



The formal
gardens at
Mapperton in
Dorset

ESTATE OF THE UNION

*How an English Viscount and his American wife are harnessing the power of matrimony
to preserve the splendour of Mapperton, their historic family home*

By Catriona Gray

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HARRY CORY WRIGHT

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Sitting at the heart of two thousand acres of verdant Dorset farmland, Mapperton is one of England's most enchanting manor houses. Dating back to the Elizabethan era, the mellow, honey-coloured buildings are clad in masses of purple wisteria in the spring, which give way to rambling roses with the approach of summer. Mapperton has only been the seat of the Earls of Sandwich since 1956, but the family – after relocating from an even bigger stately home, Hinchingsbrooke House in East Anglia – have made it so much their own that you would be forgiven for thinking they had been in residence for centuries.

Wander through the wood-panelled corridors and you uncover all manner of architectural marvels, spread over three floors and three wings. Inside the east bedroom of the north wing, you will find one of the finest ceilings in the country, adorned with plaster pendants and emblazoned with fleurs-de-lis and coats of arms. The soaring staircase hall is hung with family portraits that chronicle the Sandwich dynasty since the 1660s, and behind the house lies the greatest surprise of all: an elaborate formal garden hidden at the bottom of a steeply sloping combe. From the front of the manor, it is impossible to discern its existence, so when you finally discover the lines of neat topiary and elegant pools, the effect is almost otherworldly; the very image of gracious, easy living.

The reality of running this exquisite estate, however, is anything but effortless. Three years ago, the 11th Earl and his wife handed Mapperton over to the care of their eldest son, Luke Montagu, the Viscount Hinchingsbrooke. He now balances overseeing the vast enterprise with London life in a terraced house in Wandsworth, which he shares with

his wife the Viscountess (otherwise known as Julie), and their four children, who range in age from 12 to 20.

Today, the entire family is in residence at Mapperton for the school holidays. The private section of the house – located via an old servants' entrance – is in a state of merry uproar, with countless pairs of boots left in the hall and everyone attempting to do a dozen different tasks at once. Luke's mobile phone buzzes almost continually, and Julie is similarly in demand. A former cheerleader from the Midwest, she brims with energy and optimism. 'We met at a drinks party, but I didn't know anything about Luke's background to begin with,' she confides. 'It wasn't until three months later, when I saw him pay for something with a credit card that had "Viscount Hinchingsbrooke" on it that I found out. Not long after that, I visited his family home for the first time, and although he had warned me that it was rather large, I wasn't prepared for the sheer scale and history of it.'

The demands of running the estate are daunting indeed. 'Down here, we have a housekeeper, but it's not as if somebody's laying the table or emptying the dishwasher for us. We do all that ourselves,' says Julie. 'You do need some help in a place this size though – it takes half an hour just to close all the curtains at night, and another half an hour to

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open them again in the morning.' The house and garden alone cost £100,000 a year to maintain, while repairs add another £100,000 to the tally, more than consuming the income generated by the land and properties – even though the house featured in the 2015 film of *Far from the Madding Crowd* and the 1996 adaptation of *Emma* starring Gwyneth Paltrow.

'Mapperton has struggled over the years,' Luke admits. 'When I got involved, the first thing I did was to talk to other people who

had been in similar positions, to see what could work here and how we could diversify. We have been trying to raise visitor numbers and increase the amount of weddings that are held on the estate. Who would have thought that weddings would be the saviour of the English country house?' So the Montagus have recently transformed an old stable block into an airy space for large receptions, with a fully equipped kitchen and biomass heating, which Julie also uses for residential yoga retreats (a trained teacher,

Julie and Luke Montagu with their children, from left, Jack, William, Nestor and Emma



OPPOSITE: JACK WEARS WOOL POLO SHIRT, £185; PAUL SMITH; JULIE WEARS FIL COUPÉ DRESS, £2,495; ROLAND MOURRET; VELVET HEELS, £525; CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN; LUKE WEARS CASHMERE JUMPER, £880; CHINOS, £60; BOTH BRUNELLO CUCINELLI; EMMA WEARS CREPE DRESS, £1,960; ERDEM; VELVET HEELS, £495; MALONE SOULIERS; ALL OTHER CLOTHES, THEIR OWN



LUKE WEARS CASHMERE JUMPER, £1,580, BRUNELLO CUCINELLI. JULIE WEARS SILK DRESS, £995, PAUL SMITH. SEE STOCKISTS FOR DETAILS. HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY AMY BRANDON, USING AVEEDA AND LAURA MERCIER



Clockwise from above: the formal gardens. The Great Chamber. Luke and Julie in the gardens. The hall, one of the oldest sections of the house. Centre: a Montagu family crest. Opposite: the staircase hall, featuring ancestral family portraits





This page: the entrance to Mapperton. Opposite, clockwise from top: the drawing-room. A lion detail in a stained-glass window. An antique Flemish tapestry in the dining-room

she has her own company and runs seven classes a week in London). ‘It can be rather frightening to open up a family house like this for people to stay in, but hosting a group of yogis is ideal,’ says Luke. ‘They tend to be sympathetic and gentle, and they don’t mind if there’s the odd bit of shabby paintwork.’

A further, still less conventional revenue stream has come from Julie’s television work. In 2014, she reluctantly accepted an invitation to appear on the ‘socialites and shopping’ reality-TV show, *Ladies of London*. ‘We have school fees and we have four kids and it was a decent paycheck,’ she explains, pulling a face. ‘But with those shows, the last thing they want is to portray you in a positive light. And I get it – they want the drama. If you don’t have drama, you’re fired...’ When the show was cancelled, she was so delighted, she cracked open a bottle of champagne, she says. ‘But the silver lining to *Ladies of London* was that it helped to build my profile, and it gave me a platform.’

Indeed, as an American who has married into the British aristocracy, she has in recent months found herself much in demand as an expert commentator on Meghan Markle, and presented coverage of the Royal wedding for the BBC. ‘About 60 journalists had special access, so after the ceremony we were placed right next to where Meghan and Harry started their procession. It felt quite surreal – there were just a handful of us clapping and cheering while they waited to face the enormous crowds outside.’

Meanwhile, Luke (who dislikes being referred to by his title) has a similarly entrepreneurial bent. Having studied cinematography, he set up the Met Film School, one of the UK’s largest media colleges, and continues to make films on subjects such as forgiveness, for distribution to schools. As a trustee of the Dalai Lama Centre for Compassion, he is deeply interested in ethics; this is reflected in another non-profit organisation that he set up, the Council for Evidence-based Psychiatry, in response to his own appalling experiences with prescription drugs. Following side-effects from a sinus operation he underwent as a teenager, he was

put on antidepressants and subsequently spent 19 years on a combination of drugs, taken under medical supervision, that left him with crippling withdrawal symptoms and chronic pain. Having sued his doctor for negligence and won a £1.35 million settlement, he is determined to prevent others from experiencing a similar fate. ‘There aren’t many things you come across in your life that are such obvious injustices, and I feel rather fortunate to be in a position to help,’ he says.

Despite the demands of running Mapperton full-time, Luke remains very engaged with these other projects. He is not the only member of his family to have bold ideas – his younger brother runs a popular sandwich chain in the US, which is called, appropriately, the Earl of Sandwich, in homage to their ancestor, who invented the world’s most popular snack. (Legend has it that the first Earl was responsible for bringing the choc-ice to Britain, so clearly this enterprising streak has been passed down the generations.)

With such a wealth of history at Mapperton, it is all the more commendable that the heirs to it all are so deeply grounded in the present. Luke and Julie are surrounded by an aristocratic legacy that has

endured for centuries, but they are both very outward looking, and have thought deeply about what they want to pass on to their children.

‘For us, it’s about placing values above things. I often tell the kids that everything could be gone in a heartbeat,’ says Julie, with a gesture that encompasses Mapperton’s priceless furniture, ancestral portraits and exquisite textiles. ‘At the end of the day, it’s about the relationships that you have with others in your life, in particular your family. That human connection is the most important thing to us – it’s the legacy that we want to leave.’ □

Mapperton (www.mapperton.com).

