



# HISTORIC HOME

**Sharon Martin** takes a closer look at one of the oldest moated houses and the book of history it has inspired

**A**s one of the oldest inhabited moated houses in England, New Hall glows with local sandstone and warm Midlands brick. Situated near Sutton Coldfield in what was once the vast hunting forest of Sutton Chase, New Hall is one of the finest examples of English medieval architecture in the country.

Sir Nicholas Pevsner, the great 20th century British architectural historian, wrote about New Hall describing the Great Chamber, the 17th century staircase and various other editions to the medieval house – Elizabethan, Georgian and High Victorian – as areas “which seem so in tune, sometimes it’s hard to see where one addition ends and the other begins.”

New Hall began as a 13th century hunting lodge for kings and their courtiers and is now a 21st century luxury hotel for celebrities and high profile guests. New Hall changed hands many times over the centuries in between, where each family’s rise and fall reflected England’s political, social and economic development.

Over the centuries many have enjoyed the beauty of New Hall, whether it be in the capacity of extravagant parties or attending school, back when New Hall became a boarding school for boys. It has been added to over the years and adorned in reflection to the owners at the time. Kate Holt was inspired to write and illustrate her new book about New Hall by her godfather, A. David Owen OBE, whose family was the last to privately own the house as well as the great, engineering, Midlands conglomerate, Rubery Owen.

“My godfather’s grandfather purchased New Hall a hundred years ago in 1922 as his family’s home. The family sold the Hall and surrounding farms in the 1980’s but have retained ownership of New Hall Mill which is now one of only two water mills still surviving in the Birmingham area. The Mill and its meadow field are now managed by the New Hall Water Mill Preservation Trust and open to the public throughout the year.” Said Kate.

Kate studied history and medieval History and is an internationally renowned, photojournalist who trained at the BBC and has contributed regularly to the Guardian and

the Mail on Sunday, as well as running her communications company, Arête Stories.

Kate visited New Hall as a child and was intrigued when David proposed producing a book about it. “David’s family held an extensive archive of photographs relating to New Hall’s history including several unique images taken by Cartier Bresson. This book reflects New Hall’s beauty, unique atmosphere, and spectacular history.”

In 1985, Thistle Hotels, seeing the house’s charm and potential, bought New Hall and 26 acres of surrounding land. They undertook extensive restoration work on the house and surrounding buildings. In recent years, New Hall was sold to the Hand-Picked Hotel chain.

“When New Hall was first built over 800 years ago its four-square crenellations were built for defence, not decoration, and with the house being added to and adorned by subsequent owners, the diamond-shard mullioned windows, their rippling ancient glass, the elegant hubris of the Victorian cupola-ed, castellated wing, all mirror England’s story.”

Like many ancient houses, New Hall is now a luxury hotel: its Great Chamber and



Yew Walk are now frequented by the modern aristocracies of rock, opera and acting, such as Kylie Minogue and Luciano Pavarotti; brides wanting the glamour of medieval romance hire New Hall for their weddings, people come and stay who just want peace and quiet in magical surroundings.

“At around the turn of the 14th century, the first mention of a house at the site of New Hall is recorded. The name, New Hall, was later recorded for the first time in 1341, when the property belonged to Sir John Lizours of Fledborough, in Nottinghamshire.

“Over the years, New Hall has been added to and adorned. In 1542 a North Wing was added, including the Great Chamber, to match the style of the existing L-shaped building, but in a red sandstone rather than the greyer stone of the medieval house. The old Great Hall was extended, and a large Tudor chimney added to the south side. Mullioned windows were added to the south and east facades, along with ornate gables to the front façade.”



**I**n the early 17th century, a Priest hole was added to one of the upper bedrooms, a testament to the Catholic owners at the time, the Sacheverell’s. “It was during this period that the opulent interiors of New Hall began to emerge. The former staircase was elaborated and embellished with heraldic beasts, the Great Chamber was enlarged, and bay windows added. The frieze work in the Great Chamber is embellished with sea monsters, interspersed with the Sacheverell’s family crest of a goat.

“The ornate plasterwork ceiling in the Great Chamber is decorated with suns, small, embellished scrolls, and fruit pendants. The Sacheverell Coat of Arms is on display in the middle of the ceiling as well as on the stained-glass bay windows.”

In 1793 New Hall was owned by the Chadwick family who took it upon themselves to make the house more picturesque. This included enlarging windows and adding exquisite painted glass from Flanders,

representing legendary figures, and placed these throughout the New Hall, particularly in the bay windows of the Banqueting Hall.

In 1868 an extensive renovation began. “The Victorians’ attitude to country houses was the bigger and more ornate the better, with function being a secondary.”

Added to the house to reflect this trend were a tower, a dome and a magnificent glass porch over the bridge on the moat. “This included a picturesque roof supported on carved oak pillars. An extra storey was added to the main building, along with an array of new windows made from sandstone and mullion-transom windows along the western façade. The North wall was rebuilt to match the darker sandstone of the original house.”

Acclaimed photojournalist and author of *New Hall, The History of England in One House*, Kate Holt offers an intriguing and instant history lesson told through the many owners of this historic house. If you’re worried about not knowing much about the Dark Ages, the War of the Roses or why the Jacobites hated the Hanoverians, then this is

the book for you. An essential guide to West Midlands history, social development, and economics; how talented men emerged from the Black Country to create an industrial powerhouse in and around Birmingham, also charting its decline during the oil crisis of the 1970s.

The book also follows the gentrification of what had started as an Anglo-Saxon fortress/lodge into a much larger Gothic edifice, with original Tudor and Restoration interiors and beautifully landscaped gardens. Photographs featured in the book include the great local pioneer of the genre, Benjamin Stone, whose portfolios are kept in the V&A and Birmingham Library archives, Henri Cartier Bresson, who was commissioned by Queen magazine to profile the Owen family. Images by Kate Holt are also included.

***New Hall, The History of England in One House* by Kate Holt, published by Clearview Books will be released on December 2 and available to purchase from [amazon.co.uk](http://amazon.co.uk)**