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ENGLISH HOME

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Opulent curtains, in silk from James Hare with bespoke fringing and tassels, beautifully frame the drawing room's full-length windows. Soft florals and antique furniture create a mood that is calming and elegantly inviting. Hollyhocks fabric by Lee Jofa covers the small sofa.



Timeless ALLURE

Interior designer, Virginia Howard has created timeless, classic schemes for her family home, a glorious Georgian property in the heart of the Suffolk countryside

FEATURE CHRISTINE STOVELL STYLING BENEDICT FOLEY
PHOTOGRAPHY BOZ GAGOVSKI



'My role was to interpret my parent's wishes and create the traditional but relaxed family home they wanted'

ABOVE An uplifting yellow on the walls in the entrance hall is teamed with warm accents of red, terracotta and gold.

ABOVE RIGHT The substantial Georgian wing of the property, an extension to the original seventeenth-century farmhouse, is distinguished by a hexagonal Victorian conservatory. The house is surrounded by mature gardens and parkland.

With a distinguished career spanning some 30 years, interior designer Virginia Howard has a versatile portfolio of design styles to her name, and is rightly acclaimed for her sophisticated, elegant designs and signature attention to architectural detail. "The great touchstone of decorative style, for me," she explains, "is the master of space and light, Sir John Soane. In my early career, I worked with the late architectural historian Professor David Watkin, who was an authority on Soane and inspired my lifelong passion for Soanean elements as well as being professor emeritus of Cambridge University's History of Art and Architecture department."

Back in 1995, after many happy years living in the family home in Kent, Virginia's parents took the difficult decision to move to a more manageable property. Their search, which had begun within a

60-mile radius of London, took an unexpected direction when it led them to East Anglia. "It's an area many associate with traditional timber-framed houses, but, in fact, there are a good number of Regency houses and this one came up quite quickly," Virginia says.

With her eye for elegant design and proportion, Virginia could immediately see the potential in the Grade II listed Georgian property set in a quintessentially English landscape of formal gardens and parkland. "Fundamentally, the rooms were beautifully proportioned and absolutely as they should be. I loved it, but the prospective buyers were my parents," she says. "Fortunately they could see plenty of scope for recreating the style and feel of our previous family home, but on a smaller scale, and as a knowledgeable gardener and plantsman, my father was drawn by the beautiful grounds." ▶



ABOVE RIGHT An antique marquetry commode and the gentle flourish of florals create flow between the drawing room and the conservatory.

LEFT Staffordshire figurines make a characterful collection on the dresser in the breakfast area. The Roman blind is in a Braquenié fabric from Pierre Frey.

RIGHT A mature camellia tree, planted soon after the conservatory was added in Victorian times, is a feature of this sociable space. The table and chairs are by Virginia Howard.





The architectural credentials are exemplified by the sweeping, curved staircase with its elegant, sinuous bannister

ABOVE LEFT The traditional dining room is arranged for the elegant proportions of the room. Family heirlooms, paintings and portraits create a sense of continuity and add to the history of the house. **ABOVE RIGHT** The fine architectural detail of the house, such as the elegant, curved staircase, were an inspiration to Virginia throughout.

Virginia, whose interior design commissions include work on eighteenth-century Southill Park in Bedfordshire, is known for bringing tired country houses to life and could see her parents' new home was in need of her skills. "The interiors were full of Regency drab; heavy and dark with open fires and minimal heating, but really that was all that was wrong," she recalls. "There had been no changes to the layout, no modern 'improvements', so the renovations I made – such as new heating and updated bathrooms – were slight, and carried out with the greatest respect to the integrity of the house. The radiators, for example, are cast-iron reproductions and are largely concealed."

Virginia's reputation for the flexible and skillful interpretation of her clients' wishes has been built on her simple guiding philosophy, 'listen carefully first', a principle that she was particularly mindful of in her dual role as designer and daughter when it came to

decorating this graceful property. "My role was to interpret my parents' wishes and create the traditional but relaxed country home they wanted, incorporating the paler colours and floral fabrics my mother preferred," she says.

The six-bedroom house comprises a substantial Georgian extension to what was originally a seventeenth-century farmhouse. The property was divided up in the 1950s, but escaped heavy-handed modernization and retains its graceful proportions and original features. Stepping into the spacious entrance hall, the property's architectural credentials, which so attracted Virginia, are exemplified by the sweeping, curved staircase with its elegant, sinuous banister giving it a cantilevered appearance. "It's supported by cleverly concealed buttresses," Virginia explains. "I so appreciate the sharpness of this staircase's architectural detail; it's a pleasure to live with. Small flourishes such as these are the foundation of any decorating scheme." ▶

Dark wood is teamed with a bold red bespoke wall colour in the side hall and cloakroom. The portrait is of Virginia's brother, Guy, an army officer in The Blues & Royals who with his wife, went on to purchase and develop Giffords Hall Vineyard.





ABOVE Delicate, feminine, embracing the colours and prints loved by Virginia's mother, the quintessentially English master bedroom connects with the garden and wider pastoral views. The curtains and bed are in Jean Monro's Amelia fabric.

LEFT Virginia has created distinct zones in this elegant guest room. Fuchsia fabric by Colefax and Fowler in Blue Chintz, a timeless and popular classic, harmoniously links the space.

RIGHT The light and colours filtering in from the garden are picked up in a pretty chair beside a traditional dressing table dressed in antique lace.





Traditional colour and ageless patterns create a relaxed ambience throughout

The side hall features walk-in storage and a cloakroom which Virginia describes as having been great fun to do. "The colour is bespoke, as it is for all the paint-finished rooms," she notes.

On the opposite side of the hall, doors open onto the dining and drawing rooms, both of which have 12-foot-high ceilings. The full-height shuttered sash windows have been dressed with classic treatments to suit their proportions, respect the period of the property and frame the spectacular views across the gardens and the parkland beyond. "The drawing room is always delightfully relaxing, whatever the season," Virginia says. "'Grown-up' decorating stands the test of time. It is 25 years since the rooms were decorated."

Upstairs, four principal bedrooms lead off a spacious central landing with a beautiful glass cupola flooding it with light and a staircase to the second floor attic bedrooms. The light-suffused master suite, in the gentle colours chosen by Virginia's mother, takes its cue from the gardens, with curtains in a classic floral fabric by Jean Monro. A blend of traditional colour,

ageless patterns and a harmonious mix of furniture creates a relaxed ambience throughout.

There is also a strong sense of blurring the boundaries between inside and outside which so epitomizes the spirit of the English country home. Nowhere, perhaps, encapsulates this spirit more keenly than one special feature which made the house irresistible to Virginia and her parents: double doors off the drawing room lead to a spectacular hexagonal Victorian conservatory with a magnificent mature camellia as its centre piece. "Camellias were brought to the UK in the eighteenth century, but were relatively unknown," Virginia explains. "As new varieties arrived, they became very fashionable. However, as the early species were always grown under glass, they were prestige plants. This wonderful specimen was probably planted in the late nineteenth century and has never been healthier. The conservatory is a lovely sociable space at any time of year, but for the three months from December to March when the camellia is in bloom, it really is spectacular." ■

ABOVE LEFT & RIGHT

Wallpaper and curtains in Gollut Monochrome Russet, a classic design by George Smith, contribute to a delightfully nostalgic mood in this cocooning, restful bedroom, where thoughtfully placed family pieces create a relaxed and deeply personal feel.