



Countryside commission

Janet McMeekin discovers how a novelist's grand Highgate home acquired the feel of a quirky country house, thanks to an expert in reclaimed furniture

Photography by Andreas von Einsiedel

Five years ago, the best-selling novelist Maeve Haran and her Glasgow-born TV producer husband, Alex Graham, wondered whether they should turn their romantic notions of living in a rural idyll into reality.

"After various discussions, we concluded that we weren't entirely sure what we'd actually do if we woke up each morning in the countryside," Haran confides. »



RURAL MODERNISM **Left:** The master bedroom featuring a Retrouvius-sourced chaise longue, Farrow & Ball 19th century-inspired wallpaper and Chinese screen **Above:** The living room, with its "rather large cow" screen bought at Charleston Farmhouse, Emery & Cie tiles, and chair from Retrouvius



“The study’s cupboards were from the Natural History Museum”

READY-MADE HISTORY Above: The hallway features a painting by Scottish artist Joyce Cairns and Thai temple support from an antique shop in Archway Road **Right:** Retrouvius-sourced fire surround, chairs and cupboards from the Natural History Museum **Below:** The dining room, with Maria Speake’s addition of striking pineapple fabric to break up the long window and chairs in different shades to “mix things up a little”



However, the confirmed city dwellers still yearned for a smattering of rural life in Highgate – their neighbourhood for 25 years.

Their previous home had been a Victorian terraced house, but this time they wanted a change of scene. “We wanted a colourful family home with the feel of a welcoming country house,” Haran says. “Having found that we were both spending more time working from home, we hankered after separate, very individual spaces where we could each be creative,” she explains.

To facilitate their dream of living in something akin to a country house in the city, in 2013 the couple happened to stumble across a property, dating from 1901, that was crying out for a complete transformation.

“We realised that by totally remodelling the interior and

sensitively renovating the crumbling facade of this period house, we could bring a touch of rural modernism to Highgate,” says Haran.

With a team of architects from KSR and dedicated builders enlisted, the couple’s two-year adventure began. The original facade was rebuilt and the house discreetly extended using bricks from a pub that was being demolished in Essex, sourced by a specialist brick supplier. The interior was more problematic.

“After mentioning my worries about how to manage such a huge project alongside writing my novels, a close friend uttered the words, ‘You need Maria’,” says Haran. The Maria in question was Maria Speake, joint founder of the London-based architectural reclamation and design company Retrouvius, who heads up their interior design team.

Following lengthy discussions with Haran and Graham, and having carefully considered the couple’s own moodboards (“I bet we’re the only people who’ve ever presented Retrouvius with moodboards”), Speake set about interpreting their ideas and a home bursting with originality and character began taking shape.

“It was all incredibly exciting,” Haran reveals. “One moment we were immersed in a Dickensian scene at the noisy James Hoyle & Son foundry in Hackney, watching our staircase spindles being cast; the next, I was whisked off to the Decorex International show, where Maria and I came across a trio of funky knitted stag heads that we thought might be perfect in Alex’s study.”

Retrouvius’s quest to source just the right pieces of quirky furniture, antique fabrics, hard-wearing flooring, unusual tiles

and eye-catching accessories has paid dividends. The kitchen cupboards, originally pine boards used to mature Dutch Gouda, still bear the imprints of the round cheeses.

“Alex and I would never have thought of cladding our kitchen in salvaged pine cheeseboards, or even have known where to start sourcing them, but Retrouvius delivered spot on, every time,” Haran adds.

The hallway is dominated by the sweeping staircase with its aforementioned spindles, inspired by Glaswegian tenement buildings. Charming Emery & Cie tiles inlaid in the floor break up the wide oak floorboards and lead the eye through to the retro-style living/dining room, with its large dining table, salvaged from a secondary school laboratory.

Keen to incorporate Haran’s favoured shade of leaf green into

the hallway – “it’s the colour I always dress my heroines in” – Speake sourced a striking Terre Brûlée runner from Tim Page Carpets at the Chelsea Harbour Design Centre.

“When considering this space, Maria announced: ‘I feel one wall should be green’ and, again, she was right. Any other shade would have looked insipid.”

Emboldened by Speake’s decisive approach, Haran began to source items she may have previously dismissed.

“Alex was a bit surprised when I rang him from Charleston Farmhouse in East Sussex to ask how he felt about having an eight-foot, orange and blue Robert Campling screen featuring a rather large cow in our living room,” Haran remembers.

Speake has used three colourful rugs to zone Graham’s library-feel study into different areas; one for

working, another for playing music and the third for relaxing – especially for their dog, who has taken over one of the chairs. The mahogany cupboards were salvaged from the entomology department of the Natural History Museum; the adjustable cast-iron shelving was originally found in the Chancery Lane Patent Office.

“Retrouvius has a wonderful knack of discovering odd but beautiful things and giving them a new lease of life in an entirely different environment,” Haran says enthusiastically.

The Retrouvius influence has bestowed a true sense of ready-made history on this home, where every reclaimed piece has a past and an interesting story to tell. ■

What Became of You, My Love? (Pan Macmillan) by Maeve Haran is available now