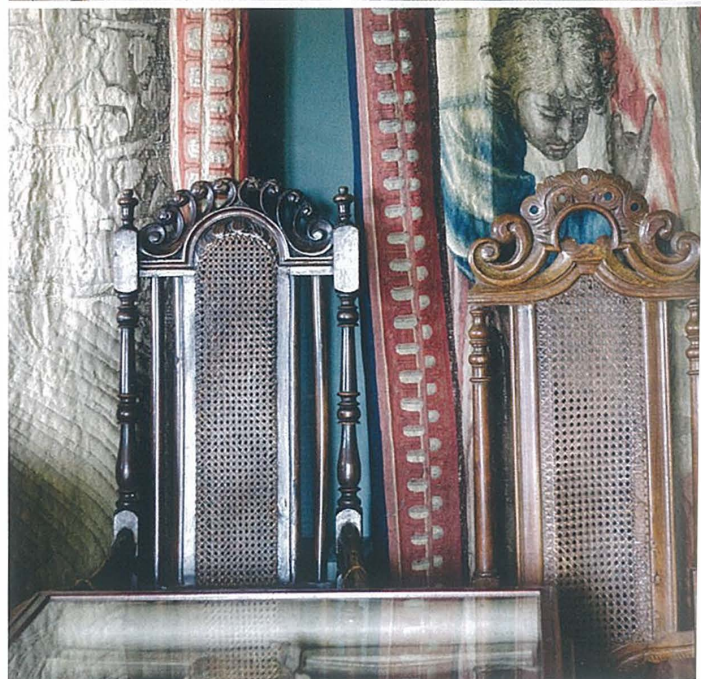
Other notable pieces can be found in the Long Room, which leads off the Big Hall, entered through a large arched doorway that's discreetly crafted into the wood panelling. Here, Murano glass goblets, designed and commissioned by Jellings Blow, glint in the cabinet above the fireplace. A beautiful Mortlake tapestry, dating to 1680 and featuring a biblical scene, weighs heavy on one wall. A display case is brimming with curios, including a handwritten note from Blow senior to William Morris. This will have delighted the group of volunteers from Kelmscott Manor, Morris' Cotswold retreat, who visited Hilles over the summer.

As to his early memories of Hilles, the house's current custodian points to the late '70s. Following the death of his father, writer Jonathan Oliver Blow, his mother, luxury hotelier Helga de Silva Blow Perera, returned to her native Sri Lanka, leaving a teenage Blow and his siblings – fashion designer Selina and polymath Amaury – to fend for themselves during boarding school breaks. With no car and little supervision, the trio would often drive to the local shops on a lawnmower or play cowboys and indians all over the house.

'Back then, Hilles felt isolated and romantic, we lived in our imaginations, rather like my young son Sasha does when he comes to stay,' says Blow. Not that you have to be a ten-year-old boy to let your imagination run riot here. The house feels charged with a unique energy and its walls resonate with the spirit of those who lived here before. There are, of course, subtle and poignant reminders of the late Isabella Blow, who took up residence at the end of the '80s.



FROM TOP LEFT: The Big Hall leads into the Long Room, which features Murano goblets designed by Blow's architect grandfather; Hilles House is full of secret corners; and stunning pieces of art, like the 1680 Mortlake tapestry; the Long Room is filled with curios from across the centuries



'Issie brought huge creative energy and vision to the house,' says Blow. During the 'Issie renaissance', as he likes to call it, Alexander McQueen, whom Isabella discovered during his graduation show at Central Saint Martins in 1992, would come here to unwind. 'Lee loved nature, going on walks and sketching birds,' he notes. During his visits, McQueen would reside in the Primavera guest room – once the bedroom of Blow's grandparents. The sunlit room takes its name from the stunning Edward Burne-Jones/William Morris tapestry featuring Botticelli's *Primavera*, which covers an entire wall.

Other prominent visitors during this time included milliner Philip Treacy and Roxy Music frontman, Bryan Ferry. Then came the art world glitterati – gallerists Stuart Shave and Max Wigram and artists Mat Collishaw, Tim Noble and Sue Webster, many of whom were introduced to Hilles by Blow's close friend, Gregor Muir – Director of Collection, International Art, at Tate. According to Blow, a former gallerist himself, many of the best 'art parties' would take place in the aforementioned Long Room. After dark, the lights were dimmed and celebrated guests would take to DJ-ing on the well-worn record player.

'Nothing beats waking up at Hilles, slightly singed from the night before and peering out from behind those heavy tapestries onto the heavenly valley below,' says Muir.

These days, Hilles is home to Blow's partner, the artist and filmmaker Martha Fiennes – albeit a landing stage between her London residence and frequent work trips across the pond. She's currently roaming the top-floor Gazebo or 'turret room', an architectural eccentricity added by Blow's grandfather that plays on the seigneurial idea of being able to survey the surrounding estate from above. Indeed, it's the perfect spot from which to look down onto the garden below, which in July is bursting with colour. Walking slowly with a laptop outstretched in front of her, Fiennes



resembles a modern-day dowder, in search of a good internet signal rather than spring water. I wonder if the 17th-century solid pewter plates and chainmail suit of armour, which line the stairwell below, could have anything to do with the intermittent signal.

'If you are a creative person, you are sensitive to lots of things and you are certainly sensitive to form and light and place at Hilles,' says Fiennes. 'These three Arts and Crafts fundamentals are very potent here. Each room receives light from the order of one's movements, so the house is super-special to me – you are always seeing new angles and illuminated spaces.'

Of course, the rooms are draughty, especially during the winter months, which explains the small army of portable electric heaters dotted about the place. The original single-pane Crittall windows are hardly conducive to keeping the heat in. No wonder Fiennes affectionately calls the house 'Wuthering Hilles'.

'Such is the wind high up on the hill here in winter, it feels like you are on a galleon at sea,' she says. 'And just when you think you can't stand it a minute longer, you wake up the next day to see this incredible mist, with deer nibbling apples from the trees, and all is forgiven.'

With its drystone walls, oriel windows and yew hedges, the house must have looked especially striking last November, on the night her younger brother, composer Magnus Fiennes, hosted his 50th birthday party here. As part of the festivities, a huge wicker man burned on the front lawn, while local Gucci illustrator, Alex Merry,

pranced around it with her group of pagan dancers.

Back in the cosy kitchen, Blow reverts to wedding mode. There have been ten weddings so far this year, and plans are afoot to host a series of salon-style art talks and sculpture installations in 2020.

Clearly excited about Hilles' latest chapter he notes: 'I'm thrilled to be giving local employment to the hotels, caterers, florists and pubs in nearby Painswick and Stroud. I have my grandfather's name, which is something I feel very strongly about, and I try my best to live out his utopian values. It's as if history is repeating itself – it's all about sharing the cake with everybody, so to speak.'

And he couldn't care less what anyone thinks about his latest vocation for hosting weddings. 'When I last saw my good friend Bryan [Ferry], the first thing he said to me was, "So, I hear you're now a vicar,"' Blow recalls, hooting with laughter. 'Don't worry,' he says, 'I'm not about to join the clergy just yet.'

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