



A panel with a Musgrave family inscription in the architrave above the front door at Johnby Hall



# Pele of laughter

Henry and Anna are the latest Howards to live at Johnby Hall, near Penrith. **Sue Allan** meets the couple and is shown round their family-friendly Tudor manor house

**Photography by Jenny Woolgar**

**J**ohnby Hall looks serene and inviting in the early spring sunshine. Looks can, however, be deceptive, for the Grade II\*-listed Tudor manor house near Greystoke hides behind its façade a fortified tower house built to fend off Scots incursions in the 14th century.

A warm welcome awaits me today though, when Anna Howard meets me at the door and ushers me up a beautiful stone spiral staircase to the Great Hall, where her husband Henry is stoking a woodburning stove in a vast fireplace. The sun streams in through the leaded windows overlooking the front drive and gardens, giving a warm glow to old oak furniture in the room and illuminating the family coats of arms and portraits on the wall.

Knowing that 14 generations of Howards have lived at nearby Greystoke Castle I assume Johnby Hall has always belonged to the Howard family, but I'm wrong.

"No, we bought it," says Henry, "... in 1783. The Duke of Norfolk (a Howard) got it mainly for the land, to add to his estate, but



Henry and Anna Howard and their son Nicholas in the vaulted dining room



The Great Hall has a beam bearing family coats of arms; below: the large paddock at the back of the house, a relief created by Henry's great-aunt, the hens

the house came as part of the package and was probably tenanted out. He then passed it to his favourite nephews – that chap over there, my great-great-great-grandfather, also called Henry Howard,” he says, pointing to one of the family portraits.

“By the end of the 19th century the house was a bit run down, until the sister of Henry Howard, my great-aunt Maud Leyborne-Popham, returned home following a failed marriage. She lived here for 30 years, did up the house and put in the garden and a wildfowl pond. She was a great Victorian arts and crafts lady. She single-handedly carved this fireplace surround, and the tiles at the back are from the Johnby Tile Works, which she set up to give employment to local people.”

The impressive oak surround is beautifully carved with birds, animals and foliage. Great-aunt Maud was evidently a very accomplished artist as well as a pretty formidable character.

“She was also a potter. There are some terracotta figures of hers in the cottage next door,” says Anna “One of our bed and breakfast apartments is in what used to be her studio. She’s also renowned for creating a large window at the back of the tower part of the house so she could have a 7ft cast iron bath installed.”



Maud died in the late 1920s, after which Johnby was tenanted again until Henry's godmother Glory Howard and her husband Bernard moved in from Greystoke Castle. Henry takes up the tale: “Glory was widowed soon after the war and lived here in Spartan splendour until the end of the 1960s when she moved down to the village.

“In 1966, when my father Nicholas got married, the Johnby part of the Greystoke estate was settled on him. He worked at GCHQ in Gloucestershire and as we came up here for our school holidays, it gradually became more of a family home – it was the first time in many generations that someone here had children.

“After dad retired in 1995 my parents moved here full-time and the house became warmer instantly. Our son Nicholas is the first child to live here for a very long time, so now it’s growing more into a real family home.”

Henry and Anna met in 2000 at Oxford, where both were studying for doctorates, before heading to Edinburgh, where Anna's parents lived.

They moved to Johnby soon after Henry's father's death in 2008.

“Mum [Bethan] wanted to move to ➤

‘Our son Nicholas is the first child to live here for a very long time, so now it’s growing more into a real family home’

something smaller,” Henry explains. “And since we had jobs but not careers in Edinburgh we were free to settle here – with Nicholas junior already on the way.”

They started the bed and breakfast business in April 2009, just a month after Nicholas was born: “We had to do something. Managing the farms and woodland with my sister, who lives in the village, is not a full-time job. Anna said: ‘Oh, you like cooking’, so that was that sorted – I’m breakfast and she’s bed,” says Henry with a grin.

“Our selling points, apart from the place itself, are that we’re very family-friendly – we take children, we take dogs and we’re just off the motorway,” says Henry. “We always use local or Fairtrade produce, including soaps from the Keswick Soap Company, eggs from our own chickens and sausages and bacon from our free-range pigs. We also offer dinner by arrangement, often using game from the estate.”

Life must get hectic: they have lively two-year-old Nicholas, another baby on the way this summer, and both have other jobs as well as catering for their guests. Henry is a freelance editor and translator and Anna works at Carlisle Cathedral. Both are singers



and soon after moving to Johnby formed The Herdwyck Consort, a vocal ensemble specialising in early music. The Consort rehearses in The Great Hall – an inspirational setting for singing Tudor music as it dates from 1583.

However, Johnby Hall’s history goes back much further than that Henry says: “Going back to the 12th century, the original Johnbys probably had a wooden pele tower here. But then in 1346 the Scots laid waste to the area, burning down what they could, so the pele tower was rebuilt in stone in the later 14th century.”

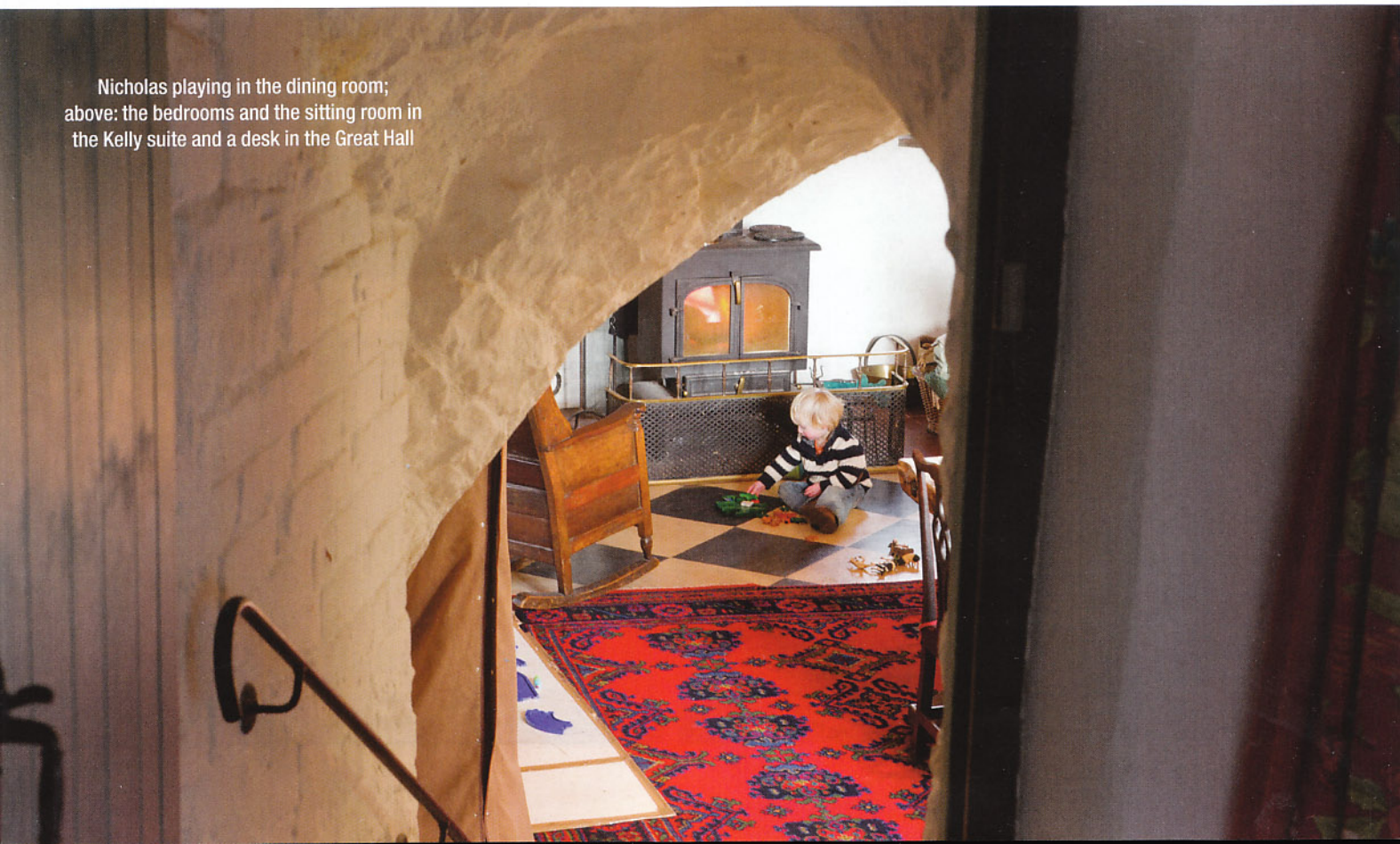
Most of the family rooms are in the old pele tower, whose northern wall is at least 6ft-thick. The greater part of the house though was built in Scottish baronial style by the Musgrave family. A panel inscribed WILLIAM MUSGRAVE, ISABEL MATENDALE 1583 may be seen in the architrave above the main door, tucked away in the south eastern corner of the house, no doubt for safety and security from the marauding Scots.

In the base of what would have been the pele tower is a large vaulted room, originally where the cattle would have been housed in the event of a raid. Today it’s known as the dining room, and is very much a family room, featuring another huge fireplace and stove as well as a long and obviously ancient refectory table.

From here we go up a staircase leading to the Kelly bed and breakfast suite – in the 18th-century annexe originally called Kelly Cottage.

“Mind your head!” Anna calls out as I duck under the low doorway which opens into a cosy little sitting room.

Nicholas playing in the dining room; above: the bedrooms and the sitting room in the Kelly suite and a desk in the Great Hall





The Great Hall, with family portraits on the wall; below: a bedroom in the Kelly suite, the vaulted dining room which is heated by a wood-burning stove

A black cast-iron range made by T Altham of Penrith sits in the white-painted stone fireplace which has carved on it the flags of both England and Scotland. Some ancestor hedging his bets perhaps?

Next door is a rather grand bedroom with a king-size sleigh bed and tapestries hanging on the walls while outside above the original cottage door is great-aunt Maud's terracotta relief of St George and the dragon.

At the other side of the main house sits another cottage, part of which has been converted into The Studio, their other bed and breakfast suite.

"We tend to put families in The Studio as there's more space for them," says Anna, showing me into an airy open plan living room. "In Maud's day there was no ceiling in this room and she had a pipe organ in here. She also put in this great big north-facing window to let in the light."

And with its fridge, tea and coffee-making facilities, shelves of books and games and even an antique boudoir grand piano which guests are welcome to play, there's plenty to keep a family comfortable and entertained.

Back outside it's chilly but Henry and Anna are keen to show me the garden, the

orchard and the paddock, which is carpeted in daffodils each spring and has Maud's pond. I'm also introduced to Schnitzel, the Saddleback pig, and the chickens. Henry reaches into the hen house and finds three eggs.

"That's what it's all about," he says, with some satisfaction. [Life](#)

■ *Johnby Hall, Penrith, Cumbria CA11 0UU. For accommodation details, tel: 017684 83257, email [bookings@johnbyhall.co.uk](mailto:bookings@johnbyhall.co.uk) or see [www.johnbyhall.co.uk](http://www.johnbyhall.co.uk).*

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