



REBUILDING CHAUCER'S HOUSE

Simon Kelner and Sally Ann Lasson's mission to save a dilapidated Oxfordshire treasure

REPORT Hilary Rose PHOTOGRAPHS Darren Chung



Clockwise from top left:
the exterior; the main
bedroom with painting
of a French courtesan;
the dining room



If you had to imagine your dream country house, it would probably be Chaucer's House. For a start, it's in Woodstock, in Oxfordshire, which for Londoners is pretty much the ultimate: far enough away to feel like proper countryside, but not so far that you can never be bothered to go, or that no one wants to come to stay. The house boasts extraordinary views over the lake at Blenheim Palace, and is a lovely English architectural hotchpotch of medieval, Georgian and Victorian. All that, and a breathtaking garden, too. But when artist and interior decorator Sally Ann Lasson and her husband, Simon Kelner – ex-editor of *The Independent* – bought the house in 2006, they had their work cut out. The previous owners had lived there for more than 50 years, which proved to be both a positive and a negative. “No one had screwed up the house,” says Lasson, sitting on the lawn with her beloved dachshund, Rovi. “But the rooms were all partitioned and there was only one bathroom. They hadn't ripped out the fireplaces, but they'd bricked them up or put storage heaters in them. So there was still plenty to play for.” The budget was busted almost immediately. Helped by local builder Paul Carter, whom



The ‘party room’ is so big that, not long after the couple moved in, they had a sit-down dinner for 74 people

Lasson describes as “the best builder in the world, bar none”, first up was the exterior stonework, which needed £150,000 of work. The only problem was, they didn't have £150,000. “So we just did a couple of things that we thought might be about to drop on someone's head,” says Lasson nonchalantly. Then an interior wall was found to be on the brink of collapse, and the roof needed redoing. They ended up spending £50,000 – their decorating budget for the whole house – on shoring up and re-pointing that wall. With the house now structurally sound, Lasson had to think about her priorities. So while the curtains in the drawing room are made of Bennison's Christmas Roses fabric, costing £200 a metre, the view through the window is of an avenue of pebbles, not the York stone flagging she would have liked. Most of the bedside tables are cloth-covered cardboard and, although some of the sash windows were in dire straits, they replaced as few of them as possible. “Because with the right wobbly glass, made to look like it's old, they can cost five grand each. But I didn't feel compromised. I just had to do a lot of thinking.” The result is quintessentially English: quirky, comfortable, not too “done”, a huge house that doesn't feel too big for two people. The couple have their own studies and bedrooms, and

Lasson's pride and joy are her linen closet, her wine cellar and the pantry. Her bedroom is papered in pale green Colefax and Fowler wallpaper, but the curtains are plain taffeta. The room is furnished with antique chairs bought “hundreds of years ago” and a painting of a 19th-century French courtesan, which her parents bought in Nice in the Seventies. Four antique French armoires were acquired from a shop in the village, along with silk for the hall curtains. Apart from a reproduction stone urn for the garden, that was pretty much it. Lasson made the curtains in the dining room herself, using a Colefax and Fowler fabric printed with fuchsias, and attached the pelmet fabric directly to the ceiling with nails. The enormous entrance hall contains only a small print by Victorian artist William Nicholson, whose family home the house once was. There's no furniture in it at all: they couldn't afford the sort of big, circular Victorian table that Lasson wanted, so they left it empty. “We grew to love the fact that there's nothing here. If there was a table, I'd have to buy flowers, and that's expensive, and it would be covered in car keys, dog leads and receipts.” What they wanted wasn't to change the house, but to reveal it. (Opinion is divided as to whether the house's name refers to the poet



Clockwise from top left: the party room; downstairs lavatory with walls covered with

letters; guest bedroom; bathroom; the Ikea kitchen; Simon Kelner and Sally Ann Lasson

Geoffrey, or his son, Thomas, both of whom have links with the area.) Floorboards were painted, fireplaces stripped of storage heaters and restored. The existing bathroom, with its huge antique bath, was revamped, and a new one created in what was a bedroom. The walls are mostly painted an antique white shade, which the Paint Library matched to a sample by John Oliver (a defunct paint company in London). It also matched a greeny-grey paint for the drawing room to a swatch of the Bennison curtain fabric. Hemmed in by planning constraints, the only structural change the couple made was to insert a door from the dining room to the party area. Lasson thinks this room probably used to be a chapel; it's so big that, not long after they moved in, they had a sit-down dinner for 74 people. But the couple spend most of their time in the kitchen, one of the smallest and most cheaply renovated rooms in the house. The fittings cost £400 and came from Ikea, but the effect looks anything but cheap, thanks to the glamorous white marble surfaces. “I've spent more on a 4ft-square bathroom in London than I've spent on this entire house,” says Lasson. “The luxury here is space.” ■

sallyannlasson.com

REGENCY



GRANDEUR

by LUCY ELWORTHY

Photographs by JAN WORONIECKI

Decorating and furnishing a derelict six-storey house in Knightsbridge would be a daunting prospect for most, but for Sally Anne Lasson, cartoonist and fashion journalist, and her husband Dominic King, songwriter, it was the kind of challenge they are used to.

Built in 1815, the house is in one of the oldest terraces in Knightsbridge. Its tall narrow structure, stucco ground floor, brick upper floors, and many-paned sash windows are all typical of Georgian architecture.

Sally Anne and Dominic discovered the house in 1980, not long after they were married. An attempt was made to pull down a few houses in the terrace, but fortunately when it was revealed that it was a Grade II listed building, it had to stay.

Their aim was to decorate the house in a style in keeping with the period. They have achieved historical accuracy and attention to detail, ending up with a house one would expect to find in a Jane Austen novel. It took them four years scouring antique shops in London such as Bonhams and Lots Road to find the correct furniture,

paintings and upholstery, collecting exquisite Regency and Georgian pieces. The vogue at this time was for dark heavy and exotic woods of mahogany or rosewood, in designs influenced by Greek, Roman and Egyptian styles. Other fashionable trends included Chinoiserie, and French Empire style, a great influence on English Regency furniture.

Dominic describes the dining room as "The Ruritanian Embassy". You can see why. Apart from its fantasy opulence, it is a showcase for their exquisite 18th- and

19th-century furniture and *objets*.

The massive portrait that dominates the room is of a notorious courtesan of the 1890s, La Belle Otero. Head erect, she oozes confidence, poise and wealth; ironically the dog at her feet symbolises fidelity! La Belle Otero was a dancer in the Folies Bergères and lusted after by many wealthy men, not to mention the odd Royal. Her conquests included Edward VII, Prince of Wales, Kaiser Bill, Nicholas II, Ferdinand of Spain and the King of Bulgaria. The cupolas at the Carlton Hotel in Cannes were modelled from her breasts.

The painting looms over an elegant French Empire chaise longue, and a table that seats 16, permanently laid with delicate 1816 Crown Derby china.

The majestic gilt embossed pelmet is the one feature Sally Anne and Dominic didn't have to rip out. It was painted in a dull grey and looked flimsy when they inherited it but when painted white and gold it was given a totally different rôle. Pearly white silk, swooping in heavy folds, frames the floor-to-ceiling french windows; the area is more like a stage than a dining room.

The drawing room is equally impressive.

Not just because of its huge proportions, but it shows off yet more handsome Regency furniture and fabrics. The room is formal, yet because of its floor-length french windows leading on to the garden, and walls covered in a soft yellow moiré silk, is sunny and inviting.

Regency-striped silk artistically frames the windows. It was typical of this period not to have curtains that draw; they were purely decorative, as the shutters served this purpose. At the far end of the room a series of 18th-century Italian prints hang above a bergère sofa.



THE DINING ROOM



REGENCY GRANDEUR



BEDROOM



THE LIVING ROOM

The bedroom is yet another room of ponderous charm. The bed is the one piece of furniture they didn't have to look for; it belonged to Dominic's family. Carved in light oak, it is said to be Italian 16th-century. A gilded piece of elaborately-carved wood crowns the bed, and rich warm dusky pink velvet hangs from it in heavy folds.

Through the bedroom is a dressing room panelled in mahogany which in turn leads

into a sumptuous bathroom. The walls are covered in rose moiré silk, and a huge bath of Carrara marble looks very inviting.

After five years of living here Sally Anne and Dominic are now selling their house for something a bit smaller. For the next house Sally Anne is looking forward to indulging in French Empire.

Any enquiries on the purchase of this house, ring WA Ellis, 581 7654. ■