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History and fiction, scandal and heroism collide in the Old War Office, now the Hinduja family's grandest London project

By Francesca SYZ Portrait by Deepu NAIR Styling by Carmel GILL



'An opportunity like this comes around once in a lifetime,' says Shalini Hinduja, daughter-in-law of the London-based Indian businessman Gopichand Hinduja. GP, as he is known, and his brother Srichand, were ranked the third wealthiest people in the UK in 2021's *Sunday Times* Rich List, with a family fortune of £17 billion.

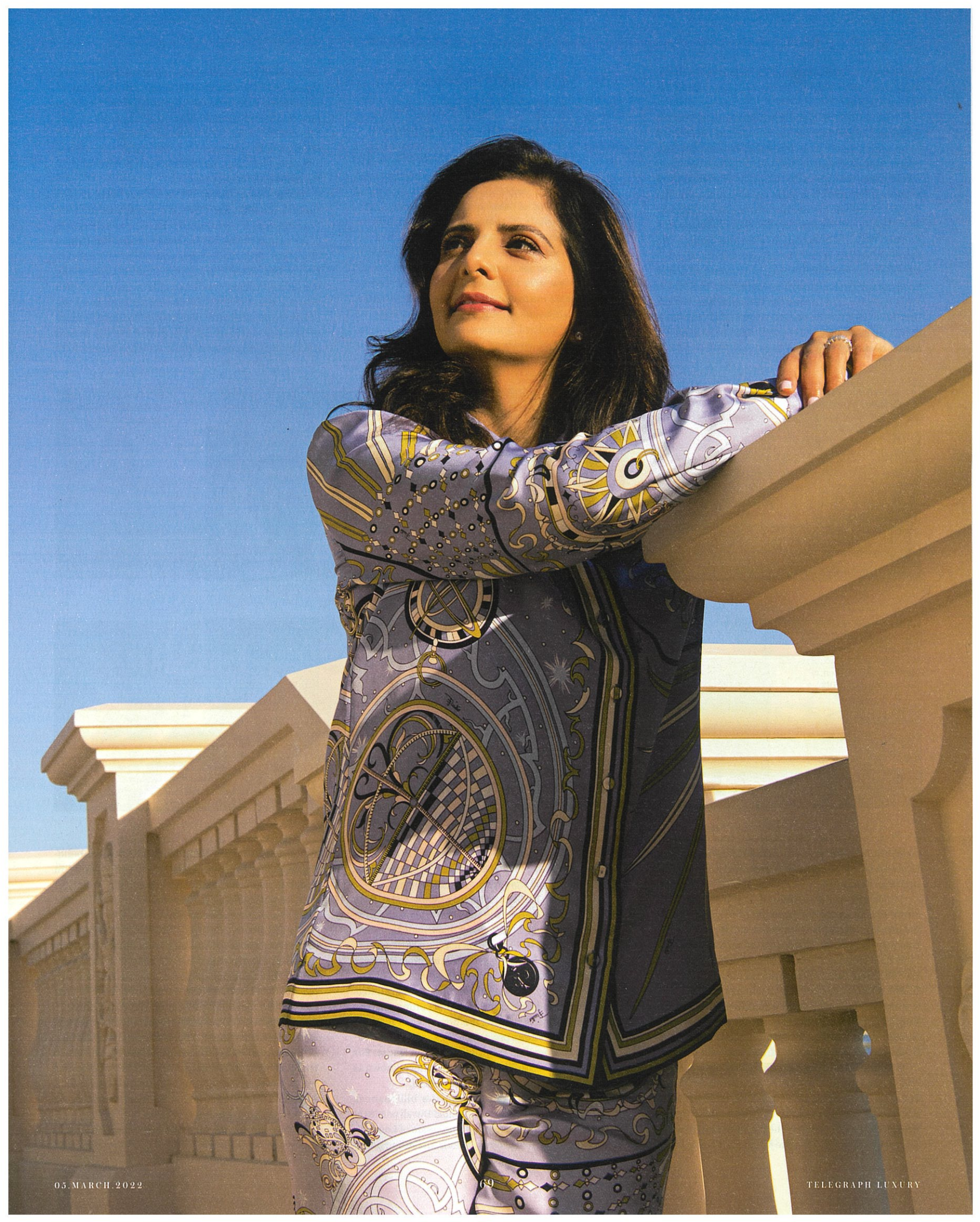
Shalini is not wrong. The opportunity to which she refers is the monumental project she is overseeing for the family: transforming the Grade II* listed Old War Office at 57 Whitehall, right opposite Horse Guards and St James's Park and just a short stroll from Downing Street, the Embankment and Mayfair. For the past five years, she has been turning it into The OWO: a 120-room Raffles hotel with 85 private residences. Raffles is the legendary Asian hotel group (now owned by Accor) the Hindujas chose to partner with on this project, famed for Raffles Hotel Singapore (birthplace of the Singapore sling) and Le Royal Monceau, Raffles Paris. This is its first foray into Britain.

The Hindujas bought the £350 million building in

2016 from the Ministry of Defence, which was selling off under-used assets. The Old War Office was built in 1906 and has featured in no fewer than five James Bond films. When it opens at the end of the year, it will be an all-singing, all-dancing 'destination', with 11 places to eat and drink, including a rooftop restaurant and two under the aegis of Italian-Argentine chef du jour Mauro Colagreco (who has just been awarded the Légion d'Honneur by President Macron). It will also have a version of the Raffles Singapore's Long Bar and a Guerlain spa, and it will house one of London's biggest ballrooms, seating more than 600 people.

If you're familiar with the Hinduja family, you either move in billionaire circles or read the news, where they occasionally appear, most memorably in 2001, when the then Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Mandelson resigned after being accused of facilitating a British passport for Srichand in return for a £1 million donation towards the development of the Millennium Dome. An internal inquiry would later find no improper

ABOVE The main façade of The OWO, which opens its doors later this year. RIGHT For Shalini Hinduja, the building's storied past was key to her vision for its lavish renovation



link between Mandelson and the Hinduja brothers. Mandelson moved on seamlessly to greater things. So did the Hindujas.

Given the level of imperial pomp associated with the building in its previous life, the fact that it is now owned by an Indian family who have spent decades building relationships between the two countries feels like some sort of justice. And given that this is the year the UK will do its utmost to seal a free trade deal with India, which is on track to become the world's third largest economy by 2050, these relationships have never felt so important.

The OWO is a labour of love for the family, who built their wealth in everything from van manufacturing (Shalini's husband, Dheeraj, is chairman of Ashok Leyland) and banking to cybersecurity and healthcare. It's in the heart of St James's, the neighbourhood where they have lived for the past 40 years and about which they feel passionately. 'Interacting with our location has always been very important to us,' says Shalini. 'We all

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cians, peers, business tycoons and community leaders, sweep up to the door in very fancy cars for a night of celebration and exquisite vegetarian food. Regulars have included Rajasthan-born steel magnate Lakshmi Mittal (fifth on the 2021 Rich List) and, depending on the decade, an assortment of politicians including Boris Johnson, Priti Patel, Sadiq Khan and his wife Saadiya, the Blairs and Theresa May.

In a new book, *The Story of the Old War Office*, authors Nicholas Foulkes and Clive Aslet write that the New War Office, as it was originally known, was described at the time as a 'swagger' building – an imperial fanfare of a place, the architectural equivalent of a military parade. Completed in 1906 by the architect Clyde Young (his father, William, was the original architect but died not long after the project broke ground), this towering colossus contained more than 1,000 offices and 2½ miles of 10ft-wide corridors that wrapped all the way around the building. In contrast to the previous generation's



LEFT The New War Office, as it was then known, at around the time of its completion in 1906



LEFT David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill in Whitehall, October 1915

RIGHT Daniel Craig as James Bond looks out over the roof of the Old War Office – birthplace of MI6 – towards Big Ben, at the end of *Skyfall*, 2012



RIGHT The Italian marble staircase of The OWO is bathed in natural light



walk in St James's Park daily, including my mother- and father-in-law. My kids [now in their 20s] grew up playing on its swings.'

The family had to do more than prove they could afford to take on the development (three other potential investors bid higher). They also had to demonstrate that they were fitting custodians for such a historically important location and one of the capital's finest examples of Edwardian baroque architecture. The Hinduja business empire has not included hotels until now, and it was the family who approached Raffles about running it. As well as significant philanthropic endeavours through their Hinduja Foundation, they are known to have a passion for conservation and restoration.

'I think Historic England recognised how hard we had worked to preserve the heritage of our own home at Carlton House Terrace,' says Shalini, referring to the row of four six-storey white-stucco Georgian houses designed by John Nash that the family bought from the Crown Estate in 2011. On a site just behind The Mall, the

houses were part of a pair of terraces built in 1827 after the demolition of a mansion occupied by King George IV while he was still the Prince Regent.

According to Forbes, the Hindujas spent £70 million buying the four houses, and the same again on a painstaking restoration that included transforming them into a single 67,000sq ft, 25-bedroom mansion harking back to the days of the Prince Regent. Here multiple Hindujas now live as a 'joint family', with both private and shared areas. 'As a family, we're very committed to doing things meticulously and authentically and not cutting corners,' explains Shalini. 'Knocking the houses back into one was both a restoration project and an attempt to re-create wherever possible the original Carlton House. For example, on the first floor there was a gallery, known as the Nash Gallery, which we have recreated.'

While the Hindujas live quietly (for billionaires), they push the boat out for their annual Diwali parties at Carlton House Terrace. At these, the cream of London's Indian community and other friends, including politi-

antiquated gentleman's club-like War Office, this building symbolised a new chapter for the British Army, in which Richard Burdon Haldane, the first secretary of state for war to inhabit the new building, would give the military a long-overdue overhaul.

Shalini admits she didn't have to dig too deep for inspiration, given the building's past inhabitants have included Herbert Kitchener (whose 'Your Country Needs You' campaign helped attract a million volunteers to the British Army in the early years of the First World War), David Lloyd George, Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden and John Profumo, who once invited Christine Keeler there. The War Office was also the birthplace, in 1909, of the Secret Service Bureau, which launched with a team of two: Vernon Kell, who headed up the Security Service, or MI5, and a naval officer, Mansfield Cumming, who led the foreign section, the Secret Intelligence Service, or MI6.

'I'm so intrigued by the building's association with espionage,' says Shalini. 'We will be referencing that,

and one entrance on Whitehall Court that became known as the Spies' Entrance, will keep its name.'

Ian Fleming encountered Cumming at the War Office during his stint in the Naval Intelligence Division and it is said he was the inspiration for the character of Bond's much-loved boss, 'M'. The extrovert Cumming, who wore a gold-rimmed monocle and had a wooden leg after cutting off his own to free himself from a car wreck, was said to test potential recruits by stabbing his wooden leg through his trousers with a paper knife. If they flinched, they didn't get the job.

Just eight years after it opened, the New War Office would become the main command centre for the First World War, the men there responsible for almost every aspect of finding, training, equipping and transporting troops to the battlefield, commissioning maps of new bits of France every time the front line moved. For it was, of course, a male-dominated establishment. As, with four brothers at the helm, is the Hinduja Group.

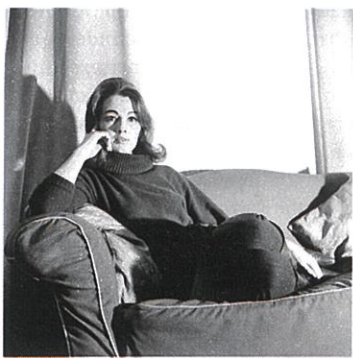
tion. I remember walking into the Ritz in Paris, which has similar volumes to us, and identifying that its interior designer, Thierry Despont, had addressed those volumes so well. So I knew he was right for [our] hotel.'

Shalini says a collaborative approach is key, whether that be input from The OWO's charismatic managing director Philippe Leboeuf (previously GM of the Mandarin Oriental Paris and before that, Claridge's), art affiliations with Sotheby's and Frieze, or EPR Architects, whose previous projects include The Ned, a luxury hotel housed in a former bank in the City. Understanding how the building worked and establishing how it could best be used in the future was crucial. 'A lot of original features were in pristine condition,' she says. 'These have provided the perfect backdrop for what we're creating, with very little intrusion needed on our part.'

Aside from the challenges of converting an austere office building into an exciting, inviting space, there was also the challenge of its shape. It is a trapezoid,

with two substantial inner courtyards. So how was that navigated? 'We listened to the architecture. The vibrant Whitehall and Horse Guards-facing side was also the most historic element, so that needed to be the hotel, whereas the back of the building is quieter and more suitable for private residences.'

The 85 Residences by Raffles, which start at £5.8 million for a two-bedroom apartment and have already broken records for the highest price in London (£11,000 per square foot for the four-bedroom duplex with terrace and private turret), are light-filled and lofty with tall windows, dark walnut kitchens by Smallbone of Devizes, original mosaic tiles and herringbone oak floors. And, of course, they will enjoy the 24-hour services of the hotel. They are in for a treat as Shalini is a foodie, lunching religiously at Le Caprice for years. 'I like to eat out locally and aspire [for The OWO's establishments] to be on the list of restaurants people want to try when they come to London,' she says.



LEFT Famous and infamous visitors to the Old War Office include model Christine Keeler, whose affair with John Profumo, secretary of state for war in the early 1960s, would not only end his career but bring down the government, too



LEFT Facing Horse Guards and St James's Park beyond, the building occupies a trapezoid plot just upriver from Hungerford Bridge and Charing Cross Station

RIGHT The world-famous Long Bar at the first Raffles Hotel, in Singapore, which has been lovingly recreated in The OWO



RIGHT Brothers Srichand and Gopichand Hinduja, who added the Old War Office to their family empire in 2016



So giving Shalini the task of transforming the secretive building into a welcoming space, was an inspired and refreshing choice. And she is well equipped to do it.

A lifelong traveller, Shalini lived in Morocco until she was eight (her Indian father was a film distributor there) before moving to London. The capital has been her home ever since. She studied psychology at University College London, where she met Dheeraj (their fathers had known each other for years), followed by an MBA at Imperial College, before going into banking.

Having always had an interest in art and design, Shalini then went on to the Inchbald School of Design, Britain's preeminent school for interior and garden design, whose alumnae have included Nina Campbell, Kelly Hoppen and Henrietta Spencer-Churchill. Before long she was offered a role as an advisor for Aston Martin and a seat on the Sotheby's international council.

'I think I bring a feminine sensibility to this project,' says Shalini, who is friendly, soft spoken and quietly self-assured. 'I'm very disciplined but also use my intui-

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There are many extraordinary original features, including the four turrets, two of which will be incorporated into hotel rooms ('great for private dining') and two into residences ('perfect for yoga'). The hotel's grand Italian marble staircase changes colour throughout the day as the sun moves and sweeps up to a series of suites, including the oak-panelled Haldane Suite, which Winston Churchill occupied while secretary of state for war. These, and a number of other historic spaces in the building, will be open to the public for 10 days a year so that everyone, not just hotel guests, can see them.

'I really love the corridors,' says Shalini unexpectedly when I ask her her favourite element of the original building. Papers too sensitive to entrust to an internal postal system were taken from one office to another by runners, so the hallways had to be wide enough for two harassed messengers to pass at speed. Now they will be a place where the lucky few can pause to mingle and celebrate this latest chapter in the story of one of London's most intriguing buildings. ●