

VICTORIAN MODERN

A Design Bible for the Victorian Home

JO LEEVERS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
RACHAEL SMITH



Thames
&Hudson

WARMING UP A HISTORIC SPACE

While narrow hallways are a feature of many urban Victorian homes, lack of space was not something interior designer Scarlett Gowing and her husband Josh had to contend with when they moved into this Grade II-listed house in East Sussex, built for a retired army officer in 1879 and later used as a school, a convalescent home and a rehabilitation centre. It was more a matter of occupying the vast spaces – particularly the 10 m (nearly 33 ft)-high hallway – and injecting fresh character by toning down the darker elements.

The parquet flooring was sanded back, a silk and wool rug added and walls covered with shimmery wallpaper from Dedar, all of which help to break up the expanse of wooden panelling. The chandeliers were designed by Scarlett herself, and furniture designs by Charles Pollock and Warren Platner for Knoll help to erase the house's institutional past. A soft wool runner on the stairs and swags of voluminous curtains on the landing show how the use of different textures can swiftly change the mood. By combining various shapes and styles, Scarlett has created a new harmony, resulting in a space that is fresh and exciting, and respects its Victorian roots.

OPPOSITE

On the landing, peach silk curtains bring out the beauty of the wood panelling.

BELOW LEFT

The front door opens into this vestibule, with glazed doors to the central hall beyond.

BELOW

An expanse of red institutional carpet once covered the parquet flooring. The sofa is vintage Ligne Roset.





ON P. 40
Gilt-edged glamour in Annabel White's Victorian home.

OPPOSITE
In Scarlett Gowing's house, delicate lights by Tom Dixon highlight the stained glass.

BELOW
Fireplaces and grates in a Horncastle & Son catalogue, 19th century.

A FORMAL GRANDEUR

Well-off Victorians would have had a house with two or more living spaces, with each room having a clear function and none of the spilling over of activities into other areas seen in modern open-plan living. In a three-storey townhouse, guests would be ushered into the morning room on the ground floor, before progressing to the dining room on the floor above and then to a drawing room (the term derives from 'withdrawing'). In a middle-class semi, that journey would be truncated, with guests entertained in a ground-floor drawing room at the front.

Either way, a house's main social space was decorated in what was seen as a typically feminine style, with wallpapers and fabrics in light colours. In larger homes, this colour scheme would contrast with the library or billiards room, both considered to be the preserve of men and decorated accordingly in sombre colours with oak or mahogany bookcases, velvet curtains and marble fireplace surrounds. Turkish or Moorish influences might have also crept in, indulging the Victorian gentleman's view of himself as a man of the world with 'exotic' tastes.

Decorating was a serious business, and by the 1880s a new breed of writers was on hand to offer advice. One of the most prolific, Mrs J.E. Panton, the daughter of the artist William Powell Frith, devised rules for everything from how many curtains to hang at a window (up to four) to the best place to buy bamboo side tables (Liberty, naturally). Her books, along with the many illustrated catalogues produced by manufacturers, were aimed squarely at the emergent middle class. The implication was that the upper classes had the advantage of having inherent taste, while others needed a little more help.



A BATH WITH A VIEW

When Scarlett Gowing and her husband Josh (see also p. 26) took on this rambling mansion in East Sussex, they went back to the original floorplans to create a family-friendly layout. The sheer scale of this master bedroom/bathing area meant that solutions had to be big and bold, so Scarlett chose a clean-lined modern bath by Clearwater as the centrepiece. It stands on a raised area (which conceals all the pipework) under a stained-glass window. The lighting by Cristina Celestino for Esperia Luci also has enough presence to occupy the large, airy space.

Having spent many years working in fashion, textures are important to Scarlett, from the deep pile of the velvet curtains and rug to the marble in the seating area. A separate WC, hidden behind a door, also benefits from plenty of luxe touches, including a vintage Lucite mirror and cool brassware.



ABOVE

A contemporary chandelier draws the eye up to the original stained-glass windows.

LEFT

A seating area with Warren Platner chairs for Knoll. A dressing room lies beyond the door.

OPPOSITE

The bath's silhouette exudes modern luxury, but in a historic setting.

