

METRO Property



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ON A WING & A PRAYER

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LOOKING GOOD INSIDE & OUT

One garden designer has transformed her home into a rural idyll, says **Jo Knowsley**



Modern touch: The living room (main) and stairs (inset) have a contemporary flavour

PHOTOS: OSCAR KORNVEI

WHEN garden designer Jo Alderson Phillips and her husband Tony first visited Deanwood House in Berkshire, they were far from sure they had found a property that would become their rural des res.

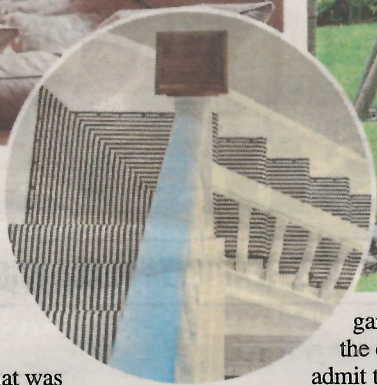
The sprawling Victorian mansion, a grand, former hunting lodge belonging to the wealthy Pilkington family who had made their fortune in glass has also been a Sisters Of Nazareth nursing home for wounded soldiers in the Second World War and in the 1980s was divided into eight rambling houses.

But in 2010, when Jo and Tony first saw the inside of No.8, the north wing of the U-shaped mansion that would

become their home, they admit now that their hearts sank. Full of dark wood panelling and smothered in William Morris wallpaper, it had cavernous, dark granite fireplaces and a hallway that was a jumble of unwelcoming – even hazardous – stairs.

'It just looked and felt very unloved,' Jo recalls. 'It felt dark and gloomy – we weren't sure about it at all. Your first impression when you entered was that you could quite easily fall down the stairs.'

It did, however, offer 2,969sq ft of space, fabulous 4.5m-high ceilings, exquisite original features and a large (if horribly overgrown) private



garden. So the couple – who admit they love a project (it's one of the reasons they're now selling as they've taken on a sizeable house and walled garden in France) – decided the three-storey, four-bedroom house was worth the gamble. They had also recently acquired a Briard puppy, Charlie, who would grow into a sizeable dog and require a great deal more space than provided by the courtyard of their little house in Henley.

There was appeal, too, in the

potentially magnificent living room with a 'secret door' (now a hidden bookcase) to the property next door, a vast fireplace and a lofty panel of beautiful stained glass later found to contain several bullet holes – one of the reasons perhaps the room had originally felt so cold and draughty. There was also lapsed planning permission, easily reinstated, for a conservatory to lead from the original kitchen.

Jo, typically, saw the house as 'an opportunity', having reinvented her own career ten years earlier by

moving from textile designer to garden designer after graduating from the prestigious Royal Horticultural Society design course. Her graduation project, The Chic Hip and Groovy Dance Pad, highlighting a garden as an entertainment space, won the RHS silver medal and was shown at the Chelsea Flower Show, where it won the BBC People's Choice award.

At Deanwood, she says, her greatest challenge was to create a home that looked as if it belonged to modern people, rather than Victorians, while 'giving a nod to the fabulous history



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A lawn unto herself: The gardens were a mess before Jo transformed them



Green zone: The oak and glass conservatory has a beautiful view of the gardens

'When we first saw it, we thought it was dark and gloomy - it felt so unloved...'



and original features of the property'. Certainly many of her decisions demanded courage. She took a paintbrush to some of the dark wood panelling and the stairs, and even the wood-stained fireplace in the living room - lifting them into the present, with Farrow and Ball's subtle Strong White paint. This area now also boasts a Jetmaster fire.

She dressed the living room - and indeed most of the house - in warm grey and soft white hues, adding drama and a contemporary flavour with giant, paper-sculpted, orb light shades from Ikea. Other rooms feature antique chandeliers and mirrors. Nearby Hungerford is an antique hunters' treasure trove, she says.

Upstairs, Jo ripped out a bathroom that had dominated the landing to create a galleried hallway, knocked two bedrooms into one to form an enormous, lavish master suite (complete with a dressing room and an en suite with standalone bath and a chandelier). She also adapted original Victorian doors for use on the wardrobes. There's a separate wet room with underfloor heating, too.

The hallway Jo so hated was levelled, fitted with a stunning original fireplace - a gift from a 'magpie' neighbour - and laid with traditional encaustic black and white tiles to create a welcoming ambience. Her favourite room, however, is her dramatic and very modern office, streaming with light at the top of the house.



Ground force: The kitchen has fabulous stone flag floors

But this is a house that has the wow factor everywhere.

The kitchen, with its fabulous stone flag floors, has a fireplace, a marble island and all

Siemens appliances, while the oak and glass conservatory, which serves as a dining room, opens out to a terrace with beautiful views over the landscaped gardens.

'We love to sit here and watch the seasons - and the birds,' Jo says. 'I like to create gardens that look good from the house and draw you outside, and that's what I've done here.'

'The gardens were a huge mess, dominated by ground elder [an invasive weed]. But I created a knot garden in the courtyard with Photinia trees - friars used to create knot gardens with herbs and called them

'embroidery for the earth'. I love that notion.'

The rest of the gardens are classical, with strong symmetry and an avenue of cherry trees. There's a mini wildflower meadow and a multi-stemmed Amelanchier lamarckii tree which has a fabulous white blossom. Jo adores it for the way it 'beautifully heralds spring'.

Transforming Deanwood has been a labour of love. But Jo and Tony are now ready to move on. 'We've been very happy here, and it'll be hard to leave,' Jo concedes. 'But now I have this two-acre walled garden at the house in the Loire Valley. In Britain, we're hoping to move to Marlborough. We've seen an old school house.' She laughs, before adding: 'And we do love a project.'

■ No.8 Deanwood House is £950,000 through savills.co.uk. For Jo's garden designs visit joannealderson.com

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