



DECORATING THE *P*ALACE

Looking back on a 50-year interior design career, Imogen Taylor reveals HM The Queen's favourite colour and how to dress a room fit for a prime minister

WORDS ALICE WRIGHT



In a career spanning half a century, interior decorator Imogen Taylor put the finishing touches to some of the most illustrious homes in the country. She dined with duchesses and prime ministers, and was granted access to palaces and stately homes, where she observed a rarefied way of life that has changed dramatically during the course of her lifetime. Now aged 90, Imogen has published a memoir of her working life, *On the Fringe*, which offers a fascinating glimpse into a world of footmen, country estates and true English eccentrics.

In 1949 Imogen joined Colefax and Fowler, a prestigious English decorating firm synonymous with the country house style, whose clients included HM The Queen and members of the British aristocracy. She began by restoring furniture and went on to assist the legendary 'haute

or 60 yards," says Imogen. "It was cheaper that way and she knew she'd be able to use it at some point." It may seem surprising one of the wealthiest women in Britain was keeping an eye on the pennies, but as Imogen notes, "she's known for being a wartime girl." Nevertheless, the Queen did have her own team of seamstresses to repair and reline curtains for her various residences – a full-time job given that Buckingham Palace alone has 760 windows.

The job allowed Imogen to mix with a rarefied milieu. "I entered the lives of people who were very close to the Queen and to the Queen's life," she says. "I was on the fringe of an extremely elite circle. They all knew each other."

One member of this elite circle was Sir Michael Peat, who became treasurer to the Queen in 1996. The job brought with it a grace-and-favour apartment at

Previous page:
Buckingham Palace, one of Imogen's clients; Chillham, a floral chintz taken from a 1920s fabric

Below: Hand-printed Mauny wallpapers



couture' designer John Fowler before becoming a principal decorator. During her career she not only worked on numerous important British homes, but also helped to export the famous English country house look to America.

Early in her career, Imogen worked with Fowler when she decorated the Audience Room at Buckingham Palace, where the Queen meets prime ministers, presidents and other important guests. Imogen remembers the magnificent cushions with tassels at each corner – "every tassel was a work of art" – which they made for the Queen's Chippendale suite of furniture. This was picked out in blue – "the Queen likes blue," says Imogen – so the walls were also painted a pale blue, and the room remains much as they decorated it to this day.

Messages from Her Majesty were relayed through her equerry, the late Patrick Plunket, and, aside from a preference for blue, the Queen didn't show much interest in interior design. "That's not really her thing," says Imogen.

The Queen did, however, show an eye for thrift. "She used to buy fabric by the piece, as we called it,

Kensington Palace, which Imogen decorated. As the Peats did not have enough suitable furniture to fill the apartment's lofty rooms, she and her team were allowed to visit the storage rooms at Windsor Castle, where spare and leftover furniture from various royal palaces was kept.

"This wasn't long after the fire at Windsor and the rooms were full of pieces that had been salvaged," says Imogen. The team found and restored furniture for the Kensington Palace apartment and created a beautiful home. So beautiful, in fact, Diana, Princess of Wales reportedly once remarked it was "a grander house" than her own.

One major job came when Imogen received a call from Lord Jellicoe, the Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the House of Lords, asking if she could help decorate Chequers, the country house retreat for the prime minister of the day. It was "a real mess", Imogen recalls, with embassy-style furniture. "We brought life into the whole thing and made it into someone's home," she says. The prime minister at the time, Edward Heath, "wasn't interested one iota, save for the display case for his yachts".

Opposite page, clockwise from top left:
The Long Gallery at Chequers; the Saloon at Haseley Court; Queen Elizabeth II and Prime Minister Theresa May in the Audience Room at Buckingham Palace



Imogen encountered assorted members of the Royal family during her career. "After a while you take it for granted... It's a job"

She does, however, remember being impressed by her first experience of working at a stately home, when she went with John Fowler to decorate Boughton House, the Northamptonshire seat of the Duke of Buccleuch. The house, built in the style of a French château, is famed for its art and furniture, and sits in an 11,000-acre estate. "When you are first shown something like that it makes a huge impression," says Imogen, adding that meeting a duchess for the first time was "a bit overpowering", although the Duchess of Buccleuch was "charming".

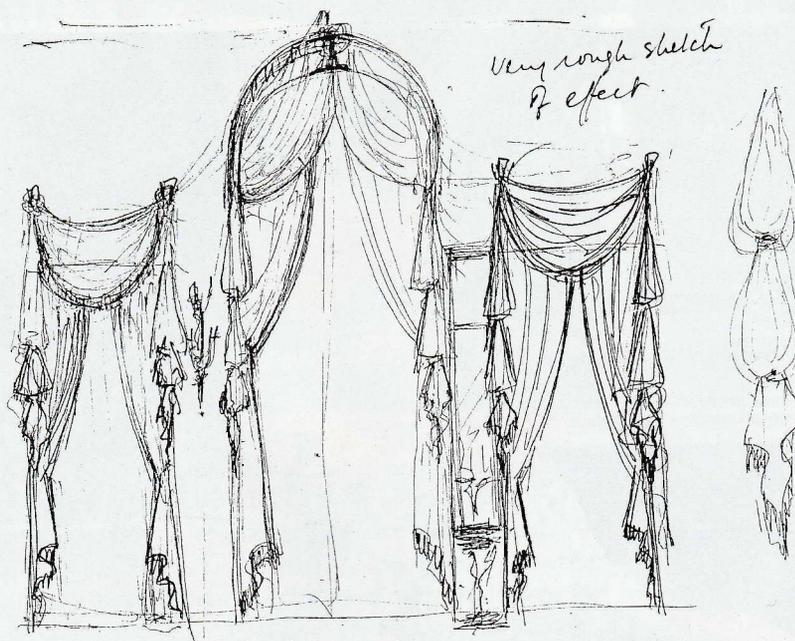
Boughton House had been used as a school for evacuees in the Second World War, during which time the furniture was put in the stable block to protect it. Imogen helped rediscover all the exquisite artefacts that had been stored away and arrange rooms for the duchess.

Later Imogen worked for the wealthy philanthropist Dorothy ("Dolly") de Rothschild at the palatial Waddesdon Manor in the Vale of Aylesbury and its dower house, Eythrope. Imogen describes Mrs de Rothschild as "an extraordinary character", not least for the "extravagant mourning" she went into after the death of her husband, James de Rothschild, even blacking out the chrome on her car wheels. And she remembers a working lunch in Waddesdon's smaller dining room where they ate off Sèvres porcelain and were served by a butler and two footmen.

As Imogen acknowledges, it all has echoes of *Downton Abbey*, but even as she was decorating these grand stately homes they were disappearing. "Thousands of country houses were destroyed during the 1960s," she says. "There was no money and there were no servants. The few that have remained are either a private business, like Chatsworth, or [in the care of the] National Trust."

In fact, it has been estimated one in six of England's country houses were demolished during the 20th century. Waddesdon Manor is now a National Trust house; the footmen and butlers are long gone. Even the country house style so beloved by Imogen and her clients, filled with antiques and chintz, has fallen out of fashion. Imogen admits she hankers for some of the things that have gone, but always accepted her work is by its nature often short-lived. "It changes," she says. "It's ephemeral."

Imogen was inspired to write her memoir as she realised her career as a decorator had placed her on the fringes of the highest echelons of British society at a time of rapid change, giving her a unique viewpoint. And while many of the houses she worked on have vanished or been transformed beyond recognition, her memories of the homes she created and the people who lived in them provide a snapshot of Britain's social history, a world that few of us have had the rare privilege to enter. ■



Although he offered no comment on the finished house, the prime minister did hold a lunch in recognition of the work. Imogen was seated next to Mr Heath and remembers an awkward meal. "He wasn't interested in the house, and I didn't know anything about yachting, or much about music," she says. "He had no small talk whatsoever."

Edward Heath was one of several prime ministers Imogen encountered during her career, along with assorted members of the royal family and countless titled figures. "After a while you take it for granted," she says. "You're no longer impressed, you just behave as you should to them. It's a job, you aren't thinking, 'Oh my'. It's only now looking back that I'm thinking, that was extraordinary."

Top: Dolly de Rothschild at Waddesdon Manor in the 1960s
Above: Imogen's ballroom curtains at Sandbeck Park in South Yorkshire

Imogen's new book, *On the Fringe - A Life in Decorating*, is published by Pimpernel Press Ltd, RRP £50. www.pimpernelpress.com