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Reimagining Retail

Making its debut in the heart of a country estate, **RH England** blends the worlds of retail and hospitality.

Words: Matt Turner • Photography: Courtesy of RH

It's the first official day of trading when Sleeper visits RH England, and early signs are encouraging. By lunchtime there is already a steady stream of guests – many of them no doubt alerted to its existence by the extensive press coverage of a celebrity-filled launch party the preceding weekend. Subtitled The Gallery at Aynho Park, the Grade I-listed building is in marked contrast to many of RH's more contemporary Gallery spaces in its US homeland. Yet the strong architectural symmetry of this 400-year-old mansion house provides a perfect backdrop for the brand's artfully-curated vignettes and roomsets, created by its visual merchandise team.

The entire estate spans 73 acres and over 60 rooms, where luxury home furnishings from RH Interiors, Contemporary, Modern and Outdoor are combined with rare art, antiques and artefacts from across the globe. The building was originally constructed in 1615 for the Cartwright family, who continued to own it until the mid-20th century. Noted architect Sir John Soane refurbished and expanded the property further in the early 19th century.

Its latest reinvention as a luxury lifestyle retail emporium is the vision of RH Chairman and CEO Gary Friedman – no stranger to

renovation projects with this level of complexity and sensitivity, having transformed several landmark buildings in North America to RH Galleries, including the former Museum of Natural History in Boston, the Three Arts Club in Chicago, and the Historic Post Office in Greenwich, Connecticut. One noteworthy recent launch is the Bethlehem Steel Building in San Francisco, which set a new benchmark for the brand upon its opening in Spring 2022, blurring the lines between residential and retail, indoors and outdoors, home and hospitality.

“We are both proud and humbled to introduce RH to the UK, in what we hope will be an inspiring and unforgettable fashion, and to fully open Aynho Park to the public for the first time in its history,” says Friedman. “We believe RH England represents our greatest work to-date and will serve as a symbol of our values and beliefs as we embark on our expansion across Europe.” The resulting property is stunning on every level. Set on an elevated plateau at the southern edge of Aynho Village, the estate features historic gardens by iconic English landscape architect Capability Brown.

Guests stepping through the Doric colonnades of the entrance hall will encounter the Aynho Unicorn – a sculptural artwork bequeathed



Amongst the Gallery's culinary offerings are live-fire concept The Orangery as well as the Tea Salon, both of which look out over the Oxfordshire countryside



by its former owner and art collector James Perkins – sat against the backdrop of a handcarved fireplace in Mexican onyx, designed by Lady Cartwright. From here, a variety of architecturally-proportioned spaces fan out to the wings of the building. The Grand Viewing Terrace spans the southern side of the main house, defined by a layered composition of parasol trees, sculptural evergreens and monolithic limestone fire tables.

Graceful salons and sitting rooms lead to an antechamber that hosts The Sir John Soane Exhibition – created in partnership with Sir John Soane's Museum in London. The exhibit highlights the architect's life and works at Aynho as well as other English country houses, with meticulous reproductions of original drawings, architectural models and artefacts. This westward sequence of spaces comes to a dramatic end in The Architecture and Design Library, home to a collection of vintage, contemporary and rare out-of-print books from some of the most influential creators of the past two millennia.

Its centrepiece is the first edition of *De Architectura libri Dece* – The Ten Books on Architecture – dating back to 1521. Authored by Roman architect Vitruvius in the 1st century BC, the seminal work has served as a foundational textbook on classical architecture for centuries. Its study of balance, symmetry and perfect proportions also reflects RH's design ethos. Presiding over the room is a replica of Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man and rare books by the great Renaissance architects Alberti, Scamozzi and Palladio, who carried forth the Vitruvian principles.

On the opposite side of the main house is The Orangery, a live-fire dining experience featuring a marble hearth flanked by custom Molteni rotisseries from France. A wall of towering arched windows frames the space, with its 22ft-high ceilings, Calacatta gold marble tables, Italian merino wool velvet seating and a dramatic lighting installation designed by Los Angeles-based glass designer and artist Alison Berger.

The adjoining Wine Lounge, once the French drawing room, serves Champagnes and wines from around the world to be enjoyed by a 19th-century rare Rouge Napoleon marble

and gilt bronze Louis XV-style fireplace. The upper levels are home to private rooms and suites, accessed via one of two grand staircases, adorned with classical sculptures and artefacts collected by Aynho's previous owners, James and Sophie Perkins.

A former stable block and workshop space in the East Wing will house The Conservatory – an American bistro offering an elevated interpretation of enduring classics – opening in Autumn 2023. The skylit garden escape will be defined by a soaring glass roof supported by structural steelwork, century-old Spanish olive trees and three monumental salvaged brick fireplaces.

The east wing also houses The RH Interior Design Studio. Providing an unprecedented level of professional design services, the interactive space features private client presentation rooms and design libraries showcasing a vast assortment of textiles, furniture and lighting finishes.

Formerly the servants' quarters, the west wing now presents artistic installations featuring luxury home furnishings from internationally-renowned designers. Just off this wing is The Loggia – a restaurant and wine bar serving wood-fired pizzas, charcuterie boards and rustic shared plates in a relaxed outdoor setting replete with French limestone fountains and fire tables.

RH England is the company's first Gallery outside North America and represents just the first step in a significant global expansion – and a carefully-considered evolution from retail into hospitality – which will see it open Gallery spaces in other prime locations around the world. London's Mayfair, Milan, Paris, Madrid, Brussels, Düsseldorf and Sydney are all slated for future openings over the next two to three years. RH has also expanded into luxury travel with private jets RH1 and RH2, and a superyacht, RH3, available for charter in the Caribbean and Mediterranean. And although RH England – despite its extensive F&B offerings, luxury boutique hotel feel and extensive room count – does not have guestrooms available for overnight stays, the brand's first RH Guesthouse opened in New York City in September 2022, representing its first foray into the hotel world, and more are sure to follow.

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