

BOURTON MANOR stands on the escarpment of Wenlock Edge and enjoys magnificent views over the Corvedale (Fig 2). In its present form, the building is a creation of architect Norman Shaw, one of several so-called Old English-style houses he designed in this locality during the 1870s, yet its interest extends beyond this. Shaw's house subsumed the remains of an earlier house that was itself the product of a very peculiar tale of political ambition and dynastic good fortune.

The roots of this story are deep and complicated to unravel. From 1544 to the end of the 17th century, the parliamentary borough of Wenlock was dominated by the Lawley family. Moreover, their long connection with the area was emotionally cemented by a remote claim to the barony of Wenlock. As we shall see, this title, which became extinct in 1471, was clearly an object of pride and fascination for the family centuries later.

‘It is a peculiar tale of political ambition and dynastic fortune ,

From the 17th century onwards, a series of advantageous marriages widened the Lawley patrimony and brought about a gradual shift in the geographic focus of their interests. By stages, they acquired property in Staffordshire, Warwickshire and Yorkshire, the latter through the marriage in 1764 of Sir Robert Lawley (died 1793) to the daughter and heiress of Beilby Thompson of Escrick Park.

None of these estates brought with them a safe parliamentary seat, a fact that was to be of great importance to the three surviving sons of this last match, all of whom pursued active political careers as Whigs or Liberals. In a roundabout way, their activities brought the modern house into existence. The eldest, Sir Robert, first tried unsuccessfully for election to Wenlock in 1794–95, but later secured a seat at Newcastle-under-Lyme. The second son, Francis, was elected MP for Warwickshire, but our concern here is with ➤

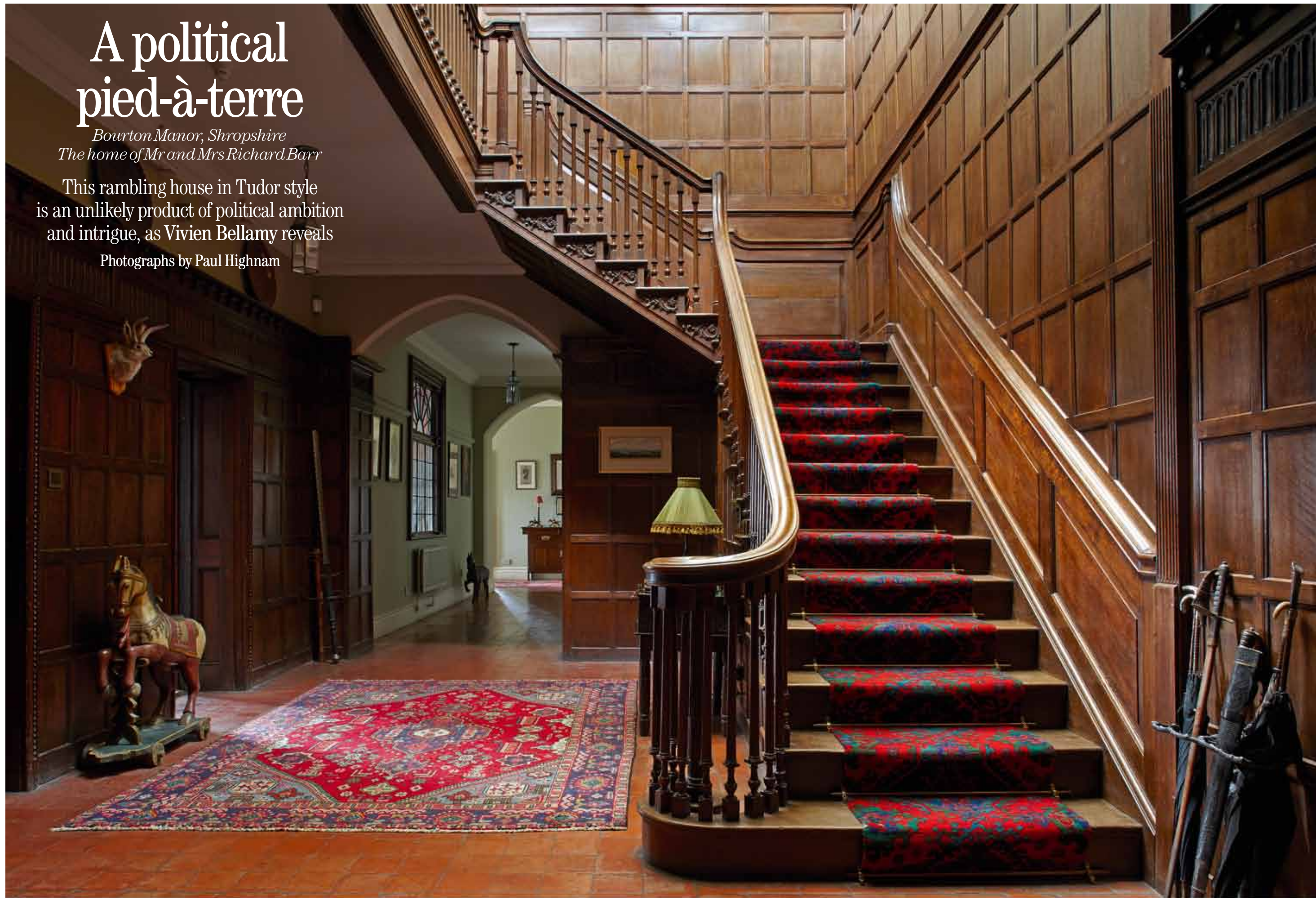
→ Fig 1: The toplit staircase hall is the best preserved of Norman Shaw's 1870s interiors. All the principal rooms open off this space

A political pied-à-terre

*Bourton Manor, Shropshire
The home of Mr and Mrs Richard Barr*

This rambling house in Tudor style is an unlikely product of political ambition and intrigue, as Vivien Bellamy reveals

Photographs by Paul Highnam





the youngest of the three, Paul.

He was 16 years younger than his oldest brother and received from him Bourton Cottage—as it was then called—on his marriage, in May 1817. Nothing is securely known of the house prior to this date. Paul made improvements to his marital home, however, and the building he created is recorded in a pair of Coalport loving cups, probably dateable to 1839. These show a *cottage ornée* with gables and picturesque 19th-century antiquarian detailing (**Fig 3**).

In the spring general election of 1820, Paul Lawley presented himself at the last minute as a candidate for Wenlock and was roundly defeated. His irritated eldest brother, Sir Robert, wrote to him from Florence: 'You have no right to avail yourself of your accidental residence upon that estate [Much Wenlock] to procure to yourself any personal advantage unless it is yours, or without the express approbation of myself and of Francis, whom it appears you have not consulted in the business.' But this humiliation was to be quickly forgotten in the light of other events.

On September 12, Paul inherited Escrick Park and a substantial fortune from his maternal uncle. Later the same month, he changed his name (for the first time) to Paul Beilby Thompson. The resources he now enjoyed



allowed him to inflict revenge on his political opponents in Shropshire. In 1821, Cecil Forester, who led the rival interest in Wenlock, was offered a Coronation peerage and requested the title—coveted by the Lawleys—of Lord Wenlock. Paul and Sir Robert united to block this calculated insult and the latter successfully secured it for himself in 1831.

Notwithstanding this confrontation, Paul later won Forester's support and became MP for Wenlock from 1826 to 1832. Thereafter, from 1832 to 1837, he represented the East Riding of Yorkshire near Escrick, yet, confusingly, his association with Shropshire was revived in 1839, when he was created Baron Wenlock—the title had been in

↑ **Fig 2 top: To the rear of the house is this superb cloud hedge and, beyond it, the view over the Corvedale.**
 ↑ **Fig 3 above: One of a pair of Coalport loving cups depicting the cottage. On the reverse of the other is 'Beilby Lawley for ever, Wenlock's pride'**

abeyance since his brother's death in 1834—and assumed once more his forsaken family name of Lawley. By this date, he had also inherited the property of all his siblings.

Beilby Lawley, 2nd Baron Wenlock, came into his inheritance on the death of his father in 1852. His interests were primarily focused in Yorkshire and he appears to have shown no interest in Bourton Cottage until 1871. In that year, he commissioned Norman Shaw, who was by then emerging as a fashionable and prominent architect, to put forward proposals for enlarging the house. The resulting drawings, dated August 1871, depict a showy building in the Old English style (Shaw described the style as Old Sussex after its inspiration from the farmhouses and cottages in that county).

In the event, however, these designs were not realised. Shaw revised the designs and created a reduced version of the house in the same architectural idiom. The contract for the execution of his improvements was signed on February 13, 1874.

The timing of the work is intriguing. Lord Wenlock's son was married in 1872 to the eldest daughter of the Earl of Harewood, so it is just possible that the whole project was initially intended to provide him with a family house. Certainly, generous provision



was made for nursery space in the 1871 plans. It may also be significant that Lord Wenlock, a committed Liberal, tried to help his son secure election to Wenlock in November 1874. Yet if the cottage was planned as a home for his son, it is odd that both the 1871 and 1874 drawings describe rooms as being 'Lord Wenlock's'. Perhaps the house was always intended to be a retreat from Yorkshire, which is definitely the purpose it came to serve.

The approach to the house is oblique, past a charming lodge, almost certainly Shaw's design. Its main front bears all the hallmarks of Shaw's Old English style: hung tiles, mullioned and

transomed windows, gables adorned with black-and-white timberwork and an asymmetrically placed entrance (**Fig 4**). Originally, there was a splendid display of 22 chimneystacks and an impressive variety of building materials including rough-cast, Wenlock limestone rubble and dressed stone. Because the main rooms occupy the garden front with its glorious views, the kitchen was sited—unusually—on the main front.

Shaw articulated the interior by his favoured device of an L-shaped passage leading from the front porch. As elsewhere, the entrance axis is shorter, leading to a double-height,

↑ **Fig 4: The Old English entrance front with its gables and recessed porch. Shaw glazed the casements with clear glass below and leaded lights above**

toplit inner staircase hall invisible from the entrance (**Fig 1**). Close to this core, Shaw placed a library, drawing room, dining room and 'Lord Wenlock's Room' to take advantage of the magnificent views. All have canted bay windows and provide two social focal points: fireplace and view. In accordance with the Old English scheme, the dining room was lined with pale-green panelling.

The 3rd Lord Wenlock inherited his father's estates in 1880, which by now comprised more than 20,000 acres in the East Riding of Yorkshire. Of the 5,000 acres owned by the family in Shropshire, by contrast, most passed ➤



to his younger brother. Therefore, although Lord Wenlock remained a keen supporter of the Wenlock Olympian Society, Shropshire was now peripheral to his interests. Then, in 1890, he was appointed Governor of Madras. An obituary assessment of his performance in *The Times* is painfully polite: 'As he laid no claim to gifts of high statesmanship or intellectual power, his rule was not marked by brilliance or originality'. These and other subsequent appointments perhaps encouraged him to sell Bourton Cottage in 1901.

The new owner was a gentleman and a businessman, John H. A. Whitley, who, with his wife, Susan, remodelled several of the interiors. Mrs Whitley left a life interest in the house to her niece, the Hon Mrs H. E. D. Field, who came here with her husband, renaming it Bourton Manor. From 1941 to 1949, the stables and service areas became a hostel for girls of the Land Army, locally recalled with affection. Mrs Field was a particularly popular chatelaine, enthusiastically contributing to the life of the village. She, her husband and the Whitleys were all deeply fond of the house and are buried in the adjoining churchyard.

The last quarter of the 20th century saw the house fall into the doldrums. It was divided into apartments, poorly

6 The main rooms have two social focal points: fireplace and view,

maintained and let out at a peppercorn rent. In 1989, as recorded in *Building Refurbishment* magazine, it was sold to hotelier Patrick Stuart. He worked tirelessly to rescue the dilapidated house, turning it into a country-house hotel, which it remained for 10 years.

The present owners, Richard and Caroline Barr, had already restored another house nearby, the 14th-century Upper Monk Hall. After an unsuccessful attempt to buy Bourton in 1995, they were delighted to gain possession in 2004. Fittingly, like so many of Shaw's clients, Mr Barr comes from a Midlands iron-founding family, specialising in conservation and restoration. A practical man, he planned, and, indeed, carried out, a lot of the work himself. Mrs Barr's strong interest in antiques, including textiles, began at the age of 11, and is reflected in the furnishing of the house (**Fig 5**).

The Barrs' restoration programme for Bourton has been extensive. There

↑ **Fig 5: The window recess in the drawing room. The fabrics and furniture have been carefully chosen to complement the interiors**

were firewalls everywhere and the hotel's cloakroom occupied the space of the present large family kitchen. Reuse of materials has been a key part of their programme: the large housekeeper's cupboards, a handsome addition to the kitchen, were retrieved from the coachhouse and the red quarry tiles that now form such an appropriate floor were found abandoned under the neglected yew hedge.

As well as restoring the principal rooms, the Barrs have converted parts of the service wing into three charming, luxury holiday lets. To the east, the gardens reflect late-19th-century enthusiasms, featuring a good rockery and a small arboretum with several imposing Wellingtonias. The woodland, carpeted with flowers from late winter, contains a touching cemetery for the Whitley and Field dogs.

The Barrs have revived and cared for all these features and are particularly proud of the superb yew cloud hedge. Thanks to them, Bourton Manor is the only one of Shaw's Shropshire houses to survive as a family home. In a rural county lavishly endowed with historic country houses, it is a fine example of more modest, late-Victorian domestic building by an architect of the highest quality.

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