



HOUSE AND HOME

Brigadoon owner Mike Fisher shows *Charlotte Hogarth-Jones* around his quintessential country home, Somerset's Ven House

PHOTOGRAPHY LUKE WHITE

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When Mike Fisher first heard of Ven House, he wasn't really in a buying mood. The owner of the award-winning 36-metre *Brigadoon* and founder of interior design firm Studio Indigo had been scoping out country houses with his partner, Charles, for some time. He'd found the property he wanted – a William-and-Mary-style country house called Chettle that he'd seen in the pages of *House & Garden*, but had lost out to another buyer. "I was feeling dejected," he admits.

A friend who worked in real estate tried to persuade him there was something better out there. Thankfully, Fisher had heard just enough about the house, which was owned by British designer Jasper Conran at the time, that he decided it was worth a look and duly drove down from London to Somerset. "It was one of those glorious English days that was absolutely beautiful," he recalls. "When Charles and I drove through the gates, our jaws just dropped."

The conversation on the drive home was fairly straightforward. "Charles asked, 'Do you like it?' and I said, 'I love it,'" remembers Fisher, and the deal was done. "I think we were both just in awe of it," he says, "and as for why I wanted a big country house... perhaps I had pretensions of grandeur? But then again, I grew up around here and all my family live in this area, so in a way it felt a lot like returning to my childhood."

From those early rose-tinted days, it soon became obvious that Fisher was going to have his work cut out at Ven. "Like any house, you take down the pictures and you take away the furniture, and suddenly it doesn't look quite as glamorous as you thought it did," he says. It was a year-long building site, installing new boilers and bathrooms, putting in place new electrics, mending stonework using specialist artisans ("they're skilled craftsmen and they're difficult to find – a dying breed," notes Fisher) and making choices to restore the house to its original state where possible – a proper bathroom, for example, was reinstated in the master bedroom.





Above: the summer house, or pavilion, is home to dining chairs by Hermès, a chandelier by Morgan Associates and Iphigenia curtains by Rubelli.
Below: an 1820 Russian chandelier adorns the morning room, along with a pair of Swedish Empire wall sconces and an 18th-century gilded console



Above: in the dining room, a William IV dining table sits below a 1920s rock crystal French chandelier, while 19th-century watercolour views of St Petersburg adorn the walls. Below: the library is home to sofas upholstered in Loft fabric by Zimmer + Rohde, while the walls are painted in four-tone colours





The drawing room features a rococo ceiling with deep acanthus frieze picked out in 22kt gold. A grand Russian chandelier by Johann Zech hangs above Georgian camel-back sofas upholstered in velvet from Alton Brooke

The reparations were just the beginning of Ven's transformation. Next came interiors, masterminded by Fleur Liversidge, Fisher's trusted employee, design talent and right-hand woman of over a decade. Together, they've worked on numerous restaurants, houses, yachts and more – Ven was simply the next project in the wings.

"I first found Fleur when I was on a skiing holiday with her father," explains Fisher. "She was this wild child, and her dad begged me to take her on," he laughs, and so she began working at Studio Indigo. It wasn't long, though, before Fisher recognised a natural talent in his young protégé. "Fleur's colour palette is just fantastic – she has this amazing ability to combine different colours in an unusual way. You look at them and think, 'My god, I never thought they'd go together,'" he says. "They say women have got a bigger spectrum of colour, so maybe that's it," Liversidge adds modestly. She also has a gift, continues Fisher, for finding exactly the right pieces to go in the right places – something that proved particularly useful at Ven, with its lofty ceilings and yet moderately sized rooms. "The thing is, I draw and draw and draw," she explains. "When you're drawing so much, you just end up with this innate natural knowledge. You know what's going to work."

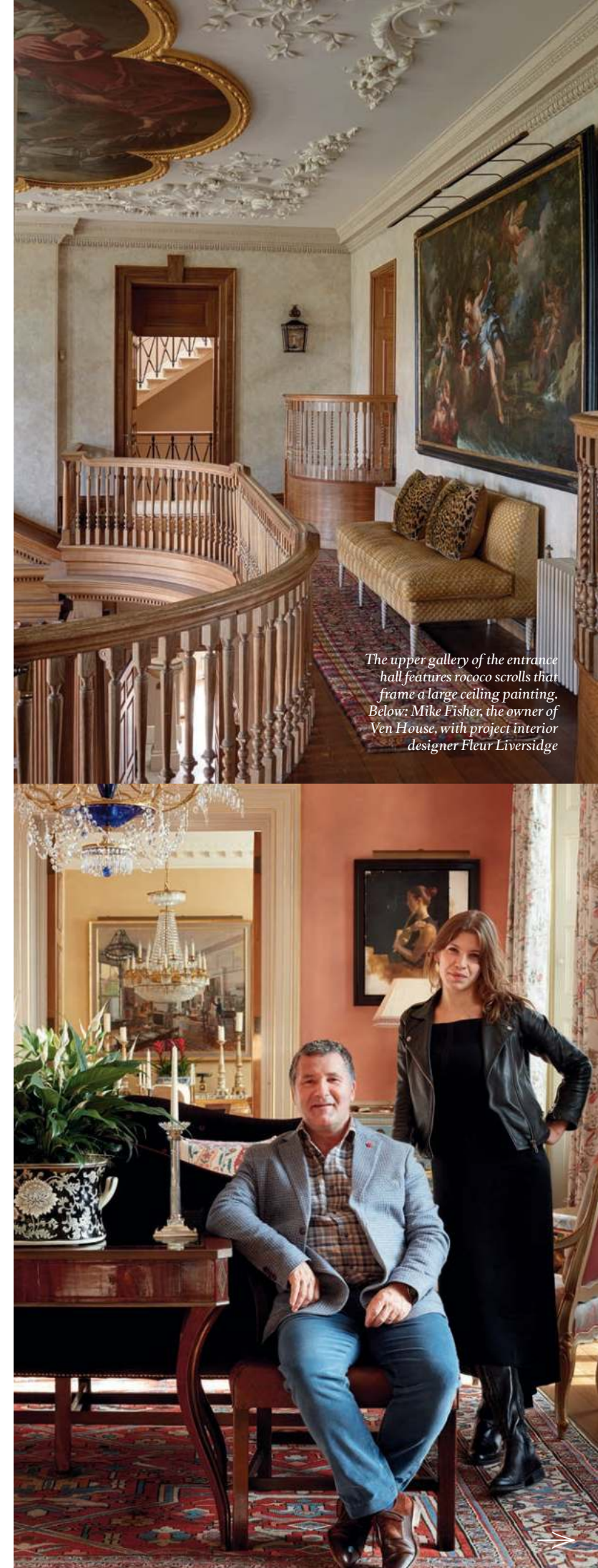
It's not the first time Liversidge has worked on one of Fisher's personal properties. Nonetheless, "I was very conscious that this was Mike's home," she says. "I really wanted to make the design experience pleasurable for him, and I came full of different ideas and bubbling with excitement every day, clutching scraps of wallpaper and bits of fabric and saying 'Look at this! How about this one?'" she laughs, "plus I really tried to bite my tongue." The pair admit they've had their fair share of creative differences over the years. "Do we always get on?" Fisher asks with incredulity. "Oh God, no! We argue all the time, but I would never dream of arguing with someone who I didn't respect and like. I wanted the interiors to have strength and character, and that's just what Fleur's got." The two of them laugh in agreement when it comes to what they have in common. "We're both absolutely bloody-minded!" they say.

They might both be forgiven for feeling the pressure at times. Ven is a house that has belonged to many great owners – and designers. Originally built in the late 1600s, the red-brick-fronted building was extended around 1725 for owner James Medlycott, a successful lawyer and descendent of the famous Somerset Medlycott family. It was then altered and extended by Decimus Burton in 1835-36, who built a number of the beautiful greenhouses in Kew Gardens, and Thomas Cubitt, the British master builder famed for his work on Belgravia, Pimlico and Bloomsbury squares in London. Since then, custodians of the house have included both Jasper Conran and American designer Thomas Kyle, who landscaped Ven's beautiful gardens. A curious crop of locals watched closely to see how Fisher would make his mark.

"Initially we were bricking it," he says, "because the house is such a great pedigree. It ranks with Chatsworth and other great British houses, and I put a lot of strain on myself thinking that people would expect something," he says. Thankfully, the reception for their hard work has been unanimously positive. "People love it," says Fisher.

Walking around the house, it's easy to see why. The design feels natural and sophisticated without being stuffy – a far cry from the back-breaking sofas and "look but don't touch" feel of comparable English country houses. Carefully selected antique furniture is offset by elegant paint shades on the walls, while pops of colour – a primrose yellow or vivid orange lamp, for example – break up the dark wood. Modern artworks and contemporary patterns also bring the look up to date. It's a warm, welcoming space that allows the architecture of the building to shine, and it feels effortless – though putting it together has been anything but.

"We tried all sorts of furniture to get it right," explains Fisher. "We put in a few modern pieces at first, but that didn't work. I have a lot of inherited Russian antique furniture, so we put that in next – that didn't



The upper gallery of the entrance hall features rococo scrolls that frame a large ceiling painting. Below: Mike Fisher, the owner of Ven House, with project interior designer Fleur Liversidge



Above: the window and bed curtains in the south-east guest bedroom are by Romo/Mark Alexander, while the inner bed curtain is an Osiris fabric by Bennison. Below: the south guest bedroom boasts Suzani carnation wall fabric and curtains from Iksel Decorative Arts



The master dressing room has fabric walling from Watts of Westminster and curtains from Rubelli. Above: the master bathroom is home to an antique bath from The Water Monopoly alongside an African zebra rug. Above right: the guest bathroom has a free-standing shower from Drummonds



Above: the orangery, erected by Decimus Burton in 1837, features wicker furniture and a contemporary mosaic table.
Below: the music room with 19th-century Ziegler rug from Afridi



work either, because the spirit of the furniture is very different; it's quite architectural and it doesn't have that softness that English country houses need." As with many Queen-Anne style houses, the proportions of Ven are such that only very specific pieces fit and look right in the rooms. Thankfully, Fisher's friend and antique dealer Edward Hurst helped them track down a host of appropriate and curious pieces.

In fact, every piece, whether located by Hurst or not, seems to have either a fascinating story or a noteworthy supplier behind it. There's a pair of rescued Georgian chairs upholstered in Russian leather that, in 1786, was loaded on to a ship that sank on its way from St Petersburg to Plymouth. Discovered years later, "it's reindeer leather and has that wonderful rich smell of birch bark and the salt of the sea," explains Fisher.

There are original maharaja bath showers that date from the 1900s; they're from The Water Monopoly, a company that specialises in antique bathroom furniture. Huge portraits, meanwhile, hang on the wall in Ven's palatial entrance hall, sourced from English art dealer Philip Mould, Matthew Upham Antiques Ltd and Daniel Hunt Fine Art. "When they arrived at Ven, they were three times my height. I thought, 'Oh my god, what have I done!'" says Fisher. "Then of course you hoist them up onto the wall and it works perfectly, so you suddenly realise that the scale works for Ven."

And thanks to Liversidge's gift for bringing together unusual colours, textures and patterns, every room has an element of surprise. On the walls of the south bedroom, for example, the same fabric – a slightly delicate, soft linen – has been used for the curtains and the walls. "It's like a really pleasing little cocoon," she explains, and it does feel that way.

In the yellow Chinese bedroom, there's a striking chartreuse wallpaper, edged with fabric and then paired with petrol teal velvet curtains. "That colour combination is really just spectacular," enthuses Fisher, and even in the master bedroom, Liversidge's bold styling has won out.

"I love blue to wear, but I hate it in interiors. It's a really difficult colour," says Fisher. "Guess what colour my master bedroom is! Fleur was really beating me over the head with it, trying to persuade me," he laughs, but again, it works. "It's not a cold blue; it's a very warm blue," she explains.

The walls in the main living area are also a distinctive shade of salmon pink, mixed from no fewer than 20 different colours painted directly on the wall, by a paint specialist gilder called Tony Malins. "The great thing is that there's so much depth of colour in this wall, it'll still look great in 20 years," says Fisher, "whereas modern emulsions will look a bit tired."

Hanging on the walls are distinctive portraits by BP Portrait Award finalist Diarmuid Kelley. "He paints really accurate portraits, and there are some areas that he just leaves unpainted," explains Liversidge. "I love that sense of crisp, white modernity that they have."

And then there are all the personal trinkets and curios that you'd expect in a private home – seashells of varying shapes and sizes, collected from beaches around the world; *Punch*-style cartoons of Europe; watercolours of Russia; Georgian mirrors and 18th-century silver made by a lady called Hester Bateman, as well as some of the original Medlycott family silver that Fisher is trying to buy back.

It's a house that's lived in, too. On Friday afternoons, the house staff and gardeners join Fisher, his partner and guests for afternoon tea with freshly baked cakes, and the beautiful grounds are often admired, with individual trees gifted and dedicated to members of Fisher's family. "In the summer months, we're always picking or planting things," he says, walking past the orangery, which will be bursting with oranges and lemons in the summer, "and on Saturdays, we always have a cosy night in with fish and chips." It's hard to think of more English rituals. But then, what could be more fitting for the quintessential English country house?

"We wanted things to be comfortable and homely. It's an impressive house," explains Fisher, "so once you get inside, you don't have to make it impressive anymore." And yet it is. ■



Above: the kitchen has a 19th-century French walnut table with painted chairs from The Parsons Table Company beneath a Delaval hanging lantern by Jamb.
Below left: a view from the house over the formal parterre. Below right: the hallway to the orangery with pearl pineapple lanterns from Charles Edwards

