

# Decorative *Interiors*

By Cecilia Neal



Henrietta Street room, Victoria & Albert Museum.

This 18th century interior boasts classical mouldings and walls covered in cloth. This shade of blue was very popular at the time.

are saving part of the country's heritage.

*“The one most important guiding principle when it comes to decorating old houses is to respect original architecture and atmosphere.”*

## DECORATIVE MOULDINGS

Don't strip out fibrous plaster cornices, panel mouldings or ceiling roses even if discoloured and damp, if they can be saved by a good restorer. Taking a mould and having the features copied is not unduly expensive.

**C**ecilia Neal talks about those basic but essential dos and don'ts when it comes to renovating old houses.

Many people dream of owning an old house but do not realise the hard work and perseverance that actually goes with owning such a property. Poor research means costly mistakes and loss of character. Restore sympathetically and you will not only enjoy all the benefits of a beautiful period property, but also know that you



**Above:** William Morris at the Victoria & Albert Museum. William Morris rejected the opulence of the Victorian era and urged a return to medieval traditions of design, craftsmanship and community.

**Right:** Strawberry room, Victoria & Albert Museum.





*Toile de Jouy bedroom. The bed shown is similar to the one displayed at the Victoria & Albert Museum (top right).\**

If skirting boards and architraves are original and architecturally correct, it is well worth keeping them, assessing how much you may need to run round new areas and then having a quantity run off at a good joinery workshop.

Do be careful with ornate plasterwork as modern emulsion paint can clog the carving, it is better to use distemper which can easily be removed.

### FIREPLACES

If you are lucky enough to have old fire surrounds and grates, it will give you great pleasure to restore them to their original condition and to return them to be the focus



of the room they were made for. Grates can be sand blasted and then repolished, and if a marble surround is stained, an expert can bleach marks and discolouration out with a "poultice."

### DOORS AND WINDOWS

Don't strip front doors or sash windows that can be repaired.

Skimpy curtains don't do justice to tall elegant windows - curtained windows should always look as long as possible.



### FLOORS AND STAIRCASES

Do have parquet floors sanded and re-polished.

Don't throw away whole staircases. It can be most despairing if numerous banisters are broken, but if you have a good one, take it to a turner – a specialist joinery workshop.

### WALLS

Do try to match paint types to the property and to what might have been used originally.

If you can find scraps of wallpaper

you can be purist and have it copied although this is very expensive. Many ranges like Zoffany have extensive archives dating back to the 17C. You will probably find you can near enough match it.

You can give a very nice contemporary or up-to-date feel to a heritage

house by using one of the very good ranges of historic colours. In this century we are much more inhibited about the use of colour than were our forebears of two hundred years ago. A clear fresh colour from one of the current ranges can do more to breathe fresh life into an old house than anything else. It is particularly exciting if you can find under wood work or some protection – a tiny scrape of a vivid colour to give you a reference.

### KITCHENS

Best not to install a fully fitted kitchen, but remember that built



*Drawing room with antique panelling. Here, antique Chinoiserie furniture has been combined with modern soft furnishings to create a stunning yet comfortable setting.\**



*A stunning breakfast room complete with elegant curtain treatment and alcove shelves decorated with pretty porcelain plates. Very 18th century.\**

in kitchen dressers were a traditional feature in houses designed by architects since about 1760.

Why not retain a Victorian larder? They are coming back into favour, and you could convert the scullery (almost a forgotten word) into a utility room.

You could still use a Victorian kitchen as an informal dining room. There was always a

scrubbed wooden table and chairs in the centre of the room.

For a thatched cottage which could be 300 years old, don't use stripped pine – that is so 1960s.

### FORMAL DINING

Don't turn the original dining room into a playroom or sitting room; formal dining in a slightly theatrical atmosphere can be such a joy. It is also nice to be able to 'shut out' the washing up.

Cecilia Neal has a rare edge among interior designers: her academic background in the fine and decorative arts and architecture. She heads an interior design and decorating practice, Meltons in Mayfair, established twenty years ago, where the front of house is also a charming retail shop crammed with small pieces of antique furniture and tempting objects for the home.



Many of the interior projects she directs, with the help of a small loyal team of designers, are heritage homes. Among them are listed houses in the English countryside, early 19th century London town houses, the renovation of Edwardian apartment blocks and a Georgian town house in Edinburgh.

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### BATHROOMS

Don't ever totally strip out rooms and get rid everything. If you want to have wonderful "old" bathrooms with fat taps, ask your builders to remove taps, plugs, and shower fittings from the property and label them carefully for restoration. Keep the baths and door fittings and have them restored, they will with luck be of very good quality.

*“Above all remember, if it is at all possible to preserve and respect original features, the spirit of the house will seemingly respond.”*

*Cecilia Neal*



*This flat has been brought up to date with the addition of a small dining room which was made out of one end of the drawing room. This allowed the existing dining room which was at the other end of the flat from the kitchen to be turned into a guest suite of bedroom, bathroom and dressing room.\**

*The new dining room has four corner cupboards which hide radiators behind painted grills, and also give plenty of storage for dining room equipment.*

*Panel mouldings, copied from mouldings in other parts of the flat, give the corner cupboards an 'as existing' a look as is possible. The wall areas have painted panels copied from existing panels in the hall, in architectural colours. They make the room which would otherwise be angular and uninteresting seem to be round. The colours ran on from the drawing room – and bordered carpet to give unity. The carpet is neutral and the rope border green and yellow. Regency bamboo chairs are in scale.*

*The little Swedish chandelier is a pretty 18C focus and the chain is draped with pale blue taffetas. The oeil de boef mirror, also Swedish gives a simple neo-classic theme. There is a service door to the kitchen. Cornice, skirting boards, mouldings and architraves were preserved and where necessary copied.*

*\* A selection of rooms designed by Cecilia for clients who live in period houses.*