

# A truly GREAT HOUSE

Flamboyant, stylish, outspoken: Sir Roy Strong has spent a lifetime inspiring the public with his love of art, history and gardens. Now he's championing a £3.36 million project to restore Westonbirt House and grounds to their former glory. Photography by Mike Charity

“I had no idea that a mid-Victorian house of such magnificence existed. It is a superb structure; all the workmanship is of the highest throughout.”

Sir Roy Strong on Westonbirt House

IT'S AN autumn morning at a school in Gloucestershire. Downstairs, the plain tables are arranged in disciplined rows waiting for the next school dinner to be served; upstairs are the dorms, full of single beds and cupboards for school uniform. Outside, the chill dank air pushes against the tall windows...

Now let's stop there. There are certain scenes which, whatever your age, catapult you back into the past with deadly accuracy. And this, surely, is one of them. What does it conjure up for you? The start of term? A dull feeling in the pit of the stomach? Utilitarian rooms with gym bars lining the walls? The smell of stale, boiled cabbage?

Well, you can forget all that. This is Westonbirt, an independent girls' school widely acclaimed for the happy and caring atmosphere it generates for its several hundred pupils. But more astonishing than that: there are no gym bars in this dining room; no bleakly-painted walls, nor aromas of overcooked cabbage.

Instead, here are riches almost beyond belief. In this dining room, the ornate ceiling of magnificently-gilded flowers, the silk-covered walls and the grey stone-carved fireplace speak of country gentlemen – of wealthy magnificence – not of lively schoolgirls. Out in the saloon next door, the oak and walnut staircase, roofed by a heavily-moulded coffer ceiling, is made for tiny-waisted well-to-do Victorian ladies to descend in dove-grey Princess-line ball gowns. On the first-floor gallery, cherubs frolic on dark green and gold leather panels, surrounded by pomegranates, butterflies and birds; there are insets of burgundy gaufrage velvet – embossed by hot rollers – that echo Italian renaissance designs. And a girls' dorm, leading off from the gallery, is enlivened not by posters of the Kaiser Chiefs or The Killers but by duck-egg blue panels, hand-painted with oils, depicting castles and birds and scenes of bucolic bliss.

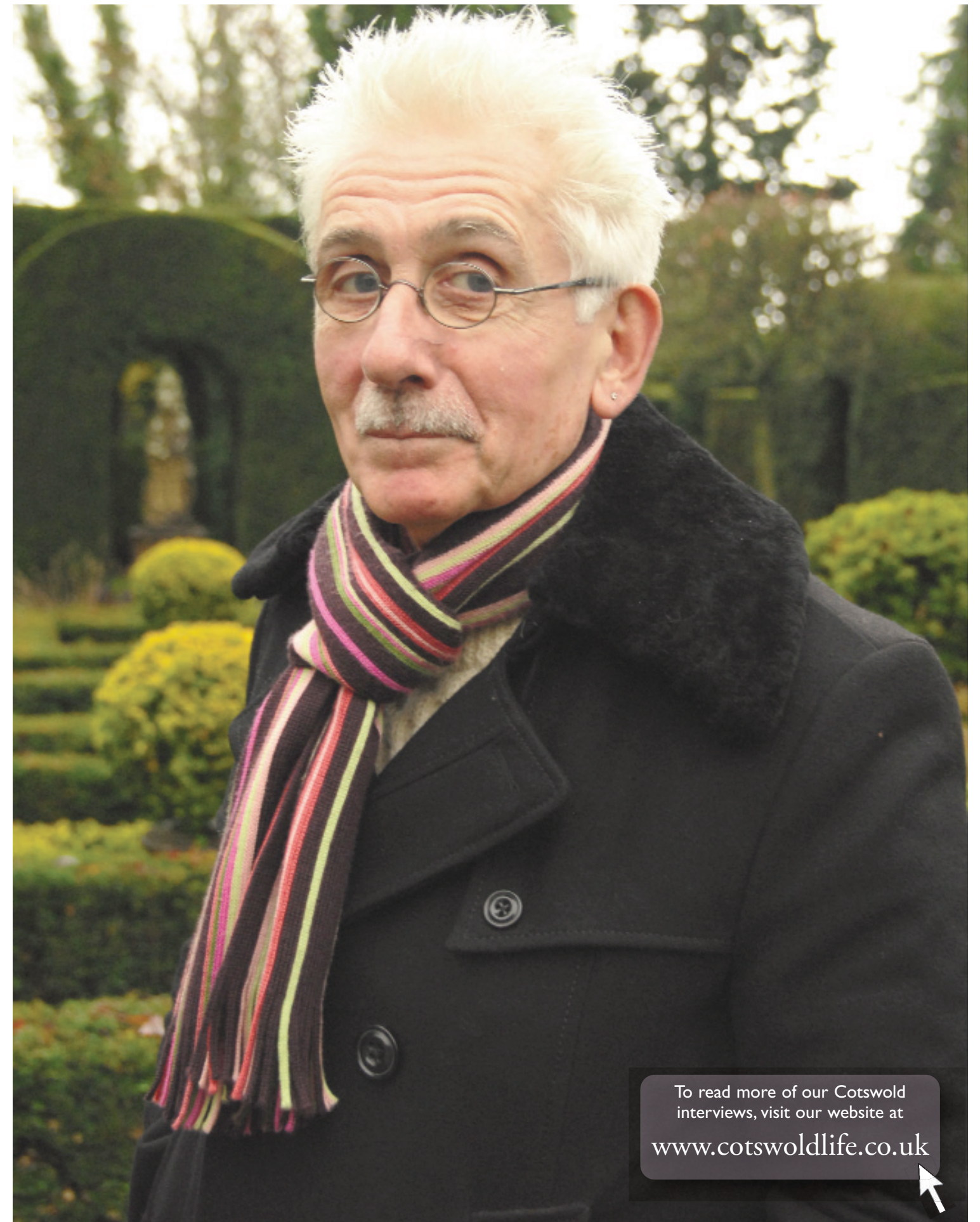
And in the middle of all this magnificence stands Sir Roy Strong, keeper of public treasures. He's here at Westonbirt to unveil a memorial to the man largely responsible for creating all this splendour – the Victorian collector, Robert Stayner Holford – and to promote the work of The Holfords of Westonbirt Trust. This newly-formed charity, of which Sir Roy is a vice president, is dedicated to the ambitious £3 million-plus task of restoring Westonbirt House and grounds to their former glory.

“This is an amazing house, not greatly known, and it should be more greatly known: it will become one of the places to come and see,” Sir Roy tells the gathered onlookers.

There's a portrait gallery in Sir Roy Strong's Herefordshire home, lining a bright corridor leading from hall to kitchen. There, on the walls you'll find the most extraordinary array of photographs. Among them, there's an impossibly romantic Tessa Traeger study of Sir Roy in profile, all flowing locks and draped shirt; a Cecil Beaton, taken in 1967, where (thanks to clever *trompe l'oeil*) Sir Roy dallies among ruffled 17th century noblemen negotiating a peace treaty.

“I think that would be a favourite,” he says, pointing to a David Bailey in which his own surreally magnified eye peers out disconcertingly at the viewer. “What are you staring at?” it seems, pointedly but politely, to enquire.

Well you wouldn't expect a dull photograph of a man known for his idiosyncratic style; whose outfits are so sartorially elegant, some are on show in Bath's Fashion Museum (“The suit was worn with a striped shirt and tie from Turnbull & Asser”...); and whose diaries are full of intimate glimpses of the quick and the dead, the quirky and the dreadful: Margaret Thatcher, The Queen Mother; Princess Michael, Mrs Shand Kydd. ►



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