

COUNTRY LIFE[®]

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EVERY WEEK

Elegant interiors



How Terence Conran still shapes our taste

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and why perry is making a comeback



Indoors with an outdoors girl

Mary Miers visits the interior designer Emily Todhunter and finds that dogs and ponies take precedence over decorating at her Wiltshire home

Photographs by Ray Main



EMILY TODHUNTER cut her teeth in 1980s New York, when the 'English look was all the rage', and has since become well-known as an English interior decorator. Driving to meet her at her Wiltshire home, I pondered on what it is that characterises 'English decoration', a phrase as often applied to the country-house interiors of John Fowler as it is to the artistic eclecticism of antique-dealing decorators or the more contemporary fusion of new and traditional design.

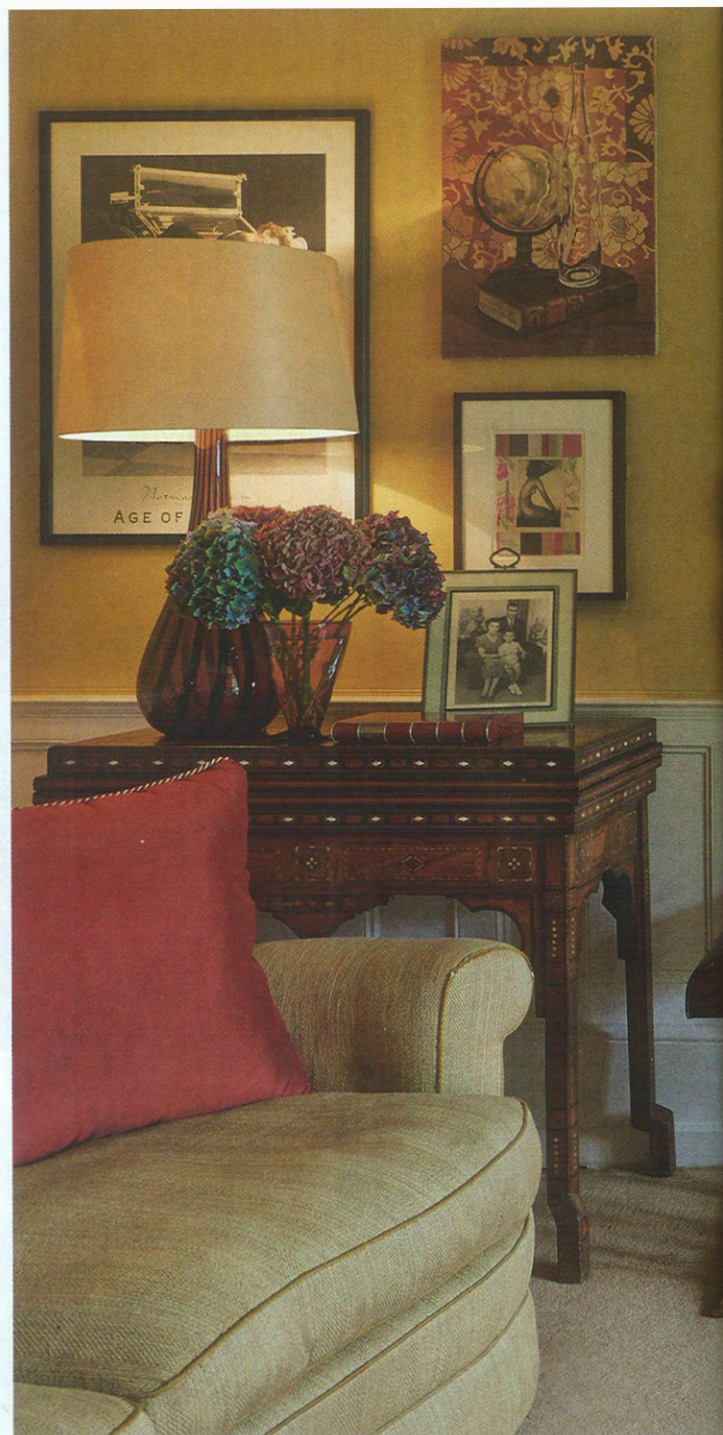
Quite unexpectedly, and as different in style as I could have imagined after a quick trawl through Todhunter Earle's prestigious international portfolio, Draycot House near Chiseldon seemed to provide an answer. Here, where nothing has been 'designed', one senses the essence of English country-house decoration, which is not so much about a design aesthetic as a way of life: the earthiness that comes from that very English engagement with outdoor pursuits and pleasures.

The overall effect is one of relaxed

“One senses the essence of English country-house decoration, which is not so much about design as a way of life”

comfort rather than urban chic, an apparent effortlessness in the way old and new pieces, textiles and colours are thrown together harmoniously alongside the essentials of country living, always playing down the decorator's hand.

Emily and her husband took on this 1720s gentleman's farmhouse nine years ago, as a place to spend weekends and holidays with their three children. Situated on the Marlborough Downs, it offered Emily the chance to replicate her own country upbringing: 'For me, it's like going back to my childhood, with dogs, chickens and



Left: Emily Todhunter in her garden.

Above left: Draycot House, Wiltshire, part of the Burderop estate. Above: The sitting room, with Emily and Anthony Stern's Aubergine Bulb lamp on the left

ponies for the children.' (Her parents still live at The Old Rectory in Farnborough, Oxfordshire, voted England's Finest Parsonage by COUNTRY LIFE, September 17, 2008).

The furniture is a hotch-potch of pieces they've inherited or moved here from previous abodes; carpets, some paint finishes and the kitchen fittings pre-date their arrival. On the walls are reminders of places and people they love—a view of their house in Greece; a 1956 *trompe l'oeil* by Martin Battersby, which her grandmother gave to her as a teenager; two Colin Zeiglers; a series of plant prints bought at a Paris flea market.

Amid all this informality are certain subtle clues as to Emily's *métier*: the odd piece she has designed herself, such as the hall rug (woven by The Rug Company) or the Aubergine Bulb lamp in the sitting room (hand-made by Anthony Stern). In her bedroom, the walls are painted pink (Dulux Autumn Fern) to reflect the tints in the fireplace brickwork and a huge mirror reflects the light. The pale curtains are devoid of pattern: 'If you've got a view, you don't want to spoil it; you should be able to look out without being distracted.'

It's the curtains and blinds at Draycot House—made in Italy for O Ecotextiles

in Ultimate Floppy Linen (<http://todhunterearle.com/portfolio/fabric/>)—that hint most readily at an expert's eye. Emily's advice is to have no stiffening at the tops of curtains and to back them with the same fabric in a different shade (not white). 'It's extravagant, but you get a better handle; it makes them move together instead of against each other, so you don't get that tension between two different weaves. I love curtains to be floppy and to see light filtering through them.'

Optional blackout is provided by Roman blinds against the windows; in the bathroom and kitchen, the blinds are of single, unlined ➤

The spare-room curtains are made and lined with Ultimate Floppy Linen, an organic fabric made in Italy for O Ecotextiles and available from Todhunter Earle

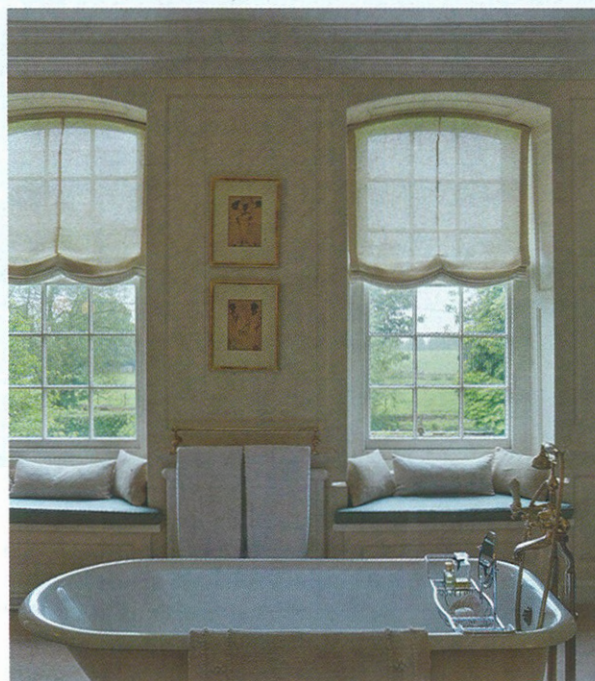


lengths of Floppy Linen, draped the Italian way.

Emily favours Dulux's Natural Calico for country houses, 'a yellowish off-white that works well against bricks and stone, bringing some warmth'. (In London, she tends to go for a cooler shade, such as Quiet White from Papers and Paints, which suits the grey light, white stucco and black railings.) 'My advice is, once you've chosen an off-white, use it everywhere. Don't have slightly different whites or cream on the woodwork, cornices and ceiling—stick to the same colour, as all these variations will show up. Don't be intimidated by a neutral shade; the beauty of it is that you can add colour with cushions and lampshades.'

Draycot House could not be more different from the smart London houses, *châteaux*, Alpine chalets, beach houses and yacht, hotel and restaurant interiors that form a large part of Todhunter Earle's work. Now based in London's Lots Road, in SW10, the firm was founded by Emily in 1988; since 1998, her former assistant Kate Earle has been a partner.

Emily's success is all the more impressive as she had no formal training,



but started out as an apprentice to the specialist painter Jim Smart, with whom she worked on projects for clients such as Anouska Hempel and 'Bubbles' Rothermere. (She remains very interested in painted effects—'decorative paint has come back into fashion; there are some incredible things being done out there with paints, lacquers and resins'.)

Emily's bathroom is an 18th-century panelled room, with Floppy Linen blinds draped the Italian way

‘The pale curtains are devoid of pattern: “If you’ve got a view, you should be able to look out without being distracted”’

Emily went on to read philosophy and psychology, but, even while at Bristol University, her car was cluttered with pots and brushes as she continued to do house-painting jobs. Then, in 1986, she got a lucky break when an American interior decorator flew her out to St Louis to paint her clients' houses, having witnessed her stippling the walls of a London gallery.

From there, Emily went to New York, where chintz was 'in' and everyone wanted an English decorator to do up their Manhattan apartment. 'Nina Campbell, Colefax and Fowler: they needed a girl on the ground, so I became that girl and worked on all the finishing trades. I learned so much and gained my experience of how teams work.'

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In 1988, Howard Stein asked Emily to decorate his new venture. 'Au Bar was at the forefront of a new generation of nightclubs with membership and it became one of the hottest in New York. It started as a dark, rat-ridden basement, but we made it like a St James's club, with panelled walls, black-and-white photographs, lots of leather and vintage objects, anticipating the Ralph Lauren look. I bought everything at auction in England and did all the drawings myself.'

This led to various prestigious jobs, both in New York and in England, to which she returned in 1990; they included Sissinghurst for Nigel Nicolson and the London restaurants Christopher's and Daphne's.

Emily sources furniture of all periods, but particularly loves 'mid century to modern'—a 1970s lacquer chest of drawers with Perspex handles, for example, or a bedside

The hall/dining room has 20th-century panelling and what Emily describes as a 'hotch potch' of furniture. The curtain fabric is *Duchess Paisley* Delicate from de Le Cuona (www.delecuona.co.uk)

table clad with leather. The firm also has its own products: 'We design rugs, lamps and furniture by default because we do lots of bespoke projects. But I don't wake up feeling I must design something; the impulse comes when I'm doing a room and suddenly think how nice it would be to include a particular piece. For instance, I was working on a design recently and needed a big orange object, so I designed a lamp in straw marquetry, a technique I'm very keen on at the moment and which has become fashionable again.'

The lamp has now been made up in different colours for the Emily Todhunter Collection, which features other lighting made by Best & Lloyd, wallpapers, fabrics and furniture (including a range in straw marquetry) made in collaboration with Tim Gosling. 'I'm very uncommercial. It's the making part of the process that appeals to me,' says Emily. 'I love workshops

and getting to know the craftsmen who make our products.'

Countering the impression that her high-budget projects might convey, Emily stresses that she has plenty of 'normal' clients and that 'we're very good at the practical elements of modern life: reorganising space, designing cupboards and "charging rooms", sorting out the rear quarters of a house'.

'We do a great line in boot rooms and pantries,' she adds and Draycot House demonstrates this. With its chickens on the windowsill, mugs of tea at the kitchen table and muddy boots in the hall, it's a revelation. Emily may have a Greek husband and be the winner of a 2011 superyacht interior-design award, but it's clear that she remains at heart an unpretentious English country girl. 🐣

<http://todhunterearle.com>; 020-7349 9999: studio office open by appointment