

HEATHCLIFF OVALLEY FOR THE TELEGRAPH



**ON FORM**  
Rosie Pearson  
and partner  
Anthony Turner  
at Asthall Manor



moved to after Asthall. "Debo seemed to approve of the changes we'd made. She had a Proustian moment when she looked at the plate rack in the scullery and remembered that the kitchen maid's name was Mabel!"

It is in the kitchen that you come closest to a glimpse of daily life here. "When I bought Asthall the kitchen was dark and Edwardian – a place for servants. Now it's where we spend most of our time," says Pearson.

The Mitfords ate in the long hall framed by fireplaces at either end; Pearson has added two portraits of her daughters, Annie and Dora, by Kate Munro Moyston, their bright colours a nod to Jamaica. When Pearson's family home, Cowdray Park, was sold, she inherited the unusual embroidered family crest that hangs over a fireplace.

When they first moved in, the family stayed in a flat above the ballroom where the older Mitford children had lived. It is now a holiday let where you can still see traces of the

thanks, because they were, in the early years, an important part of why people came here. Now people come for the garden and for the sculpture, but they kick-started it all." Last year, 8,000 people visited.

Sculpture spills into the hall, where the panelling dates back to the Redesdale days. "One of the reasons I loved the house was that it felt so untouched," says Pearson. Lord Redesdale, immortalised as Farve in Jessica Mitford's *Hons and Rebels*, sold the house in 1926 to the reclusive Hardcastles, who did nothing to alter it.

When Pearson moved in, Asthall was in a perilous state: the roof was collapsing, timbers rotting. But that was part of its attraction: "I was so pleased that its features hadn't been buried under modern fittings," she says.

After moving back from Jamaica, where she lived for 10 years, she

wanted to make Asthall a comfortable family home – without compromising its history. Mitford fans do turn up occasionally and relics remain, such as the Hon's cupboard, which became the Mitford children's secret domain, where they would gossip out of parental earshot.

The youngest Mitford sister Debo, the late Duchess of Devonshire, was four when the family left Asthall. One day she turned up in her Daimler, en route to her pub, the Swan at Swinbrook, the village the

children's handiwork: the mural which Nancy painted in the yellow room when she was a student at the Slade School of Art still survives (famously she was only there for a month, finding life impossible without a servant to pick up her clothes).

The ballroom is used as a gallery during *on form*, where this year antiques dealer Toby Lorford has designed a room set with sculptures dotted across tables flanked by inviting sofas. "We're always experimenting with ways to encourage people to live with art," says Pearson, who enjoys the idea of Asthall being a creative hub. "It would be

selfish not to share the house." One of the apartments is now a live-work space for designers Yunus Ascott and Eliza Higginbottom, whose screen credits include the jewel-

lery in *Game of Thrones*.

At weekends, guests stay in the "blue" bedroom, where the Mitford girls had their lessons. The panelling and chipped paint are unchanged, as is the window seat overlooking the church. "Their governess would close the curtains as she didn't think it was suitable for the girls to see funerals. Now we look out and we can see wonderful sculptures all over the gardens," says Pearson.

*on form* runs until July 8  
[onformsculpture.co.uk](http://onformsculpture.co.uk)

## Sculpting a future as the Mitfords' legacy lives on

### GREAT ESTATES

Once home to one of the nation's most colourful families, Asthall Manor still embraces creativity, discovers **Serena Fokschaner**

It is easy to see why Rosie Pearson fell for Asthall Manor. On a summer's afternoon, the Jacobean house, with its rose-covered façade, is the quintessence of Cotswold charm.

For Pearson, a former journalist, the house had added literary allure. Lord Redesdale, father of Debo, Nancy, Jessica, Diana, Pamela and Unity Mitford, extended the 17th-century property after the family moved there in 1919, adding the magnificent ballroom, with its Arts and Crafts ceiling. In Nancy's *The Pursuit of Love*, the fictional Alconleigh is partly inspired by Asthall, where guests at hunting and shooting parties in the Twenties included the Churchills and the society portraitist Walter Sickert.

Asthall, near Burford in Oxfordshire,

is something of a shrine for Mitford devotees, and when Pearson bought the house in 1997 she knew she was taking on a literary legacy. But improvements were needed: she commissioned Julian and Isabel Bannerman (who landscaped Highgrove) to transform the six-acre gardens. "Apart from planting a few trees, the Mitfords were never great gardeners," says Pearson.

But that was years ago and the gardens are now one of the reasons for visiting *on form*. Asthall's sculpture show which opens to the public today.

What began as an experiment in the garden with a handful of pieces, including works by Pearson's partner, Anthony Turner, has become a biennial Cotswolds fixture. This year's *on form* – the only UK sculpture show ded-

icated to stone – is the largest yet, with works by artists including Helaine Blumenfeld and Lucy Unwin.

Like everything here, *on form* is done with style and wit, including the signs which urge visitors: "Please DO touch". "Art shows can be intimidating, but the garden is welcoming with twists and turns and we exaggerate that by the way we place the sculptures," says Pearson, pointing out armadillos on the croquet lawn.

"I sometimes say 'don't mention the Mitfords', as they can be a distraction from what I'm trying to do now, but I realise that I should give them a nod of



**ART HOUSE**  
Inside Asthall, left; and below, a work by Jon Isherwood

