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THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

The 18th-century drawing-room chimney piece carved with pastoral scenes was originally intended for the dining room – it cost £22 when it was made. The large oil painting is an 18th-century copy of Van Dyck's portrait of the children of Charles I

ESTATE EXPECTATIONS

When Dr Philip Mansel inherited Smedmore House, a 17th-century manor on the Dorset coast, his high hopes for its future were founded on its past. From a lawsuit to a taunting ghost, giggling schoolgirls to men-at-arms, the historian revived his family home by uncovering the stories behind its walled gardens and Georgian façade. Ruth Guilding lends an ear. Photography: Tim Beddow

SMEDMORE House is a long way away from anywhere, 10km along looping switchback lanes from the nearest town. It lies in a green declivity with its ancient outbuildings and gardens tucked in behind, an escarpment of Purbeck stone above and the land and sea stretching away to France in front. The shallow bay at Kimmeridge, with its fossil-filled cliffs and teeming marine life, is part of its estates, along with the little village of the same name. Very little has changed here since some modest building improvements made during the 18th century.

Smedmore has been sold only once, when the De Smedemores left in 1391. The present house was begun around 1610 and filled up with a cargo of superb marquetry furniture and paintings in 1934, the property of Lady Elizabeth Villiers, a childless Victorian born of a wealthy Dutch family, who left everything to her niece (family name: Mansel). The estate has passed down by inheritance through seven centuries to Dr Philip Mansel, a historian of France and the Ottoman Empire, a founder of the Society for Court Studies and one of the most urbane men that I have ever met, with 11 books to his name.

'It all looks peaceful, agricultural and English; in fact it's always been warlike, industrial and international,' says my host. He lists the Samian ware and Roman jewellery found locally, the Norman Conquest, Dutch and French investment in the bitumous shale works here, local fishermen seeking their fortunes in America, and that other local industry, smuggling. 'France is very near. Mobile phones automatically switch over to France telecom.'

Smedmore is full of treasures and the stories that go with them. There is a tiger's gravestone in the garden, a chair made by George Bullock for Napoleon during his exile on St Helena, and a pair of ebonised Japanese cabinets of the type associated with Daniel Marot. But as a child in the 1960s, Philip was bored, longing for London and the consolations of the Harrods bookshop, with its novels of African adventure by Rider Haggard. Now he sees the house through the lives of his prede-

Top: in the entrance hall is an elbow chair of ebonised beechwood made by George Bullock for Napoleon. Above: a portrait of the French king Louis XVIII, the subject of a historical biography written by Philip, hangs above a sofa in the Swedish Empire style. Opposite: a landscape by Joseph Tudor, showing the obelisk raised after the Battle of the Boyne, came by inheritance from Godart Baron de Ginkel

The dining-room table is laid with porcelain from one of two huge dinner services. Its walls are painted a warm pink that becomes lighter as it rises up the walls to the ceiling

cessors, whose clutter of needle-cases, spectacles, letters, diaries and sketchbooks are still stuffed into tin boxes, drawers and cabinets in almost every room. He has become the custodian and curator of their secrets. 'This is my creation; in here I've put anything I could find,' he says in the family museum he has made next to the old butler's pantry. 'This is the gold coin won at cards off Napoleon by Colonel John Mansel, gallant officer. My mother's father was blinded during World War I – that's the bucket for washing his glass eye.'

'This is my great-great-grandfather, and that's his brother, the father of Dorset molluscology, John Clavell Mansel-Pleydell,' he continues. 'These two great-aunts, who were terrifying old ladies, were nurses in World War I; their mother was a suffragette who was arrested for breaking the windows of the War Office (this I found out through Google; it had been airbrushed out of family memory). She had a very conventional husband, a hunting colonel who literally came a cropper and died in the hunting field, of course.' Asked if there is anything here of his own, he points out the medal pinned to his chest by the French ambassador, appointing him *Chevalier des Arts et Lettres* in 2010.

Beyond the locked pantry door, a stone-flagged passage with discarded carcass furniture parked edge to edge leads to the disused Georgian kitchens, where his uncle hosts the occasional shooting lunch. 'Believe me, it *was* grungier,' says Philip. 'This is the apple loft, and this was the housekeeper's room. My aunt remembers going there with notes from her parents and running out because she was so frightened of her.'

There was a lawsuit and a ghost in the early 19th century, and then a period when the house was let to tenants, but in the 1920s the village men ceremoniously towed the returning Mansel family up the drive. By 1935 Arthur Oswald could write in *Country Life*: 'It has again become the family home.' This was the last and perhaps the only time (until now) that Smedmore had its photograph taken. 'My aunt can remember the furniture being moved and people giggling when the photographer arrived,' says Philip. But Smedmore's

Top: in the oak-panelled Cedar Room, early 17th-century portraits of Count and Countess Wassenaar flank a Queen Anne walnut bureau cabinet which is crammed with previous generations' papers and sketchbooks. Above: a vitrine holds family miniatures, mourning lockets and a Wedgwood anti-slavery medallion bearing the legend: 'Am I not a man and a brother?' Opposite: the Turkish room is Philip's work in progress

Top: a glass vitrine on the bedside chest of drawers holds doll's-house furniture made in the 18th and 19th centuries. Above left: one of a pair of huge 17th-century Dutch bird paintings in the manner of Hondecoeter. Above right: the galleried stairwell with barley-sugar-twist balusters and portraits of 19th-century ancestors. Opposite: a guest bathroom is decorated with a frieze of old delft tiles running around the dado

renaissance was short-lived. 'All this went on until 1939 and then stopped,' he says, in the walled gardens, planted with lush grass and apple trees, where the silhouettes of stoves and cordons are still visible. Major Mansel returned to his regiment and Smedmore was briefly let to a girls' school from Potters Bar, whose dust-furred medicine bottles stand abandoned on an upstairs shelf. The house was then requisitioned by the army, which afterwards decamped with snuffboxes and a pair of duelling pistols. 'The war is still going on,' says Philip, against the distant clatter and crump from the military firing range a mile off. 'There were always wars with the sea, wars within families about wills, rich against poor, servants against master.'

Philip inherited Smedmore in 1989. 'My parents' taste was restrained; there was a lot of beige.' Since then he has spent the royalties from his books on bringing back beauty and colour, introducing rugs of russet, pink and blue woven in Istanbul, and tall Oriental jars to fill with garden flowers. The hall is apple-green, the drawing room a glowing custard-yellow. His friend, the late Gervase Jackson-Stops, mixed a Tintoretto pink for the dining-room walls from test swatches that were preserved behind the door but then accidentally painted over. Another friend, Frouz Fartasht, helped him hang up plates from two of Smedmore's dinner services in 2008. 'The plaster work is by the under-researched 18th-century Dorset craftsmen, the Bastard brothers of Blandford.'

Much of his life and work happen elsewhere, but Philip laboured against all advice to ensure that Smedmore's landmark Clavell Tower was transplanted 25m inland from the crumbling cliff edge and leased to the Landmark Trust. Thomas Hardy took his first love, Eliza Nicholl, there, and the folly inspired PD James's thriller *The Black Tower*. 'Everyone kept saying to me: "Let it go, Philip,"' he remembers. Perhaps the Mansel motto, *Quod Vult, Vult Valde* ('What he wants, he wants very much'), applies after all ■

Smedmore House is available for rental. For more information, ring 01929 480719, or visit smedmorehouse.com

Top: in the 18th-century kitchen, two plank panels salvaged from the stables are carved with the names of the grooms and stable boys who lived and worked here long ago. Above: Smedmore's main front was added to the house in the 1760s by George Clavell. Opposite: maps, charters, pedigrees and many other items are stored in the museum corridor, including the doll collection made by Philip's grandmother