

WILLIAMSTRIP

A harmonious synthesis of colours, textiles and understated style enhances the restored interior making it one of the most impressive country house resuscitations of recent years

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Williamstrip is a beautiful Georgian house, with a splendid landscaped park, in the heart of the Cotswolds. Long the home of the Hicks-Beach family, it has now been acquired by

new owners who have carried out a major restoration and redecorated the interior with flair as a setting for collections of English and Irish furniture and paintings, and historic textiles. They chose Mark Gillette, a decorator with considerable experience of historic houses, to do the interior. At the same time, they employed Craig Hamilton, the leading contemporary classical architect, to design a replacement for the kitchen wing - built by John Soane and demolished in 1946 - and a Greek Revival swimming pool pavilion in the garden that's a small masterpiece in its own right.

Williamstrip dates originally from around 1700, but the major architectural interest is the contribution of John Soane, who worked at Williamstrip for Michael Hicks-Beach in 1791. Soane regularised the exterior, refacing the west front, converting it to nine bays and adding shallow segmental bows. He also refaced the south front and added a new north wing. Inside, he created the library and the top-lit central staircase. David Brandon knocked the main rooms together in 1865-6 to create the large, plain dining and drawing rooms, which are lit by south-facing bay windows. Brandon's work was tactful and the house retains a solid, elegant Georgian character. Like many country houses, the estate went downhill in the mid twentieth century. The back parts were demolished after the Second World War to make the house easier to run with fewer staff. Soane's library was also dismantled and a false ceiling put over the staircase to conserve heat.

When the current owners took on Williamstrip, their aim was to revive it as a family home, and redecorate and re-furnish it in a way that would enhance the Georgian character but would also be cheerful and comfortable. They appointed Mark Gillette in October 2008, having encountered his work at a house of similar scale in

FRONT: The exterior of Williamstrip was remodelled by John Soane in the late eighteenth century; changes included refacing this, the west front.

LEFT: The walls of the south-facing main drawing room at Williamstrip are covered in yellow silk French damask to emphasise the room's sunny aspect; the curtains are of Lefèvre silk.



RIGHT: A Chinese Chippendale cabinet stands in the dining room

County Durham, which won a Georgian Group Architectural Award. Mark worked closely with the owners and there were regular meetings with Craig Hamilton, the architect, and Symm, the building contractors, which ensured that the whole project was harmonious.

Mark's designing depends on the circumstances. In some historic houses with existing contents and old decoration, the touch is light, deferential and conservationist, but in others there is a scope to be more creative, and freer in interpretation. At Williamstrip, the rooms were plain, partstripped and neglected. There was an opportunity to bring back colour, life and character. His aim has been to create a layered look that makes the interior seem as if it has evolved, without taking too purist a line. Modern comforts, including

spacious bathrooms with the best modern plumbing and a large family kitchen, were added, but with respect for the architecture and the owners' fine furniture. A key to his approach is the use of historic carpets and antique light fittings, subtle colours and good classic fabrics that create a rich, authentic, but comfortable feel.

The main drawing room is large, resulting from the 1860s alterations, and has a classical modillion cornice. The client wanted a yellow room to complement the southern aspect, so Mark covered the walls with battened French silk damask with a light, warm, yellow tone. Great care has been taken to avoid too sharp or new a finish, the damask having some wool content, to 'dull it down'. The large comfortable sofas and armchairs have an array



RIGHT: An array of paintings from different eras and styles adorn the walls of the entrance hall and staircase

of antique cushions collected by the owners. As this is the principal drawing room, there is a more formal character here than in the smaller family rooms, and this is enhanced by Old Master paintings and superlative furniture. Especially striking is a set of Vardy seat furniture from Spencer House. When acquired, this was smothered with modern gold, but it has been restored and upholstered in magnificent gauffraged French silk velvet.

The sitting room has a similar silk wallcovering but is smaller, more relaxed and informal, with a nineteenth-century, patterned Brussels-weave carpet and curtains of embroidered silk. The useful central ottoman was made from one of the owners' Aubussons and is partnered by a cosy club fender.

There is a nineteenth-century chandelier from Denton Antiques, and the pictures are nineteenth and early twentieth century. Most striking is the collection of drawings by Laura Knight hung on one wall; these had been in a folio for years but make a perfect symmetrical array here.

The dining room has warm wine-coloured curtains and covers but pale walls as it is used in Summer as well as Winter evenings. The reinstatement of architectural features ties with the resuscitation of Soane elsewhere, especially the principal staircase. There, the removal of the false ceiling has opened up the full height to the Soane original with its characteristic glazed oculus, to sensational effect. The staircase itself is a Victorian insertion but was improved by darkening



the treads and repainting the banisters. The yellow walls run through to the entrance hall, where characteristic Irish Georgian mahogany furniture is suitably robust.

The new wing designed by Craig complements the historic exterior; it transforms the practical working of the house with a family entrance that leads to a secondary staircase. Meanwhile, Mark decorated the new kitchen to accompany understated Greek Revival fittings designed by Craig and made by Symm.

The interior of Williamstrip is a happy combination of architectural restoration and elegant, comfortable decoration. There is a blend of splendour and informality. It is full of personal touches and distinctive taste, as in the collection of paintings and old cushions. The architecture is now impressive, but nothing overwhelms. Mark's harmonious synthesis of colours, textiles, comfort and understated style enhances the restored interior, making it one of the most impressive country-house resuscitations of recent years.

ABOVE: A pair of chairs by John Vardy (1718-65) from Spencer house have been re-upholstered in French silk velvet



MARK GILLETTE

Mark Gillette Interior Design

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