



A Chaucer's tale

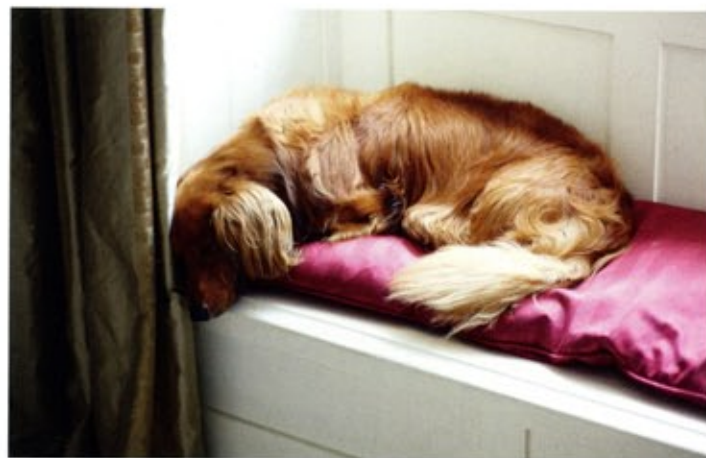
Using the lightest of touches, the current owners redecorated their Oxfordshire home – known as Chaucer's House – to create a comfortable interior without compromising its medieval roots, or its beautiful garden

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OPPOSITE The house (bottom) is a mix of architectural styles, with sections dating from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The elegant Victorian drawing room (top) is furnished with a bespoke Beaumont & Fletcher sofa and footstool. THIS PAGE Curtains in 'Fuchsia' by Colefax and Fowler and a French Empire chandelier bought in Le Touquet, where the owners used to have a house, add decorative touches to the seventeenth-century dining room





Usually, you'd expect indulgent dog owners to buy their pup a souped-up kennel. Or maybe, for really pampered pooches, one of those swanky four-poster dog beds. But for Rovi, the glossy-coated long-haired dachshund owned by Chelsea-based cartoonist and designer Sally Ann Lasson and her husband Simon Kelner, former editor of *The Independent*, nothing less than a country house would do. 'Rovi was six months old and he just couldn't manage full time in London,' explains Sally Ann, with a wry smile. 'He needed a weekend retreat in the country.'

They began their country adventures by renting a house on the Blenheim estate, and it was while on her way to the shops in nearby Woodstock that she first spotted Chaucer's House, a rather neglected, butter-coloured, stone house. It is an accretive building, which from the façade reads left to right like an architectural history equation. It begins with the remains of what was once a large Tudor hall, followed by the central slice built in the seventeenth century, and then a Victorian wing on the right-hand side added in the 1830s. Despite its being called Chaucer's House, it's not entirely clear whether Geoffrey himself ever felt 'Aprille's shoures' here. But it most certainly was home to his son Thomas Chaucer, who sat in Parliament and was Speaker of the House of Commons. Another illustrious custodian was the artist William Nicholson, who brought up his family at the house, including his son, the painter Ben Nicholson. Surely the time was right for another pair of creatives to take up residence?

And so, one day, Sally Ann found herself in front of the local estate agent's window, her phone ringing. 'Simon had been flicking through a property magazine at home and was bombarding me with calls, but the mobile signal here is terrible,' she explains. 'He got through at the exact moment I looked up and spotted an advertisement for Chaucer's House. We both shouted down the phone at each other. "It's my house," I yelled, as Simon shouted back, "It's your house." It was like spontaneous combustion.'

But buying the house didn't come without a fight. The provenance, coupled with its not having been on the market since 1951, resulted in a stream of eager punters, the most eager of the lot being Simon and Sally Ann. 'Marvellously, it hadn't been subject to any Seventies or Eighties decorating fads,' she says. 'A pair of doctors, Mr and Mrs Robb-Smith, had lived here and apart from putting in a bathroom, they hadn't touched anything. They obviously weren't terribly interested in interiors.'

But what the doctors were interested in was the one-acre garden. 'When I got into the garden,' says

THIS PAGE The front door opens on to a large, panelled hall with an open fire (above left). Rovi the dachshund naps on a window seat (top left). In the kitchen (above right), a simple wooden table is surrounded by chairs from The Conran Shop, made of metal but finished to look like wood. OPPOSITE The library is in the medieval part of the house, where the white shelving and modern furniture contrast with the exposed wood and bricks



Sally Ann, 'that's when I thought, "I don't care if this kills me or bankrupts me, I have to have this house."' While the Robb-Smiths may have turned a blind eye to what lay inside, they had spent 50 years' hard graft on the outside, planning, planting and pruning.

'Although, internally, everything needed to be done, nothing structural needed to be done,' says Sally Ann. 'All the rooms were in exactly the perfect, logical place, so all I needed to do was take the interiors apart and put them back together.' And that's exactly what she did, retaining every doorknob, window latch and laundry cupboard in the five-bedroom house. 'My ambition with any house is that at the end, when you've finished, it should look like you've done nothing,' she explains.

Because of the house's accretive nature, Sally Ann had to go with the existing flow. The front door opens on to a vast, empty, seventeenth-century panelled hall. On each floor you traverse the ages: the Victorian drawing room is off the hall to the right, to the left is the seventeenth-century dining room and kitchen, and the medieval exposed-stonework library hall. At the top of the stairs, on the half landing, is the 'Nancy Dell'Olio Suite' – named after their friend who once got stuck in the bathroom, inspiring a rousing chorus of 'Oh dear, what can the matter be? Nancy Dell'Olio got stuck in the lavatory!' All the large French armoires are from Bluedog & Sought, the antiques shop across the road. 'They all come apart,' says Sally Ann of the behemoth pieces. 'They were the Ikea of their day, but with no complicated instructions.'

Up another flight of stairs, on the first floor, is Simon's room, which has views over the Blenheim lake and Hawksmoor's arch, and in the corner a passage lined with William Morris wallpaper leading to a bathroom. The first-floor hall leads on to Sally Ann's rooms. The bedroom has Colefax and Fowler wallpaper, an old French trumeau over the chimneypiece and a window that looks out over the formal parterre down a romantic lavender path to the bottom of the split-level garden; a door in the corner leads to her private sitting room. The two attic storage rooms on the top floor had their ceilings removed to reveal beautiful old beams and are now bedrooms where Simon's daughter, Phoebe, comes to rest and recover from the tribulations of city life.

While Sally Ann has made the house her own, the garden is a different story. 'I don't feel it's my garden, I'm just a custodian,' she explains. 'I still call it "Mrs Robb-Smith's garden", and whenever I buy new plants I check with Bonnie, an elderly neighbour, to see if Mrs Robb-Smith would have approved' □

Sally Ann Lasson Gallery: 020-7226 8600; www.sallyannlasson.com

THIS PAGE A glass-panelled door opens from the library on to a gravelled terrace (below left), with a pizza oven in the corner. To the right of this, beyond the garden wall (bottom left), Hawksmoor's arch rises at the entrance to the Blenheim estate. The Nancy Dell'Olio Suite (below right) has a pretty, tapestry-covered Regency chair, bought at an antiques fair at Chelsea Town Hall, and a French armoire from local antiques shop Bluedog & Sought. OPPOSITE Sally Ann's room is dominated by a 1926 portrait by Charles Blanc of the Spanish dancer and courtesan known as La Belle Otero, which Sally Ann's parents bought in Nice in the Seventies

