

Elegance in a time warp

Ronald Payne takes a step back in time to tour an elegant Belgravia flat where every room has been restored in a different period style

We are in the second-floor apartment of an elegant house on the eastern edge of Belgravia. Suitably enough for an area of London rich in embassies and cosmopolitan high life, its name would also be appropriate for a small central European state sharing a common border with Ruritania. "I address you today as president of Belgravia," sounds about right.

Queen Anne did a lot for the English drawing room, and she would be quite pleased with the decor that immortalises her name which has been recreated in the flat.

With great care taken over historic paint washes on the walls, this salon remains formal and impeccably done. The wool and silk damasks that make up the curtains are hand-dyed by Humphries Weaving, the only British firm capable of doing this. Some curtains were indeed made especially to match a surviving remnant from a lovely Queen Anne wing armchair.

A gas-fired gadget in the fireplace is the only obvious acknowledgement of the 20th century. It's one of those "fires" upon which the simulated logs glow yet are never consumed by the flames.

I was pleased to notice that the library shelves were bending slightly under their load of leather-bound volumes of the kind of books you might admire but probably never read.

Just across the road is the wall surrounding the gardens of Buckingham Palace. It's not far from those giant Stalinist-type buildings along Victoria



The computer, incongruous in the George I study

Way that used to house forbidding corporate bodies. All that belongs to a world very different from the interior of the flat in Chester Street.

Inside the cocoon, a series of small time-warp miracles of decor has been achieved by the owner Lucy Johnson who describes herself as a happily divorced antiquarian. She is a 36-year-old fine arts dealer who specialises in the late Stuart period.

"I love researching 17th-century furniture and reconstructing interiors. It's my passion and I'm very focused in my business."

This sparky antiques dealer with laughing eyes and a sharp mind really went over

the top when she began work on the compact apartment where she has lived for ten years.

Each of the six rooms offers a cameo performance in style. The bathroom amusingly earns the estate agent appellation Native American. Surely no smoke signals there, for it is all mirrors and high-tech jet and spray bathtub.

There's a hint, though, of Johnson's interest in earthier things, such as tribal energy, in the Native American craft objects hanging on the bathroom wall.

So gleaming tidy is the kitchen that it is hard to imagine anything actually being cooked there. But that is a false impression, for Johnson assures me she is a "spontaneous and abundant" cook keen on 17th-century food.

The kitchen is described as "country". Simulated brick walls, effective enough to trompe the oeil of an unbeliever are done in an intriguing lime green mixed by herself with a dash of olive.

Here is a virtual kitchen, small but perfect. It is surrounded by other rooms done in the real style of other times.

Still glowing from a session in the great American bath, I



Moving on: Lucy Johnson

can imagine myself making for one of the two bedrooms. Why not try out the mid-18th century French provincial bedroom, with its own more trad en-suite bathroom?

The only disadvantage is that French provincials a couple of centuries ago were shorter persons altogether. It is far from certain that their solid polished wood bedheads and tails could comfortably accommodate today's larger bulks.

Constantly having to accomplish a strong visual century swap with every move from one room to another might prove psychologically taxing — but not for Johnson.

"It's not disturbing for me," she says. I have different moods. The mood here does move quite dramatically but I suppose that I just shift with it. I like that change as I move in different directions. I'm quite spontaneous."

It is all well and good to do a bit of serious work, as she does in the George I study, once it is accepted that a computer there cannot really be classified as genuine Georgian.

But imagine the culture clash effort involved carrying your microwaved ready-to-eat dinner past the walls amusingly papered with indenture documents looted from other times, and setting it down at



Dignitaries and royalty are among the neighbours

the table in the dining room done up King Charles style.

That is the kind of clash only too likely to develop in anyone less spontaneous than Lucy Johnson.

Will she not miss such a special place now that she is off to start a new life in the Cotswolds? "No, though I should say yes, part of me will miss it. But I've moved on to an earthy little cottage that I've painted myself."

Her 42-year lease on the flat at 2 Chester Street is now on offer at a price of £565,000, including a genuine late 20th-century parking space.

The furniture, works of art and so on do not come in the same package as the flat, though offers for the place almost as it stands could be considered.

So much has been done to create authentic period interiors that it is almost impossible to imagine what the apartment would look like stripped of its finery.

"I don't much care what happens now that I'm leaving, I'll let it go to whoever buys it. I've done it now."

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