

Doddington Hall has grown its own festive decorations for centuries. Claire Birch, who inherited the house, tells Amy Claridge how her family are carrying on the tradition



DECK THE HALL

with boughs of holly



EACH CHRISTMAS, Claire Birch and her team of ladies create a display at Doddington, using home-grown decorations, which people flock to see. Decorating the House is shared between Claire and her husband James, the resident cutting garden florist Rachel, the housekeeper Rose and her team. Preparations start in summer, when Claire cuts hydrangea, alliums and poppy heads that she then dries in armfuls in spare rooms and outbuildings.

Some of the flowers are used in their natural dried state; their faded elegance lending a mellow hue to Doddington's Elizabethan interior. Others – such as seed heads – are sprayed with gold or silver to add glamour to a traditional arrangement. As well as the dried flowers gathered during the year, much foraging is done from the Gardens and the Estate a few days before the decorating starts. Armfuls of ivy, holly, birch twigs, red and yellow dogwood suckers, sedums, larch and pine cones are gathered.

Claire has lived at Doddington since she was 11, when her parents took the house over from her paternal grandparents. She married and lived both abroad and in London but took over from her father and late mother in 2005. 'The House has been open to the public since the 1950s,' explains Claire who lives at Doddington with her husband James and three children: George, Luke and Alice.

'Thirty years ago we started growing and selling Christmas trees, and 20 years ago we began selling decorations as well. The "See the Hall Decorated"





weekends using home-grown and homemade decorations started in 2006. Doddington is a firm part of thousands of local families' Christmas tradition – bringing that much enjoyment to so many people makes me feel very privileged.'

The Enchanted Forest located in the second floor 96-foot Elizabethan Long Gallery is Claire's masterpiece. It's a magical recreation of forests heavy with snow and the expectation that Santa will pass through. Claire has suspended dried leaves interspersed with chandelier crystals on wires to give the illusion of a wintry landscape. Woodland creatures such as foxes, hares and deer made from willow, by willow artist Alison Walling, wind their way among the foliage. Even a life-size stag will be present.

Doddington has a resident cutting gardener and florist, Rachel Petheram, who each year tackles the Great Hall. The 18-foot dining table made by Claire's father with wood from the estate is laden with arrangements in glass vases, which lead the eye up to an enormous home-grown Christmas tree. Between the vases, Rachel has arranged dried and sprayed decorations. Look closely and you will find yourself smiling at what is – on inspection – a corn-on-the-cob with its outer layers peeled back in curling fronds. It has been grown in the Hall's kitchen garden, dried and sprayed silver. Last year, borlotti bean pods were sprayed silver, allowing their natural purple to show through. Globe artichokes are also a favourite; their architectural shape that looks so spikily resplendent in the summer, has a whole new glamour when sparkling under candlelight.

'Doddington has always been a part of my life,' says Claire. 'I enjoy sharing my home with visitors, as I feel the house is very special. I love its history, and as my ancestors were keen collectors and the house has never been sold or cleared out, it is full of fascinating things, all of which have a story to tell.'

The Hall and its gardens, including

a two-acre walled kitchen garden, is open to visitors most of the year, offering an interesting glimpse into a family home that has never been sold since it was built in 1595. Apart from the food that is grown in the kitchen garden, the estate also provides the cafe, farm shop and restaurant kitchen with Lincoln Red beef, pheasant, partridge, pigeon and venison. There's an on-site butchery, and a bakery that at this time of year, churns out hundreds of Christmas puddings.

Maintaining an Elizabethan property is expensive. The Christmas decorations are fun, but they also provide income. Innovation is important. New this year are displays created by the ladies of the North Midlands Area of the National Association of Flower Arrangement Societies (NAFAS) who have been invited to produce decorations for rooms at Doddington using only materials from the estate.

The 'See the Hall Decorated' weekends are a small part of Christmas at Doddington Hall. Over 30 years ago, Claire's parents Antony Jarvis and his late wife Victoria planted the forest of Christmas trees, which now supplies the festive tree needs of local families. A stable yard is turned into a tree emporium and families embark on the tricky business of choosing the right one. 'Every now and then,' says Claire, 'You'll watch someone give a furtive glance to a tree being examined nearby, and see a look in their eye that says: that one's perfect, I hope they put it back.'

Once you've got the tree, you can visit the 'Bauble Barn', a refurbished carriage barn offering the largest selection of traditional glass baubles – funky sparklers, traditional wooden figures, hand-painted glass – in the region. It exists alongside an outpost of the London interiors shop, India Jane. However jaded you've become with Christmas, it's impossible not to be drawn into the excitement at Doddington – the home-grown decorations, the green trees, the baubles and the gifts – all combine to inspire a determination to make this Christmas the most beautiful yet. ♦

WHEN TO VISIT

'See the Hall Decorated' weekends are on 10, 11, 17 and 18 December. The Farm Shop, cafe, restaurant and Bauble Barn are open seven days a week, as is 'India Jane at Doddington Hall'. There are daily sales of trees from the Estate.

♦ *Doddington Hall, Doddington, Lincoln: 01522-694308, www.doddingtonhall.com*



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