

# INTERIORS

## Bossington Hall



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and Guy Dewdney



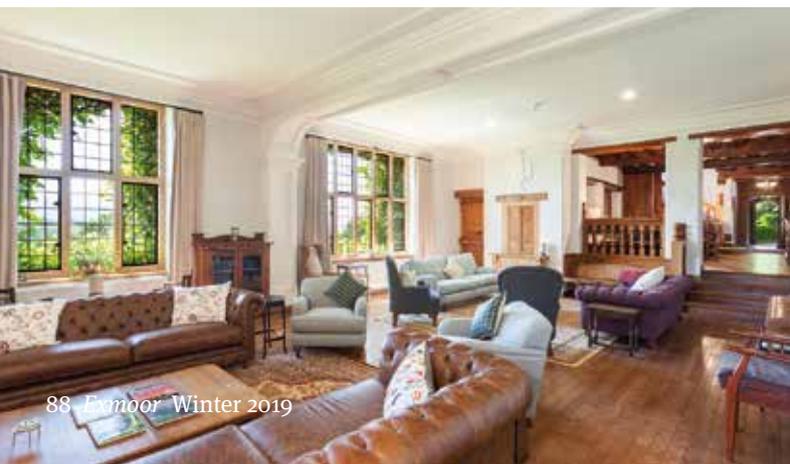
This story begins with a ray of sunshine falling on an Exmoor orchard and a rich man's vision. It ends where it started, with the fulfilment of a dream.

Allan Hughes and Guy Dewdney both wanted a house whose unobtrusive elegance enhances but does not dominate a landscape that rolls majestically from Dunkery Beacon to Porlock Bay and from the Bristol Channel to the North Devon coast.

They both got their wish because shipping magnate Allan built a magnificent Edwardian mansion on a hillside at Bossington in William Morris' Arts and Crafts style using local craftsmen and indigenous materials. He called it Lynch, after the nearby Lynch Combe, and one of his family described it as "grand but not at all pretentious".

Guy Dewdney, a property developer, lived with his then wife in a nearby watermill and the house on the hill was writ large in both his surroundings and his thoughts. "We used to discuss what we would do if we could buy it," he said.

His dream finally came true two and a half years ago and, now restored to its original glory and renamed Bossington Hall, the building provides the sort of stylish luxury which, Guy wryly observed, is normally reserved for millionaires and lottery winners.



Guy had only five months to wind back the clock more than a century and turn what had become seven holiday apartments back into a single magnificent country house, which now provides for parties of up to 30 guests, with 15 bedrooms and 14 bathrooms. The 7 reception rooms have been restored to their Edwardian elegance.

Since then, meticulous attention to detail and a standard of service which would not be out of place in Downton Abbey has brought solid bookings for all of this year and most of next. "It's incredibly hard work to maintain the standards we have set ourselves, but we have a system which makes the house run like a well-oiled machine," Guy said.

"The idea is to keep the place so immaculate that arriving guests could be forgiven for thinking no one else has ever stayed here!"

Guy is no stranger to daunting renovation projects. "My father was in property and I grew up with the smell of lath and plaster walls and ceilings being pulled down." He had spent the previous year rebuilding a burned-out house in Porlock and, prior to that, many years on a massive restoration of Lynch Mill.

"When the hall came up for sale there was a lot of soul-searching about how we would make it work as a business and we decided to go for the whole house holiday let – family get-togethers, anniversaries and so on. That meant restoring it back to being a single dwelling.

"One problem was that as we were signing up to buy it I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer but we still decided to go for it." The disease is thankfully under control but Guy was in no mood to make concessions. He remembered emerging from radiation treatment at Exeter, driving to Brighton to pick up furniture, and from there to North Yorkshire to buy 30 Edwardian-style dining chairs before returning to Exmoor via the Lake District.

"That was the sort of thing you had to do if you wanted to get this place sorted on schedule."

Researching the history of his new acquisition, Guy discovered that Allan Hughes had owned

the New Zealand Shipping Company which dominated Australian and New Zealand meat exports with a fleet of the first refrigerated vessels.

A keen stag-hunter, Mr Hughes rented a house at Chapel Knap, Porlock Weir, before the First World War and spent an increasing amount of time on Exmoor. The story goes that looking across the valley to a distant orchard, he remarked: "That's the place to build a house – there's always a patch of sunlight there."

He bought 40 acres of land around Lynch Combe, commissioned the architect C.H.B. Quennell to design a house in the Lutyens style and engaged local contractor, John Cooksley, to build it. Cooksley brought in 19 men, including eight masons, five carpenters, a plumber, a thatcher and two boys, as well as five horses, and started work in September 1911. The build would take nearly two years.

Guy has ledgers detailing the local materials stipulated in the Arts and Crafts philosophy: stone from Hawkcombe and Lynch Combe, bricks from Alcombe, slates from Treborough, Porlock millstones, alabaster blue rock from Blue Anchor and timber beams from Luccombe.

An intriguing item was "three hundredweight of hair for plaster". Where that came from is anybody's guess.

At the centre of the house was what was known as the 'home place', the family sitting-room which was designed to entertain up to 200 people. It had Italian marble fireplaces and oak said to be from old ships' timbers.

Water filters, sluices and slate shelving were installed in the cellars and the vast attics contained cedar wardrobes to protect fur coats from moths. Water came from a reservoir in Lynch Combe, which is still used for the garden today.

When workmen took up floorboards to replace the central heating (the new wireless system is controlled by an app), they were bemused to find paper quilts stuffed with what looked mightily like the crispy seaweed served in Chinese restaurants but turned out to be 100-year-old industrial freezer insulation made out of sea grass from Kentucky. "We left it because it's really good insulation," Guy said.

Imposing though the main house was, it seemed that by 1923 the Hughes family outgrew it, and what became known as the 'Nursery Wing' was added to the back of the property, making a total of 28 bedrooms, half a dozen bathrooms and a dairy.





*The grounds and terrace at Bossington Hall offer stunning views of the coast and moors and include tranquil corners (top right) such as the Tennis Pavilion by the court and Googie's Bridge.*

The house was surrounded by eight acres of gardens planned by Mr Hughes' wife Googie, and which contained a bowling green, squash and tennis courts, stables for a dozen horses and kennels.

Guy says that by now there was hardly a family in Allerford which did not have someone employed at Lynch. There were six gardeners and three grooms, plus a chauffeur who drove Googie out every day in an American Buick, and seven indoor maids.

Mr Hughes appeared to share the philosophy of a former Duke of Bedford whose gardeners were told to throw themselves in bushes when he approached to spare him from having to see working men.

Guy told us: "It seems men were not employed in the house as Mr Hughes said they were dirty, stole your silk handkerchiefs and drank your port!" He also showed us the frosted glass in the corridors, installed so that servants could move about unseen by the family.

Mr Hughes intended the estate to be at least partially self-supporting. Daffodils were sent to Covent Garden, and after the Second World War, five acres of Allerford Meadow became a market garden, but with only limited success and it was thus returned to grassland.

In an altruistic move to prevent workers losing their jobs, Mr Hughes bought more land on which to raise sheep, poultry and pigs. His son-in-law, Sir Gonne Pilcher, introduced Exmoor's first Danish Landrace pigs, and lettuce, tomatoes and flowers were grown under glass until Sir Gonne's death in 1966.

Mr Hughes never lost his love of hunting. Earlier he had bought 1,000 acres of Dunkery moorland and in 1934 it was given to the National Trust by his wife with a covenant preventing the Trust from banning hunting. Mr Hughes and others also bought the Deer Park near Oare to preserve it for hunting.

The Hughes dynasty ended in 1982 when the house was sold at auction and converted into seven self-catering holiday apartments. It changed hands again before Guy Dewdney bought it in 2017 and brought it both forward to the new millennium and back to the grace and elegance of Edwardian England.

Grace and elegance come at a price but Guy is convinced it's good value. "Recently we had a family who previously stayed on a caravan site at Brean Down. They discovered we were cheaper than staying in six caravans on a campsite and they had a wonderful time.

"At the other end of the scale was a titled lady who arrived with two Filipino servants in a very posh car. What all our guests have in common is that they're looking for comfort and tranquillity in an astonishingly beautiful place.

"A week's stay starts at £7,000, a week at Christmas next year will be £11,000 and prices start at £4,500 for a weekend. It might sound a lot, but spread it across 30 people and it's about £50 a night. You can't often stay in a pub for that."

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