

A CHESHIRE COUNTRY CHRISTMAS

If there's one thing our ancestors did well, it was build elegant homes, and it's down to us to ensure their style and purpose are as relevant today as when the ladies of Cranford might have walked their halls

WORDS: Kate Houghton PHOTOGRAPHY: Colin Poole

Built in the early 19th century, Spurstow Hall, near Tarporley, is a classic example of the type of farmhouse the comfortably-off landed gentry would have built to show off their standing and wealth. So many of these beautiful houses have suffered at the hands of homeowners determined to modernise, it's a delight to discover one that, while much of the original features have been lost, absolutely reflects its era and its purpose — a grand family home for a family committed to the land. And a home perfect for Christmas.

Ellie Barlow and her husband, Richard, bought the hall four years ago, somewhat spontaneously.

We lived only 10 miles away, near Beeston," Ellie says. "We had plans drawn up to convert the house into somewhere we could call our forever home, but when the costs were put forward it just didn't make sense to do it. As part of my research into what I might achieve I had visited Spurstow Hall, which was for sale, but out of our reach. Then by huge coincidence, while we were on holiday, Savills called me to say the owners of Spurstow Hall were willing to negotiate — and I made an offer on the spot. Richard hadn't even seen it! He was always going to love it though, it's just magical here."

At Christmas, of course, the magic is more than apparent, as festive sparkle





Miles Negus-Fancey has created racing scenes in a room Ellie created from part of the very large entrance hall.



Marple investigates her options in the formal sitting room



A stunning painting by artist James Gillick

spreads throughout the hall.

"Christmas is quite a big affair in the house," Ellie says. "We tend to have a tree everywhere we can fit one – although the numbers have reduced the more furniture we have acquired. We have trees in the family room and the drawing room, which is where we tend to spend Christmas Day.

"We also have trees in the library, the dining room and a couple in the atrium and the corridors on the first floor. I decorate the trees myself and am quite picky about it. Each tree has a colour theme aligned to the décor of the room. To allow the children an opportunity to decorate a tree and hang all of their chosen decorations, they have trees in their own bedrooms too, which we do together."

One of the hall's greatest draws was the acreage and the stabling. Ellie has four dressage horses – two of which she describes as "quite posh" and which have competed at this year's European



Championships, ridden by Sarah Higgins, from Nether Alderley.

Ellie's love of all things equestrian runs through the décor of her home, the finishing touches of a major exercise after moving in.

"We were very lucky," she says. "The previous owners had undertaken a major renovation; they had gutted the entire property, had made the lake bigger, planted trees, renovated every outbuilding from top to bottom: a colossal overhaul. They did everything to a very high standard so all the basics were in place. For us, however, it had a very formal feel to it and a lot of the original features had gone; there had been quite a big reshuffle inside, only a couple of original fireplaces remained and the ceiling height had been reduced in a lot of rooms.

"There was a lot of fitted furniture in every single room and a lot of unpainted oak, which felt very modern inside of this property. When we bought it, we wanted to soften it and take it back to being what it would have been for so many years, an extensive family home which would have catered for the needs of people with dogs and cats and horses and chickens, much the way that we live now. We wanted to bring it back to being more akin to its historical roots."

Ellie and Richard have certainly succeeded in their efforts to bring an elegant 19th century aesthetic to Spurstow Hall, yet it has an informality that brings warmth and welcome to the home, too.

"When I first started with the décor I brought in an interior designer, but it just didn't work for me, her vision for the house



The dining table can extend to seat 20 and is Ellie's task to set for Christmas lunch

wasn't really what I wanted, so I spent a lot of time scouring magazines and Pinterest boards to understand what I did want.

"There were a couple of room schemes the designer had presented that I liked, so I set about doing these first. I had been introduced to Jojo Bradley for reupholstery and invited her to help with me with these projects. It soon became apparent we were a much better fit and she ended up doing most of the house.

"We have used a consistent colour palette throughout – soft greys, greens, blues and a raspberry as an accent colour in a few rooms. All the colours are very muted. Lots of Zoffany, Ralph Lauren, Pierre Frey and Hermès fabric as well, bringing the equestrianism in."

This is made most clear in the small ▶

Photo: Milly Hart



Ellie with her beloved horse, Worcester



Ellie's chosen tablescaping, from Mrs. Alice

library room, which Ellie and Richard created to the side of the main entrance hall.

"I had seen some very beautiful dining rooms with hunting scenes on the walls," Ellie explains. "I don't hunt, I'm not interested, but I wanted to bring the horses in. We asked Miles Negus-Fancey to create something for us and he came up with a vintage racing scene and set it against the backdrop of Beeston and Bickerton Hills, and then if you look very carefully he has also included my dogs as well, my border terriers and my poodle.

"All the artwork you will find in the house is equestrian themed, so pieces from Daniel Crane, James Gillick... I saw a piece by Daniel at Burleigh Horse Trials and absolutely loved it, I had never been so drawn to anything before, ever, so asked if I could buy it. He said no, because it was of his old hunter, Percy, who had died. So he recreated it for me using my horse, Worcester.

"When it arrived, I cried, a lot, then had a panic about how we were going to get it upstairs, as it's absolutely massive."

Ellie's Christmas style is as elegant and English as the feeling with which she has imbued her home.

"We have a proper family Christmas," she says. "All the grandparents and aunts, uncles and cousins – lots of play and fun and Christmas trees everywhere.

"I think we had about 12 last year. The table will extend to seat 20 and I use tablescaping I bought from Alice Nailor-Leyland, Mrs. Alice on Instagram. She creates four-person settings and you buy the box with everything you need. I'm a little bit obsessed."

The day starts like most families' days do,

The family room has stone floors and leather sofas, practical comfort in a home filled with dogs and small children



Ellie's kitchen is farmhouse practical yet beautiful too

with Ellie and Richard's children, Maisie, 7 and Henry, 4, waking early to discover what Santa has delivered in the night. Then it's outside to feed the six horses, two ponies, three donkeys and various chickens before a family brunch is served.

"Then we all head off to the Yew Tree, in Bunbury, while Richard's mother, Alison, makes the dinner," Ellie laughs. "She's a much better cook than I.

"It's my job to lay the table. We dine around 3.30pm, before playing board games for the rest of the day or a good long dog walk.

"It's a proper Christmas, with turkey and all the trimmings, and a smoked salmon that Richard's father, Mike, smokes himself. It will probably look a little different this year, I suspect, but we shall do what we need to do." ♦