

“We completely redecorated our home in just six weeks”

Explore a medieval mansion that's been made over with thoroughly-modern methods





Occasionally there comes a time when you just have to be brave and seize the moment – a one-off opportunity presents itself that is just too good to miss. For Alex and Gabriella Charles such a point arrived two years ago when they looked at the mortgage market. “We realised that the kind of deals that were on offer couldn’t last forever,” Alex explains. “And we thought that this might be the only chance we’d get to buy the house of our dreams.” The property in question, however, turned out to be a bit of a surprise. “We originally wanted a big Georgian house near Bath,” Alex continues. “Something clean, simple and elegant with no gables or fiddly bits.”

New Beginnings

That was until they spotted Scudamore Court on the internet, a Grade II*-listed medieval hall house on the Wiltshire-Somerset border. Although it was pretty much the opposite of what they were looking for, one visit was enough to completely change their minds. “We walked through the door into the great hall, and just immediately fell in love with it,” Alex recalls. Of course taking on a second property, particularly of this scale, is a huge commitment but the couple had a plan, deciding to rent it out as a holiday home to cover some of the costs.

This, however, came with its own problem attached; from exchanging contracts to their first guests arriving, Alex and Gabriella had just six weeks to get the house ready. This was no small task either, as while the property had undergone a complete structural renovation in the 1980s, the décor was not to the couple’s taste, and there was the not insignificant matter of a complete set of furnishings to be acquired, too. Mission impossible one might think, but not, it turns out, if you box clever.



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Clicking Into Place

Having found the house online, they decided to harness the power of the web to help meet their deadline, and the results are truly remarkable. “In the end we actually really enjoyed it,” Alex explains. “We searched auction houses all over Europe, and deliberately looked for pieces that needed restoring or had small defects that would put off the serious collector. We found the most incredible bargains.” Their haul included nine beautiful antique beds, all bought in the space of two weeks for no more than £400 each, with an inlaid walnut pair the prize find. These cost just £150 each, and were delivered from Milan for £70. Such parsimony allowed the couple to spend a little bit more on a few choice items – a rare Regency day bed, discovered in an antiques shop in Edinburgh, and a bespoke-built marble-topped table pieced together from reclaimed church floors.

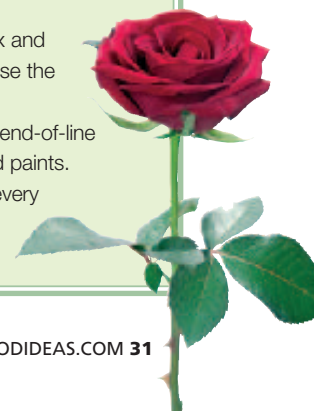
When it was purchased, the house's decoration was quite dark. “It was very, very traditional,” Alex explains. “The previous owner had a significant art collection, and what they'd chosen worked well with all the oil paintings. However, while we wanted to retain the house's character, we were keen to introduce more light, and give it a bit of a contemporary twist.” To this end, a much brighter palette of paints was chosen, and many of their furniture finds were reupholstered in modern fabrics from Designers Guild. This gives what are still very traditional forms a surprising new lease of life, and Gabriella found the process so enjoyable that she's since founded her own company, rarechair.co.uk, to offer the same service.





10 Ways To Renovate On A Budget

- Buy the right property – serious structural work will always be expensive.
- Build contingencies into your spending plans – overruns are likely in any large project.
- Prioritise what really needs doing and what can wait until later.
- Seek recommendations for tradesmen, and get written quotations for all work.
- If you've got DIY skills, use them – but make sure you know your limits.
- Salvage yards are a great place to look for architectural bargains.
- Auction rooms can be full of cheap furnishings and accessories – just bid carefully!
- Take a leaf from Alex and Gabriella's book and use the power of the internet.
- Check out sales for end-of-line fabrics, wallpapers and paints.
- Read *Period Ideas* every month for great hints, tips and suggestions.





Hot Location

Although they didn't get the Georgian property they were initially looking for, Alex and Gabriella still ended up near Bath, a city synonymous with the style. The first settlement on the site was founded by the Romans shortly after their invasion of Britain in AD 43, attracted by the naturally-occurring hot springs. Named Aquae Sulis, it became an important religious site.

However, it was later generation of health-seekers whose impact is most visible today. Around the start of the 18th century, taking the waters became very fashionable amongst the aristocracy, leading to the rapid expansion of the city. The two most notable architects were John Wood the elder and John Wood the younger. The son was the author of the city's most celebrated landmark, the Royal Crescent. Constructed in Bath limestone, it remains probably the finest example of Georgian design.

For visitors to Scudamore, Bath is a mere twenty minutes away, while even closer is Salisbury Plain, home to Stonehenge and numerous beautiful walks. Other nearby attractions include Longleat, which in addition to a stunningly-preserved Elizabethan manor also boasts a world-renowned safari park, and, unsurprisingly given the area's heritage, numerous spas.





Past & Present

For all the changes, there were a number of elements that the couple were happy to keep. The kitchen, for example, was simply treated to a lick of fresh paint. An old Aga converted to run on electricity was also kept in place, and has proved a fine complement to the oil-fired central heating and numerous log burners, helping to keep much of the downstairs warm during winter. The previous owners were also passionate about formal gardens, and even though the impressive and varied grounds are a lot of work – it takes a gardener 10 hours per acre per week to keep them in shape – Alex and Gabriella say that they wouldn't change them for anything.

In spite of their rental commitments the couple are still typically able to spend three out of four weekends at the house, meaning that it is still treated very much as a family home. "We leave our photos and possessions out when we're not there," Alex explains. The fact that they can still enjoy the property, and managed to turn a very challenging deadline for redecorating into an interesting and worthwhile experience, goes to show that if you can seize the moment, good things are often not far behind.

Further Information

Scudamore Court sleeps up to 12 and can be booked throughout the year. Prices start from £1,950 for a two-night weekend up to £3,400 for a full week. To find out more, or to make a booking, call 01637 881 942 or visit uniquehomestays.com.

