

CHRISTMAS 2013 £3.99

Period Homes & INTERIORS

Win
£2,000
WORTH OF
PRIZES

Real homes at
Christmas

Beautiful interiors dressed to impress

Dining
delights
Sweet treats
for Yuletide
guests

122
CLASSIC GIFT
SOLUTIONS

BUYERS' GUIDE

Range cookers fit
for the party season

Winter walks
Majestic landscapes
to explore this Noël

Festive decorating
Embrace the spirit of Christmas with our stylish ideas



LABOUR OF LOVE

Chris and Damian fell in love with Huntsham Court on first sight, and they immediately set about restoring it into a lavish country house

FEATURE SOPHIE WARREN-SMITH PHOTOGRAPHY OLIVER GORDON STYLING JULIE HAILEY & HELEN BLUNT



Nestled in the rolling Devon countryside on the border of Somerset and Exmoor National Park, you'll find Huntsham Court, a Grade II*-listed Victorian mansion built in the 1860s in a Gothic style. It was built for a bride as a wedding present from her husband and once played home to Douglas Adams, author of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

It was during the search for a venue for their civil partnership that present owners, Chris Badham and Damian Llambias, struck upon the idea of finding a location for a hospitality business as well as a place they could call home. 'We were looking for a historic house to rent for our ceremony, with plenty of bedrooms for our family and friends in opulent surroundings,' explains Damian. 'However, they were all either expensive hotels or private mansions with valuable antiques, so you could look but not touch – there's no fun or relaxation when you can't sit on the sofa.'

After successfully finding a venue for their service, the journey for their business venture began. Chris and Damian had been trying to escape the city for a few years, but never made the jump. They eventually came across Huntsham Court – it fitted their brief of great bedroom spaces, plus it could host 120 people. It was sold by the original family in the 1970s and was made into a hotel. At this time, the rooms were fitted with ensembles, making it different to other huge old houses, which often have 20 bedrooms and just one bathroom. Then in the 2000s, it was sold again to be split up into flats, but permission was never granted.

A NEW FUTURE

The couple had moved quite a lot in the past as they love restoration projects. However, nothing was on this scale after mainly living in London Victorian terraces. 'When we bought it,' begins Damian, 'it was a neglected Victorian mansion wrapped in ivy. It was like stepping into the 1970s with flock wallpaper and rusty avocado bathrooms. Every room was a rainbow – for instance, the Purdey bedroom in the attic had burgundy stained sheets, yellow walls, an orange carpet and blue woodwork, while other rooms had snake paintings and faded sheets!' The pair decided to keep the best of each room – such as historic wallpapers or vintage curtains – and to neutralise the decor in the others. 'We didn't want all the rooms to be the same, like >>





in some hotels, we wanted to embrace country house chic,' explains Damian. 'We had to buy lots of furniture to fill the rooms, last year alone we purchased 64 sofas, as well as hundreds of other pieces. We also had leaks everywhere, and have quite literally put in miles of cabling to get the electrics working – the whole house ran off just one 60 amp fuse.'

As the building is Grade II*-listed, the couple made sure that all the work has been carried out sensitively, in liaison with the local conservation officer, and have kept the original format of the house unchanged – their ethos is to embrace, restore and retain. 'The Victorians knew how to build, so it's a great building, the floor plan is brilliant and the windows have wonderful double sash shutters that fold into the floor – masterful engineering,' says Chris. 'We are also aware that we are trying to preserve the building for another 100 years. That said, you do have to embrace modernity, you can't make do with just one light bulb in a huge room, so we've bought chandeliers from auction houses, improved the plumbing and heating and introduced modern essentials, including Wi-Fi.'

DECORATIVE DECISIONS

Due to the size of Huntsham Court, Chris and Damian have had to be strict with their budget. They scoured auction houses where they bought Victorian furniture at great prices, but in order to counteract the heavy nature of the Victorian decor – which is typically quite dark and dominant – they aimed to lighten the atmosphere for a more modern feel. 'We wanted to work with the original features, such as the Jacobean panelling and the hand muralled ceiling. We bought metres of fabric at the Osborne & Little and Colefax & Fowler clearance sales – we even took my mum with her walking stick to protect the trolley as we piled it high!' exclaims Damian. The result was some >>

A local craftsman built an octagon-shaped kitchen island to match the dome of the ceiling. It is painted in Green Verditer by Dulux (0844 481 7817, www.dulux.co.uk). The Christmas cake was made by The Cake Lady (www.the-cake-lady.org).



Far left Sadly, the original Aga is no longer functional, although Chris and Damian did consult a stove expert to enquire about whether it could be restored, but it had been used so heavily in the past that the cast iron had warped. They decided to keep it to add to the charm and character of the kitchen. **Below** The house is always

a hive of activity – especially at Christmas time, so Chris and Damian use local supplier, Posh Nosh event catering (www.posh-nosh.co.uk), who work wonders with their festive mince pies and delicious chocolate brownies. They adorn the kitchen worktops ready for any passing visitors who may pop in to say hello.





Chris and Damian decided against art work and hung Aubusson rugs on the walls in the dining room instead. Beautiful wallpaper and curtains complete the elegant look. The floral centrepieces from Earth Gallery Flowers (01398 332100, www.earthgallery.biz) create a stunning focal point.

‘Always have something oversized in a room as it plays with proportion and makes it feel bigger – but don’t oversize everything otherwise it can look too cluttered’

exquisite metallic embroideries and silks with reflective qualities that help make the interior appear lighter.

As the Great Hall already had stunning panelling, they painted the walls in a warm stony colour that highlighted the contrast of the panelling and was sensitive to the Portland stone columns and fireplace. As many of the rooms have bold wallpapers, Chris and Damian continued this neutral scheme through the corridors, creating an ideal backdrop for their art work. The 3.7m high ceilings meant they needed huge paintings, but as these were quite pricey, they bought Aubusson carpets from auction which they hung in the dining room instead – they were a fraction of the cost and add a visual texture to the room as well as softening the acoustics.

‘We’ve sourced some fabulous historic wallpapers,’ explains Damian. ‘Little Greene make a great range inspired by the English Heritage archive. We chose the Bayham Abbey print in Bath as it was soft and neutral. Our biggest extravagance was the wallpaper in the Library, made by Watts of London, who also supplied the wallpaper in the Houses of Parliament. We chose the Welby Shrewsbury design as its gold base colour reflects light, and when you look at it on an angle, the textures and reflections change, it really brightens up the room. We also love chinoiserie, but a Zoffany multipanel wallpaper we wanted was beyond our reach, however our artist friends weren’t! We invited them to stay and a combination of persuasion, wine and a box of paints helped us convince Susan McFarland to paint some on the walls – every time she visits we add more birds and butterflies, all based on the monogrammed fireplace.’

LEARNING CURVES

As Chris and Damian had previously restored old properties, they were experienced in stripping out electrics, plumbing, heating and redecorating a house completely. But with Huntsham, it wasn’t possible to ‘make do and mend’ and the couple believe in doing a proper job. ‘Quick, cheap fixes only last a couple of years and we don’t want the whole place falling apart in five years – slow and steady wins the race. We also rent the house out for events and weddings, which has helped the cash flow and enabled us to get ahead of the repairs. Thus after 18 months, we are now preventative rather than reactionary to problems,’

>>



Above from top The festive table is dressed to impress with beautiful place settings. The couple have used a crisp linen tablecloth, gold ribbon from Jane Means (01522 522544, www.janemeans.com), holly from the garden to add a natural element and a clementine for a pop of colour. The tableware

is from Dibor (0800 408 0660, www.dibor.co.uk). They have set the scene with beautiful lanterns on the mantelpiece, for similar, try Nordic House (0845 475 1610, www.nordichouse.co.uk). Pine garlands from Bloom (0844 482 2332, www.bloom.uk.com) continue the natural feel.



explains Damian. It really is a labour of love and it's their favourite place. 'We often just set up a table for two in the Great Hall in front of a roaring fire as we can't quite believe the house is ours – but without renting it out, it would never have been possible. We want to do right by the building and invest in its maintenance, and by opening it up, other people have the opportunity to enjoy the house too,' says Chris.

FUTURE PLANS

Huntsham Court is still very much a 'work in progress' as they only bought the house in January 2012 and there is still lots to do. Chris and Damian have a five-year plan to rewire the whole house, and as they rewire room by room, they redecorate too. The building was also repointed in concrete in the 1980s, which stops it from breathing, so at some time they need to repoint it again, which in itself is no small task. They are also half way through repainting the 140 windows, which collectively have over 700 glass panels. 'The biggest adjustment,' says Damian, 'was to the scale of the building, nothing is cheap when you need hundreds of meters of curtain fabric, pipework and cabling!'

'We can't imagine leaving Huntsham,' says Chris, 'the area is beautiful, the people are warm and welcoming and the love of the building in the community has been brilliant. Every trade has gone the extra mile to help bring the house back to life and its former glory. We've even managed to restore the gardens repairing the Old Dovecote and the original paths – last winter we planted 5,000 bulbs and 700 yew and beech trees to create hedges and the planting architecture of the grounds. Maybe one day, we may even finish painting the windows, but it's a bit like the Forth Bridge!'

The silk cushions in the Monica bedroom add to the oriental theme. The striped cushions are from Colefax & Fowler (www.colefax.com) and the yellow designs are from an interior store in Taunton.



Useful info

Hire out Huntsham Court for your own event: call 01398 361277, or visit www.huntshamcourt.co.uk for details.

Far left Damian and Chris have named all the bedrooms. The first floor is named after friends and family members, the second floor after places where they have lived, and the attic floor after pets. The yellow room here is called Monica, after Damian's mother. The bird and tree mural was handpainted by

their artist friend, Susan McFarland. **Below from top** The couple sourced the majority of their dark antique Victorian furniture from auction houses and they have dressed the house accordingly. A vintage radio sits upon a traditional writing desk and a beautiful cream bird cage stands on a chest of drawers.



*'Buy art you love – if you see an old
nick nack in a junk shop and fall in love
with it, frame it or display it on a shelf'*



The most luxurious bathroom is in the Douglas suite, named after Damian's father. They painted the room in Parchment Paper from Dulux's Heritage Origin range (0844 481 7817, www.dulux.co.uk). The oval mirrors were a great find at an auction at Lots Road in London.