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**JAMES
CORDEN:
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Exclusive interview
By Caitlin Moran



INTERIORS SPECIAL

THE HIDE AND SEEK HOUSE

When a couple took on a dilapidated 12-bedroom former rehab centre, their friends thought they were mad. But now it's their stunning family home

REPORT Jo Leever **PHOTOGRAPHS** Rachael Smith



Home!



The central hallway with Dedar wallpaper and vintage Ligne Roset sofa. Opposite: Scarlett Gowling with her husband, Josh, and sons Arlo, 7, and Orlando, 11

Home!

The living room, with Capellini sofa and Knoll side tables. Below: the main bedroom with vintage lacquer panels and modern Zeitraum bedside tables



At first glance, this house, with its dark wood-lined rooms and institutional past, might seem an unexpected choice for Australian-born interior designer Scarlett Gowing, who grew up with the sunshine and big-sky vistas of Sydney. “Thankfully, I like a challenge,” says Gowing, who wasn’t put off by the building’s boarded-up windows, acres of red carpet and the odd collapsed ceiling. Not to mention its slightly murky history. “The house had epic proportions, but felt oddly chaotic. It had lost its identity,” she says. “Some of our friends thought we’d gone mad, but I could see ways to restore its grandeur and create something beautiful from its old Victorian bones.”

This 12-bedroom house was originally built in 1880 for a Major Robert Tubbs and his wife, Fanny, but after Fanny’s death in 1922, it was sold off and used by a series of institutions, some jollier than others. It stands on a hill in St Leonards-on-Sea, the edgier area west of Hastings, East Sussex, and while the nearby



Home!



A seating area with Warren Platner for Knoll chairs. Left: Clearwater bath and lighting by Cristina Celestino for Esperia, beneath Victorian stained glass windows

pebbly beach isn't quite Bondi, it has its own charm, says Gowing, who heads down there with the family's border collie, Onyx, most days.

She and her husband, Josh Holliday, who runs a digital agency, bought their grade II listed home five years ago and embarked on renovating it while juggling work and family life with their sons, Orlando and Arlo, now 11 and 7. Mysteriously bricked-up doorways were opened up, stud walls that sliced through the largest rooms were removed and the damaged stained glass windows were repaired. A new kitchen was installed and the heating and plumbing were completely overhauled. Even decorating the rooms was a major undertaking and a scaffolding rig was needed to paint the 10m-high ceiling in the hall.

The red carpet that ran through this vast hall and up the stairs remained in situ until all the structural work was done, protecting the floors from the inevitable mess of building work. It also came in handy when the couple threw a spectacular party, just before work started. "We decked out the empty rooms with silver mirror balls and everyone was free to go a bit wild, as we knew that afterwards every surface would be renovated or restored," says Gowing.

When the time finally came to move on to the interior design, Gowing set about balancing the more overbearing gothic features with soft fabrics and contemporary furniture. Generous lengths of curtains in peach-toned silk and chocolate velvet bring out the beauty of the wood panelling that runs through many of the rooms. Wallpapers also play a role. The hallway has the silky, rippled patterns of a Dedar design and Kelly Wearstler's Graffito pattern injects levity into the library.

For furniture, Gowing erred towards clean-lined modern shapes by Ligne Roset and Knoll that sit well in the historic setting, mixing them with vintage and mid-century finds. Lighting is minimalist, with designs by Tom Dixon and Cristina Celestino hanging alongside Gowing's own pieces.

When Gowing and her husband bought the property at the end of 2017, they were rescuing it from more than 80 years of institutional use and a slightly chequered history. From 1922 until 1992, it was a convalescent home for employees of the London General Omnibus Company (which later became London Transport) and rooms were jauntily named after the capital's bus garages, such as Elmers End and Acton. A sun room at the back of the

house (now the family's kitchen) was a spot where recuperating bus drivers could bask in the sunshine and gaze out at the manicured gardens. Later, the house was used for residential school trips, had a stint as a language school and even hosted a fair few weddings. Things turned darker in the 2000s, when it became a rehabilitation centre for drug users, run by the Scientologists.

Today, Gowing's work has breathed new life into the once gloomy spaces and restored the house's original identity as a family home. "When we have a group of friends over, all the kids end up playing a mammoth game of tag. It can go on for hours because there are so many nooks and crannies to hide in," she says.

While the bulk of the redesign is now done, work on a house of this scale never really finishes, says Gowing. Reclaiming the garden, which had been entirely overtaken by brambles, is ongoing and she is now busy decorating a guest wing, once used by servants. "Our restoration was mindful of the house's past, but it also looks to the future. I like to think that Major Tubbs would approve," she says. ■

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