

# The Fighting Cocks, 'Undressed'

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*The World of Interiors – November 2004*

“The pantry,” she said, “it was the pantry I couldn’t resist” and as a result Mark and Louise Stephen sold their sensitively restored cottage in the picturesque village of Amberley, West Sussex and moved a couple of miles up the road to embark on a project that was to take ten years of tantalising work, ‘undressing’ their new home.

The Fighting Cocks was originally a rural Tavern, tucked into a gentle fold of the South Downs, it formed part of the Parham Estate. It was closed as a Tavern around 1880, then spent some time as a village tobacconists/sweet shop in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, before being divided into two independent cottages as homes for the head cook and gardener from Parham House. Louise told me that “being an estate cottage they had never lavished a penny on it, just covered everything up with paint and later on with plaster board”.

Mark and Louise met while both were working at Christies in the early 1980’s. Together they developed a taste for and knowledge of early Country Furniture and Folk Art long before it was generally appreciated or understood and a passion was born in them. Every piece they collected was carefully selected for its ‘feel’ and subsequently closely examined in minute detail for originality and authenticity, it would be reasonable to describe them as fastidious even perfectionists.

“It is the atmosphere and spirit of things that attracts me” says Louise “and I love to find them raw, untouched, crusty and honest”. It was her feel for these pieces that enticed them to leave London for a rural lifestyle which ultimately led them to the Fighting Cocks.

“I just could not believe it when I first went in” Louise told me, “I could feel the integrity of the interior, the layers of history slapped one on top of the other, concealing the original skin which I itched to reveal”. They had of course seen early painted furniture and works of art meticulously restored and watched the layers of paint and varnish removed to reveal the original colours and surfaces and ambitiously resolved to ‘undress’ their new home in the same way, inch by painstaking inch.

The colours that emerged were entrancing. Louise found it almost addictive as each room revealed its historic character, “we were so lucky with the colours, the ridiculous ripe raspberry, the homely earthy Georgian yellows and umbers, all faded, crazed and softened by time”. It was frequently a technical struggle to remove later layers of paint, and sometimes a plaster skim or filler from areas concealing damp or crumbling original plaster, sadly in a few cases the original finish was so far gone it had to be sacrificed.

Then as each precious inch of ancient distemper decorated wall was uncovered intact, Louise began to see her project as “like a big still life, composed of the hundreds of tiny still lives within it”. Every detail demanded attention and a small team of dedicated craftsman were gently coerced into realizing the dream. Encouraged to work slowly, like artisans from a bygone era, the glorious yet challenging brief was to “get it right”. Wherever repair work was needed to protect or replicate the original it was handled in the traditional manner with original materials where possible. Fabulous 17<sup>th</sup> Century flagstones from a farmhouse in Siddlesham, a massive early slate window ledge that the mason refused to cut down and therefore had to dig into the wall, lime mortar with horse hair, ancient hand made bricks, cast iron radiators complete with flaking paint, vintage light switches and ceramic ceiling roses with their original old painted wooden patress blocks, the bath, loo, cistern basins, taps and plugs, the door handles, locks and letter box and even the screws and nails that held them all in place were trucked down and individually selected from various house clearers, reclamation yards and country auctions.

As the undressing process gradually progressed it became apparent which areas of damage would have to be renewed due to disintegration. In the kitchen and pantry for example, all the internal walls and ceilings scraped like a dream to reveal a wonderful ancient patchwork of cracked and blistered plasters, renders, limewashed stone and brick. However the external

wall had to be entirely re-plastered which we then painted in a kind of primitive *trompe l'oeil* to simulate the character, atmosphere and colours of the recently exposed original surrounding it. In the main living room with the “ludicrously high, beetroot coloured fire surround and mole coloured shutters”, we painted and distressed, to the point of peeling and flaking, a *trompe dado*, adorned the renewed lime plaster walls with eight coats of traditional limewash and then decorated with bold sponge painted balls of red and blue. Louise insists that “it is a naturally happy house with strong unfussy features and brave colours” so where it was necessary to reinvent, we encouraged her to proceed in the same vein. It was a glorious day when John Payne’s dedicated scraping uncovered a huge painted arch topped finger plate on the sitting room door that Louise recognised as being identical to others she had seen in the servants quarters of nearby Petworth House. Each little discovery like this was so rewarding and felt like an endorsement for having ever undertaken such an ambitious project and somehow made it all seem worthwhile.

The same flair and attention to detail has been applied to the selection and positioning of furniture. Mark and Louise have only ever collected pieces that they believed “belong here”, pieces that tell a story, make a statement and are not shy or fussy. The massive “chocolate brown” house keeper’s cupboard which Louise says reminds her “of a huge friendly standing stone from the Avebury Circle” came from the edge of Dartmoor originally. They just managed to squeeze it into the house, then placed it to overlook the kitchen table at the heart of the house. They admire its “scale and presence, its simplicity and integrity”. Above all they cherish colours, old crusty paint surfaces on wood, metal, plaster or brick. Softened by wear, faded, patinated through handling, crazed or textured by shrinkage and expansion, or just raw the way nature and generations of service have left them.

“I remember my Granny’s home from my childhood” Louise explained, “I remember the steam, huge pudding basins, pieces of muslin and shelves piled with jam jars, I remember feeling so happy sharing her calm pace of life, in no hurry yet always busy. When I came here for the first time I saw the old green painted lantern outside the front door, the crumbling water butt and then the pantry, it was the pantry I couldn’t resist. I saw it all there waiting to be uncovered and yearned to bring it back to life, back to my memories”.

Leaving the Fighting Cocks one day in early Autumn, I bumped into ‘Kipper’, the traditional local mason and plasterer, who with his magic trowel and blends of lime, sand, straw and horse hair and heaven knows what, has gently and sensitively pieced together and sometimes invented, missing and worn out parts of Louise’s vision, to take the house back in time. Never without a hat of some sort, today it was a worn somewhat frayed straw example with a bunch of fresh lavender loosely woven around the brim, I voiced my approval of the decorative feature to him, he smiled a broad warm open smile and said “keeps the flies off you know”. Honestly I didn’t know, but I left thinking that Louise’s Granny probably would have.

**Robert Young**