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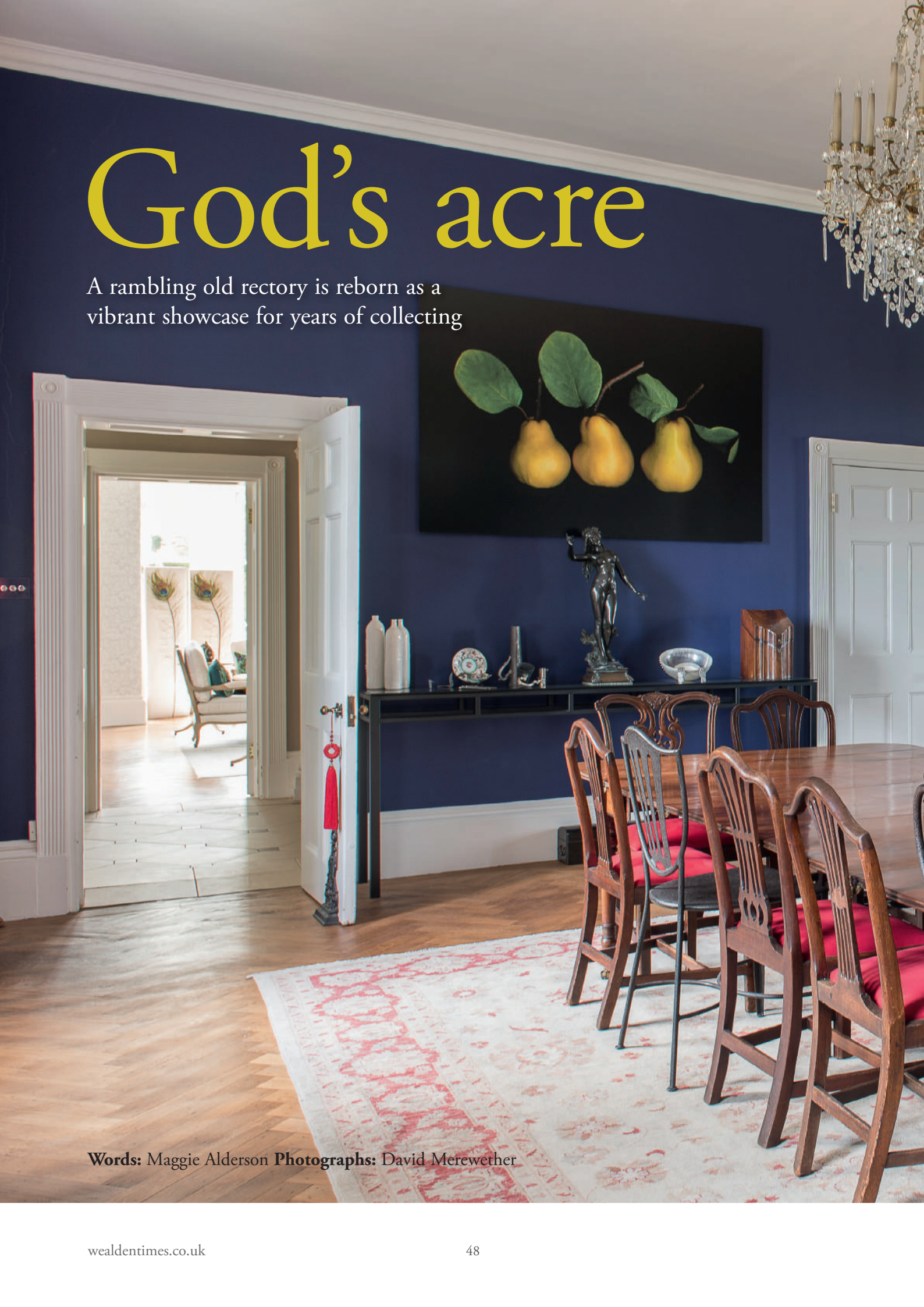


INTERIORS SUPPLEMENT *inside*

*Inspirational Interiors • Fabulous Fashion • Delicious Dishes*

# God's acre

A rambling old rectory is reborn as a vibrant showcase for years of collecting



**Words:** Maggie Alderson **Photographs:** David Merewether





**Previous page:** The dining room is painted in Thai Sapphire by Little Greene. The cast iron dining chairs are from Oka. The botanical photograph is by Isabel Bannerman **Top:** Jane's love of peacock feathers is in strong evidence in the kitchen. The wallpaper is by Matthew Williamson. The chandelier is by Lee Broom **Above:** Looking through to the back kitchen

Every house has a story – but it's very rare to find one that feels like a story in itself. With this dwelling, in the south east corner of Kent, even before you turn into the gravel drive that slopes gently up to the elegant porticoed entrance, there is a sense of a scene being set.

The perfect English meadow, with sheep safely grazing, trees dotted through it, as though placed by Capability himself, an ancient parish church set behind, all enclosed by the kind of metal fences you see around major country estates. It feels like it's still the 18th century, when the house was built, and if Mr Darcy were to swing into view, wet shirt and breeches clinging to his hunksome frame, you wouldn't be at all surprised.

It fits perfectly with the most recent part of this house's history. The trail which brought the current owners to this perfect Georgian rectory – only the fourth set of residents not to be rectors of the parish – started with one of them dreaming of a house with its own lake.

"We were still based in London," says John, "but we had a cottage near Canterbury. One day I said, 'Wouldn't it be nice to have a lake at the end of the garden so you could have a swim in the morning?'"

A treasure hunt of houses began with the first one, while being in entirely the wrong spot, too close to the ►



**Left and below:** The first glimpse of Jane's extensive collection of Murano glass in the main hall. The ebony console table is by Gareth Neal

motorway, opening up the idea of the perfect proportions of a Georgian house being what they were looking for.

"I had always said I couldn't retire to the country," says Jane, "because the houses aren't big enough, they're all barns and farmhouses, but when we saw the first house it got us thinking maybe there are other Georgians ones."

The next key plot point: separate Googling led them both to the same house – the one where they now live.

"It said it was under offer," says John, "but on an irrational impulse I took the day off to come and look at it anyway – and found the owners weren't happy with the offer. I thought Jane will say it's too big...but when she came to look, to my amazement she said 'It's going to be a lot of work'... with the clear implication 'and when can we start?'"

"We knew it was a ten-year project," says Jane. "We've done a room a year for six years and it's not finished yet. We couldn't have done any of it without Kevin McNulty, our wonderful builder. He's my hero and genius problem solver."

As they tell the tale, we are sitting around a large table under a chandelier made from old-style decanters by Lee Broom, in the huge kitchen, which is more of a series of rooms, with a wonderfully theatrical feel – enhanced further by the sound of the church bells ringing outside.

Up some steps from the dining and cooking area is an opening through to what was the earlier wing of the





**Above:** Behind a sofa in the sitting room, a collection of ceramics by Tanya Gomez **Right:** More peacock feathers on a decorative screen. The late 19th century bronze figure is from Christopher Buck Antiques

building, with parts dating back to the 13th century, with a warren of service rooms including a butler's pantry, a flower room, laundry and a food pantry. Viewed from the main kitchen, framed by lit cupboards with Tiffany blue-painted interiors, it has the air of a proscenium arch, enclosing the scene set behind, with a central storage island, painted the same blue, stage centre.

All around the main kitchen/dining area are those blue-painted cupboards, lit from within to showcase part (a small part...) of Jane's extraordinary collection of glass, which is a theme throughout the house.

"The kitchen nearly brought us to our knees," says Jane. "It was 6" deep in water and we were scooping it out with saucepans. It was also very dark, so we put back the south-west-facing window which a previous owner had taken out."

Jane doesn't know which owner, but it's quite a narrow field. Built by the Church of England in 1770, until 1928 it was an active rectory – and a grand one as befits such a 'good living' with three parishes in its care. The church sold it in 1928 and it stayed with that family until 1966.

For ten years after that, the house – by then a Grade II listed building – stood empty and became derelict, until the Council stepped in. ▶





**Above:** The dining room viewed from the other end, showing the second Isabel Bannerman photograph over 12 figures of Chinese astrology signs from Clignancourt fleamarket in Paris. The metal console tables were commissioned from Tom Faulkner, furniture designer. The red velvet curtain fabric is by Timorous Beasts. The collections of glass on the trolley and objects on the mantelpiece are arranged by Jane. ▶



**This page:** The wonderful pea green paint in John's study also by Little Greene. The curtain fabric is by Lacroix. John's computer is cleverly hidden behind doors in the bookshelves. The Chinese porcelain Foo Dogs – or 'guardian lions' – on the mantelpiece are another of Jane's favourite things to collect

"An architect and his wife came to the rescue and bought it from them," says John. "They made it good and dry and kept all the original features, the shutters and the windows."

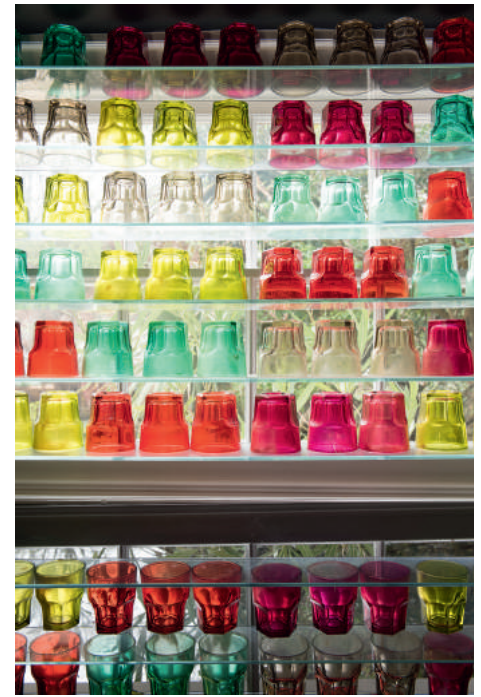
Sitting with us at the table is another important character in the story of the rectory, Mark Howorth of the London-based interior and architectural design company, Callender Howorth, who worked with Jane and John previously on their London house and Kent cottage, and played a big part in the décor of the rectory.

"Kitchens are normally very utilitarian," he says. "But this is more of a gallery of Jane's lifetime collection of glass. That's why it is so much fun working with her. It's all about colour, texture, pattern. Jane will have an idea that sparks something in our team, it's very collaborative."

This made it the perfect point for us to go and explore what that collaboration has created, which turned out to be more of an expedition than a house tour, as I filled 30 pages of my large notebook, with frantic scribbling.

It is truly rambling, with a back staircase up to the mansard-roofed old wing of the house as well as the grand ▶





**Left:** The walls in the 'blackboard loo' have been enthusiastically graffitied by the whole family **Above:** The loo window is filled with coloured Duralex tumblers, reflected in the mirror on the window sill

one opposite the front door, and six to 12 bedrooms... "depending how you look at it," says John. I also lost count of the number of bathrooms and can only remember that they were all big and they were all fabulous and I wanted to have a long leisurely bath in every one of them.

But while it is a very large and varied house, it is unified in character, all brought together by the owners' personalities, interests and collections, with various themes linking it all together, cleverly merged into context by Mark's input.

One of the themes is peacock feathers, which I first notice on the decorative screen in the grand drawing room, in fabric sourced by Mark. Later on I spot them again on the other side of the house in the snug – a cosy TV room – where they appear in a beautiful mosaic table by glass artist Nikki Ella Whitlock, one of many craft makers Jane follows and collects.

And when, at the end of the house tour (several hours later...) we returned to the kitchen, I spotted the peacock wallpaper in there.

"There is something peacock in every room..." said Jane, smiling. "I've always loved them, which made me want to set off to the top of the house again to find them all, and I would have been quite happy to have done so, being by that point as much in love with a house as it's possible to be."

The magic starts in the hallway, where the glass collection – as seen in the kitchen – comes into glorious focus in a brightly coloured group of stunning hand-blown pieces of Murano glass, collected over many years of visiting Venice. (Clearly a special place to Jane and John, who have decorated one of the guest bedrooms in tribute to it, with Venetian scene curtains and some splendid Venetian glass mirrors.)

But back to the hall – although it is hard to maintain your focus in a house where there are just so many amazing things in every room, from groups of interesting objects masterfully arranged, to the wonderfully bold colours on the walls and curtains.

The first collection of glass you see on entering the house ►



**Above:** The family call this display in a passage at the rear of the house 'Jane's Table of Curiosities'. It started as one shelf and grew into three tables as people gave her presents for it

sits on a console table made out of ebony by woodworker Gareth Neal, combining classic forms used in antique furniture, in a contemporary design. This is just one of many – and I mean, many - pieces in the house sourced from the Contemporary Applied Arts (CAA) gallery on the South Bank.

CAA is a charity supporting designer makers in the applied arts - glass, ceramics, textiles, metal, wood, jewellery – which the couple have long supported. As she says: “We’ve got room for it...”

In the drawing room is another collection, of ceramics by Tanya Gomez, brilliantly grouped, as are all the objects of interest throughout the house, by Jane; an art form in itself.

Indeed, I found it hard to tear myself away from some of the groups of collated treasures, which are found in every room. They are just so interesting to look at. In the dining room, across the hall from the sitting room, were four I found particularly captivating, each very different in character.

Against the far wall, is a row of a dozen green figures depicting the 12 signs of Chinese astrology, their scale making them a striking focal point – and the first hint of another theme of the house, which features many charming clusters of Chinese figurines, of various kinds.

On the other side of the room, on top of a matching console

table, is a fascinatingly varied collection of artworks and bibelots, some from CAA, others made by friends and family. The third arrangement is on top of the mantelpiece, the fourth a splendid group of cut glass decanters on a drinks trolley.

But while I had to drag myself from what legendary decorator David Hicks called ‘tablescapes’, this magnificent room – with walls in Thai Sapphire by Little Greene - is splendid wherever your eye falls and a perfect illustration of the creative partnership between Jane and Mark.

“I told Mark I wanted colour and he came up with this wonderful purple,” says Jane.

“It’s all about colour, texture and vibrancy,” says Mark.

“Nothing was done in the way it’s ‘supposed’ to be. It’s quirky. A house has to reflect the personality of the owners.”

“You made me brave,” adds Jane.

“We did push you a bit...” laughs Mark.

Perfectly illustrating the colour-texture-vibrancy here is his choice of fabric for the curtains – a very bold, large scale red and black velvet by Timorous Beasties, called Bird Branch.

Another of Mark’s touches, showing the (literal...) polish a professional interior designer brings to a project, are the antiqued mirror panels on the back wall.

“The premise of designing this house,” says Mark, ▶



*The first room we visit upstairs is Jane's library, lined with books, many of them first editions, a haven I never wanted to leave* ▶



**Above and left:** The mantelpiece in Jane’s library with more chinoiserie and a detail of her very personal collection of books **Above right:** a collection of crystals

“was giving back some love and character which had been lost over the years, while working within the listed status.

“Because of the scale of the dining room – it really is a huge room – it needed another element and I came up with the idea of the antiqued mirror. But we had to be very careful to get the balance right, not to be garish. It had to be the right level of patina and the right scale. Because the walls of an old house aren’t straight, it’s a bit skewiff and that’s perfect, it looks like it’s been there 250 years.”

Alongside the contemporary energy boost from such considered additions, the furnishings in the dining room reflect its perfect Georgian symmetry, with four doors, two windows and two facing console tables. Then there is the brilliant touch of unmatching dining chairs. Mixed in with eight antique chairs are four modern iron ones, from Oka.

The colour and drama continues when you step through the door into John’s study – its wonderful bright pea green paint standing out thrillingly next to the purple of the dining room. This one is also by Little Greene, called Phthalo Green. “It has the exact brightness, intensity and acidity of green we wanted,” says Mark and once you’re in the room it’s the perfect background for the vivid botanical curtain fabric he sourced from Lacroix (sweetie...)

Jane’s touch sings out from an arrangement of Chinese guardian lions – ‘Foo Dogs’ – on the mantelpiece, who look very much a family group. “I like tableaux,” she explains. She’s certainly brilliant at creating them.

From the study, you step out through another door – this being one of those special houses where you can walk around in circles, from room to room and inside



**This page:** The ‘Library Loo’ featuring a table made of books, book cover art by the Connor Brothers, from Lilford Galleries in Canterbury, hanging books, book wallpaper – and a book that is really a shelf

and out – into a dark stone-flagged corridor, with several rooms off it. The first is the ‘blackboard loo’, a lavatory with all the walls painted in blackboard paint, which the family have covered with chalked comments.

In the loo window is another example of Jane’s visual originality, combined with her love of glass. The window frame is lined with glass shelves holding classic Durable tumblers in multiple colours, the light pouring through them, like a modern take on a stained glass window. It’s stunning.

Next door is a temple to Jane’s glass creativity – the studio where she creates art works of her own using gold-leaf-backed glass mosaic pieces, she buys from the only artisans in the world who still make them, in Venice.

Back out into the corridor and Jane’s unique aesthetic sense is displayed again on five bookcases from Oka. It’s a fascinating assembly of extraordinary and interesting objects, which they call Jane’s Table of Curiosities - the closest thing I’ve ever seen in a private home to Oxford’s Pitt Rivers Museum.

“It started as one shelf,” she says. “People give me presents...”

It’s a collection you could spend an afternoon examining, but the prospect of ascending the bright red stair carpet – Mark’s choice to extend the bold





**Above left and right:** Another book cover artwork by the Connor Brothers from Lilford Galleries in one of the bedrooms  
**Below:** A mounted unicorn head from Rockett St George

colour of the ground floor rooms to the upper floor – to examine the bedrooms was enough to tear me away.

But the first room we visit up there is not a bedroom, it's Jane's library. A room, lined with books, many of them first editions, that I never wanted to leave. With a chandelier brought from their London house, a marble fireplace, the original lift-up shutters still working and polished floorboards, sloping endearingly downhill, it's a haven.

Next door is another loo, also fitted out Jane style. There is a table in the shape of a pile of books, brilliant (and pleasingly naughty) book cover artworks by the artists known as the Connor Brothers and 'bookshelf' wallpaper. And next to the loo what appears to be a pile of books hanging in mid-air.

Look closely and you will see on the spine of the bottom tome the words '*Ceci n'est pas un livre*' – this is not a book. It's actually a very witty shelf.

It's a prime example of the sense of humour throughout the house. Despite the lavish furnishing and beautiful objects, there is no pomposity here. And a house of this scale could take itself rather seriously.

Nowhere is that more apparent than over the door of the adjacent bedroom – where a 'life-size' stuffed unicorn head, mounted on a panel, stops me in my tracks.

"It was Jane's idea," says John, clearly delighted at my



**This page:** The Venice bedroom features Venetian mirrors and curtains featuring Venetian scenes from Zoffany

reaction. “She said ‘a house like this should have moose heads, but that means killing things. We should get a unicorn.’”

And then, being the conjurer of objects of beauty and curiosity that she is – she found one. An item of myth and magic which sums up the atmosphere of this extraordinary house and the very special people who own it.

Not just a story, a fairy tale.



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[callenderhoworth.com](http://callenderhoworth.com)

Builder Kevin McNulty [boilerhealthcare.co.uk](http://boilerhealthcare.co.uk)

Christopher Buck Antiques

Contemporary Applied Arts [caa.org.uk](http://caa.org.uk)

Curtains made by Mill House Designs [millhousedesigns.net](http://millhousedesigns.net)

Isabel Bannerman [bannermandesign.com](http://bannermandesign.com)

Lilford Gallery [lilfordgallery.com](http://lilfordgallery.com)

Master glassmaker, Murano [masterafrocelotto.com](http://masterafrocelotto.com)

Norfolk Decorative Antiques did all the chandeliers and wall

lights in the house [antiquelighting.co.uk](http://antiquelighting.co.uk)

Tanya Gomez ceramics [tgceramics.co.uk](http://tgceramics.co.uk)

Venetian mosaic glass [orsoni.com](http://orsoni.com)

Woodwork [thoroughlywood.co.uk](http://thoroughlywood.co.uk)

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