

**B**EDFORDSHIRE was a crucible for good neo-Classical country houses and interiors. One that has never been recorded before in *COUNTRY LIFE*, however, is the stately Turvey House, recently adapted and refurbished with advice by Peter Inskip, for a new generation—the seventh in the same family as the John Higgins who built it. It's one of several buildings in and around the village of Turvey associated with the Higgins family, on land that for centuries had previously belonged to the Mordaunt family.

The Mordaunts, Barons of Turvey and, from 1628, Earls of Peterborough, were the principal landowners in the area from the 13th century and their outstanding and memorable tombs can be found in the parish church. In the 17th century they also inherited Drayton in Northamptonshire. By 1786, however, the 5th Earl of Peterborough was obliged to sell off his Manors at Turvey and Clifton and 19 farms.

‘A powerful frontage to a magnificent suite of interior spaces’

John Higgins of nearby Weston Underwood joined forces with his father's first cousin, Charles (a rich grocer and sheriff of London in 1786–7), and a London banker William Fuller to acquire their Turvey estates. Charles Higgins took Turvey Abbey and the land around that house, as John created a new estate to the north and west of the village. The two Higgins' properties were managed with an unusual degree of co-operation thereafter and both sides of the family contributed towards improvements made to both the parish church and village. Turvey Abbey was later embellished with fragments from the demolished Jacobean house at Easton Maudit in Northamptonshire and is now a Benedictine convent.

In 1793, John Higgins married Martha Farrer, daughter of the neighbouring estate of Brayfield House, in Buckinghamshire. In 1794, on an open site west of the parish church, they constructed a commodious new residence, still the core of the Turvey House we see today. This house was later largely swallowed up in an ambitious 1838–43 remodelling (*Fig 1*), but the elegant stable block to the north-east of the house suggests something of its restrained architectural character. Work to this new residence was presumably completed in 1796, the date on the stables.

A view of the entrance front (then facing south-west) was recorded in a drawing by ►

*Fig 1: Turvey—a façade in Roman cement of about 1840, encasing a 1794 house*

# Updating a legacy

*Turvey House, Bedfordshire  
The home of Charlie and Grace Hambury*

Never previously described in *COUNTRY LIFE*, this fine neo-Classical house has recently been adapted and refurbished by the seventh generation of the family that built it. Jeremy Musson reports

Photographs by Paul Highnam





*Fig 2 above: The domed staircase hall. John Higgins and his wife Martha are seen in the double portrait. Fig 3 below: The landing of the staircase hall presents a memorable sequence of neo-classical details*



the antiquary and watercolourist Thomas Fisher and is thought to date to about 1810. Fisher shows a five-bay central block of two-and-a-half storeys with a pediment over the central bay, and a single-storey porch. To either side were two-storey canted wings and lining the façade was a delicate verandah with Chinoiserie brackets. Annotations on the drawing refer to the roof of the verandah as pea-green, presumably copper. The wings and verandah may have been a late addition to the central block.

The new house overlooked a park that was created from agricultural land. Hedges were removed, trees planted and the River Ouse diverted to form a serpentine stretch of water. In his diaries John Byng, 5th Viscount Torrington, described 'a largish house... with not one tree near it'. He goes on waspishly to imply that Higgins had felled the trees when in fact they had been sold by the Mordaunt family for cash. The architect of the 1790s house is not known, but it was perhaps John Wing of Bedford.

John Higgins died in 1813 and his son, Thomas, did not take control of the estate until he was 21 in 1818. Thomas created the new walled kitchen garden, which is dated 1820,



*Fig 4: The dining room, as remodelled from two rooms in about 1840, looking through to the corresponding drawing room*

but the remodelling of the house followed only after his marriage in 1838 to Charlotte Price. She was the daughter of Sir Rose Price, 1st Baronet, a plantation owner in Jamaica with an estate in Cornwall (the Higgins and Price coats of arms appear in the carved decoration of the staircase hall stone chimney-piece). In June of that year Thomas had written about how 'everything [at Turvey] seems to smile at the near prospect of the fostering care of a mistress'. Thomas Higgins also built a cottage ornée—Turvey Cottage—in 1837. Perhaps conscious of the age difference between

himself and his wife, he may have intended this as a future dowry house.

Numerous Bedfordshire houses were being improved in this period, including Luton Hoo and Wrest Park in the 1830s. The remodelling at Turvey House included the creation of a new entrance to the rear through a new porch of baseless unfluted Doric columns. This new entrance front remained notably austere, whereas the park front was reworked in spectacular fashion in an essentially neo-

Grecian style. The side wings were squared off and raised up and the whole house given an additional attic floor.

A wealth of ornament in Roman cement was overlaid across the façade and covered in a stone-coloured limewash. Paler limewash was applied to three friezes, which are casts after the sculptor Thorvaldsen; the two in the end bays are versions of Anacreon, the lyric poet, being received by Cupid, and the central bay has a depiction of Alexander the Great

entering Babylon, with winged Victory driving his chariot. The result is a splendid façade more the character of an urban set piece in the manner of Nash or Pennethorne than a country house. The striking contrast in character between the front and the other sides of the building must have been carefully considered and is echoed throughout the house.

The work to the new building appears to have been complete by the time of the 1843 tithe map. Thomas continued to improve the ►

landscape between 1847 and 1856, including land exchanges with his cousin, Longuet Higgins of Turvey Abbey. Once again, there is simply no documentary evidence as to the identity of the architect, although there is a Nash-like flourish that might support an attribution to Decimus Burton. Sir Howard Colvin, however, thought Burton unlikely and mooted the suggestion of William Donthorn. Whatever the case, the architect added a powerful frontage to face the parkland and created a magnificent suite of interior spaces.

The route through from the oval entrance hall leads into a lofty, top-lit hall (Fig 2) spanned by a coffered dome and wrapped around with a stone cantilevered staircase and gallery. Opening off the stair at landing level is a room set over the entrance hall, the entrance to which is framed by a screen of fluted Corinthian columns and pilasters. Opposite this, at gallery level on the axis of the room, is an elaborate niche formed by a pair of Corinthian pilasters. Arched doorways and openings to passages have a distinctly Soanian feel (Fig 3).

## Arched doorways to passages have a Soanian feel

On the ground floor, the main dining room, drawing room and smoking room fill the south-west front. The two former enjoy fine views over the landscape to the south and were probably created by knocking together existing rooms of the 1790s. Their decoration perfectly reflects the transition between late Regency and early Victorian taste; the former austere and the latter bolder in character. The drawing room (Fig 6) is a lighter interior with a low-relief panelled ceiling and broad inset alcoves to either side of the elaborate marble chimneypiece (which is probably an addition of about 1900). A deep recess frames a central mirror on one short wall that answers the French window to the garden and the colours in the ceiling are thought to be the original mid-19th-century scheme. The dining room (Fig 4) has walls hung in a deep red damask paper specifically printed on the advice of Peter Inskip during earlier renovation work in the early 1970s. Finally, there is a rich cornice with a plain ceiling, and alcoves for sideboards at each end.

Several pieces of furniture commissioned for these rooms still survive, including walnut sideboards adorned with the family crest of a griffin's head. Throughout these rooms are also many family portraits that give a link to the Higgins' who shaped the house, as well as Italian and Dutch paintings collected mostly



Fig 5: The former smoking room: retaining some early 19th century pull-down maps

in the mid-19th century. These principal rooms still project the comfortable and sophisticated culture of the late Georgian gentry residence that persisted well into the Victorian age; a sense of parade and comfort, carefully designed for the well-developed rituals of reception of guests for dining, with subsequent conversation and performance in the drawing room. The original smoking room, adjacent to the library, has original burr walnut bookshelves with rolled maps by Arrowsmith (published between 1801 and 1804, of Africa, America, Asia and Europe) that can still be pulled down on a cord for close study (Fig 5).

One rather unusual touch on the bedroom floor is given by a section of highly ornamental ironwork spiral staircase that leads to a series of attic rooms (now museum rooms). The spiral staircase was reputedly acquired from the Great Exhibition in 1851 and it seems the attic rooms were then the nursery floor. In the historic service areas of the house are also found 19th century bell systems and leather fire buckets. Thomas and Charlotte Higgins' son, William, extended the park to

the north in the 1870s, created the carriage arch to the entrance court (which bears his initials), and added the Ketton stone balustrade in front of the house. In 1953, the Turvey House estate was inherited by Lady Hanbury, nee Higgins, and her husband Sir Hanmer Hanbury—the latter a grandson of the Sir Thomas Hanbury who laid out the famous gardens at La Mortola, near the Italian border with France. Thomas's son, Sir Cecil, lived at Kingston Maurward in Dorset, where he also created a famous garden, but this was later sold.

After Lady Hanbury's death in 2004, the house has been opened to the public and is also used for events and filming; however, recent works by architect Peter Inskip, completed in 2018, have made the house a comfortable home for Lady Hanbury's grandson, Charlie, his wife Grace and their children. Charlie's father Daniel decided the house would be best taken on by the next generation and lives in a farmhouse on the estate.

The house divides quite naturally into show rooms that face the park and the family rooms



on the north-east side. Most importantly, the works of Mr Inskip and his colleague Stephen Gee have formed a light and elegant modern kitchen out of a 1790s room (Fig 7). This once served as a billiard room but had subsequently become a flower room and retained a classical chimneypiece and plaster cornice. The adjoining gun room, accessed directly from the entrance hall, has become the family cloak room/boot room. A reception room on the west side of the new kitchen has been adapted to become a comfortable modern family sitting room, accessed directly from the kitchen, with fine westward views across the park. To make these changes possible, a set of 1870s fitted bookshelves from this space were moved up to a new museum room created on the attic floor.

These judicious and timely alterations have happily brought new life to a house owned by Charlie Hanbury's family since it was built in the 1790s and support the new business ventures he and Grace have developed on the estate that will give the house the secure economic future it needs.

*Acknowledgments: James Miller, Peter Inskip. For information about rentals, weddings, events and visits, see [www.turveyhouse.co.uk](http://www.turveyhouse.co.uk)*

Fig 6 above: The drawing room, with its richly decorated panelled ceiling and series of arched recesses. Fig 7 below: The new family kitchen, formed recently out of an unused 1790s room, and the jib door connecting to the new family sitting room

