

# Leicestershire and Rutland **Life**

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Setting sail on  
Rutland Water

At home with  
Victoria Westropp



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## At home with the Honorable Vicky Westropp



Vicky Westropp inherited a neglected country mansion surrounded by jungle. She describes to Life writer Joan Stephens how she tackled the monumental task of restoring her historic stately home, its gardens and lakes...

# Bringing Goadby Marwood Hall back to life

**A** move from Chelsea to Oxfordshire is not such a big step – but moving from Oxfordshire to the Vale of Belvoir involved a change of lifestyle which is one the Hon. Vicky Westropp has taken in her athletic stride.

Slight, slim and energetic, she treads purposefully around the 200 acres of Goadby Marwood Hall which she inherited six years ago from her godmother, the late Miss Monica Sheriffe.

With an airy wave of the hand she indicates the massive restoration of the house and grounds, and clearly both have been major undertakings. They have cost – what?

“Loads of noughts”, she agrees but adds that she works six hours a day in the garden herself, and has masterminded the planning and the necessary work involved.

“You name it, I’ve done it” she says breezily of a

career which included studying at the Institut Britannique in Paris, working as a secretary/PA in the politics, film and music businesses, aromatherpy, shiatsu and teaching yoga, driving racing cars herself (“though I really prefer horses”) and most recently landscape gardening.

“I trained at the Chelsea Physic Garden, and also worked with the late Rosemary Verey for a time. That taught me how very expensive designing and stocking a garden can be, which is one reason why I don’t produce costly complex and detailed illustrated designs – I feel it is better for people to spend money on plants. Most of my designs are sketches on the back of envelopes – and since I set up as a landscape gardener 20 years ago, I’ve done quite a bit of what I call “tweaking”, re-designing gardens for clients and friends.”

Vicky and her husband, Harry, met on the hunting field and have been married for 13 years. They and their ▶

*Pictured is Vicky Westropp in the grounds of the restored Goadby Marwood Hall  
Photograph by Lionel Heap*





What was impenetrable jungle six short years ago, has been cleared, so that now the Hall once again boasts several gardens, including a rose garden, a secret garden, a vegetable garden, and a tennis court garden

*The Goadby Marwood gardens and, below opposite, the Hall during restoration*

*Portraits by Lionel Heap*



12-year-old daughter, Mimi, arrived in Goadby Marwood six years ago, since when Vicky's time has been taken up turning the almost derelict Hall into a family home, and restoring the neglected 200-acre estate, which includes 20 acres of lakes and 20 more of woodland, to its former glory.

"Definitely more major transformation than mere tweaking," she agrees, adding that she still manages to find time for riding and hunting, and has just given up being joint Master of the Belvoir Hunt, a position she took up three years ago, fittingly, as her illustrious godmother, Monica Sheriffe, hunted with the Belvoir, and was passionate about horses, owning both hunters and racehorses – sadly, many of her valuable racing trophies were stolen in a raid on the Hall in 1990.

Although the oldest parts of it date back to the 16th century, most of the ironstone building was re-built in 1750. It was once the home of the first Duke of Buckingham, whose Coat of Arms graces the front entrance.

The Hall was bought from the Belvoir estate in 1920 by Captain Bertie Sheriffe, who had two daughters,





Monica and Joan. Joan married Toby Greenall of the Burton-on-Trent brewing family, but was tragically killed in a hunting accident in 1926, when pregnant with their first child.

Thus Monica Sheriffe, known as Miss Mon to the villagers, inherited the Hall. She never married, though she had many admirers, but having no kin when she died, she bequeathed the Hall and the estate to her god-daughter.

Restoration was a daunting task to face, and work began on the house itself in October 1999. Vicky explains: We had to have a new roof, and the external walls needed to be re-dressed. We had to dig out and re-landscape the entire garden at the rear in order to lower the ground levels, as damp was rotting the floors.

"There were 64 sash windows to be repaired and restored to their original condition – replacing the sash cords alone took 300 metres of cord! The chimneys hadn't been swept for years – so that when we eventually cleaned out the 33 flues, they produced 105 sacks of soot. ▶







'Work is ongoing and will be for years, but at least people in the village and beyond are pleased that the Hall is a family home again...'



Top left: Vicky with husband Harry and daughter Mimi

Above right: Intrepid Vicky trying her hand at motor racing at Silverstone

Left: From her time as joint master of the Belvoir Hunt, Vicky is pictured (second from right) at Belvoir kennels with huntsman Martin Thornton (centre), hunt staff and fellow joint masters James Henderson (left), Richard Morley (second from left) and Bill Bishop (right)

"Parts of the house hadn't been touched since the first World War, so it all needed re-wiring and re-plumbing, and extra bathrooms put in. We also moved the kitchen to the billiard room, so it is now in a much more convenient position."

Out in the grounds, Vicky walks me across the rear lawn to the gate in the church wall – "the yew hedge was so tall and so thick, you couldn't see the church at all. I planned to take the trees down, but realised if we did, the wall would collapse too, so they are still here holding it up. Then my idea was to go in for topiary, which I'd call "yew-topiary" – quite appropriate, as my 17th great grandfather was Thomas Moore, author of *Utopia*," she explained.

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She has help with mowing the extensive lawns, and some of the heavier work, but Vicky spends hours every day working in the garden.

In front of the Hall, three of the four lakes have been restored – "We reclaimed them from swamp, and nearly lost a JCB in the process," Vicky recalls. Once the village stew ponds, two lakes contain trout, the others coarse fish. The trout were originally brought from Derbyshire in 1727, by men who walked day and night carrying buckets of fish on their heads.

The area is a paradise for birds, including kingfishers. Besides rhododendrons and other shrubs, the new owners have planted more than 12,000 trees, re-fenced the entire estate, rebuilt bridges and put water troughs in all the fields.

A great deal has been done, but as Vicky Westropp is the first to acknowledge, "there is loads more to do. Work is ongoing and will be for years, but at least people in the village and beyond are pleased that the Hall is a family home again, and when we have opened the gardens for the Red Cross, or held other events here, visitors have appreciated the thought and work we've put in.

"It's tough going, but rewarding too," is her verdict.