



The main bedroom is lined with *Victoires* wallpaper from the Emily Todhunter Collection

Evolution of a designer's home

Matthew Dennison visits designer Kate Earle's country house in East Anglia, and discovers handsome interiors that have evolved with time

Photographs by Dylan Thomas

INTERIOR designer Kate Earle is no stranger to working in partnership. With Emily Todhunter, she runs leading design practice Todhunter Earle. Their projects invariably involve collaboration with clients. Yet it is Miss Earle's particular vision—a comfortable, updated Classicism spiked with Art Deco elements and a relish for the sleek decorative arts of the 1930s and 1940s—that defines all her interiors.

Working with a business partner or a client is very different from working with one's husband, however. This was Miss Earle's challenge in decorating the country house she shares with her husband, Tom Hill, a planning barrister and Queen's Counsel with a passion for architectural history and English furniture of the early 19th century.

Beyond the fringes of Dedham Vale, where broad, flat fields reflect the wide skies of East Anglia, a tall house of chimneys, gables and cupolas rises above smooth parkland. This

is the house Mr Hill bought in 1996, six years before his marriage to Miss Earle.

At its core lies a medium-size, 18th-century country house, but visitors will search in vain for external signs of this particular heritage. Instead, the face the house presents to today's viewer is resolutely Victorian, a solid amalgam of Jacobethan and Pont Street Dutch elements, crenellated and finialed, tall, plate-glass windows overlooking tree-studded greensward. As so often, however, first impressions are misleading. Behind its idiosyncratic façade, the house preserves a largely unchanged late-Georgian interior. Only the staircase—fretted and baronial—and a dash of armorial stained glass that Miss Earle has been careful to conceal keep pace with the later remodelling.

It was by chance that Mr Hill bought the house a century to the day after its acquisition by the Hon Stanhope Tollemache, like him a bachelor in his middle years, who

married and promptly began the process of remodelling. Tollemache employed the local diocesan architect, Frank Brown, a pupil of G. E. Street, to add two new wings—one housing nursery accommodation, the other a large drawing room—and disguise the house's 18th-century exterior beneath a new façade, which was, in part, indebted to nearby Helmingham Hall, his childhood home, and partly to Blickling Hall, in the neighbouring county of Norfolk. Happily, architect and patron exercised restraint indoors. Their principal contribution to the current appearance of the interior is the white-painted staircase, which rises from an open-plan hall-cum-sitting room, referred to on the 1920s servant's bell board as the 'lounge hall'.

This was the house Miss Earle acquired on her marriage. Structurally sound, it had been extensively redecorated in 1947, with





The carved and painted staircase was late-19th-century owner Stanhope Tollemache's main contribution to the interior of the house

tain throughout supplied by Harvey Nichols. It was sparsely furnished with antique furniture bought on Mr Hill's frequent trips to auction houses and his extensive collection of books.

Much of Miss Earle's work takes the form of multi-million-pound London residential projects, often providing entire interiors for the homes of immensely rich clients. In her own house in the country, her approach is more modest. The interiors remain a work in progress—for example, Tollemache's large drawing room, which runs the full depth of the house, is currently out of action as a furniture store—and rooms have been renovated one by one in stages since 2002. At no point has Miss Earle devised a furniture layout or even an electrical one. Only in one instance has she approached a room

as she would a scheme for a client—in her own bathroom, which was created from a disused bedroom. The room was planned and plumbed from scratch, with advice on lighting from expert Sally Storey of Lighting Design International.

Although the house owes its current appearance to the joint input of Miss Earle and Mr Hill, it offers intimations of its long history. The dining room is lined with a modern 'India' paper of the sort that would have been fashionable when the house was built (in this case, a design by de Gournay, which Miss Earle had custom-printed on paper rather than silk, its scale increased so that the pattern stretches right up to the cornice); pelmets in several rooms were inspired not by 18th-century models, but by the simpler lines of the window treatments created in 1947.

Neither husband nor wife altered the house's internal layout. Off the central hall lie the dining room and Mr Hill's library. To the rear of the hall is a large sitting area, from which the staircase ascends to a row of bedrooms and bathrooms and, beyond, the bedrooms used by the couple's two children, Orlando (seven) and Lily (six). Beyond the dining room is a smaller sitting room and domestic offices, including the kitchen and a butler's pantry. Tollemache's drawing room is reached via a door from the 'lounge hall'. Rooms still fulfil the purpose for which they were built: only Mr Hill's library—the most traditional interior in the house—has changed its function: it was formerly a morning room. This is also the only room where Miss Earle altered any of the architectural features, replacing a dark, late-19th-century chimneypiece ➤

with a smaller, more streamlined marble equivalent in grey-green and white.

There is a freshness and crispness to each of these rooms, but, as in all the best decorating, Miss Earle has worked with consummate *legerdemain*. Hers has been an apparently effortless juggling act, balancing the demands of the house, the needs of her own family, her own tastes and her husband's avid collecting. Each room contains proof of Mr Hill's fondness for English furniture-making of the Regency period and early 19th century, as well as occasional examples of more sumptuous, painted and gilded Continental pieces. These contrast with the elegant lines of mid-20th-century decorative arts, which are a hallmark of Miss Earle's work, as well as a number of paintings and objects of heroic scale that she inherited from her grandparents—among them, a large English still life of game and fruit and a giltwood Venetian gondola lantern, both now in the hall. In the dining room, an 18th-century parcel-gilt looking glass acquired by Mr Hill is flanked by 1940s gilt wall lights chosen by Miss Earle. Beneath them is an early-19th-century sideboard on which stand ormolu and basalt candlesticks of similar date and a flower vase of the type popularised by Constance Spry. As throughout the house, this marriage of distinct styles is consistently happy and harmonious.

'This marriage of distinctive styles is happy and harmonious'

Todhunter Earle produces lighting, fabric, wallpaper, rugs and furniture under the name the Emily Todhunter Collection. Miss Earle has used products from this range in a number of different rooms—the bestselling *Anemone* lamp in the Gold Bedroom, *Vendôme* wallpaper on the upstairs landing and a bamboo trellis-pattern paper, *Victoires*, in the main bedroom. She has also used fabric and wallpaper from leading companies at home and abroad, including wallpaper by venerable British company Cole & Son, and fabric by Manuel Canovas. Mr Hill's bathroom is lined with Cole & Son's *Hummingbirds* paper, and Miss Earle chose the large-pattern *Madras Violet* for a spare bedroom. This design had been discontinued until photographs of this room sparked such interest that the company put it back into production.

The result is a sequence of interiors that, true to country-house tradition, appear to have evolved rather than being the work of a moment. The mix of periods and combination of styles and influences contributes to an



Above The wallpaper in the dining room is by de Gournay, custom-printed onto paper rather than silk. The pattern was re-sized at Kate Earle's request. **Facing page** In Tom Hill's library, once a morning room, Robert Kime cushions inject a note of colour

organic sense of gentle acquisition. Rooms are practical and flooded with light through Tollemache's large plate-glass windows. In functional areas, such as bathrooms and the kitchen, pale colours suggest modernity: in fact, Miss Earle retained almost all the kitchen's 1940s joinery and designed extra cupboards based on those already in place.

This is not a house in which rooms of parade seek to dazzle the visitor, nor an interior designer's showplace. It's a handsome family home worthy of its setting in the newly restored parkland, which Mr Hill was able to reunite with the house in 1998. 'When I first came, I couldn't imagine myself living here,' Miss Earle remembers. 'It just wasn't the sort of house I had imagined I'd live in.' Guided by her own design instincts, memories of her grandparents' house and by her husband's burgeoning collection, she has risen to the challenge in splendid fashion. 🐾

How to get the look

Edward Bulmer's 50 paint colours are created from entirely natural ingredients. Miss Earle used a Pots of Paint off-white in the Gold Bedroom for its 'lovely, chalky finish' (www.potsofpaint.com)

Cole & Son creates wallpapers that are distinguished by their patterns but also, Miss Earle says, their hand-blocked appearance (www.cole-and-son.com)

In her own bathroom, Miss Earle installed painted wooden panelling to dado height. This imbues a simple room with an architectural framework, and hides all piping

Miss Earle has a passion for handsome lamps, bought at auction and in antique shops. Several in the Emily Todhunter Collection are inspired by such examples (020-7349 9999; www.todhunterearle.com)

