



WORDS: VIVIENNE BAILEY PHOTOS: NICK YARSLEY



Above Steve escapes the pressures of day-to-day living by cooking up feasts for his friends.

Left The garden room – in Victorian times used for growing fruit – is now perfect for after-dinner drinks. It was also the stunning venue for Steve and Vivienne’s wedding this summer (they were lucky and enjoyed one of the few sunny days of July).

Top left A new ‘in and out’ driveway was re-created to mirror the original, which was lost in the 70s.

Middle Japanese design provided inspiration for the back garden.

Far left Today, the entrance from the lounge into the garden room helps to create a feeling of the outdoors, inside.

Private. passions

Steve Dunn’s enthusiasm for Victorian architecture was the inspiration behind his decision to buy a decaying early Victorian villa in the centre of Royal Leamington Spa.

He also wanted to create an escape from the stresses and strains of the modern-day corporate world. Steve has been a managing director of blue chip companies for more than 20 years and his partner Vivienne Bailey runs a marketing agency. Juggling diaries is often complicated and Steve felt the time was right to build a unique home in which they could spend time together.

Although he recognised the challenges in

restoring Florence House, designed and built in the mid 1840s by Daniel Goodman Squirhill, a prominent local architect who wanted to ‘show what he could do’, Steve was confident that his eye for detail and knowledge of the period would allow him to completely transform the property.

“I did think about getting in a project manager, but decided against it as I wanted to work with the builder. I was determined to make sure the restoration of the Grade II listed building was both sympathetic and in keeping with the house’s history,” says Steve.

Armed with a mass of books, original plans and archived material, he started the process >>



Left The 19th Century bookcase houses an extensive collection of opera CDs, while the staircase leads up to the mezzanine level – originally the servants’ rooms.

Below Farrow & Ball Breakfast Green adds to the authentic look of the dining room.

Right The sunny aspect of the lounge is enhanced by bold yellow paint.

Below right Steve’s attention to detail comes through in the painstaking restoration of the plasterwork ceiling.

18 months ago. The glory of the house was the presence of much high quality detailing and innovative features – the main rooms have elaborate ceiling plasterwork and roses, while carvings of oak leaves and acorns adorn the beautiful staircase.

But scratch the surface and every element had to be repaired. Paint finishes to ceilings were chosen to avoid damaging or obscuring the plasterwork and applied by industrial sprayers, while the Farrow and Ball paint catalogue was used to select authentic Victorian colours for the walls.

Steve admits he fell in love with the house when he first saw the garden room, which still has the original stained glass depicting the four seasons, encaustic tiles, a sumptuous plasterwork ceiling and frieze and a Corunna marble fountain.

“Sadly, it was riddled with damp, had a leaking roof and the doors into the garden were rotten throughout. Two carpenters turned the work down as they felt it was simply too difficult, but eventually we found a real craftsman, who also helped us track down a locksmith in Birmingham so that we could re-create the original locks,” says Steve.

The room has now been furnished with

‘Steve admits he fell in love with the house when he first saw the garden room, which still had its original stained glass...’





Lloyd Loom furniture which, with its beech wood frames and timeless quality, adds to the overall effect.

Steve's other main passion is cooking, so the fact that Florence House already had a four-oven Aga was another major selling point. He has built the rest of the kitchen around this, making sure that there's plenty of storage space and adding on a small conservatory for casual summer dining. Off the kitchen, he's transformed what he believes was the house's original kitchen into a formal dining room, with Lancashire wavy line ladder back ash chairs dating back to the 1830s and an English oak sideboard from the 1880s.

On the ground floor and mezzanine level, what would have been servants' rooms have been turned into a utility room, cloakroom, wine cellar and bathroom. In addition, two bedrooms have been turned into large bathrooms – one is an en suite to the master bedroom, another is on the top floor alongside the two guest bedrooms.

“Because we have family and friends >>





coming to stay, I wanted to give guests privacy so that they are pretty much self-contained on the third floor, which even has its own central heating system,” says Steve.

Other high points for Steve are his library, which has more than 1,000 books, and the garden. The front has been remodelled to reproduce the ‘in and out’ driveway (shown on 19th Century maps and photos in the County Records Office) while at the back, the garden was landscaped in a sympathetic style. The original coach house – which was in a ruinous condition – was taken down and rebuilt brick by brick, retaining all its original stained glass.

The house is now filled with Victorian art, fabrics and natural fibre carpets, and a range of hand-made furniture based on the British Arts and Crafts Movement. Steve designed a number of these pieces, including his office desk, library table, dresser and bookcase, which were then built by an architect friend.

“It’s been a much longer job than I imagined and there were times when we thought the workmen would never leave. Not surprisingly, the main builder has become a friend, so at least if we need any more jobs done or the roof leaks, we don’t have to worry. We both enjoyed our first summer in the garden and being able to entertain in the garden room, which is still my favourite in the house,” says Steve. **PH**

Address book
 XLNT², tel: 01926 882253 did all building work, contact Andy Graham.
 Prestige Gardens, tel: 01926 314771, contact Chris Harrison.



Top The master bedroom is dominated by magnificent swagged curtains and a 19th Century bed.

Above A guest room preserves the original servants’ fireplace.

Left Originally a bedroom, this room is now a large guest bathroom.