



In the summer of 1981, I was asked by Geoff Simms to photograph Charleston Farmhouse in East Sussex, where Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant had moved in 1916 creating a unique home for their family and a retreat for many artists, thinkers and writers who would later be known as The Bloomsbury Set.

When Duncan Grant died in 1978 the house and its contents had fallen into disrepair. In April 1980 The Charleston Trust was formed, to buy the house to preserve and restore this jewel. Geoff was a volunteer and I was happy to volunteer my services, my photographs would be used as a record and to help raise money for this enormous undertaking.

These are a few of my photographs from that time and felt I would like to give them an airing.

East Sussex 21st July 1981.

Bumping along a farm track, avoiding potholes and pheasants, with my cameras in the boot of the car, I had little idea of the world I was about to enter. Guided by a hastily sketched map, we arrived outside the gates of a farmhouse. A sad, neglected house, a pond shiny with weed reflected a meadow and a massive fig tree stood guard over the faded pink front door, dropping its fruit onto a weedy gravel path.



The windows looked blindly towards an overgrown garden, resilient roses and lavender, grass as high as an elephant's eye with hints of lichen covered sculpture poking through. We had arrived at Charleston farmhouse.

Entering by a side door and greeted with a smell of must and dust, we turned left and walked into a kitchen with a sturdy table, the top made of beautiful tiles, laden with pots, mugs and brightly decorated bowls, an odd mixture - an electric kettle, a jar of instant coffee and modern packaging balanced on

kitchen chairs, bashed and used, painted in abstract designs. There was an electric cooker and a fridge. The larders were filled with pottery and bits and pieces of sculpture, letters and postcards stuffed behind a mirror, dead flowers in a vase.



To the right was a shadowy room with modern shelves laden with more pottery, their colours shining out in the gloom.





The fireplace was filled with plastic bags and the wallpaper peeling off



the walls and in places, lying on the floor. Its design was dark grey, black and yellow, squares and lines then a frieze of circles and lines at the top



of the walls. The sun sneaked through the dusty window and picked out the grey turning it to silver.

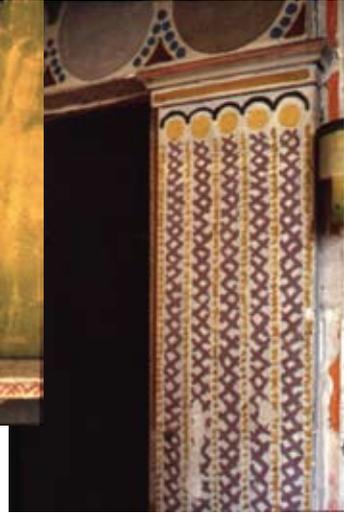
An oak side table held a beautiful tea caddy behind which leaned an exquisite framed charcoal drawing of Vanessa Bell by Duncan Grant, was the only furniture in the room.

We then crossed a small hallway, past the front door and went into a room that was filled with light and energy.



The colours on the fireplace vibrated, and on the mantelpiece, a wonderful oil painting of Helen Arpt by Duncan Grant with a jumble of bright pots lined in front. On a shelf to the left, a stunning study of Paul Roche by Duncan Grant, gathering dust.

In front of the fireplace slabs of stone stood like books on end. The fireplace surround was decorative



with circles of muted earth colours, the distemper peeling and fading, the plaster dissolving.

We wandered into a room that looked onto the back garden, the marble fireplace had been daubed with grey paint. Above the fireplace



two ladies supported a mirror, with a large crack, reflected sunlight into the corners of the room, highlighting This was a room that held the ghosts of something past and this feeling of stepping carefully in the footprints of the inhabitants of this charming

house was magnified when we stepped into the larger studio.

It was a room stuffed to bursting with paintings stacked against the walls, an easel choked with oil paint, brushes hardening in pottery mugs, scraps of paper, black and white

photographs, lists and jottings and random postcards.

In the corner an elegant walnut cabinet showed a mix of china and porcelain, decanters and antique glass.

The bare floor boards splattered



with paint had groups of screens and chairs, the fireplace was cold but the room was welcoming, a stool with a beautiful vibrant tapestry was drawn up to a battered armchair.

As I walked across the room, something fluttered, a photograph slid on a painted table, it was a study of Duncan Grant in a sun hat, a massive white beard, taken in the same spot on which I stood. The table was painted with a man riding a fantastic sea creature, a coffee mug had left rings on the surface.





A door led to a garden, apple and pear trees running riot, their fruit picked over by thrushes and blackbirds. Poppies burst their pods and dandelions floated their clocks, we ate our picnic sitting on painted kitchen chairs and drinking wine

At least three years had passed since Duncan Grant died at his dear and devoted friend, Paul Roche's house in May 1978, yet the vitality of creativity hovered in this room perhaps sparked by the paintings stacked by the walls or the random collection of everyday objects cluttered on every surface.

A bust of Virginia Woolfe peered from a dark corner, postcards and snapshots propped behind it.



from Omega mugs. Behind the house, Firlie Beacon basked in sun, the only sounds were of a lazy hazy day in East Sussex.

We reminded ourselves that we had work to do so photographed the interior until daylight faded.





Charleston Farmhouse August 2nd 1981

Before starting work, we drove up to Firle Beacon and walked along the escarpment. Firle beacon is known as a “Marilyn” coined from the Scottish for a hill over 3000ft called a Munro hence Marilyn after Marilyn Munroe although Firle Beacon is only 217 meters high it commands wonderful views of east sussex, the English channel and as we discovered, a skylark’s view of Charleston Farmhouse. Berwick church can be seen and also the village of Firle with Firle Place standing in parkland.

Driving down the road from the beacon I remembered that my father used to report on speed hill climbs here for his magazine, Autosport, in the 1950’s and 1960’s.

Charleston Farmhouse was waiting silent and beautiful. I photographed a bedroom adjoining the big studio that had French doors opening to the garden. There was a bath with decorated panels, a wash hand basin and a cupboard painted with a vase

design. Hanging on a wall, a mirror in a wool work frame decorated with stitching next to a tender study of a sleeping baby.

On the first floor were four bedrooms, two bathrooms and a loo. The fifth room was red and black



below the large sash window that overlooked a walled garden, was a painting of an irish wolfhound, above, a painting of a magnificent cockerel. This room was also being packed up, a cardboard box full of books perched on a tapestry stool.



A bedroom with a view of the pond had a bed with a headboard painted with a dead eyed morpheus and a painted corner wardrobe and many paintings stacked by the walls next to rolled up carpets.

Another bedroom had a beautiful bookshelf with pillars on either side, on the top shelf a bust of Vanessa Bell. The bookcase was empty, the back panels had been



decorated with a sponge dipped in terracotta paint.

The next bedroom was a contrast to all the other rooms in the house, the walls were undecorated, leaning



against an armchair was a painting of a young girl, the bed and mattress were upended and a screen was folded in a corner.

The last bedroom had a decorated fire mantle, a long stool with a Grecian tapestry and a magnificent and vibrant tapestry stool, the walls were plain which served as a perfect background for the rich colours of the fireplace and tapestry.



We peeped into a rather bleak bathroom and climbed to the attics.

As we moved from the ground



floor an air of sadness became apparent. In the attics, the feeling was stronger.

Most unoccupied houses have a desolate air, I felt an overwhelming sadness up here that wasn't apparent in the rest of the house and was very keen to take the photographs and leave.

This was a studio with a fine north



light, a painting of cows in a yard and one of Christ, photographs of young people larking and a pile of canvases hunched under the peeling eaves.

The door lintel was decorated



but without the vigour of the rest of the decorations in the house, bits of patterned wallpaper had been badly hung. It seemed as if Vanessa Bell had worked here maybe inspired by the views across the Sussex Weald, able to concentrate on her art away from the distractions of a busy household perhaps this was her sanctuary.

Arriving downstairs we went to a



separate building that was a pottery, a smell of damp clay lingered, unglazed, glazed, painted and broken ceramics crammed onto every surface.

In the garden, a small pool fed



by a spouting head was decorated with mosaic, which on closer inspection, we realized were bits of ceramics from the pottery, this theme was echoed on the floor of a courtyard. There were many

concrete sculptures and also one of red brick. The sculptures sat very well in the overgrown garden, around every corner another surprise, the garden would have been magnificent a mixture of English cottage and Mediterranean splendour.



August 10th 1981

The house was draped in scaffolding, building work and repairs had begun.



The contents were being packed up and on the front and side doors notices proclaimed “Danger Poison Gas Keep Away”. Geoff found this amusing as apparently Vanessa Bell sometimes grew tired of her sister Virginia and various visitors arriving



unannounced so she would paint a sign with the word OUT and put it on the track leading to the house. The house was riddled with woodworm, not only in the fabric of the house, furniture and picture frames were also infested. The gas had done its work and in the dining



room an ingenious series of pulleys were slowly and gently pulling the damaged wallpaper off to be laid in boxes for restoration, the same process was being carried out in the garden room. The bare walls were in a sorry state, the plaster crumbling, large holes pierced the ceilings and damp places splattered the walls.



In the studio, artwork and furniture were embalmed in plastic with the word GAS stuck on post it notes. Beautiful screens and painted doors even the lampshades were encased in shrouds.



We finished our work, packed up and, with the exposed film, I had an indelible memory of stepping into a special world, of tasting a soupçon of a remarkable place , I felt fortunate to have been able to step inside and sample the flavour of fresh creativity at the start of the twentieth century.



In fond memory of Geoffrey R.Simms.

