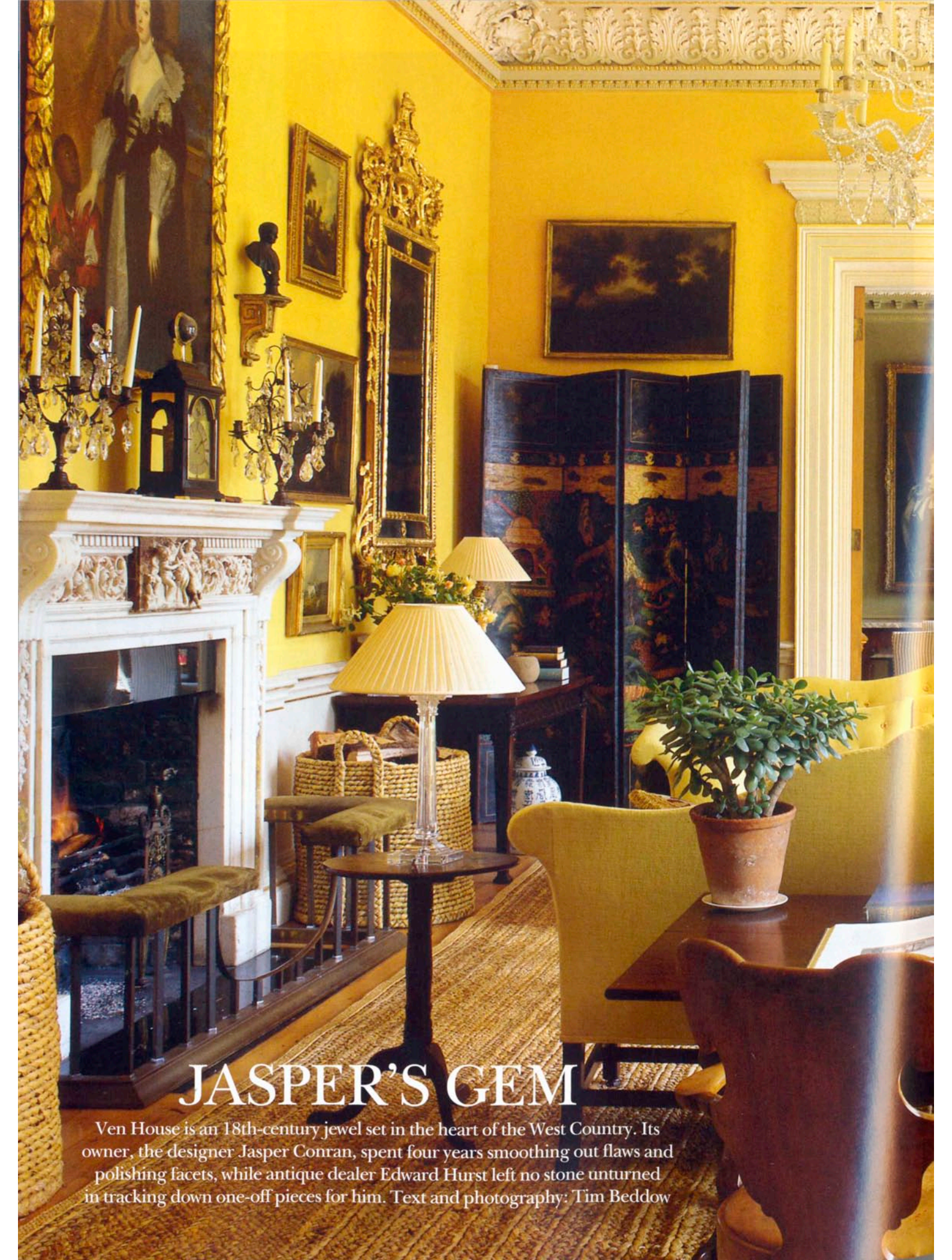


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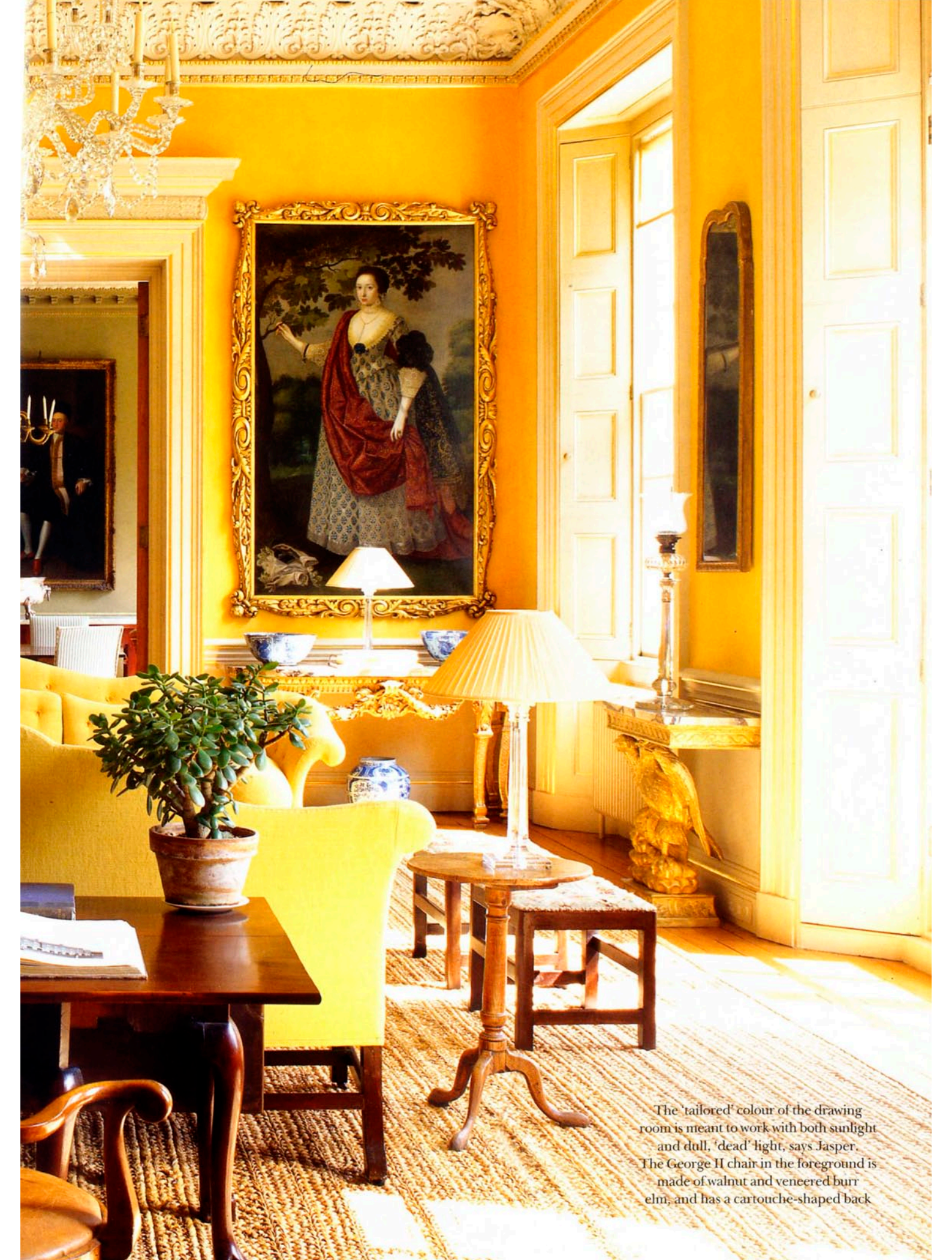
THE WORLD OF INTERIORS



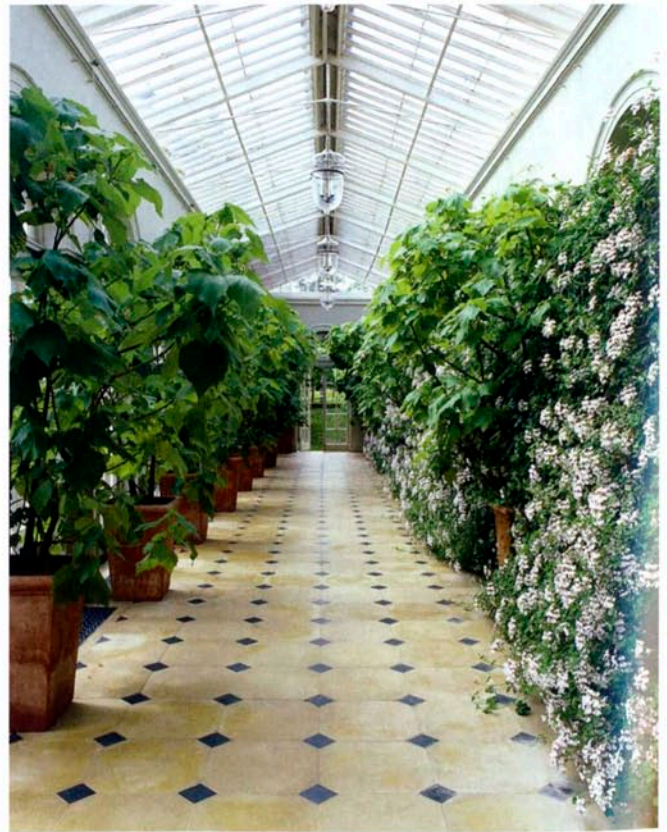


JASPER'S GEM

Ven House is an 18th-century jewel set in the heart of the West Country. Its owner, the designer Jasper Conran, spent four years smoothing out flaws and polishing facets, while antique dealer Edward Hurst left no stone unturned in tracking down one-off pieces for him. Text and photography: Tim Beddow



The 'tailored' colour of the drawing room is meant to work with both sunlight and dull, 'dead' light, says Jasper. The George II chair in the foreground is made of walnut and veneered burr elm, and has a cartouche-shaped back



This page, clockwise from top: the drawing room looking west towards the glass walkway. Edward sought out two different 18th-century sofas, as a strict pair would have been excessively formal. They were covered using vintage heavy-duty French linen sheets; Jasper wanted a flowering plant whose scent would waft through the ground-floor rooms, and in the long conservatory he chose jasmine and Paulownia; the owner refers affectionately to the sitters in the large dining-room portrait as 'the uglies'. Opposite: in the tall conservatory, the giant tree ferns are imports from New Zealand, while the table came from Petersham Nurseries, in Richmond



VEN HOUSE IS, quite simply, breathtaking. For designer extraordinaire Jasper Conran, the past four years since he acquired the Grade I-listed gem 'have been a very romantic journey, because of all the learning and friendships made. It's what I really love doing and I've had the opportunity to do it.' Edward Hurst, the knowledgeable antique dealer and interior consultant on the same journey, is a little less sanguine. 'It has nearly killed me,' he says, with a wry smile. The love and care bestowed on it by Jasper and 'my teacher', as he calls Edward, have never dimmed, despite occasional hair-raising moments. 'But I do like a bit of danger,' adds Edward.

Attention to every detail has been paramount. Yet this is no slavish museum re-creation of a collection of Georgian interiors. Both Jasper and Edward are too offbeat to have gone down that route – and in any case, it would never have occurred to them. 'If we had wanted strictly 18th century,' says Jasper, 'we would have ended up with a strange, uncomfortable building. I wanted a country house that looked like it had been lived in – a home, but with a quirky attitude to it.'

Jasper first saw Ven for sale in *Country Life* some years ago, but missed the boat. 'It drifted out, but never left my memory,' he says. So when an estate agent rang him five years ago to say it was on the market again, 'I came down to have a look and just bought it. The outside looked like my dream; with a certain amount of arrogance, I thought I could do the inside...'

At the turn of the 17th century, Ven consisted of a very much smaller house, of which the present morning and dining rooms were part. The front door would have led into the latter. It was

in the 1720s that James Medlycott commissioned architect Nathaniel Ireson, from Wincanton, to design and build the house that stands today, while Ireson was also working at nearby Stourhead. In 1835, Decimus Burton, architect of the Athenaeum Club, added a top floor, new wings and a conservatory. The estate stayed in the family till 1957, when Sir Hubert Medlycott sold it.

Ven passed through several hands until 1991, when Tommy Kyle – an American with a passion for 'rescuing' crumbling piles – ploughed his considerable energy into Ven. 'We definitely owe Tommy thanks,' says Jasper. 'Aside from bequeathing a fabulous semi-mature garden which I could bend slightly to my will, being an American he had completely sorted out the hot water, heating and roof.'

Jasper readily admits that once he had the keys, he was thrown into a mild swivet. 'Until now I thought I could rely on my own knowledge, but here, no.' Although obsessed by country houses, antiques and paintings for as long as he can remember, 'This is the biggest thing I had taken on by a long chalk. I realised there was a lot I didn't know.'

But he had noticed an article in this, his favourite magazine, on an antique dealer who lived in the area (*WoI* Dec 2006). Edward takes up the story: 'I had a call from a lady asking if her friend could buy the "tuliperries" he had seen in one of the photos. I said: "Very sorry, I gave them to my wife as a present." About a year later, she called again, saying her friend had bought a house near here and could they come to see the "chicken shed" [Edward's shop-cum-storeroom]?'

Top: beneath the library's rug lies rush matting (see also the drawing room) made by Felicity Irons of Rush Matters – it has to be watered in the summer to prevent it drying out. In between the windows hang a pair of Georgian pier glasses with their original plates. Opposite: an 18th-century bust of Homer stands in a stairwell, while the dog painting once belonged to the antique dealer Peter Hinwood



A meeting was arranged. 'It was Saturday and they were late. I was a bit grumpy, and thought it was going to be a waste of time.' Edward didn't really know anything about Jasper. When they arrived: 'He looked around everywhere, asking me about this and that, poking around the back room with things I had hidden for a fair. He was unstoppable! And then jammed as much as possible into the Bentley. "See you tomorrow with the rest!" he said, so I loaded up my horse box the next day, for our first of many rendezvous at the house.'

Jasper remembers Edward initially walking around the house muttering, 'Sleepy... sleepy...' meaning that here was a house untroubled by the centuries and with a special atmosphere. But there was much to be done. The grand hall was covered with eight layers of orange shellac. 'It looked like a banking hall,' says Jasper. That alone took a small team six months to strip back. The kitchen had a Spanish hacienda floor, to which Jasper took a sledgehammer one Sunday evening. He definitely prefers the hands-on approach.

'I instinctively knew that I did not want a decorator,' says Jasper. 'The tone and texture of the house did not seem appropriate for that. But fortunately, Edward – as well as his encyclopaedic knowledge of everything, especially 18th-century English and Irish antiques and interiors – has great vision.' So the two would religiously meet every Friday for lunch to discuss the week's findings. 'Edward would go: "No, no, no, not right" [to Jasper's discoveries]. But sometimes I was right!' he insists. The main problem, of course, was tracking down the right pieces.

For Edward, that a piece is 18th-century is just the beginning. Aside from exhibiting top-notch craftsmanship, it must break the mould of its genre in some way: be a one-off. Most importantly, it must be something he would personally like to live with and want to have in his own home. 'Pieces which have a tender quality,' Edward explains, 'and have not been ruined by over-restoration.' Such things take time, luck and detective work to uncover. But that is the meat and drink of Edward's chosen path: for him, tracking down a 'lost' unique piece is where the excitement lies. 'We have been very fortunate,' he says modestly. It surely also required considerable nerve and the occasional leap of faith, though, to find such things as the enormous painting of the racehorse Ring Tail in a country house up north, or the mid-18th-century English glass chandelier – in the main drawing room – at a flea market in the south of France. 'Because of their weight and shapes, putting them in place in the house required more nerves of steel than I care to remember,' Edward says. That he manages to source, with increasing frequency, such paintings and furniture is perhaps a measure of his knowledge, allied to a quiet tenacity and an extensive list of contacts.

'The project is, of course, ongoing,' says the restless Jasper, who now hosts the village fête and occasionally opens the gardens to the public. All is freshly in place at Ven now, but the passage of time will in due course add patina to its magnificent sleepiness ■

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Top: a 19th-century map of Somerset in Jasper's bathroom just marks the house on its fringe. The oval mirror, surrounded by prospect engravings, has been stripped back to its original colour. Opposite: this single guest-room displays a late 18th-century French four-poster that Edward found in a flea market. Of a similar vintage, the embossed leather screen is one of the owner's most long-standing possessions