



Behind closed doors

Recording the interiors of our great houses is a genre of picture-taking that is well worth mastering, says R Keith Evans FRPS

Every camera-carrying visitor to our stately homes probably comes away with lots of satisfactory exterior pictures. But complement these with equally good photographs of the interiors, and you have a much fuller and more interesting story to tell.

Technically, taking such pictures need not be difficult. The first step, though, is getting permission: property owners may not look too kindly on a photographer's tripod impeding

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



R Keith Evans FRPS practised the craft

of recording historic buildings in the stately homes of New York. For the past five years he has been chairman of the Archaeology and Heritage Group

the flow of visitors. Or they may ban amateur photography altogether, in the interests of selling more postcards and brochures. The policy of The National Trust, managing some of the finest houses in England and Wales, has happily become more flexible in recent years, and in many cases no restriction is placed on interior photography provided the images are not for commercial use.

Ideally, of course, to ensure you don't inconvenience other

visitors, try to plan your visit for a day when the property is closed to the public; here, policy varies from one property owner to another, but most will be pleased to accommodate a bona-fide photographer or small group on such days, when the only other people present will be cleaners and conservators.

In return, it is a courtesy to send the owner copies of at least some of your resulting images, and I am indebted to all of those represented here for

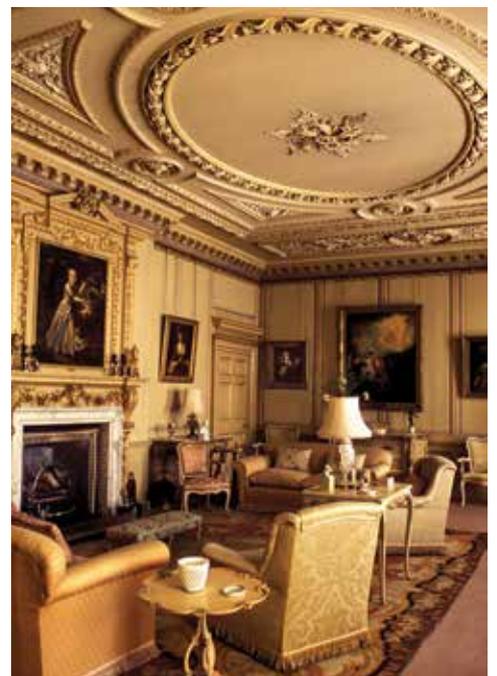


Top left A Georgian dining room, with the table set for a formal meal. Take care over details – make sure that chairs and place settings, for example, are positioned neatly. A polarising filter eliminated reflections from the paintings

Top right The only illumination on this 17th-century staircase came from the small window on the left. So I lit the richly carved newel posts and cabinet using two portable 100W floodlights, and obscured the window itself for half of the total exposure

Left The Great Hall was often designed to be imposing, even daunting, to fill arriving guests with awe. Here, the pillars, balcony and distant view are in fact a trompe-l'oeil painting on the interior wall

Right Look for ornate ceiling decoration. Glancing light from the windows here emphasises the plasterwork





Above Although vital to the running of a great house, life and conditions in the kitchen bore little similarity to that 'above stairs'. Such pictures add a further dimension to your record of a property

Left The few small windows on the right (eastern) side of this historic hall left the west wall comparatively dark. So here we have a composite of three different exposures, each two-thirds of a stop apart

short part of the total exposure, so they record but do not overexpose and burn out. It is here that digital capture proves its worth, in that you can readily check and adjust the lighting after each exposure – just as you checked your Polaroid test shots when using film. But don't overdo that other tool of digital photography, HDR capture, which can look far from natural.

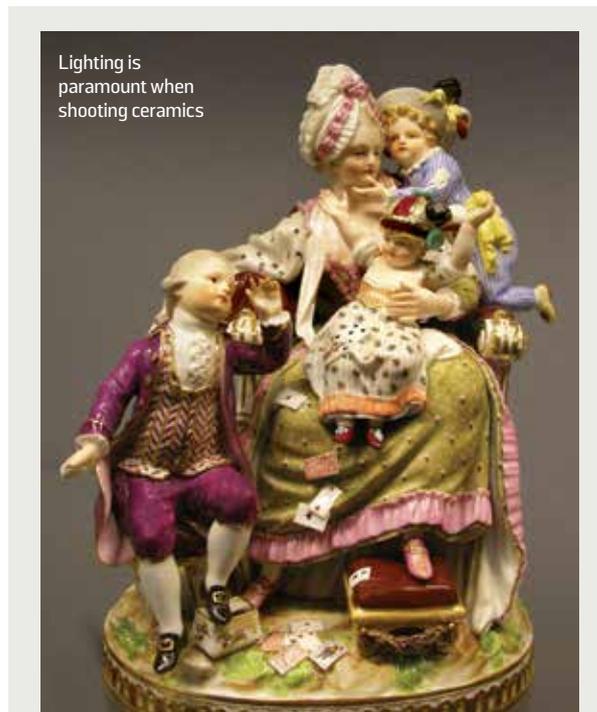
their co-operation in arranging photographic facilities. The photo libraries of The National Trust or English Heritage may also welcome samples of your work.

LIGHTING IS CRUCIAL

On your arrival, or on a previous planning visit, decide on the order in which you will photograph the various rooms. Take advantage of the best natural light in each – avoiding, for example, bright sunlight overpowering one corner of a room.

Subdued sunlight, or even an overcast day, will result in softer and more natural lighting. In either case, though, you will need to supplement natural daylight with your own hand-held or tripod-mounted flash or tungsten lights. For a natural look, include windows and the view beyond, but make sure you balance the lighting colour temperature, whether the source be daylight, flash, tungsten or fluorescent. The added light should be soft, so use diffusers or softboxes to ensure you don't create any hard-edged shadows.

Room lights are better switched off except for just a



Lighting is paramount when shooting ceramics

CAPTURE THE DETAILS

Photographing artefacts demands careful technique

This Meissen figurine is about 12 inches high, and is made of glazed porcelain. Ceramics, bronzes and polished furniture need careful lighting to avoid specular highlights. In some cases a polarising filter will

reduce reflections, although not those from metallic surfaces, which are better controlled by careful positioning and perhaps hiding the source of reflections with a black cloth or card.

AIM FOR THE 'LIVED-IN' LOOK

Depending on the size of the room, you will probably need the widest-angle lens possible, so be careful to avoid extraneous items – notices, rope barriers, electric cables and the like. Also avoid unintentional 'converging verticals', preferably in-camera using lens movements. That said, in the case of modern architecture – in a contemporary apartment or office building, for example – exaggerated angles can add a dynamic look.

Given the opportunity, place bowls of flowers or fruit, or carefully arranged books or magazines, on side tables to provide a 'lived-in' appearance, or to add interest to a foreground.

In typical great houses that are open to the public visitors may be able to explore their more workaday aspects – life 'below stairs' in the kitchens and servants' quarters – and here too you can find worthwhile pictures.

Don't forget, either, the smaller details – individual items of furniture, artefacts gathered over the lifetime of the house, trompe-l'oeil paintings; all will add value and interest to your day's haul of photographs.