

My perfect weekend

Nicky Philipps, 47
Royal portraitist

Turrets, tapas and the call of my easel

My weekends are usually spent at either end of the M4—at my house and studio in South Kensington, London, or, more often, in South Wales at my former family home in Pembrokeshire, Picton Castle. Sometimes, I'll stop off in Wiltshire and stay with my mother [Susie Philipps, also an artist]. She has

a beautiful studio there and does wonderful paintings of flowers, so I love to paint with, and learn from, her.

But I go to Picton as often as possible, normally driving down on Friday lunchtime and leaving at midday on Monday to avoid the traffic. The castle has been open to the public since 1986 and, as a Trustee, I like to keep an eye on things. My father died five years ago, and I stay in his old house on the other side of the walled garden. It really is the most glorious place so I love to invite friends to stay—and it's not just to pull out the ragwort!

There is always so much going on at the castle, from carriage displays to vintage car rallies, that it's a very exciting place to be. And if anyone ever tells you that an artist is not capable of pulling off a concert for 3,000 people at short notice, they would be wrong! In 2007 I organised an Elvis tribute concert in a week. And the following year I organised a similar event for Abba.

The castle gardens are amazing—we have 45 acres of woodland where I love to walk a black spaniel, Lola, that belongs to a friend of mine. I plan to kidnap her: she reminds me of the three spaniels whose muddy paws my father would be constantly striving to keep away from public weddings at the castle when I was little.

Our fabulous gardener, Roddy Milne, is always opening up new views and the flowers change all the time. Earlier this week the sun was shining on an old garden wall with blue hydrangeas and purple buddleias in the foreground, which just cried out to be painted. So I spent the evening in the garden with a paintbrush and easel, listening to the Ashes on the radio. It was very relaxing. I'd love more people to come here and paint the gardens and I'm hoping to launch a Picton Art Group next month.

On Saturdays, we usually have lunch at the castle restaurant. Our wonderful Spanish chef Maria makes delicious tapas and the best quiche in Britain. Then we might go into Narberth, the town nearby, to look around the lovely craft and antique shops. In the evening we head over to Druidstone Hotel, about 12 miles away, which is perched on a cliff top facing west and has sublime sunsets.

My whole family are painters; my grandfather, Richard Hanning Philipps, my parents and my sister [Clare Lumsden], so I grew up with art.

In short

- **Herbal tea or stiff drink?**
A gin and tonic.
- **Currently reading?**
A gossipy and riveting history of Sotheby's.
- **Ideal night out?**
Being taken out for dinner.
- **Favourite item of clothing?**
I once poured all my earnings from a portrait into a long, suede, fur-lined coat, because I was so cold.
- **Earliest memory?**
Standing outside our London house, aged four, dressed as a rabbit. I hated it!

My favourite things

- My grandfather's paintbox and portable easel
- A palette I used in Florence
- My grandmother's engagement ring
- All and any horses
- A picture of the queue at the ladies' loo at Ascot, by my sister



Photo: Jay Williams/PA

Easel living: Nicky Philipps at her former family home Picton Castle

Inset: Nicky Philipps's Coronation anniversary portrait of the Queen

I attended art college in London, but left when I was asked to upend a dustbin in order to 'express myself'. Then I went to Florence, where I did learn something, and became a portrait painter. An early portrait was of my Great Aunt Gwenllian, who founded the Picton Castle Trust. My grandfather commissioned it in the Nineties and it now hangs in the castle.

But the turning point in my career came in 2010 with the commission, through my gallery [Fine Art Commissions], to paint the Princes William and Harry. That painting now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery and it might sound cheesy, but if I'm in London over the weekend I'll always end up at the NPG. I love that place, and not only because my painting is there. It might have been a result of the Princes' portrait that I received my most important assignment: a portrait of the Queen, commissioned in 2012 by the Royal Mail who wanted to celebrate her Coronation with six commemorative stamps.

They already had five portraits and were looking for one more. They just wanted a head and shoulders for the stamp, but I was really keen to do a full-length painting to show the Queen as Head of State. OK, they said. So I went berserk with an 8ft canvas, although we agreed they would only pay for a head and shoulders.

I had three one-hour sittings with the Queen, who I'd actually first met in 1969 when I was five and she and Prince Philip came to stay at Picton. Family lore has it that having curtsied to them, I lost interest by the time I reached Prince Charles and Princess Anne, feeling that I was done with formalities. I have a very clear memory of it because my mother had dressed me up in a foul lace dress, which prickled. Somehow, I doubt if the Queen remembers. The Palace was extraordinarily accommodating while I worked there and I'm so grateful to Desmond Shawe-Taylor, the Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures.

They let me choose my own setting and I went for the Chinese drawing room because it was the only one I was shown that had a north-facing window; and from among the robes of the Queen, I chose those of the Garter. It was my idea to include the corgis, too. The Queen asked how many I wanted and I said: 'All four, please'. I couldn't just have one because the Queen is always seen trailed by a pack and two doesn't work, compositionally.

The session with the dogs was quite chaotic, but they were not nearly as aggressive as people make out. The Queen was delightful. It's hard enough painting a portrait without having to worry about protocol, but she exudes a sense of calm and has the most wonderful, infectious laugh which, more than anything, put me at ease.

When my feet are back on the ground and I'm not in work mode, I love spending Sundays cooking a big lunch. I try to make it coincide with the arrival at Picton from Dorset of my nephew and niece, Mollie and William [10 and 7, Clare's children], who sometimes come and stay for a week in their summer holidays. They love going around the castle with its flat roofs and crenellations. If it's good weather, we'll go to one of the beaches nearby, such as Newgale. The children are mad about surfing and we build sandcastles together. I also like to draw huge mazes in the sand, and then watch from the cliffs above as people try to make their way through them. There are picnics and barbecues; and as we get towards autumn we'll start picking sloes and blackberries, and have bonfires. It's not a bad way to spend your days, really.

Interview by Teresa Levonian Cole