

"Stately scene:
Chatsworth, where
this summer's most
sensational dance will
be held... marking the
21st birthday of the
Marquess of Hartington,
heir to the Duke of
Devonshire," wrote
Vogue in June 1965.
"There'll be 800 guests,
a train to take them
from London, and back
at dawn." The caption
accompanied this image
of Jean Shrimpton –
in diamonds and Dior
– shot by David Bailey
on the south lawn





Cache in *the attic*

When Laura Burlington decided to search the Chatsworth storerooms for a christening gown for her son, she also found five centuries of fashion... and an exhibition was born. By Violet Henderson

Sometime before 1932, Adele Astaire, Fred's elder sister and, for a while, his celebrated dance partner, first visited Chatsworth. A uniformed butler showed her into one of the many grand staterooms, and there, at its furthest end, a phalanx of po-faced Cavendish women waited – if not exactly to welcome Astaire, then at least to receive her. After all, an American! an actress! a dancer! would not have been their own first choice of belle for Charles, heir apparent to the Duchy of Devonshire and its many estates, including the jewel among them – the jewel among all British houses – Chatsworth. Picking up on the distinct chill emanating from across the room, Astaire (a woman of tiny proportions who liked to wear manly Mainbocher suits) sprang from her feet to her hands and cartwheeled over to meet them.

"It was certainly an icebreaker! They loved her after that," says Laura Burlington, who had no need to resort to acrobatics when she first met her own in-laws, Chatsworth's current incumbents, the 12th Duke and Duchess of Devonshire. Laura, a former model, stylist and seamstress for the young Roland Mouret, is sitting before me in a vividly blue drawing room, her

herringbone Balenciaga jacket discarded over her knee, heavy-duty lace-up Louboutin boots crossed politely. Outside, through 18th-century windows edged in gold, Chatsworth's Emperor Fountain projects a quill of water – once the highest in the world, it was created to make an impression on Tsar Nicholas I.

But, for now, Laura is focused on Astaire's short entry into Chatsworth's long history, which began in 1553 at the behest of the redoubtable Bess of Hardwick, a woman who amassed four husbands in her lifetime, one of whom was fortuitously a Cavendish. Astaire, says Laura, soon married Charles, but she neither became the Duchess nor moved into Chatsworth, as he died before inheriting the title. Nevertheless, Laura did discover a little of the dancer stowed away in the house that was never to be her home. In the bedroom where she always slept, in some long-closed drawers, were her old copies of *Vogue*, annotated with her handwritten comments. "How charming!" she exclaimed beside a snap of Noël Coward in the society section. They had not seen daylight for more than 80 years.

This spring, Astaire's copies of *Vogue*, a handful of her formal portraits and a short film of her dancing (the only reel of her >

dancing that still exists) will be displayed at Chatsworth alongside other sartorial jewels, including the 7th Duke's first shoe (dated 1808) and Stella Tennant's nose ring (famously captured by Steven Meisel for *Vogue's* December 1993 story "Anglo-Saxon Attitude") in Chatsworth's first fashion exhibition, *House Style: Five Centuries of Fashion at Chatsworth*. "Everyone knows about the Hans Holbein the Younger, the Gainsboroughs, the Reynolds that are here," says Laura. "I hope that this exhibition will bring a new audience to Chatsworth."

Six years ago, even the Cavendishes, a family of historic collectors, were not aware of the full extent of the fashion that they owned. Laura only guessed at it when she went looking for a christening gown for her eldest son, a search that began with a knock on the door of the house's textile department – if anything is a barometer of grandeur, it is surely this. A member of its full-time staff led her through the bowels of the building into a windowless storeroom, just one of dozens. From a shelf packed with many long white boxes, down came a long white box, and inside it were not one but tens of robes, wrapped in tissue paper each with tantalising handwritten labels: "Christening robe made for Nancy Mitford by her mother Lady Redesdale in 1907. Also worn by her brothers and sisters." Laura was delighted. "My first thought was, what else is there here?" she says. "I was desperate to look inside." Laura knew from experience that this was a family that liked to dress. It was only in 2004, after the current Duke and Duchess took up residence, that the tradition of changing into black tie for every dinner was relaxed. While the 11th Duke – considered a dandy at Cambridge University before the austerity of war curtailed his spending (just a little) – very literally expressed himself through his clothes: he had made for himself 22 navy jumpers, each of them bearing one of his slogans: "All passion spent", "Never argue with a Cadogan", "Never marry a Mitford" (which, of course, he did).

Around 365 average-sized three-bedroom houses could fit inside Chatsworth, according to Deborah "Debo" Devonshire, the wife of the 11th Duke and youngest of the Mitford sisters, who died in 2014 and whose inimitable style saw her segue from dramatic Oscar de la Renta to prim tweed suits. Laura was acutely aware that calibrating Chatsworth's fashion was not a task for one person, so she called up her friend Hamish Bowles, American *Vogue's* international editor-at-large and connoisseur of couture. She knew Bowles from her modelling days; he had once dressed her in Vivienne

Westwood, she had fainted, "and he had been so delightful about it". Bowles was thrilled by the project that Laura mooted, but, after seeing for himself its magnitude, he insisted the costume historian and exhibition curator Patrick Kinmonth and his creative partner Antonio Monfredo join the party. A team was born.

"The size of the exhibition today owes so much to how big Patrick dreamt," says Laura. We are now standing in the house's Baroque chapel, where, beneath the white marble altarpiece, Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire once knelt to say her prayers. Her marital arrangements are some of the most famous in British history: she lived in Chatsworth with both her husband, the 5th Duke, and his girlfriend, her close

"Hubert de Givenchy told me not to make it all about couture and grand things"

friend Lady Elizabeth Foster. Under *House Style's* guise the chapel will be a meditation on life and death, beginning with those fateful christening gowns, ending with a selection of historic mourning clothes. A further 25 of Chatsworth's staterooms will be made use of, with more than a hundred mannequins employed, displayed in 10ft-high curved-glass cabinets. It promises all the showmanship of the V&A's 2015 sell-out *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty*, all the intellectual frisson of *Valentino: Master of Couture* (another of Kinmonth's feats of execution). As he later tells me over the telephone, "I took inspiration from the present Duke and Duchess, who have introduced so much contemporary art and sculpture to Chatsworth. I wanted this exhibition to reflect that, to be modern in its presentation."

There will be a room devoted to punk, another devoted to gold. Dominating the long South Sketch Gallery will be an image – shot by Mario Testino for the May 2006 issue of American *Vogue* – of Stella Tennant in a dress worthy of Georgiana, and beside it the pale green gown she wears in the picture, on loan from Dior. Close by, Elizabeth I will look equally resplendent, standing in a portrait of 1592, swathed in an ornate gown given to her by her dear friend Bess of Hardwick, and beside her will be another version of the gown, as reimagined by Alessandro Michele. (Gucci is *House*

Style's principal sponsor, a relationship that began last year when Glen Luchford photographed the label's 2017 cruise collection in the house and grounds.) Using historic photographs as reference, the jeweller CW Sellors is remaking a lost headdress of ostrich feathers, amethysts and pearls that once crowned Duchess Louise for the 1897 Devonshire House Ball, which she threw with the 8th Duke in London to commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. Chatsworth still has the dress, a chartreuse and ivory concoction embroidered with fine 19th-century bling and a sweeping train, made for the Duchess by the House of Worth. The party was themed: Duchess Louise wore this dress as costume, she was Zenobia, the warrior Queen of Palmyra. In fact, the Devonshire House Ball's fancy-dress code induced social hysteria: the British Library, overrun by young women seeking to research historical costume, had to turn them away.

And yet for all its big production, *House Style* promises to have a great deal of charm. An attribute that, says Laura, owes much to Hubert de Givenchy: she met him in Paris to talk not only about the exhibition but also his relationship to Debo, for whom he made so many clothes. "He told me not to make it all about couture and grand things – personal things, he said, are as important as great craftsmanship – and that I should look for Andrew Devonshire's embroidered slippers." Reworked and repatched a hundred times, these slippers, which were eventually discovered in the archives, say much about the Devonshires' situation after the Second World War when, following the unexpected deaths of both Andrew's brother and father, Andrew suddenly found himself with a dukedom and an inheritance-tax bill that amounted to 80 per cent of the estate's total value. Land was sold, art handed over, every iota of energy went to keeping Chatsworth in the family and not as a Derbyshire offshoot of the V&A, which was a very real threat. In a letter discovered in the archives, it is noted that the ermine on the ducal gowns is getting a bit dog-eared – but, of course, ermine is prohibitively expensive. Could, perhaps, Debo solve the situation by rearing some white rabbits?

The writer Charlotte Mosley remembers another instance of the Duke and Duchess's make-do-and-mend approach. They were sitting together to watch a nativity play, when an angel entered in a beautiful gown. Debo turned to her, thrilled, and whispered conspiratorially, "The angel is wearing my old Givenchy." ■

"House Style: Five Centuries of Fashion at Chatsworth" will be at Chatsworth House from March 25 until October 22



A late-19th-century christening robe, worn by the 11th Duke of Devonshire and successive generations of the Cavendish family

Mario Testino's image of Stella Tennant in Dior Haute Couture will appear – alongside the gown itself – in the South Sketch Gallery, which will be themed “the Georgiana Effect”



Left: Adele Astaire and Cecil Beaton in 1931. Adele, sister of Fred Astaire and wife of the second son of the 9th Duke of Devonshire, cartwheeled her way into the Cavendish women's affections. Below: the 11th Duke's silk Turnbull & Asser pyjamas and oft-worn, much-repaired John Lobb slippers. Right: the Duke in one of his bespoke jumpers

