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Stories in walls

JASPREET SHERGILL SPEAKS TO PHOTOJOURNALIST AND AUTHOR KATE HOLT ABOUT HER NEW BOOK, WHICH DELVES INTO THE HISTORY OF ONE OF ENGLAND'S OLDEST INHABITED MOATED HOUSES, SUTTON COLDFIELD'S NEW HALL



THE 13TH CENTURY MANOR HOUSE IS NOW A LUXURY HOTEL

As one of England's oldest inhabited moated houses, there's history aplenty to be found within the walls of New Hall.

Situated in Sutton Coldfield, in what was once the vast hunting forest of Sutton Chase in the ancient county of Warwickshire, New Hall has stood for the best part of a millennium and today welcomes guests from all over the world as a luxury hotel.

Added to and adorned by various owners, including the Earls of Warwick, whose fortunes rose and fell in the social, political and economic upheavals over the centuries, New Hall's story is a story which reflects England's history in miniature.

British photojournalist and author Kate Holt's new book, *New Hall: The History of England in One House*, unpacks the history that lies within the walls, which unveil influences from all over the world and different periods of time.

"I was originally born in Zimbabwe, my mother was South African and my father was English and so we travelled around quite a bit and I ended up and I ended up at school in England when I was 11," says Kate.

"My father had been at university with David Owen, who subsequently owned New Hall, which is how that connection came about because the owner of New Hall, David, was my godfather."

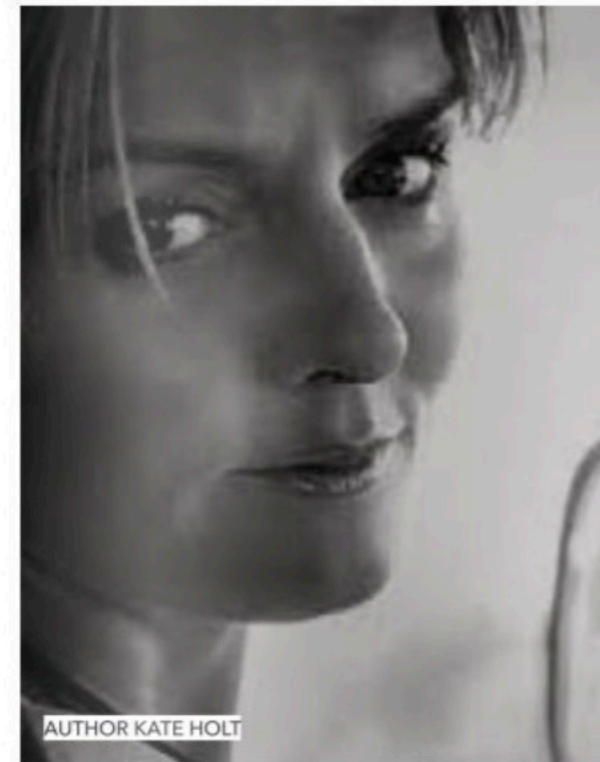
After leaving school, Kate studied history at St Andrews before joining the BBC, working in their London newsroom.

"Then after leaving the BBC, I went and studied photojournalism at the London College of Printing and then worked for a whole range of UK papers from *The Independent* to *The Times* to *The Guardian*, predominantly in East Africa, so I was based in Nairobi for 10 years but also, in places like Iraq and Afghanistan," says Kate.

"And then about 10 years ago I set up my own media and communications company called Arete and we gather content for a wide range of city UN and charity clients and I still do photography and mainly for exhibitions and specific projects."

Growing up, Kate's decision to study history was purely out of interest. But it is a decision which has come in handy as her work life has developed.

"I was lucky enough to study a wide range of history



AUTHOR KATE HOLT

and the modules at university which I chose were mediaeval history, and history of art. I did a lot of work around the renaissance, fine architecture so I had a really good grounding in history. I think history has always fascinated me because when you look at what's going on in the world today, so much of it is repeated, cycles of what's happened before."

After studying history, news and current affairs were next in line, but after working in the industry a new path was formed - leading Kate closer to New Hall, without her even knowing.

"I joined the BBC because I largely wanted to do news and current affairs which I found fascinating, but I found that TV was quite restrictive because you're going off and doing stories that took a lot of research and organisation," she says.

"I really wanted to be able to go off to countries to do stories that really mattered and I felt like I couldn't be as creative as I wanted and I really wanted to go and do something a bit more creative like photography whereby I could have my own response to certain situations."

Following her passion to be creative, Kate found herself in South Sudan to do a photojournalism project which she brought to the UK. After receiving so much support and a great response, it was her godfather who opened the doors for an unexpected project.

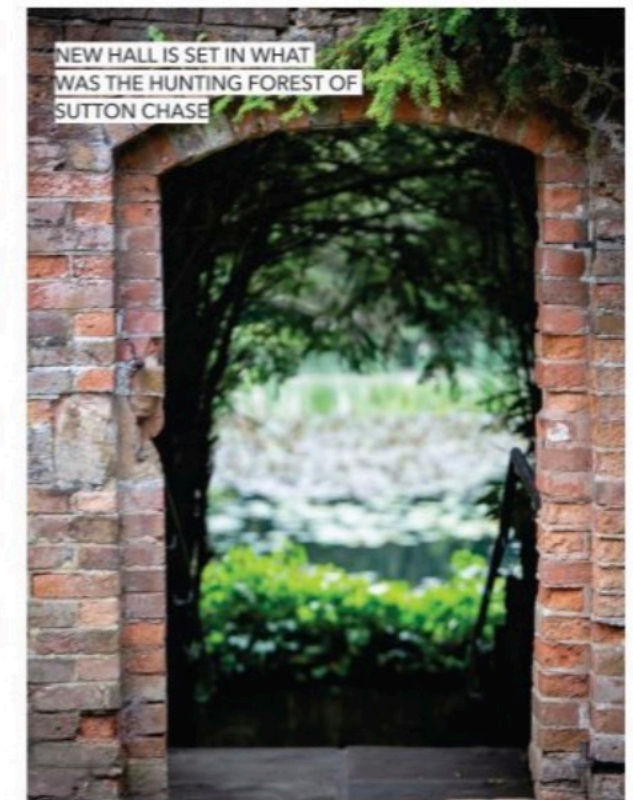
"I went to Sudan and spent a few weeks there doing a photo story about teenage girls and their lives

there, so I documented and interviewed about 12 girls and pulled it all into an exhibition in London and Birmingham at The Mac which my godfather, David suggested," explains Kate.

"So many people saw it and the response to it was really extraordinary because I think very often when you see these photo exhibitions of foreign places, they're quite broad and they're about war and really big topics but this was truly about the lives of just the girls and how they live in South Sudan. It was so similar to girls in the UK; they liked wearing pretty clothes and liked going out, they had hopes, dreams and aspirations but their day-to-day life was very different and there were struggles that came with it. "But this project was what led me to New Hall. "

Kate recalls a memory of when she was five years old, visiting the picturesque grounds of New Hall which she describes as magical. It seems as though history really did repeat itself when Kate visited those very grounds many years later.

"New Hall is one of the oldest houses in England and my godfather's family owned it, they bought it back in 1924," says Kate. "I visited it as child and I remember to this day that when I went, it wasn't being lived in and I remember it had a moat, it had stuffed fish on the walls and I remember the gardens being magical, with big trees; you know when you're little, everything seems big and beautiful."



NEW HALL IS SET IN WHAT WAS THE HUNTING FOREST OF SUTTON CHASE

“I really had that memory in mind from a very long time ago, but after he came to the South Sudan exhibition, David told me he’d got all these photographs of New Hall in big boxes but he didn’t know what to do with them. Some of them are by Cartier-Bresson, who is a very well-known photojournalist and someone who I knew from studying; he’s always been one of these gods in photojournalism because he produced such beautiful work.

“So I started spending some time with David and going through all these boxes of photographs and all this material and decided that it would be such an amazing project to do, because it’s one of the most interesting houses that there are in the Midlands with such an extraordinary history.

“Then, of course, COVID happened, and I had all this information and these photographs, so I sat down and wrote a book.”

Starting from the source, original material and information was given to Kate and through thorough research Kate discovered and unveiled tales of what lay within New Hall from all over the world.

“David and his wife Esther gave me so much material about New Hall and New Hill Mill, about the history, his family history, so it was firstly collating all this information and then working out a way to tell the story of the house that made sense to people,” Kate Says.

“There had been all these different families that had owned it through its 900-year-old history. I decided to divide the book into chapters of who had owned it, of which family had owned it, so each of the chapters reflects the different owners of New Hall.

“You can look online, and you can go to various books but there was never a comprehensive history of New Hall. I started to

find out all sorts of bits of information, and people sent me photos and we put out a call for requests for information on the Sutton Coldfield history website and it was amazing. It was quite an in-depth research project.”

She added” “There were so many golden nuggets of information that came through, from the fascinating types of people who’ve lived there and how they’ve made their money, to how such a beautiful house in the 19th century could have

been left empty for 50 years. At one point between 1798 and 1850, the house was lived in by a caretaker and a farmer and pretty much derelict.

“Then the man who renovated it and took it over had served in the British Army in India. And then you start to realise that all those experiences that people have had, then start to influence what they do to buildings. So, this guy, he spent time in India for two or three years in the military and if you look at the things he did to New Hall, they very much reflected that period of Victorian influenced Indian architecture.”

The importance of keeping historical buildings alive and going back in time to unpack those layers through architecture and stories is something close to Kate.

“It’s essential because I think houses and buildings like New Hall, through which you can really see the different layers of British history, are such an interesting way of telling the story of the history of England,” she says.

“So in New Hall, you’ve got the original L-shaped part that was built in the 13th century and then you have, the mediaeval editions and then you’ve got further bits that are built in the Elizabethan era and then bits that were built in the Georgian era. It’s all influenced by what was going on in the wider UK historical scene, and I think that’s what’s so interesting about it, you can peel back those layers and really get a sense of what was going on in that era at the time. Every building has a history and every building is shaped by the people that have worked and lived in it.”

New Hall: The History of England in One House is published by Clearview Books on December 2, 2022, priced £35.

