

The Remix



Words by **Catriona Gray**

Interior designer Cindy Leveson is the creator of many of Goodwood's sumptuous interiors. Catriona Gray talks to her about combining antique and modern touches, the enduring appeal of country house style and how to sprinkle a little Christmas magic on your home

For over 20 years, the decorator Cindy Leveson has been adding her elegant imprint to Goodwood's array of fine buildings and rooms. From major restoration projects, such as the transformation of Hound Lodge, to regular refreshes of some of the grandest rooms in the main house, Leveson's trademark is to create comfortable, liveable spaces that celebrate the past yet feel airy and modern.

Leveson is a doyenne of the contemporary country house style, creating traditional interiors that are suited to 21st-century tastes and effortlessly balance old with new. Her commissions have ranged from rustic hunting lodges, their ceilings hung with hundreds of antlers, to smart townhouses where exquisite pieces of 18th- and 19th-century mahogany furniture sit happily alongside contemporary pieces and lighting.

She has an instinctive eye for good furniture, learnt from her mother, who dealt in antiques. Leveson spent much of her childhood visiting dealers and fairs, which left her with an innate ability to discern the real from the fake. Her career began as a stylist in the 1980s, working with a noted photographer called Charles Settrington, who specialised in shooting still-life images for advertising campaigns. That same Charles Settrington, of course, later became the Earl of March, and is now the Duke of Richmond. "It was the best grounding for becoming a decorator," she says. "If you can survive being a stylist, you can pretty much survive anything, as your thinking has to be so lateral."

Their projects were certainly varied, and she built sets that ranged from Victorian-style drawing rooms to bold visions of the future. One campaign, for Osborne & Little, saw Leveson recreate a river in the studio, complete with a boat. The oars were borrowed from Eton's First Eight, at the Duke of Richmond's suggestion, and wrapped in wallpaper for the shoot.

When the Duke moved into a new property, he persuaded Leveson to decorate it. "I'd never worked on a house before, but I eventually agreed," she says. Other commissions followed, which led to her transition to becoming a full-time interior decorator. "In the beginning, I didn't know I had a particular style, but as the years went on it became clear I had a leaning towards England and the country look. Chintz has never gone out of fashion for me, nor has brown furniture. In every job, I've persuaded my clients – even the most modernist ones – to include something old somewhere. A room needs to be grounded, it needs a bit of history, whether it's a piece of furniture or an ancient cushion."

Today, her work is varied, with projects in both London and the country, although she does return regularly to Goodwood for ongoing work, most recently on some of the private bedrooms in the house, which she had initially redecorated when the Duke and his family first moved in. Her traditional aesthetic means there's less chance of the schemes dating, especially since she often works with antiques inherited by her clients, and any updates tend to be minor tweaks or refreshing rather than radical overhauls. "The country house interior has endured as an aesthetic because it works," she says. "It's comfortable and always looks good, as long as you don't overdo it. You need to have a light touch."

Leveson's work can be seen to its best effect on the Estate, as she has overseen the decoration of virtually all the commercial spaces, including Hound Lodge, Farmer, Butcher, Chef, The Farmer's Bar, The Goodwood Hotel and The Kennels. For all of these projects, she has emphasised the history of the space, to immerse visitors in a sense of place, yet the atmosphere in each of the buildings is subtly different.

Opening pages: The Snug at the Goodwood Hotel. This page, from top: Cindy Leveson, and some of her sketches and design details



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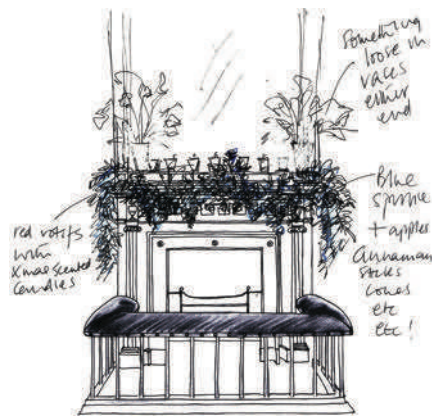




“We wanted Hound Lodge to feel like a private house but one that you could rent,” she says. Formerly used as kennels for the Goodwood Hunt, it was completely transformed for its opening in 2016. The kennels were turned into bedrooms, while two new wings were added to create a large drawing room and dining room. Aside from 20 paintings and half a dozen pieces of furniture, Leveson had to source every single item, right down to the china and glass. Everything has a local element: the mattresses are stuffed with wool from the Goodwood sheep and the communal areas contain an impressive library of books – gradually amassed by Leveson – all of which are about the Richmond family, Sussex, hunting, dogs and country life.

“Collections help to create an atmosphere,” she says. “It could be a particular artist or certain objects, whatever appeals to you. A thoughtful display always makes a space look interesting.” At the Estate’s restaurant, Farmer, Butcher, Chef, she has accumulated what is perhaps her most impressive collection yet, a huge assortment of items that line the walls, referencing the restaurant’s heritage and ethos. There are clusters of vintage English kitchenalia; fragments of shell-work and neoclassical cornicing; farming equipment, ranging from brightly painted spanners to rusty farming tools, and a wonderful miscellany of treasures, such as pressed flowers and iron keys, all carefully curated to create a museum-worthy display that will hold your interest from first course all the way through to pudding. Her next major project on the Estate will be the redesign of the hotel.

At Christmas, Leveson also has a hand in Goodwood’s festive appearance. She has created decorations for The Kennels, Hound Lodge and Farmer’s Bar, which have become the template for Goodwood to copy for the years to come. She loves festooning the Estate’s fireplaces with greenery and decorating the tables with seasonal berries and foliage. Warm, cosy and welcoming, the many spaces at Goodwood are particularly compelling during the depths of winter, where there’s always a roaring log fire and a comfortable chair to sink into. It’s the secret to Leveson’s success – the ability to create interiors that are so inviting, you never want to leave.



From top: the dining room of Farmer, Butcher, Chef, with its collections of old plasterwork, butterflies and vintage ephemera; Leveson's sketch for Christmas fireplace decorations

Cindy Leveson's Christmas decorating tips

Think about creating focal points: the key areas are the tree, the staircase, and the fireplace. For me, I always make a point of dressing the fireplace – it looks so welcoming and festive. It's best to use real foliage – make sure to buy spruce, as the needles won't drop and make a mess. You can order spruce swags in the length you need from your local florist, then add extra branches yourself to make it appear really sumptuous. Of course, you can buy imitation garlands, but the real ones look better and make the entire house smell wonderful. I twine lots of fake berries into the foliage along with ribbons and decorations – they're a one-off investment as they can be reused every year.

I love wrapping Christmas presents, and they can make quite a statement when they're heaped up en masse. I only use one type of wrapping paper and one kind of ribbon in two widths, depending on the size of the gift. Each year, I do something different: leopard-print paper with black ribbon; glossy red paper with shocking pink bows; or black and white stripes to create a monochrome effect. They look so wonderful that it can be very disappointing when the time comes to give them away.

In terms of the Christmas tree, I'm quite averse to “done” schemes. I prefer an assortment of decorations that have meaning to you and your family, and which have been gradually accumulated over time. I always encourage my clients to start collecting, and if they have children, to keep any homemade decorations from school. It may not look very sophisticated but the sentimental value is so much more important. It's what Christmas is all about.

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