A FOREVER HOME

As 18 Stafford Terrace opens again to the public in September, we find out what makes it such a special, historic home

Words BETHAN ANDREWS

There are an abundance of fascinating homes in Kensington and Chelsea, and many that highlight the luxury of the famously glamorous area of our capital city. But perhaps those that are most interesting are those that show us what life was truly like in the past. Dotted around London, there are some incredible homes that have been miraculously preserved and are now open for the public to explore. 18 Stafford Terrace, formally known as the Linley Sambourne House, is a prime example of one of these properties and is re-opening to the public on 8 September, giving people the chance to see the property in all its extravagant glory.

The Kensington address is where *Punch* cartoonist Edward Linley Sambourne lived with his wife and two children from 1875 and it provides a rare chance to see a completely preserved late-Victorian, middle-class home. As senior curator Daniel Robbins tells me, due to the fact that the house was passed on from one generation of the family to the next, it has survived predominantly unchanged – something often unheard of in the preservation of historic houses.

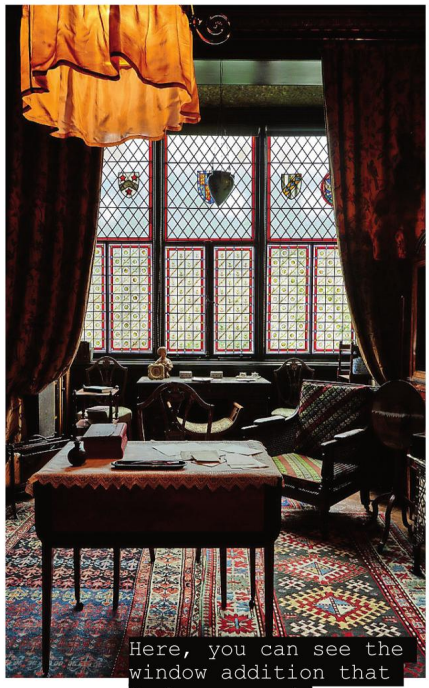
Shirley Nicholson, a specialist in the Victorians, has compiled all the details of the diaries that were left in order to create an accurate picture of family life. 'The National Trust was very busy after the war preserving 18th century mansions, and anything Victorian was completely beyond the pale,' says Nicholson. 'So in a lot of ways it is a miracle this survived. Kensington is rich in artistic houses, but this one actually tells you how life was lived within it too and is the *only* one that retains that.'

So how did it manage to survive so well? 'It was Roy, who was the son who lived here by himself, who made sure that things weren't ripped out. It was really his willingness to go on living here that protected it all in a way,' says Robbins. 'He was very proud of it and always spoke of it as "his beautiful home".'

As a result, the home gives a unique insight into the personal lives of the Sambourne family, and also provides a rare example of what was known as an 'Aesthetic Interior' or 'House Beautiful' style. The Aesthetic Movement of the late 19th century advocated the use of exotic influences in the decoration of the home that can be seen in the various Japanese, Middle-Eastern and Chinese objects throughout the property.

For those who love history, the rooms are filled with the furniture and personal possessions of which the Sambournes left behind. A huge archive of diaries, papers, bills and letters also survive, providing an exceptionally detailed picture of daily life in the house at that time – in many cases, it feels like time has stopped still.

The drawing room is a fascinating insight into the lives of Victorians



Here, you can see the window addition that Sambourne made

'The real significance of this house comes from the fact that it has so remarkably managed to stay as intact as it has over such a long period of time,' says Robbins. 'It was never sold into public ownership until the 80s, and from an early stage the family seemed to know that they wanted it to be preserved in the future, therefore features were always retained – which is very rare.'

I'm told that it has changed a little at times as their granddaughter who lived at the house in the 60s did a certain amount of upgrading, but most of the home is untouched. 'They were over 50 years ago now, so they've also blended in to the original feel of the house,' he says. 'The fascinating thing is that, in many ways, from the outside and the form of the house it is very standard and of it's period but the amazing part is the way in which the Sambournes turned it from a conventional middle class home, to an artistic home of riches and extravagance.'

It is full of surprises and it comes to life with the stories

The house was planned by Sambourne to look as if he was a wealthy, well-established artist. Many attributes of wealthy Victorian homes such as oil paintings or china were expensive, so he covered the walls with prints instead – and if you look carefully the china has cracks, showing that he found a bargain. He would also create mock gilding by using gold paint as a clever cover up and his skill was how he combined it all.

When Sambourne wasn't busy drawing or developing photographs, he enjoyed a strident social life. 'They had very rich friends who would ask them to their country piles,' says Nicholson. 'So a lot of the rooms such as the dining room will have hardly have been used – though you can still see all the dinner party menus from when they did host.'

The morning room is a great example of the alterations that Sambourne made to rooms, as he added a large and elaborate window extension where he would have done his work. Throughout the house is a combination of William Morris wallpapers on both the walls and ceilings, showing the artistic flair of the owner.

The drawing room is a spectacular room in the property and shows how the family liked to live. It is full of surprises too and it comes to life with the insight from the stories, perhaps emphasised when you reach the tiny bathroom upstairs, a room adorned to the brim with Sambourne's infamous female nude images.

The whole house is fascinating for those interested in history and each room really does tell a story. r

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