



# PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

EAST LOTHIAN'S YESTER HOUSE IS RESTORED AND REVIVED,  
READY FOR ANOTHER 300 YEARS OF GRACIOUS LIVING

Photography ZAC and ZAC Words Catherine Coyle





n the hallway, at the bottom of a splendidly imposing staircase, a tree has been installed, decked in fairy lights and flanked by comfortable cushions. It's an unusual addition to an interior, but one that in this case represents the life that has been captured and redirected back into this vast, grade A-listed stately home in East Lothian.

When Nicola and Garreth Wood first came to view Yester House, Nicola was not immediately drawn to it. Having recently started a family and completed renovations to their own extensive home, Nicola wasn't sold on the idea of starting the process all over again, and certainly not on a much, much bigger property. "When we looked at Yester House, I thought perhaps Garreth's plan was to turn it into a private country club," she says. "So when he suggested it as our family home, I couldn't see how I would have the time to take on a renovation of this scale."

Over the next few years, the couple continued to view properties, but nothing quite measured up to Yester House. "Then I heard through the grapevine that it had sold," Nicola recalls. "My heart sank. I felt really disappointed that we'd missed out on it." As luck would have it, a short time later, the owners called to see if the Woods were still interested, and this time they jumped at the chance.

Designed by Scottish architects James Smith and Alexander McGill in the 17th century, with some ▶

**[Previous pages]** Built in 1715, Yester House sits on almost 500 acres of East Lothian land. The porte-cochère (on the right) was a later addition, created for those arriving in horse-drawn carriages. It's now the main entrance to the house. The pavilion (on the left) has been remodelled as a guest wing.

**[Left]** Here, in the entrance hall, the flagstones were cleaned up and the fireplace (one of 20) was reopened, setting a welcoming tone. Artworks by Peter Howson and Alexander Millar add personality, while decorative pieces such as the Timothy Oulton pendant light show the scale of this enormous space



[Right] "The corning, panelling and decorative plasterwork were all in good shape and didn't require refurbishment," recalls Jeffreys' design director Alison Vance. "We wanted to emphasise the beauty of the vaulted ceilings here so we added LED lighting." The walls are painted in Farrow & Ball's Skimming Stone and Slipper Satin. The fireplace was repurposed from another room, and the fender, bench and rug are by Clockhouse

later additions and alterations by the great William Adam, Yester House was owned by the Hay family, Marquesses of Tweeddale, until the 1960s. They sold it to the Italian-American composer Gian Carlo Menotti, who'd been seduced by the acoustics in the ballroom and planned to create an opera house in a derelict stable block on the estate. When Menotti died in 2007, his son Francis took on the property, before the Woods purchased it in 2013.

With her renovation experience, Nicola realised this was going to be a gargantuan task. Nevertheless, it was one she knew she wouldn't be able to pass over entirely to the professionals. "I felt it should be a collaborative approach," she explains. "I loved being involved in every aspect of the project. Even when it's something seemingly small, if you are retoring a house to be your home, you have to be completely happy with it."

That's why feeling a connection with the designers at Jeffreys Interiors of Stockbridge, in particular Alison Vance and Jo Aynsley, was key to the success of this project. Collaborative working was so strong, in fact, that when the job was eventually finished, after almost four years (making it the largest project Jeffreys had ever undertaken), Nicola now counts Jo and Alison as two of her close friends.

"I had around a year and a half's worth of tear sheets and pages from magazines – things that I ▶











liked or wanted to try,” she says of the process. “But one of the most surprising things during this project was how my tastes developed.”

The Woods’ planning was already underway with specialist conservation and heritage architects Groves Raines before the team from Jeffreys started working on the interior scheme with Nicola. It was she who signed off everything, down to the last cushion. The house covers 3,200sq.m over four floors, with a pavilion annexe now converted into a self-contained apartment. There are 13 bedrooms, 11 bathrooms and no fewer than 20 fireplaces. There are even 12 rooms in the basement. One full-time housekeeper, plus a team of experts on call for everything from maintaining windows to specialist glass cleaning and repairing chandeliers, keeps Yester House meticulously maintained.

“Close teamwork and being involved in the nuts and bolts of the job, on ▶



**[Previous pages]** The salon was previously the ballroom, and still has its original sprung floor. The wall panels were painted in the 1760s by William Delacour and restored over the course of six weeks by Mr and Mrs Bell Artists. Nevin of Edinburgh carried out specialist cleaning and repainting of the walls, woodwork, cornicing and architectural detailing. Three bespoke floor coverings by Turnberry Rug Works help to zone the vast space. Sinclairs made up the window dressings (each drop is 5m), requiring 73m of Mark Alexander fabric. **[Above]** Artist Rachel Bell painted the panel over the fireplace in the style of the Delacour works that she’d restored elsewhere in the salon. The house’s original fireplaces were brought back to life by specialist firm Thistle & Rose. The plasterwork was in good condition but reaching it was tricky: “High scaffolding was erected while the team from Nevin’s sprayed the ceiling and painting the detailing,” says Jeffreys’ head of design Jo Aynsley. “While they were up there, they found hidden signatures on a little scroll – it was the last decorators, in 1968. Nevin’s and Jeffreys’ details have now been added and hidden away again.”



[Right] Nobilis wallpaper creates a neutral backdrop in the relaxed family space. Owner Nicola Wood wanted her home to be cosy and welcoming, so the bespoke L-shaped sofas are oversized and comfortable. The refurbished gilt-edged mirror came with the house. Its partner is in the children's playroom. During the restoration, the Jeffreys team discovered that the salon's chandeliers were originally from Kensington Palace. The sideboards were supplied by Pieter Porter

“YOU ALWAYS WANT YOUR HOME TO BE COSY AND INVITING. BUT IN A HOUSE OF THIS SCALE, WE HAD TO THINK ABOUT HOW TO DEAL WITH THE PROPORTIONS OF EVERY ROOM”





[Below] Big Croc wallpaper by Elitis complements Farrow & Ball's Brinjal paint in the ground-floor study, where the original bookcases have been scumble-glazed for effect. The mood here is rich and modern thanks to the Wychwood orange chairs and the Emma J Shipley Darth Vader cushions – a nod to Gareth's love of *Star Wars*. [Below] The tiger sculpture by Jack Vettriano features his singing butler and is one of two, bought at auction supporting the Elephant Family Foundation



had to think about how to deal with the size and the proportions of every room.”

She believes the good condition of the roof was one of the main reasons why the plasterwork, cornicing and ornate ceilings, especially that of the first-floor salon, have been so beautifully preserved. In fact, specialist decorating firm Nevin of Edinburgh only had to clean up the plasterwork and repaint it. There was also a reconfiguration of some of the rooms, to better accommodate 21st-century life. The kitchen was relocated to the centre of the living areas on the ground floor; on one side is a relaxed living room for adults, and on the other is a children’s playroom. Making this move was important for Nicola, who was well aware that most households run off a central kitchen in the heart of the home.

Upstairs, the original enfilade (a suite of rooms formally aligned with each ▶







things like the placement of electric sockets, for example, meant that there was no need for retrofitting and we could problem-solve in the most practical sense,” recalls Alison Vance, design director at Jeffreys. “A job like this has the potential to feel overwhelming, so we broke it down, room by room, planning from the entrance and moving more broadly from there.”

The greatest successes at Yester House are the rejuvenated original features that allow history and contemporary family life to co-exist. The design scheme hasn’t ignored the building’s roots, but it has worked them into a style that allows this to be a comfortable, family home. “That was really important,” agrees Nicola. “You always want your home to be cosy and inviting. But in a house of this scale, we ▶



**[Left]** The kitchen was relocated to a bigger, more central space on the ground floor – the heart of the home. Owner Nicola worked with Sculleries of Stockbridge to design a multi-purpose space for family living. The huge island has an Aga at one end and a Belfast sink at the other. The floor had to be reinforced to support it. Wide-board oak flooring by Strathearn was chosen – its non-slip textured surface was a must for the dogs and children. Elisabeth James supplied the consoles, with the dining table and chairs from Elizabeth James Antiques adding a hint of period glamour to the neutral-toned kitchen. **[Above]** Philanthropists Nicola and Garreth Wood set up global children’s health charity KidsOR in 2018, and the dining room is a formal space for fundraising events. The bespoke table, which can seat 24, has been colour-matched to the existing console tables. The chairs are by Wychwood Design. **[Right]** The tree installation is by Abhika and breathes life through the staircase







[Below] The walls of the master bedroom have been upholstered in a Mark Alexander fabric, with a bespoke silk wool carpet by Turnberry Rug Works for added luxury. The four-poster, made by Beaudesert, is 3m tall and is the biggest bed the company has ever made. The kingsize Sankey sofa at the foot is 2.5m long. The room's original shelving and architectural detailing have been cleaned up and repainted. [Top left] The bathroom is by the Bathroom Company, with flooring by Strathearn and curtains by Lewis & Wood. [Bottom left] The dressing-room cabinetry is by Sculleries of Stockbridge







**[Left and top right]** The 'travel room' is where guests like to sleep. The ceilings are not quite so lofty up here in the attic, making it feel cosy. The original hand-painted Zuber wallpaper panels were peeling and turning yellow; they have now been restored and framed in black, with Little Greene's Drummond on the walls. Both the sofa and the writing desk are original to the house. **[Bottom right]** The walls curve in this bedroom which inspired a carousel theme. The carousel horses were hand painted by Rachel and Cornelius of Mr and Mrs Bell Artists

other) has been opened up, creating a sense of flow and ensuring the whole family are connected. The space now consists of a grand master suite – the master bedroom, individual dressing rooms for Garreth and Nicola, a treatment room and the master bathroom – which in turn links to the bedrooms of the couple's young daughters.

In the first-floor salon, hand-painted panels by William Delacour dating from 1761 have been restored in situ by Mr and Mrs Bell Artists. "While the paintings were being repaired, the restorers found marks that can only have been caused by the spray from champagne bottles," recalls Jo, Jeffrey's head of design. "There were also feathers stuck to the paint from some previous owner's pet parrot!"

This room was originally used as a ballroom and it retains its sprung floor – a nightmare for the electricians, who were not allowed to lift the timber. Gian Carlo Menotti's grand piano remains in the room where the acoustics are best, and Garreth and Nicola's daughters are now learning to play it. In the attic, the 'travel room' has original panels by Zuber, the venerable French wallpaper maker; these were cleaned up and their red hue was taken as the basis for the rest of the decoration. This room is now guests' favourite place to sleep.

The key to this renovation has not been to faithfully replicate the interiors or restore them to their original state, but rather to acknowledge the house's classical heritage and sympathetically adapt it to its new residents. "A lot of furniture came with the house – ▶







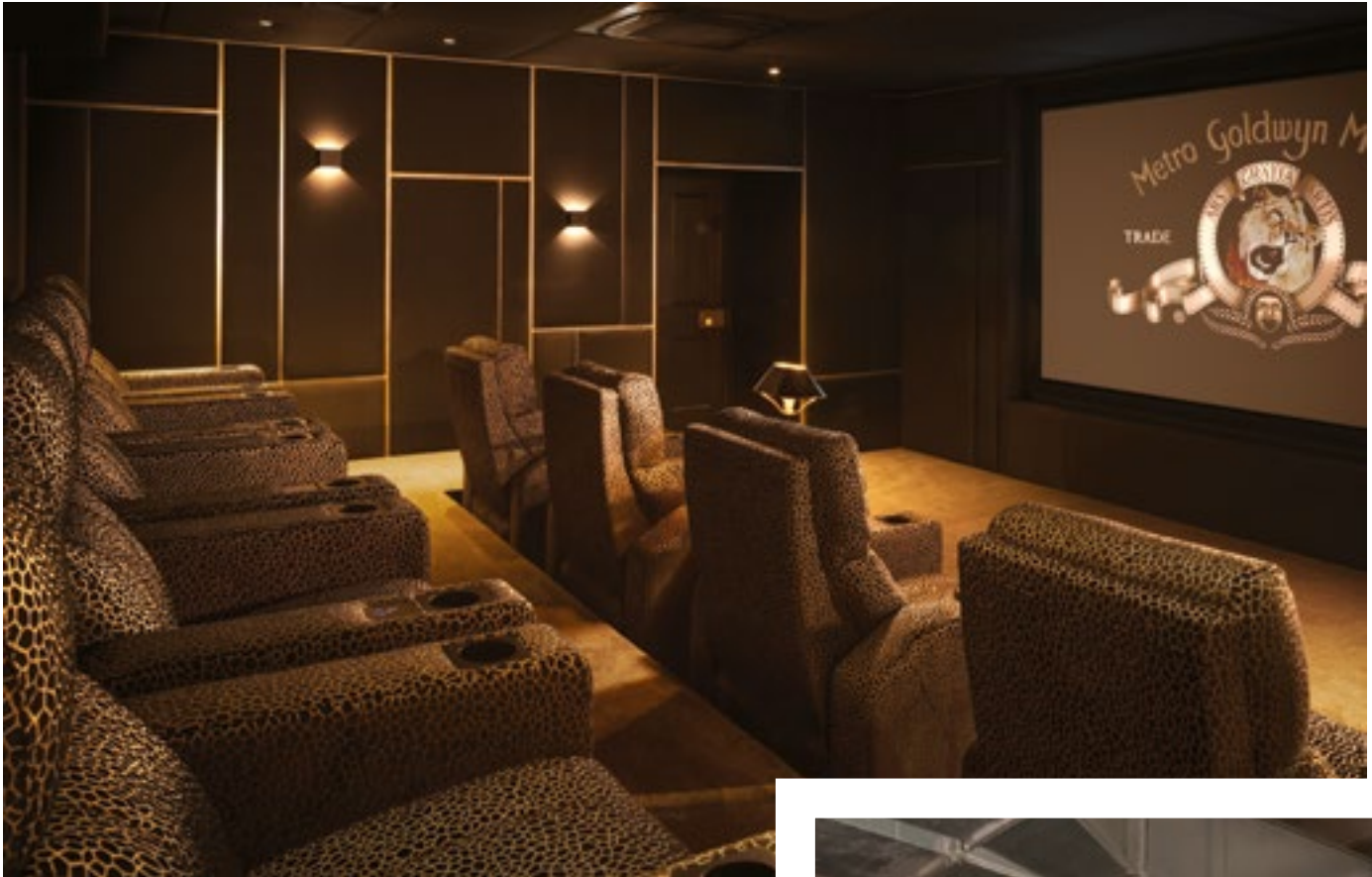
Bespoke joinery by Ogilvies of Haddington gives the couple's children a wonderful bunk room with lots of space and storage. Below the castellated mezzanine, the children have their own dressing room, and there's a Jack and Jill bathroom, too



console tables, mirrors, wardrobes," says Nicola. "I probably had more of a rustic, natural style, but Alison and Jo enlightened me how certain pieces can be reused within more modern contexts – and how more contemporary looks can work in a traditional setting."

The house has a warm and natural flow between the vast spaces, with a palette of soft neutral colours and subtle textures that add depth and character to each room. Where the interior designers have really excelled, however, is in the way they've made light of the truly vast proportions of this house by getting the scale of their interventions just right – the ceilings are a towering 6m high in some rooms, for example. To give an indication of the scale, floor lamps have been used as table lamps in the dining room, so massive are some of the pieces of furniture. Bespoke pieces commissioned by Jeffreys from the likes of Edinburgh cabinetmaking ▶





[Above and right] The damp, dark basement is now a playground for grownups and kids alike. Jeffreys worked with Ideaworks and Clockhouse in the cinema room to ensure that sound from the hidden speakers could penetrate the fabric walls. There is also a gym area located on the lower ground floor

firm Charlotte James, meanwhile, are so deliberately understated that you could be forgiven for thinking they'd always been part of the house.

Conversely, down in the basement level, the warren of rooms once housing the servants' quarters, original kitchen, pantry and laundry has been turned into a colourful modern playground. It's an entertainment zone, where this young family can amuse themselves in the cinema room, gym and play pool and revel in the fun-filled home they've created.

"We're a sociable family and normally the house would be full of people," says Nicola. "I feel most proud of what we've achieved when visitors tell me it's cosy and warm and doesn't feel too big or stately." ■

