



BEST OF BOTH

Two worlds collide within an 18th-century Wiltshire cottage that was given a late-Georgian facelift. By **Rachel Leedham**. Photographs by **Rachael Smith**

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As a designer of exquisite hand-knotted rugs Luke Irwin might be forgiven a shoes-off policy in his home, but instead he leads the way by tramping grassy boots straight from the newly mown lawn on to the palest of blue silk rugs in the drawing room. ‘Oh come on, this is the country,’ he declares, insisting that I follow suit.

The bit of country in question is an idyllic valley overlooking the Wiltshire Downs where Irwin lives with his wife, Alice, and their two children, Otis, nine, and Violet, five. Their Grade II listed four-bedroom house sits in the middle of a seven-acre plot bordered by its own wood, a paddock and a chalk stream, and is so pretty that Alice confesses to having sobbed when she first saw it. ‘The funniest thing was that I realised I had actually been



The exterior A formal lawn with clipped box hedging leads up to the late-Georgian facade, added on to the original 1730 cottage.

Alice's study 'It's a huge luxury having my own room where I can have my books and personal pictures,' notes Alice, who chose a warm blue for the walls – Stone Blue by Farrow & Ball (farrow-ball.com) – that picks out the colour in the Ikat 9 Persian hand-knotted rug by her husband, Luke Irwin. The late-19th-century sofa is upholstered in Wicker linen by Fermoie (fermoie.com).

The drawing room The loftier late-Georgian end of the double reception room is the more grown-up side of the space, and is furnished with an antique sofa and armchair, and a pink Elveden easy chair by Howe (howelondon.com). The footstool is upholstered in Flower Stencil by Vanderhurd (vanderhurd.com). The portrait to the left of the window is by the French painter Paul César Helleu; the abstract above the fireplace is by Jacob Epstein. On the floor is Irwin's Aqua Sari rug, crafted from recycled silk saris.



here before – the previous owner of 35 years was the aunt of a great friend,' she says. 'I feel completely fatalistic about this house.'

Before they bought it in 2012 the Irwins were living a few miles farther south in Dorset, close to where Alice, an interior designer, grew up. Her mother, Annabel Elliot, also an interior designer, was a co-founder of the Gillingham-based antiques and interiors emporium Talisman, and it was while Irwin was working there that he and Alice met.

It was also thanks to his mother-in-law that Irwin – a Dublin-born Old Etonian with previously a 'rather fey' career in the theatre, PR and the antiques world – decided to start designing rugs. 'I was at a lunch hosted by Annabel, and I found myself sitting next to a 10-year-old Tibetan boy

who told me that his father was a master rug weaver,' he recalls. 'By the end of our encounter I knew this was what I wanted to do.'

Eleven years on, Irwin's creations, which span bold ikat motifs to the subtlest ethereal designs inspired by cloud formations, grace some of the chicest homes, and his store in Pimlico, London, which he opened in 2010, is a magnet for interior designers. Irwin is regularly jetting off to visit his teams of artisan weavers in Nepal and Jaipur, but when he is in Britain he spends four days of the week with his family in Wiltshire, where he feels 'an enormous sense of release and relief' to have escaped the frenetic pace of London.

The property is a house of two distinct parts: a stone cottage that dates from 1730 and a grander



late-Georgian annexe that was added almost a century later. The result is a mix of cosy, cottagey rooms and elegant, airy spaces united by a beguiling melange of antiques and textiles.

One enters through the older side of the house via a narrow hall decorated with Scrapwood wallpaper by the Dutch designer Piet Hein Eek – a trompe l’oeil that mimics old wood panels. This

corridor joins up with the late-Georgian entrance hall, painted a startling leaf green. To one side is a compact kitchen that links beautifully with the Georgian dining area thanks to an enlarged opening in the dividing wall. Just off this space is Alice’s study, furnished with one of Irwin’s brassier ikats and painted a rich blue. ‘There is a lot of blue in the house; it makes me happy,’ she says.

On the other side of the hall is a double reception room whose two contrasting architectural styles dictated its dual identity as a snug television room and a more formal drawing room. The surfaces are scattered with intriguing objects, many of them birds – ‘subliminally, the house is becoming an aviary’ – while the walls are hung with art, some of it very fine. ‘I think that it’s interesting

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The nursery Otis and Violet’s desk, picked up at a local antiques fair, enjoys wonderful garden views. The Parrots Tibetan rug was created by Irwin, whose extensive travels are tracked on a magnetic wall map.

The main bedroom Echo by Little Greene (littlegreene.com) is a subtle backdrop for a Cameroonian ceremonial headdress and a pair of 19th-century French mirrors. The headboard fabric is Sweet Pea by Robert Kime (robertkime.com).





how you build a collection of pictures and objects,' Irwin says. 'The more you look, the more you understand – it's rather like cricket.'

Beyond the reception room is the nursery, where, when the weather permits, French doors are flung open to the garden. Bantam chickens and a duck – hatched and adopted by the chickens – patrol the lawns; the Irwins have also acquired two dogs, a cat

and, most recently, four sheep that serve as lawnmowers for the paddock beyond. 'Luke is utterly ambivalent about the animals, while I would happily turn this into a hobby farm,' Alice says.

Upstairs, the late-Georgian side of the house is taken up by the master bedroom, Otis's room and the guest bedroom; in the cottage are Violet's room and two bathrooms. From this height, one has

even better views of the garden, painstakingly created by the previous owner from what had been a plot full of concrete. 'It was an extraordinary act of love,' Alice says. 'We're lucky in that we inherited the bones of a garden we would have wanted to create. Her passion for nature is our ethos, too – there is something very romantic about it.' lukeirwin.com

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The hallway Entering the house via the original cottage, one is met by a narrow space decorated with Scrapwood wallpaper by Piet Hein Eek, available from Rockett St George (rockettstgeorge.co.uk). The runner is from Istanbul. The corridor opens out into a wider entrance hall in the newer part of the house. Here, an early 19th-century suzani pops against a leaf-green hue – Garden by Little Greene (littlegreene.com). The ceiling light is from Anthony Redmile (redmile.com); the table lamp was fashioned from an old bottle.

