

Living History

Giles Quarme's Chelsea home is steeped in history but it has been a challenge bringing the building up to date without destroying its original character. **Tony Barrell** reports



Giles Quarme wears two hats. Before he became a chartered architect in the 1970s he studied art history at Norwich University, and his interest in elevations and load-bearing walls has plainly not overshadowed his old enthusiasm for the lives and works of great painters and sculptors.

One senses that he particularly savours the role his house played in the artistic milieu of Victorian and Edwardian Chelsea. The sculptor John Tweed lived here, but that's not all. Tweed was a great friend of Auguste Rodin, and often entertained the French sculptor in these very rooms. "Rodin used to come here quite regularly for tea," says Giles. "We were thinking of putting up a brown plaque

saying 'Rodin had tea here'."

The bohemian links keep trickling out.

Tweed's wife was a model for the painter Philip Wilson Steer, who lived next door. The writer Hilaire Belloc resided just up the road and would visit the Tweed home

along with the critic Max Beerholm. "Tweed tells various stories in his memoirs of Beerholm coming here to gamble with Belloc, then losing and having to borrow money to get home," says Giles.

Giles and his barrister wife Margaret bought the house in 1990. A victim of years of neglect, it badly needed repairing. It had suffered the usual indignities of 1960s modernisation – its fireplaces were ripped out, its panelling removed and its parquet floors covered with carpet. But there were other, more serious problems. Water had



Top: The Georgian Gothic conservatory joins neatly onto the Victorian extension, which is partly remodelled. **Above:** Giles Quarme in front of the Waterloo-led facade of his Chelsea home. **Opposite Page:** Above the 19th-century fireplace in the first-floor living room is an equestrian portrait of Giles' great-grandfather, painted around the 1840s.



Opposite Page: The 19th-century *dent* in the living room supports various objects including Willy Pogany's illustrated book of *The Inland Marine*. Above the glass, with its iron and bronze hinges, and Victorian art and above, a bust and through new French *dent* into the conservatory.

penetrated the roof and rotted the building's spine wall right down to the basement. To make it worse, doorways had been cut into this wall in ignorance of its structural importance, and the upper floors were collapsing.

Damp was permeating the building from the basement, which housed a dismal dining room and depressingly dark kitchen. "It was like being in a dungeon," remembers Giles. A two-storey rear extension providing bathrooms had been added during the Victorian era. But the layout of the rooms within the extension did not make good use of the space and shut off the rear garden from the house.



One aspect of the house that would be a problem for some is that it has subsided a little into the soft riverside ground. However, because the bricks were bedded in traditional lime mortar, and lime plaster was used internally, the flexibility of the structure has allowed it to go with the flow. Doors and walls may have shifted

Giles discovered to his horror that the whole floor was collapsing

out of line, but that's the way Giles likes it. "Some of the floors have dropped 1 1/2 ins or so," he says. "It's all over the place – it's lively. It gives it a cottage feel."

HISTORY

The house is a remnant of mid-Georgian Chelsea, once a quiet village, whose principal claims to fame were the Royal Hospital for Old and Invalid soldiers, founded by Charles II and opened after his death in 1692; and the Chelsea Physic Garden with its myriad healing herbs, established in 1673. During the 18th century terraced houses were erected along the north bank of the Thames near Chelsea's old church, their proud neoclassical redbrick facades overlooking the relatively unpolluted waterway with its sailing traffic. Behind the houses lay agricultural land, while across the river was the unspoiled prospect of Battersea Common Field.

A contemporary illustration of Giles' street shows a terrace of four-storey brick houses with pedimented doorcases, six-over-six-

pane sash windows and dormer windows in the roof; the houses are separated from the river wharves by simple post-and-rail fences and a rough track, shaded at intervals by tall trees.

A roughly carved stone plaque set in a brick garden wall at the rear reveals it was built in 1755. He doesn't know who was the original owner although, as it is not a grand dwelling, it was probably occupied by somebody of moderate means with an interest in the river – a ship's surgeon, perhaps, or a customs officer.

The house is one of a non-matching pair; its neighbour is older. Giles' house was built up against it and in fact the builder took some liberties at the neighbour's expense. He created alcoves in some of the rooms by discontinuing the new wall and cheekily plastering the neighbour's external wall. This saved on bricks, which were expensive to transport in this pre-railway age.

The building later underwent Victorianisation. A two-storey extension was added at the back and the wall dividing the rooms on the ground floor was knocked through to create a living room. The facade may also have been rebuilt, since it has a sawtooth external cornice more typical of the 19th than the 18th century.

During the 19th century this part of Chelsea grew popular with artists attracted by the light created by the Thames. It was also a favourite location for writers – Turner, Whistler and Rossetti all lived around here, as did George Eliot and Thomas Carlyle.

In the 1870s Sir Joseph Bazalgette's Chelsea Embankment was constructed, which distanced these houses from the river and paved the way for the traffic that rumbles past today.

The house was owned by John Tweed from the late 19th century. Tweed was a Glasgow-born sculptor who worked under Rodin and specialised in statues of British VIPs. In the early 20th century he completed monuments to Lord Clive of India, as well as statues of Queen Victoria, Lord Kinchener and Cecil

Rhodes. John Tweed died in 1931 and the house was internally modernised by a subsequent owner in the 1960s, but then was not properly maintained.

RENOVATION

The building's faults only came to light once Giles had begun work.

Above: Pretty wall scones mingle with small paintings in the first-floor living room. Opposite Page: The tasteful furnishings in the living room include a man's boat, bergamot sofa and a small antique Chinese rug. Giles has restored the Victorian parquet floor.



DESCRIPTION

Giles Quarmer's Grade II listed home was built in 1755 as a typical mid-18th-century town house with red stock bricks and a mansard roof. The roof covering is now slate but would originally have been tiles.

The facade has been altered at some stage as there is a post-Georgian saw tooth cornice beneath the eaves.

The softwood sash windows have the six-over-six-arrangement that was very common in the 18th century, and splayed brick heads.

There are three dormer windows in the roof, one at the front and two at the rear. Wisteria twines around the front door and lower windows. The house is fronted by wrought-iron railings of a late 18th-century design.

The house has five floors including the basement and the roof storey, and each floor of the main house follows the classic Georgian plan of one front and one back room. Opening off the basement is a cellar.

To the rear of the house is a walled, paved garden on to which encroaches a Victorian extension, originally two storeys high but now three. This has been further extended horizontally by the addition of a hardwood conservatory which provides the new kitchen with a dining area.

The ground and first floors form the main living areas of the house, and the bedrooms occupy the second floor, top floor and basement.

As it was impractical to live among the rubble, he and Margaret rented a house for a year, and Giles paid weekly supervisory visits. He acted as his own contractor, employing tradesmen for such tasks as roofing, joinery and plumbing.

While the roof timbers were largely sound, the slates were very badly delaminated and had to be replaced. Giles used salvaged Welsh slates, "so you wouldn't notice it had been re-roofed."

To support the floors the spine wall had to be strengthened all the way up the building. New studwork was inserted to match the original Georgian construction, and pine wainscot panelling was renewed where necessary.

When the top floor floorboards were lifted in preparation for installing services, Giles discovered to his horror that the whole floor was collapsing. As in many other cheaply-built Georgian houses, undersized joists had been used to economise on wood. These had been cut away from both top and bottom for the installation of successive plumbing and electrical systems, leaving a thickness of only about 2ins. It transpired that the floor had only been secured by the nails holding the boards to the joists, and by the laths and plaster of the ceiling below. The whole floor had to be replaced.

The next problem was the basement. Having suffered two centuries of water penetration, it had to be dug out and tanked with waterproof render.

Leading off the basement is the old coal cellar, where another nasty surprise was in store for Giles.

"When I first looked into the cellar, I could just see something moving in the darkness," he recalls. "The more I looked, the more it seemed as if the whole floor was moving with a kind of rippling, shimmering effect. I came back with a torch and it was like an Indiana Jones horror effect – the whole floor was covered in woodlice. Not hundreds, but millions of them."

The cellar has now been turned into a tanked brick vault; Giles regrets that it has lost some of its old character, but it was the only way to keep out damp and pests. Damp was also kept at bay with a new silicone damp-proof course injected into the walls of the house.

Extensive replastering was required inside the building since much of the old plaster was rotten and falling away from the laths. When plaster was removed from the alcove near the staircase on the ground floor, Giles came face to face with the tack-pointing of his neighbour's external wall, and the original builder's scheme for saving on bricks was finally revealed.

Above: The laurel-garland wallpaper, from Rupert Cavendish, lends a French classical feel to the formal dining room. Opposite Page: Giles' amazing Chinese lacquer cupboard, reworked by an African fertility symbol and mounted animal horns, in the conservatory dining area.

READERS' HOMES

Period House is on the lookout for readers' homes to feature, whether it's a Georgian rectory, 1930s semi or a converted windmill. So if you have restored, converted or simply refurbished a period house we would love to hear from you. As an incentive we offer a free year's subscription to Period House for any house we feature as a restoration or interior case study. Send us colour photographs of the house, inside and out - ideally with some taken before work began - together with details of its age, history and the work undertaken.



The shallow plaster doorway arches that are a Victorian feature of the ground-floor and first-floor rooms had to be entirely renewed. The plasterer tried making one with sections of fibrous plaster, but Giles was unhappy with the resulting lumps and insisted that the others be run in-situ. He showed the plasterer how to do it the old-fashioned way, using nothing more technical than two nails, a pencil and a piece of string to produce a smooth geometrical arch. "Modern stick-on mouldings are all beautifully straight, whereas these walls are not," explains Giles.

One of his main priorities was to rationalise the layout of the house, bringing the living space up from the dark depths of the building. The Victorian bathroom extension now provides a pleasant

ground-floor kitchen, while the conservatory has created an informal kitchen/dining area with a generous view of the rear garden.

He had earmarked the first floor of the extension for a study, and decided to add a second floor to form an extra bedroom. Since the house is a Grade II listed building, Giles had to obtain planning consent. For the new storey he used



It was like being shut in a dungeon

reclaimed London stock bricks, laid in English bond with flush pointing to match the existing work. New six-over-six-pane sash windows that matched the others were inserted in each floor.

The conservatory neatly completes the rear end of the house. Made of hardwood rafters and double-glazed, it has a sloping roof and simple tracery in a Georgian Gothic style. "I thought it more appropriate for the house than the Victorian style," says Giles. The conservatory is painted dark green outside, and its steel security bars are rendered almost invisible by their careful correspondence with the glazing bars behind. On the inside the kitchen floor of Carrara marble is still too shiny for Giles' taste – he would prefer it to look old and worn.

Giles has scoured antique shops and salvage yards for fireplaces to replace those unceremoniously ripped out in the 1960s. The fireplace gracing the formal dining room is a 1780s Adamesque example, whose previous owner had heavy-handedly stripped it in the belief it was Edwardian. It depicts the Roman goddess of agriculture, Ceres, surrounded by patti with sheaves of wheat. Made of gesso and pine, its details are now so indistinct it would not bear repainting. Giles completed the fireplace as traditionally as possible, using the closest thing he could find to Siena marble – "Siena marble is so hard to get because it breaks up," he says – and an inner lining of Carrara marble.

Another compromise can be found in the first-floor living room – a 19th-century Georgian reproduction fireplace, again over-

zealously stripped by a former owner. The fireplace in the basement bedroom, however, is contemporary with the house. Found in fragments and reassembled, it features such classic Georgian devices as a Greek key, an egg-and-dart pattern and a shell motif. Replacement pieces have been expertly carved by students of the City & Guilds Art School, across the river in Kensington.

In his renovation Giles has respected the Georgian essence of the house. With his choice of furnishings he has, unconsciously or otherwise, gone a step further and recaptured the spirit of the Grand Tour – the long, odyssey voyage around foreign parts that was expected of 18th-century gentry.

He has a taste for exotic pieces such as African fertility symbols

and Chinese tables and rugs, which mingle happily with more conventional English antiques. One unmissable item is his huge Chinese marriage cupboard, elaborately carved with stylised images of hats and other arcane symbols of good luck. "My wife sent me to an auction to buy a dining table," he recounts. "I wanted to buy a Georgian card table, but unfortunately I arrived too late – I was furious. Then I saw this."

Giles says he sees houses as being rather like children – once they have reached a certain maturity it is time to send them on their way. So, having restored this house, he has put it on the market and set his sights on two candidates for a new home and a new challenge. "One is a Georgian house in a Chelsea square which needs a lot of work; the other is a Regency house in Kensington that has had nothing done to it for 30 years."

If you are interested in buying the well-rested former home of John Tweed, call Hampton on 071 815 3444 or Giles on 071 582 0748.



FLOOR PLAN

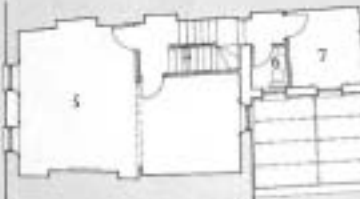
Ground Floor

1. Living Room
2. Library
3. Conservatory
4. Kitchen



First Floor

5. Living Room
6. Bedroom
7. Study



Second Floor

8. Bedroom
9. En-suite Bathroom
10. Bedroom



USEFUL ADDRESSES

Architect: Giles Quarme, 41 Cardigan Street, London SE11 5PF. Tel: 071 582 0748

Joinery and kitchen: John Elber Furniture Workshops, Royal Victoria Patriotic Building, Trinity Road, London SW18 5SX. Tel: 081 874 3361

Damp-proofing: Greater London Property Care, 11 Greenleaf House, Darkes Lane, Putters Bar, Hertfordshire EN6 1AE. Tel: 0707 44964

Roofing: Keith Vinten, Frogs Leap, Magdalen Laver, Ongar, Essex. Tel: 0836 201504

Electrical work: Koshias Brothers Electrical, 9 Solihull Road, London N9 9DB. Tel: 0811 270002

Decorating: Fairnie Contracts, 81 Mayford Road, London SW12. Tel: 081 675 0126

Carving and sculpture: City & Guilds of London Art School, 124 Kensington Park Road, London SE11 4DJ. Tel: 071 735 2306

Plumbing: Mercer-Cunliffe, 101 Westwood Park, Forest Hill London SE23 3QZ. Tel: 081 699 9731

Marble: Dialbuild, 23 Cubworth Street, London E1 5QU. Tel: 071 377 2101

Fabric: Peter Jones, Sloane Square, London, SW1W 8EL. Tel: 071 720 3434