

DEVONLIFE

YOUR ESSENTIAL MONTHLY GUIDE TO THE COUNTY

devonlifemagazine.co.uk JUNE 2023

Slapton Ley

A nature-rich haven

**SOUTH WEST
COAST PATH**
Celebrating 50 years

BUCKFASTLEIGH
An insider's guide

RIVIERA RESCUERS
Meet the Torbay coastguard

INSIDE
coast
MAGAZINE
Worth
£4.99

The House of Ida

Inside Jean Queen Donna Ida's
newly restored Devon manor

£5.50



INSIDE

June 2023



The Palm Room at Langdon Court, which has been restored by Donna Ida Thornton and her husband Robert Walton. Photo: Nico Wills Photography

12

A MANOR REBORN

Fashion icon and 'Jean Queen' Donna Ida Thornton moved to Devon with her husband, Robert Walton, where they embarked on an 18 month restoration of the Jacobean manor house Langdon Court. They tell us about the highs and lows of taking on such a mammoth task.

82

CHOCOLATE HEAVEN

From her cottage on the outskirts of Dartmoor Kristina Evans hand crafts divine chocolates, with flavours and designs that run with the seasons. Anne Brunner-Ellis meets the chocolatier whose creations also help those less fortunate with a charity donation from each sale.

102

NATURE'S VARIATIONS

Peter Randall-Page is one of the world's foremost sculptors, renowned for his work which is inspired by nature and geometric forms. From his Dartmoor home and studio he talks to Mercedes Smith about his extraordinary 50 year career.

114

PARTY ON THE PITCH

Sandy Park, home to the Exeter Chiefs, is launching its first live outdoor music concerts and organisers have gathered an impressive line up of names including Rick Astley, Ronan Keating, Gabrielle and Will Young – who will be returning to the city where he went to university.



The library at
Langdon Court



THE HOUSE OF IDA

Jean queen

DONNA IDA THORNTON

has spent the last 18 months renovating listed manor house Langdon Court. She tells Rebecca Pitcairn about living the dream in south Devon

PHOTOS: Nico Wills Photography

LANGDON COURT



Donna Ida Thornton is living the good life – having recently moved from the outskirts of Reading to south Devon. But while a move to the country might mean a slower pace of life for most, it's been as hectic as ever for the Australian-born denim designer.

Together with her husband, restaurateur and president of the Restaurant Association Robert Walton MBE, Donna has spent the past 18 months repairing and restoring the Grade II* Listed Jacobean manor house, Langdon Court, in Wembury, ready for its grand opening next month.

'It's been a mammoth project but we've loved every second,' says Donna, who bought the 16th century mansion with Robert, who she affectionately calls 'Bobby Dazzler', during lockdown and started renovations towards the start of 2022. 'It was incredibly run down, it hadn't had any money spent on it for years and years. There were leaks and things hadn't been repaired properly. All the lead had been stolen from the roof so there was water ingress, there was quite a lot of damage.'

Despite its challenges, renovating the former hotel has been a dream come true for Donna, who has always fantasised about living in a country manor house. However, rather than keep the 16-bedroom property and listed walled gardens to themselves, the couple have decided to not only live in the house but share it with others reinventing it as an exclusive use venue for special events, such as weddings and birthdays, or as a filming location.

'Langdon Court is really special and we want to treat her that way,' Donna says, personifying the house as if it were a loved one. 'Houses like that should be shared but they need to be nurtured and we just want to look after her and preserve her, not just for the next 30 or 40 years but hundreds of years to come.'

Known as the 'Jean Queen', Donna set up the boutique denim concept she is now famous for 17 years ago, having moved from Sydney to London in the 1990s. She opened her first boutique in Chelsea in 2006, selling jeans from a range of designers before opening two more stores in Belgravia and Guildford. Six years later, she launched her own self-titled brand featuring styles she had personally designed for women, named after women. >

'We just want to look after her and preserve her, not just for the next 30 or 40 years but hundreds of years to come'





above:

The centrepiece kitchen was designed and built by Cornwall-based Williams and Son.

left:

The drawing room.

far left:

The doggy stables are home to Julio, Fernando, Eduardo, Gonzalo and Emilio.





above:

The centrepiece kitchen was designed and built by Cornwall-based Williams and Son.

left:

The drawing room.

far left:

The doggy stables are home to Julio, Fernando, Eduardo, Gonzalo and Emilio.

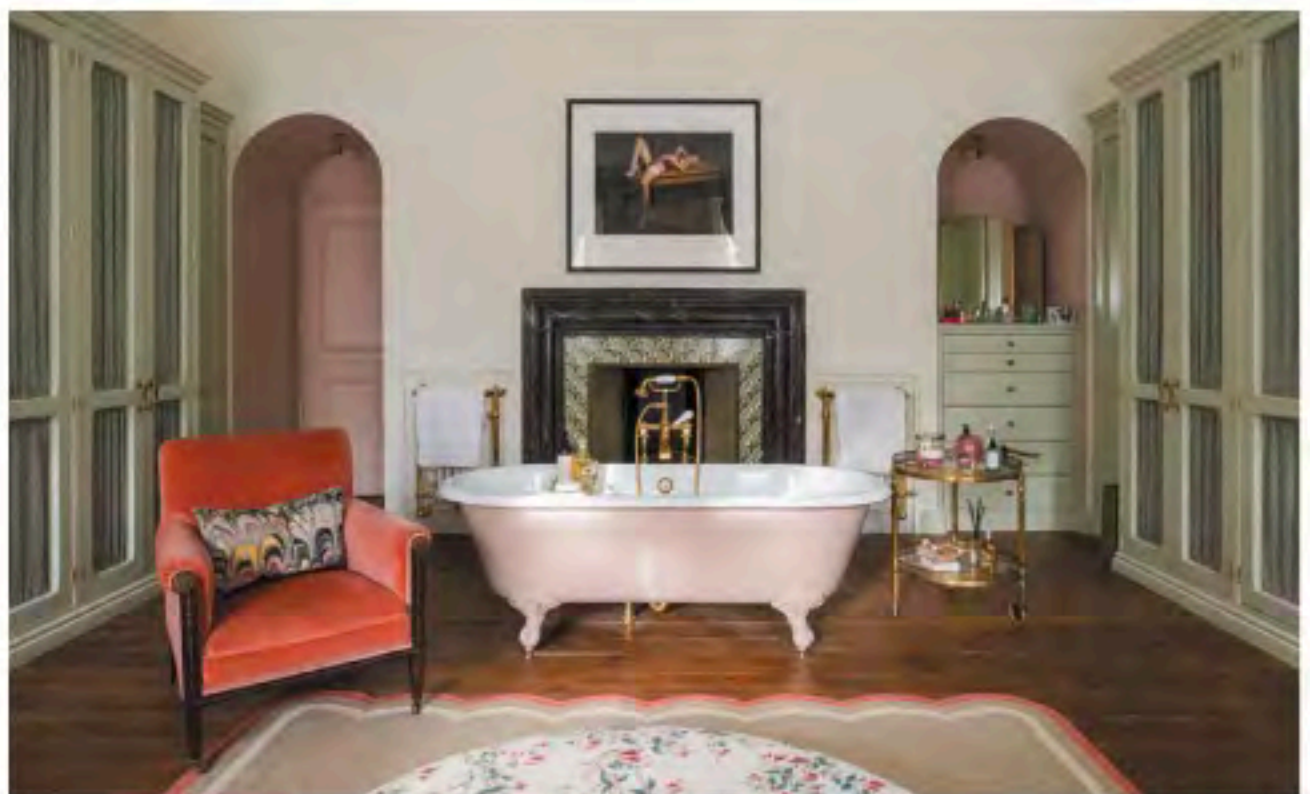




DONNA'S DEVON

'I fell in love with Devon not long after I moved to the UK and spent a lot of time here when I first came over. There was a TV show called *French Leave* and I was obsessed with the chef in it, John Burton Race. Then he opened a restaurant in Dartmouth so I'd drive down a lot to go there.

'Devon is a foodies' paradise, you've got the most amazing farmers and produce here. Jamie Rogers, of Twenty Seven in Kingsbridge, was the chef at Langdon Court for years and we're delighted that he will be back as our consultant chef. Langdon Court is just 10 minutes from the beach at Wembury. I love walking with the dogs there and going further along the coast. We go to Salcombe and Totnes a lot.'





left:
The morning room

below left:
The dressing room

below right:
The main bedroom

'Some of the most beautiful parts of the building are what you would usually describe as back-of-house'

'Ida is my middle name but it was also my grandmother's name and so I name the styles after women she would have liked to have hung out with – sweet old-fashioned names like Ivy, Eliza, Norma and Edna. I think about Ida a lot, she was very stylish. She'd make her own clothes and was very creative. I love the thought of the brand being close to her,' says Donna, whose keen eye for style has attracted a cult following over the years with celebrities including presenter Amanda Holden, Dame Kelly Holmes and model Jodie Kidd wearing her designs.

Moving the brand online in 2017 – 'We were ahead of the curve in that respect,' Donna remarks – has given her the freedom to move further away from London and, having already transformed a Berkshire pub-turned-Indian restaurant belonging to her husband into a home for the couple, Langdon Court provided the perfect opportunity to step up her interior design skills.

'I've loved making things since I was a kid, I'd make my dolls mini-dresses or mini-furniture,' she says. 'I understand construction and once you understand the engineering behind design, you can make things look amazing.'

Working alongside an army of local trades people including Devon-based BBK Builders, Devon Carpenters, BLKC Decorators, Uni-Lec and Titan Mechanical, Donna and Robert have managed to breathe new life into Langdon Court.

'They've all worked so well together and they appreciate how important it is to bring Langdon Court back to life,' says Donna, adding that they have uncovered etchings in brickwork and glass of signatures belonging to tradesmen who had worked on the building in the early 19th century. 'She's an old girl, over 500 years old, so she's not an easy building to work on but I've been amazed at the quality of the craftsmanship, I've never seen anything like it before.'

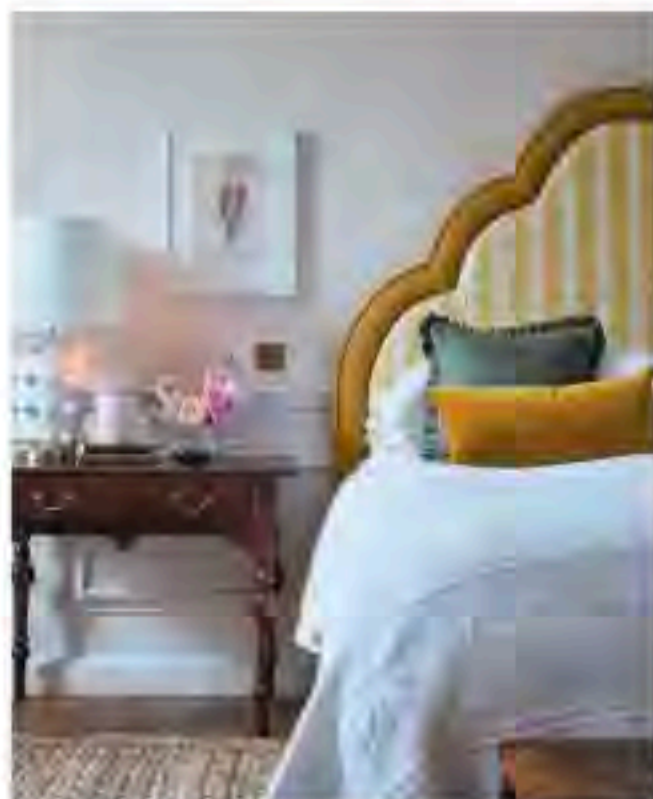
Donna has filled Langdon Court with stylish pieces, which she has sourced everywhere from eBay and sample sales to the local antique shops of Ashburton, and has worked with renowned interior designer Geraldine Apponyi on the overall design of the home. Together the pair have thought of everything – even a set of dog stables for her five chihuahuas; Julio, Fernando, Eduardo, Gonzalo and Emilio.

'They are loving it down here in Devon but the house is quite big so the stables have given them a much more relaxed setting to eat in,' she says of the dogs she describes as her little Mexican army.

'Geraldine and I have worked incredibly closely together over the past 18 months and she just gets me and she gets the house,' Donna adds. 'Her style is cosy English but with a European-influenced design feel. It's not overly English country house look, it feels modern but in keeping with the style of the house.'

'I wanted to create a comfortable environment with big sofas, soft lighting and fresh and modern colours and she's certainly nailed that.'

Donna's keen eye for design and attention to detail flow through the property, where original details, such as feature fireplaces, panelling and stained glass windows are elegantly complemented by new design additions from British-based companies, such as Corston Architectural Detail hardware for the doors, Perrin and Rowe taps, Shaws of Darwen sinks and a centrepiece kitchen designed and built by Cornwall-based Williams and Son. >





'The only thing that isn't British are the kitchen appliances, which are by Italian brand Bertazzoni, but my husband knows kitchens and if you want the best of the best, you have to go Italian,' Donna adds.

When guests stay, Robert and Donna will live in a first-floor 'apartment' – a section of the house which includes a bedroom, shower room, dressing room and 'tea and toast' room. However, Donna's vision for Langdon Court as a quintessentially British home from home means there is no front or back-of-house as such, guests who book the property are free to roam the rest of Langdon Court from the kitchen to the pantry.

'Some of the most beautiful parts of the building are what you would usually describe as 'back-of-house' – the chef's snug in the kitchen, the pot wash, the china room, the laundry and boot room, those are the most interesting and unique parts of the building to me so why would we hide them?'

With the official launch next month, Donna's dream is finally edging nearer to reality, although she is under no illusion that that's where the work will end.

'I don't think you can go into a building of this age and calibre thinking there will be an end date, it will never be completely finished as there will always be something to maintain,' she says of the project which she guesses they have sunk at least a couple of million into. 'But I see it as an investment not only in us and our surroundings but an investment in my family and friends too, that they can come and experience such a rich part of British history, I feel really lucky that we found her.'

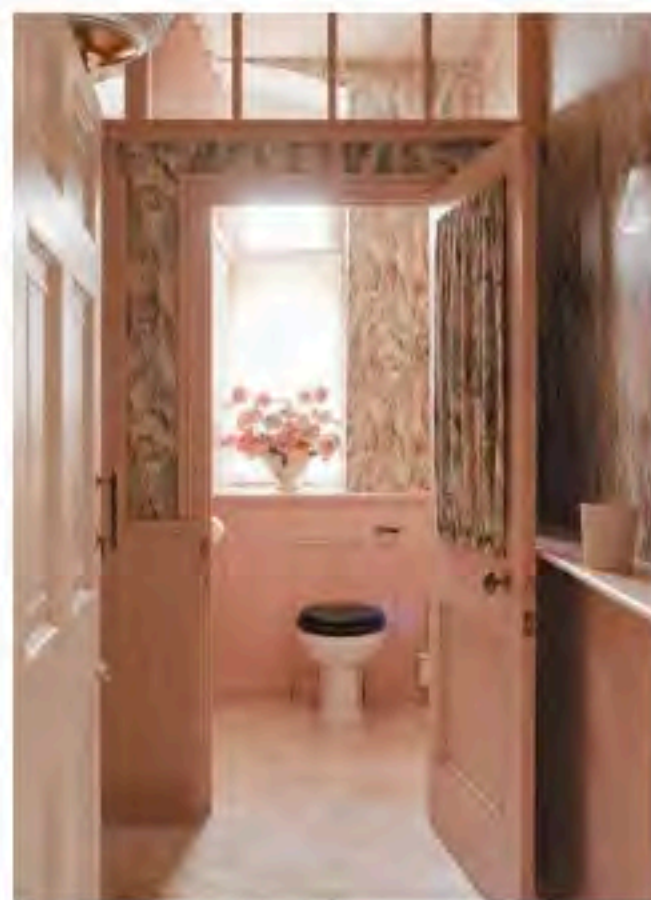
Rooms at Langdon Court will be open on a B&B basis as part a soft launch throughout the month of June only. The entire house is available for private bookings and events from July.
langdoncourtmanor.com

'She's not an easy building to work on but I've been amazed at the quality of the craftsmanship'

above:
The Palm Room

right:
The pink bathroom

bottom:
The gardens at Langdon Court





'The only thing that isn't British are the kitchen appliances, which are by Italian brand Bertazzoni, but my husband knows kitchens and if you want the best of the best, you have to go Italian,' Donna adds.

When guests stay, Robert and Donna will live in a first-floor 'apartment' – a section of the house which includes a bedroom, shower room, dressing room and 'tea and toast' room. However, Donna's vision for Langdon Court as a quintessentially British home from home means there is no front or back-of-house as such, guests who book the property are free to roam the rest of Langdon Court from the kitchen to the pantry.

'Some of the most beautiful parts of the building are what you would usually describe as 'back-of-house' – the chef's snug in the kitchen, the pot wash, the china room, the laundry and boot room, those are the most interesting and unique parts of the building to me so why would we hide them?'

With the official launch next month, Donna's dream is finally edging nearer to reality, although she is under no illusion that that's where the work will end.

'I don't think you can go into a building of this age and calibre thinking there will be an end date, it will never be completely finished as there will always be something to maintain,' she says of the project which she guesses they have sunk at least a couple of million into. 'But I see it as an investment not only in us and our surroundings but an investment in my family and friends too, that they can come and experience such a rich part of British history, I feel really lucky that we found her.'

Rooms at Langdon Court will be open on a B&B basis as part a soft launch throughout the month of June only. The entire house is available for private bookings and events from July.
langdoncourtmanor.com

'She's not an easy building to work on but I've been amazed at the quality of the craftsmanship'

above:
The Palm Room

right:
The pink bathroom

bottom:
The gardens at Langdon Court

