

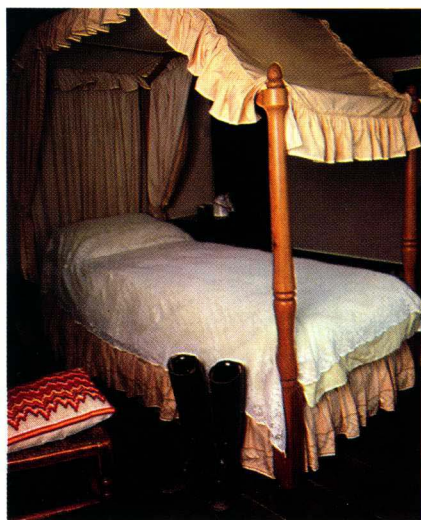
ENGLISH  
COUNTRY STYLE



MARY GILLIATT

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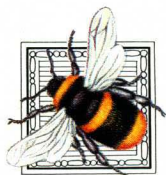


Photography by  
CHRISTINE HANSCOMB

Orbis · London







For my father, Arthur Green, who loved the country  
and made everything possible for me

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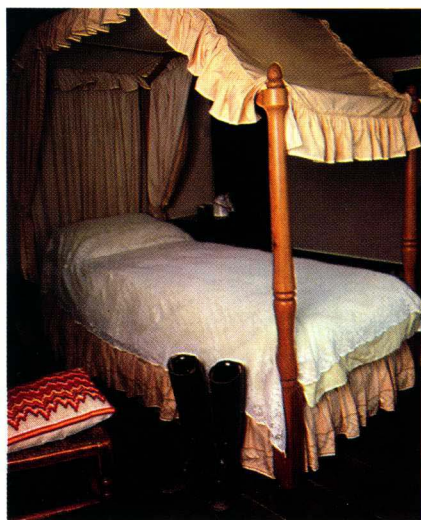






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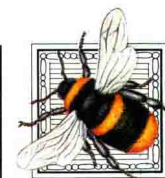


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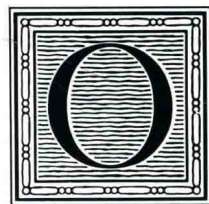




# INTRODUCTION



Such glorious clutter, such splendid profusion of flowers and china, memorabilia and books, cooking utensils and dishes, such sheer exuberance is still as much a part of the English country theme as many simpler, quieter arrangements, for English style is nothing if not eclectic, nothing if not layered. Many of the hallmarks are here: the stripped pine dresser or hutch, the generous mix of flowers and foliage, the happy mixture of pink and blue, the pinboard completely hidden by the collected paperwork, the magpie collections of this and that.



Over the past two decades there have been many books on English country houses and English style, or styles. Indeed, my first book, issued in 1967, was called *English Style* (Bodley Head) in Britain and *English Style in Interior Decoration* (Viking) in America, and dealt with the changes in interior decoration since the early 1950s and the Festival of Britain. Many of these books have been both lively and scholarly and have given detailed and fascinating accounts of the architecture and decoration of country houses as well as the kind of life led in them through the centuries. All of them have been handsome. I have gained much valuable knowledge and insight through reading Peter Thornton's encyclopedic and beautifully written *Authentic Decor: The Domestic Interior, 1620-1920*; Gervase Jackson-Stops' and James Pipkin's *The English Country House: A Grand Tour*; the wonderfully detailed and nostalgic books by Olive Cook, *English Cottages and Farmhouses* and *The English Country House*; John Cornforth's thought-

A deeply comfortable sofa dominates more interesting furniture in this highly pleasing room. Lengths of lace filter the sun that pours through the long pine-framed windows with their integral panelled shutters. All woods are much the same colour here, so that the general effect is of a harmonious build-up of golden hues and tones. Nothing is over-obtrusive; even the harp's strong shape melds into the piano and the tallboy beyond, just as the various fabrics meld gently into each other.









The white clapboard house is so much a part of North America that one forgets the part it also plays in southern counties such as Kent and Sussex. In this particular instance the miniature size of the cottage is deceptive, for behind the higgledy-piggledy clapboard building is a courtyard flanked on one side by a converted barn and on the other by a modern wing built some two hundred years after the original structure. And who can blame the occupants for expanding on their particular bit of wooded land when they needed more space?

The creeper, bereft of its softening leaves at the time of the photograph, is as much a part of many English country houses as a chimney. Note one major difference from American clapboard houses: the lack of shutters, which surrounded almost every American country window.





Greystone walls and slate tiles  
blend with the greens of an  
English country house garden  
where red roses add just the right  
splash of colour.



ful *The Inspiration of the Past* and, of course, Mark Girouard's incomparable *Life in the English Country House*.

But, having grown up in the heart of East Anglia, I wanted to illustrate in particular the rurality of English country house decoration, as well as its evolution to the English country style of today, and to explain how that style is achieved, using a representative group of lesser country houses, farmhouses and cottages to show the ways in which they relate to their surrounding countryside and also to their past. A general introduction on the lure of the countryside and its pervasive influence on the British is followed by short histories of each room within a house, which aim to explain in a simple way the roots of English country decoration and the reasons why certain colours, juxtapositions, arrangements and even objects are used today as a matter of almost unthinking tradition. The final chapter gives practical details of various decorative techniques for walls, floors, windows and furniture, which can achieve the effects illustrated and described previously, and is followed by a list of sources of English country style furnishings in Britain and the States.

Although the interiors of great country houses have been illustrated in some detail over the years and, thanks to dedicated restoration and reconstruction, have changed very little in substance, there has been comparatively little documentation of lesser country houses. Evidence can be gleaned from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century watercolours and the backgrounds in paintings of domestic scenes, and from the inventories of different estates in old auction house records. During the nineteenth century so many new houses were built that many of the old fell into appalling states of disrepair, and it is due to the sensitivity and knowledge of a hard core of enthusiastic



## INTRODUCTION

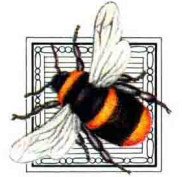
restorers from the beginning of the century to World War II that so many beautiful examples of old manor houses survive. These enthusiasts managed to reintroduce that 'sense of remoteness in time', as John Cornforth put it in his *The Inspiration of the Past*, which happily is endemic to many country houses, and to bring a renewed awareness of the fabric and feeling of an old house, something which had been almost submerged in the waves of Edwardian philistinism.

This nucleus of enthusiasm, together with the endogenous English nostalgia, combined with what I believe to be an entirely new influence to produce the kind of decoration now thought of as thoroughly English. This new and unexpected influence was from the Americans who started to come to England from the late nineteenth century on. These civilized Americans with their sense of old values and traditions introduced a new dimension of comfort as well as sensitivity to the best of the past. John Cornforth quotes a Mrs Haweis, writing in *Beautiful Houses* (1882) about G.H. Boughton, an Anglo-American painter, friend of Whistler and Walter Crane, who was living in a house designed by Norman Shaw: 'He has brought from America a certain elegance of style in living which has not yet become common on this side of the Atlantic: less *posé* than French taste, more subtle than English. The prevailing impression of the house is softness, refinement, harmony. There is nothing *bizarre* or eccentric, to startle and not seldom annoy.'

Instead of buying the 'Queen Anne' style reproduction furniture of the Edwardian era, many people began to collect old pieces; to be delighted by the 'patina of age'; to try to make a synthesis of centuries. After the Second World War people who had inherited country houses determined to restore them, if not to full grandeur, at least to a semblance of former glory, and many other people looked for country houses to buy and restore, from derelict manors to broken-down barns and farms to unmodernized cottages. Few houses today are restored and furnished with the meticulous attention to detail and period, the kind of freezing of history typical of the romantic restoration of the first third of the century. People now usually think of English country style as in part the 'humble elegance' of John Fowler, the kind of style that draws elements from every facet of the past that seem best suited to create a relaxed and harmonious whole, whatever the period of the house. Most important, it is a style that fits comfortably with the surrounding landscape.



A peaceful green setting outside to complement the interior: French windows open from the living room on to a flagstone path, with honeysuckle and roses by the door.

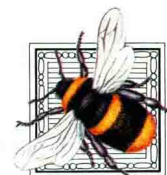




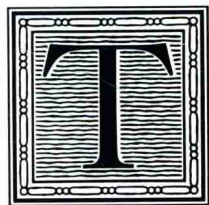




# THE LURE OF THE ENGLISH COUNTRYSIDE



*Garden into landscape The British have always excelled at the careful siting of country houses (apart from the many early ones that do not have a south-facing aspect, a relic of the days when the south winds were supposed to carry the plague). The scene pictured left, with the church at the rear and horses to the front grazing contentedly amongst the daisies, is the kind of rural idyll that most English people dream of seeing from their windows, especially if their gardens happen to merge imperceptibly into the fields and meadows beyond.*



The difference between quintessentially English country and everybody else's country is not just the difference in colour or terrain, the quality of the light or the intensity of the heat. It is not just in the tangle of varying greens, the damp freshness of the foliage after rain, the sweetness of the early morning birds. The Dordogne, Umbria, Virginia, New England, are all a joyous weft and warp of green in season, their trees magnificent, their birds exotic.

It is not just in the meandering lanes, hedges thick with wild rose and hazel, oak saplings and holly, rickety gates opening on to meadows drizzled with buttercups. There are parts of America's East Coast, delights like Block Island, Rhode Island, where the lanes and stone walls out-Devon Devon and the scent of the honeysuckle hedges is so piercingly sweet it intoxicates.

It is not just in the lovely sounds and scents of a summer weekend with its mixture of wood pigeons warbling, late cocks crowing, grass-

*An ancient churchyard and sheep grazing among the tombstones by a tiny East Anglian church – a country house view that is unchanging, peaceful, charming.*