



A labour of LOVE

Penelope Baddeley meets Lucy and Alex Arterton whose sensitive restoration of the gardens and interiors of Darley House has unveiled specimen plants dating back to Paxton and a host of exciting period features

Lucy and Alex Arterton were holidaying in Derbyshire with their three boys when they made a delightful chance discovery, which ensured they would return to the county time and time again.

They spotted details of an intriguing Georgian residence in the window of an estate agent in Matlock and, for the following two evenings, Alex went in search of the historic house whilst out running.

After several fruitless efforts, Peak Railway enthusiast Alex finally found the extraordinary hidden gem - a late 18th



Lucy and Alex under the coach arch at Darley House
Photo: Penelope Baddeley

century grand gritstone house, just off the A6 at Darley Dale. It was obscured from view by a high stone wall and gate.

'I peered over the wall and just thought wow! No one knows this place is here,' said Alex, a chartered accountant with one of the world's largest professional service firms in London.

'It was just like I imagined Francis Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*.

'We later found that the gardens had been restored and cared for by the last owners of the house George and Edith Briscoe who regularly opened them to the public and even had a whole episode of BBC *Gardener's*



ABOVE: Darley House Photo: Elly Hazael
 RIGHT: The sitting room with its comfortable but period feel Photo: Jane Bates/Jane Bates Interior Design
 BELOW RIGHT: An elegant corner of the Tissington room with its shuttered windows Photo: Stella Scordellis/SMS Creative Photography



World devoted to them.'

The house was then empty for some time and nature began to reclaim the garden. The house and garden needed new custodians who had the passion and vision to bring both back to life.

Lucy, whose mother is from Leek and has family in the area, said: 'I don't really think many people would have taken this on, but Alex loves architecture. He is passionate about old buildings and we loved the garden.'

The couple, whose first home is in Surrey, bought Darley House in 2009 and since that time have immersed themselves in its rich,

exciting and interesting history, whilst engaging in the practicalities of sympathetically restoring the building with 'fantastic support' from of a team of talented local craftsmen orchestrated by Martin Swindell.

'One of its main attractions is the garden and its history and its link with Joseph Paxton,' explained Lucy. The famous English gardener and architect Joseph Paxton (1803-1865), was head gardener at Chatsworth from 1826 and bought Darley House for his daughter in 1845.

'He landscaped the gardens here at Darley House,' said Lucy, 'and you can find some >



similarities with the gardens at Chatsworth?

One similarity is a rockery emerging from the undergrowth, which might well be considered a miniature scale version of the rock garden at the Duke of Devonshire's Derbyshire country seat.

Notably the grounds of Darley House, currently under a programme of careful restoration, with the help of local gardener Jayne Mitchell, retain original architectural

"Most striking are the specimen mature trees.

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Steps from the terrace to the beautifully landscaped gardens Photo: Elly Hazael

features and planting structures from the Victorian period.

The private and secluded gardens include a large formal lawn with sweeping broad stone steps leading to a grand balustraded garden terrace designed by Paxton. And from this raised terrace, which commands views of rolling hills, the visitor is invited to explore a series of landscaped Victorian gravelled pathways, close to which can be found small fairy-like hollows, formed from natural spring openings.

Most striking are the specimen mature trees. A glorious and ancient copper beech stands sentinel astride an ivy-covered raised mound and dominates the upper gardens.

Ancient yews mark the boundary of the property. And there is a curiously exotic giant redwood and a pair of huge ginkgo biloba trees - all of which are believed to have been planted by Paxton some 160 years ago.

This was a period when botanists travelled the world in search of exotic seeds from the colonies, in the explorative spirit of the age. These desirable plants could be grown on ingeniously constructed glass houses, such as the now demolished Great Conservatory, built at Chatsworth by Paxton circa 1837.

It is a source of joy to Lucy that her Derbyshire garden is still revealing curious

and as yet unidentified imported plants and there are other fascinating hints about the life of the house at the time of Paxton and his daughter.

A patio wall retains the faint outline of a former conservatory, which clearly suggests from its zigzag shape that Paxton had built a glass room here, experimenting with the 'ridge and furrow' glass roof construction, which he later used to such magnificent effect when he designed the Crystal Palace in 1851 for the Great Exhibition.

'It was hugely exciting to discover the history in this house,' said Lucy. 'It makes you feel responsible. We feel we are guardians of the house rather than its owners.'

Alex is similarly in thrall to the house's history. After weeks of research at council offices, trawling census material, he discovered that Darley House was also once home to Sir Richard Copley-Christie, the philanthropist, educationalist, lawyer and bibliophile, responsible for creating the Christie Hospital in Manchester.

It is likely this towering Victorian figure, who occupied Darley House in 1881 and lived there for 20 years, gathered and housed his library at Darley Dale, before donating his collection to form the famous Christie Library at Manchester University.

Alex said: 'It's amazing that Paxton and Christie both lived here!'

The Christie family's Latin motto 'Sic viresco' (Thus I Flourish) is still inscribed above the portico of the old coach arch, which adjoins the entrance hall of Darley House.

But if Darley House flourished under its notable Victorian owners, like many old >



Bathroom designed by Lucy in conjunction with Ultimate Bathrooms, Bakewell
Photo: Stella Scordellis/SMS Creative Photography



The spacious family dining kitchen Photo: Jane Bates/Jane Bates Interior Design



A view of the kitchen from the mezzanine Photo: Elly Hazael

houses it was modernised in the sixties and seventies, necessitating its present restoration which has lasted five years.

Work has included the re-configuration of rooms, re-plumbing, re-wiring and re-laying of stone floors, re-painting, re-panelling, re-plastering and re-insulating.

Fourteen tonnes of authentic lime plaster were used on the walls. Some 50 to 60 bags of sheep wool were purchased to re-insulate the roof. On the recommendation of Richard Fearn (Design and Build) Lucy and Alex took the bold decision to have the rear of the property sand-blasted to remove traces of industrial revolution grime. Lucy said: 'It just transformed the house! When we first bought the house it looked a little drab. It looked forlorn and a little bit unhappy. But now it's been cleaned it looks so beautiful.'

In addition, all vestiges of now-unfashionable 1970s alterations have been removed: dozens of pvc windows have been taken out and replaced with artisan crafted Georgian-style box sashes and original vertically recessed wooden shutters were repaired.

The ceilings of many rooms had been artificially lowered and each false ceiling

was painstakingly removed to reveal the lofty Georgian originals, with their elaborate plaster cornices. Where plaster was damaged, casts of originals were taken to make good replacements.

Lucy and Alex are no strangers to restoring interiors. They have previously undertaken work on Edwardian and

Victorian properties. But they admit that Darley House, where they spend a great deal of time with their extended family, has been a daunting labour of love.

Said Lucy: 'The scale of the project has been phenomenal; a huge undertaking.'

The pair advises that anyone planning to engage on a similar enterprise live in the



The entrance hall with log burner and original tiled floor Photo: Lucy Arterton

property first to get a feel for its 'needs' and its character.

'It was two years before we did anything and during that time we were very fortunate to have the input and support of family and friends,' said Lucy.

'You need to live in it before you can decide what each room is going to be,' added Alex.

The impetus to create their new high specification kitchen came following a cold snap of winter weather in 2011, which caused a catastrophic pipe burst in an overhead bathroom. The pair, travelling to and fro from their primary residence in Surrey, was reduced to setting up a kettle and a stove in the dining room.

Lucy and Alex transformed the original kitchen into a large utility room and built an entirely new and contemporary kitchen, with a mezzanine, on the site of a former asbestos-roofed garage which had been created in the 1970s from an original glass roofed billiard room.

Gritstone from the site was re-used for the exterior kitchen walls and a Georgian style bay window was added to the new extension, which perfectly echoes an original Georgian bay at the opposite end of the rear wall of the house, creating a pleasing symmetry. This allowed light to flood into a spacious and luxurious new informal kitchen dining area, which is characterised by its striking open beam vaulted ceiling and beautiful, locally-sourced natural stone floor.

One of the most exciting architectural discoveries was the unveiling of the original grand entrance hall which emerged on removal of a layer of plasterboard wall panelling and the dismantling of its false lowered ceiling. The final triumph came with the discovery of the room's colourful Victorian tiled floor which had been hidden under white linoleum. The couple finished the room with a heavy wooden antique fire surround for the fireplace, which curiously resembled its original fireplace which they



Decorative plasterwork has been carefully restored
Photo: Stella Scordellis/SMS Creative Photography



A light-filled corner of the living room Photo: Stella Scordellis/SMS Creative Photography

“There’s nothing like being in a house on your own to give you a relationship with it”

had seen in an old photograph.

Alex said: 'We really have been thoughtful. We've done the house to the best standard that we could have. Although it's not a listed building we have restored it to that standard.'

The re-configured first floor is home to six luxury bedroom suites, three of which enjoy large en-suite travertine-tiled bathrooms, with freestanding baths. Each bedroom is fondly named after the family's favourite local places to visit: Tissington, Cressbrook, Monsal, Dovedale, Castleton and Darley.

Lucy loves the house and has revelled in time spent alone within it. Time has allowed her to sense its personality, as well as to make plans - and endless sets of roman blinds!

'There's nothing like being in a house on your own to give you a relationship with it,'

she says.

'There's been a symbiotic relationship with the house. Our approach has been let's see what the house needs, and not what we are limited by. That's why it's taken so long. It's not been an efficient way of doing things but it's been a nurturing way of doing things.'

In turn the house has clearly nurtured the family, including the children; William aged 21, Ben aged 18 and Ollie aged 15: providing a bolt hole from busy and demanding lives.

But now in a drive to make their Derbyshire dream home more sustainable, the family is to hire out Darley House to groups of discerning visitors.

She said: 'We have benefited so much from Darley House as the perfect place to relax and to escape from the stresses of every day life with our family and we >

would like to share the house with other people who will appreciate its wonderful history and the beauty of the area.'

In addition Darley House is to host a wide range of artistic courses and retreats, ranging from art study weeks to yoga retreats, and with the possibility of historical society events and horticultural classes. Trips to places of local interest will be arranged and a chef is to be brought in to cater for guests.

'I'm marketing the house either for people to come and stay, or to attend a residential course or to hold a course themselves. I want to work with the house to make a business that fits in with our personalities and interests.'

House hire for private groups is available from the end of March 2015 and the first residential art retreats are already planned. From 14th to 17th September is a course entitled 'Observation to Abstraction: The Scribble' and from 9th to 12th November 'Painting Light, After Turner'.

'These courses will be incredibly therapeutic,' enthused Lucy, who has attended Ella Clocksin's art classes for three years. 'They will suit people who have an interest in painting that they want to develop or return to, and those who wish to relax and focus on their creative side.' Darley



Use of a subtle colour palette with bright notes highlights the graceful main staircase
Photo: Stella Scordellis/SMS Creative Photography

House, its gardens and the stunning surrounding landscapes will certainly provide plenty of inspiration.

Jessika Hulbert of Woollen Workshop, who acquired her lifelong love of wools from her Dutch grandmother, will also be running three-day avant-garde knitting and crocheting courses applying traditional techniques to contemporary living from 28th September to 1st October and 8th to 11th October. The aim will be to explore the world of nature in the surrounding countryside and create palettes from a variety of British wools, including alpaca.

Lucy is in no doubt that the special setting of Darley House, its calm Georgian grandeur and enchanted hidden gardens will provide a healing peaceful haven for the visitor - not unlike the Secret Garden of the famous turn of the century popular classic novel. ■



The panelled TV room Photo: Stella Scordellis/SMS Creative Photography

For further information and bookings, or for course details, visit the website www.darleyhouse.com or email info@darleyhouse.com



The Tissington bedroom
Photo: Stella Scordellis/SMS Creative Photography

Darley House

Ground floor features include:

Grand entrance hall with French doors to 'Paxton' patio
Drawing room with marble fireplace
Wood panelled TV room and study
Exceptionally large games room with doors to garden (where courses will be held)
Tom Howley luxury bespoke family dining kitchen with mezzanine
Morrocan style tadelakt plastered wet room
First floor comfortably sleeps 14

and comprises six bedrooms:
Three double bedrooms with large luxury en-suite bathrooms
Two twin bedrooms
One double bunk room (sleeps four)
Shower room

Out and About:

Lucy and Alex love Shopping at: Matlock Antiques and Collectables
Eating at: Stones Restaurant in Matlock, The Peacock at Rowsley, The Mistral at Wirksworth, Thai

No.1 at Matlock.
Visiting: Haddon Hall, Chatsworth House, and Alton Towers.

Lucy and Alex recommend:

Martin Swindell - Builder and lecturer at Chesterfield College
Nick Marriott Associates - Architects
Ross Nelson - Joiner
Trevor Holmes - Decorator
Martin Shimwell - Plumbing and Heating Services
Jeremy Ward Electrical Ltd - Electrician
Gina Marsh - artist and decorator
Kevin Greaves - plaster casters,

Italplaster.co.uk
Andy Rodgers - Lime Plasterer
Richard Fearn Design and Build - Ultimate Bathrooms, Bakewell
Archtop Joinery Wirksworth - for windows
C. Gregory and sons - Oak suppliers
M J H Masonry - for stone mason work
Mike Wye - Tadelakt supplier
Birchover quarry - for stone supply
Fabric and Furnishings of Bakewell - for curtains and upholstery
Tom Howley Kitchens