

# A VERY *English* SANCTUARY

On a verdant bluff above the English Channel, textiles designer **Richard Smith** turns a forgotten estate into a convivial country home—and brilliant lab for experiments in color and pattern.



INTERIOR DESIGN BY **Richard Smith** AND **Andrew Blackman** • LANDSCAPE DESIGN BY **James Horner**  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **Dylan Thomas** • STYLING BY **Sara Mathers** • WRITTEN BY **Richard Smith**

Smith cloaked a second-floor bedroom in his bamboo trellis wallpaper to emphasize the space's connection to the gardens below. Monotype in oil over mantel, Juliet Scott

OPPOSITE: The Sussex sandstone farmhouse dates to the 17th century, with porches and casement windows added around 1805.



### Rules of the House



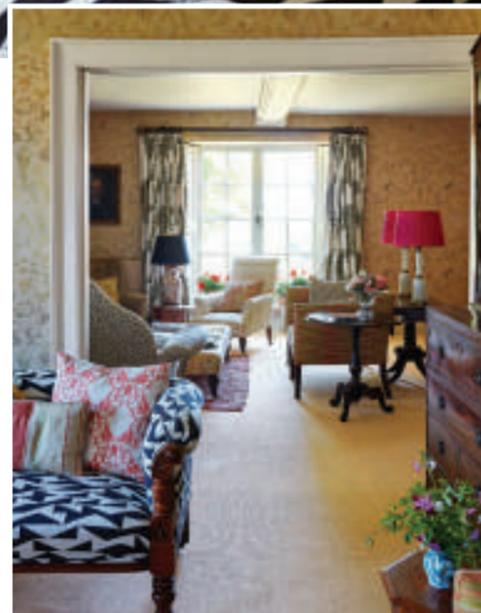
**RICHARD SMITH'S GRACIOUS LESSONS FOR THE MODERN MANOR**



#### CONNECT DOUBLE PARLORS WITH PATTERN.

"To unify the two halves of the large drawing room, I covered both in the same shell-pink wallcovering and repeated fabrics on the windows and settees."

*Flame stitch settee fabric and metallic wallpaper, Madeaux*



#### LET LIFE IMITATE ART.

"We added trelliswork to the entry after seeing something similar in a 19th-century engraving of the house."  
*Door color, Fawn by Farrow & Ball*



#### SLOW ROLL THE LANDSCAPE.

"In the eight years before turning our attention to the outdoors, we visited endless gardens and made photo scrapbooks of all the things we saw and loved. We took our time."



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## XPLORING

the rugged coastline outside the ancient fishing port of Hastings some 20 years ago, my partner, Andrew [Blackman], and I stumbled upon Fairlight Place. At

the time, it was a romantic 17th-century wreck, abandoned and crumbling on a bluff high above the English Channel. It was love at first sight.

Back then, we were living in London with a weekend bolt-hole halfway down to this quiet part of the Sussex coast. Over the next five years, we did some serious stalking, regularly driving down to clamber over the gate, wander through overgrown gardens to picnic on the lawn, and dream that one day this

might be home. Indeed, it is where we live now, and I am still pinching myself all these years later.

Fairlight Place is a handsome and unpretentious manor house happy in its own skin. Built of locally quarried sandstone blocks with large casement windows added in the early 1800s (much appreciated by us—the rooms are flooded with sea-reflected light), the house sits comfortably within a 15-foot wall that surrounds it on three sides. There is a small attached Victorian annex that we called home for the first few months whilst we installed luxuries in the main house (things like electricity and hot water).

After four years of external renovation, we were able to turn our attention to the interiors. Andrew, an art dealer, was in charge of paintings

“Fairlight Place is a *handsome and unpretentious* manor house happy in its own skin.”



and furniture, and of course I served as the colour and fabrics department. We wanted to take our time, let the house speak to us and allow it to come back to life in an unhurried and thoughtful way. This coincided with my third collection for No.9 Thompson, the brand I design for Jim Thompson, and I made the most of the opportunity to get a better sense of how the fabrics perform in real life. (To use only my own designs at home may look like egomania, but I don't feel I can expect other people to buy my work if I don't live with it myself!) And when I launched my own collection, Madeaux, a few years later, I was determined to go through that same process, experimenting with texture, colour, and pattern. In

the time since, I have come to rely on the house as an invaluable design laboratory. For instance, I designed the wallpaper in the kitchen (a colourful assemblage of French stripes) to bring a warm, fun atmosphere to what is probably our most-used room. It is to the kitchen we head when we see storms approaching us across the sea. It houses the all-important AGA stove, our best friend day and night,

the warm heart of a welcoming home. We are not great fans of an overheated house, so the stove or fireplace is often our only source of heat. We entertain often and wanted to instill a sense of joie de vivre, particularly here and in the dining room, where a trompe l'oeil ceiling treatment and candy-striped corner poles create a tent illusion. It's more flamboyant than our

A lively tapestry of purple wallflowers and mauve nepeta grandiflora greets visitors along the back drive.



△ **HARNESS THE POWER OF SEPIA.** “I’ve always loved the palette’s simple beauty. And the red drapery pelmets add a bit of humor.”

**IDENTIFY YOUR MOST-USED ROOM—AND CELEBRATE IT.** “The French stripe patchwork on the walls pulls together the disparate elements of the kitchen, seems appropriate in both summer and winter, and makes a colourful background to frequent kitchen suppers for six or eight.” *Flooring, reclaimed terra-cotta roof tiles*





◀ **BUILD A RAPPORT BETWEEN ESSENTIAL IDEAS.**

"Two themes repeat throughout the house: black and stripes, and I find they're best when combined. In the master bedroom, the wallpaper was inspired by a Japanese screen, and the charcoal stripe is a handwoven linen silk fabric." *Table, custom upholstered in a 1930s velvet*

usual style, but it certainly gives our dinner parties a sense of occasion!

In the earliest part of the house is a double drawing room: in the front section, an inglenook hearth for winter evenings, and in the rear, French doors look onto a terrace and into the garden beyond—a lovely, quiet place to sit and make phone calls in the late afternoon. I discovered that using the same plaster pink wallcovering and repeating some of the same fabrics throughout unifies the two halves beautifully.

It wasn't until eight years in that we began seriously to tackle the grounds. Enter gifted gardener James Horner, the first Christopher Lloyd scholar at nearby Great Dixter House & Gardens. With us for three years, he has layered texture, shape, and colour within a framework of yew that we'd planted previously. Now one of my biggest treats is the morning commute to my studio, a former cart shed set in the wall. I'm back most days for lunch and again at four-ish in the summer months for tea in one of the garden seating areas. Friends coming for dinner know to bring several layers as they will most likely be made to sit outside in anything even approaching good weather.

We can comfortably sleep 14 people in pretty rooms overlooking the sea or the gardens. On the second floor, these are separated by a landing that stretches the length of the house. A window at each end creates a wonderfully light and optimistic space, but it wasn't always thus: During the four years of restoration, on an exceptionally windy Christmas night, I came down from the top floor to find snow had found a way through the still-unrepaired window to create a seasonal drift on the bare floorboards.

I think of that evening often. For centuries, this house stood ruggedly resilient to the coastal temperament. Yet there was much to rescue. And it, with the garden, has repaid us a hundredfold the love and thought we have put in. We couldn't feel more privileged to call this home. ♦



## JOIE DE VIVRE BY THE SEA

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1 In the walled garden, vintage Brighton cafe chairs and a chinoiserie bench (Andrew Crace). 2 A simple claw-foot tub is positioned for spectacular views of the English Channel. 3 Smith in his picking garden, surrounded by delphinium, poppies, and nepeta. 4 An Italian bronze bust guards Victorian and Georgian glass decanters in the dining room. 5 Afternoon cocktails are served beneath a copper sycamore tree. 6 A Victorian tented wardrobe brings a carnivalesque sense of whimsy to the entry. 7 An antique cast-stone urn rises between hornbeam hedges. 8 Smith created the illusion of a tented ceiling with a custom trompe l'oeil treatment complete with candy-striped trim and corner poles.



Restoring the manor home and its gardens has taken 15 years.

