

Happy Valley

WHEN Sophie and Hugo Grenville took over their 17th century house with its lovely Georgian facade they knew it would be a struggle on all fronts to make it habitable as a family home.

"We were mad to take it on," says Sophie, showing me photographs of the near-ruin she has hung on the kitchen wall, as Hector, 7, and Oscar, 5, play noisily with Marek, the Czech au pair.

It was pure romance that saw them through. The house, dating back to 1650, still had its beautiful old shutters intact as well as many period details right down to the door handles. It reminded them both of their grandmothers' houses. At first immobilised by the sheer scale of the project, Hugo nonetheless soon applied his passion for colour to the interior. He chose colours the Georgians would have used such as peacock green, duck egg blue and violet, providing a remarkable backdrop for his pictures.

"Hugo has total say in the house colours," Sophie admits. "I go along with it because it suits me. I don't have the vision that he has. We discuss everything together then I go off to London and he does it. My mother is always amazed by that."

Hugo even has a colour named after him in a London paintshop. Grenville Green is similar to the blue-green shade he has mixed for the dining room though at the Red House he has stuck to the Dulux Heritage range.

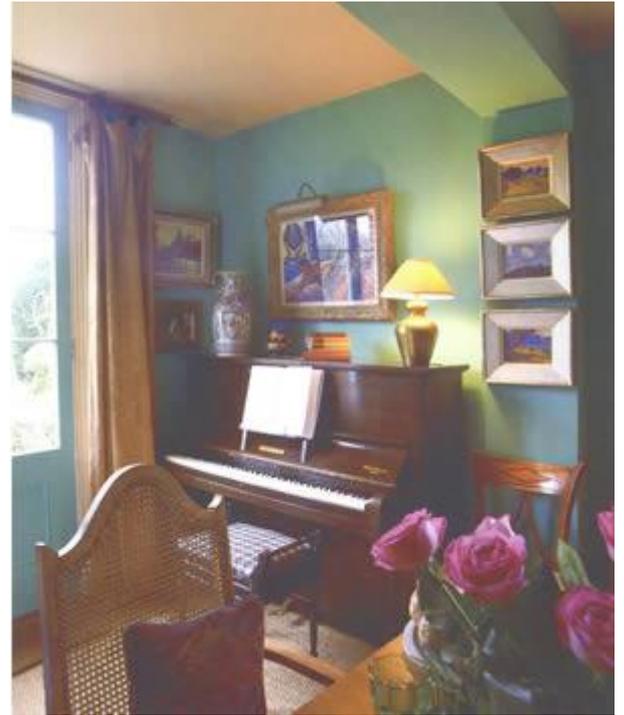
"Nothing fancy" he says. "Often I can't find the exact colour so I just mix them until I get it right."

Fortunately the Grenvilles are not the type who feel they have to keep on restoring until they day the die which is just as well with the planners keeping a close eye on the house. One of a handful of Grade II* listed homes in the county it also has the distinction of being listed in Pevsner's architectural guides.

The only structural alteration they made was to put French doors in the dining room so that there are now three sets in a row at the back of the house. It changed a dull and dingy space into a light and elegant room overlooking the large garden which Hugo has similarly transformed.

"It totally revolutionised living here," says Sophie.

In 1997 the Grenvilles gave up their Victorian house on the edge of a London park and moved into the Red House in the Waveney Valley. It was the start of a love affair with the Suffolk landscape, writes Marion Welham



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When they moved into the Red House, one of the biggest challenges was to fund the repairs and keep the home going. Day to day income fell largely to Sophie who kept on her job as marketing consultant.

"I was working really hard in London. I was just fed up with never being here but for 10 years I did it to keep us all going. I still do it but only 60 days a year which is a good balance."

Hugo, sells his work - mostly landscapes and life paintings - almost exclusively through Messums in London's West End. Essentially a colourist, with a bright palette of intense blues, greens, yellows and violets, he works ceaselessly in his garden studio to produce an exhibition every 18 months.

The walls are resplendent with his paintings, making the question of fittings and furnishings rather less relevant than they would otherwise be. What furniture they did not bring with them from London was found in junk shops though some pieces were thoughtfully left by the previous residents. Old curtains were adapted and included a pair from the 1940s donated by Hugo's mother, which now hang in the bedroom and feature in some of his life paintings.

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The school is aimed at giving people the skills and inspiration they need to move their painting forward. Though by no means closed to beginners, it is intended for those with a real commitment to learning.

"I don't think it is a question of black and white whether you can paint or not," says Hugo. "It is whether you really want to. I think if you really want to express yourself in paint at some level you will be empowered to do so."

Hugo's forceful and vibrant landscapes reflect the influence of Matisse who led the Fauvist movement at the turn of the last century with his emotional response to colour.

"The sea does not have to be the blue that you saw," explains Hugo. "It might be pink or it might be red or it might be violet. There is this sense that we can use colour as a tool for linking the viewer with the emotional experience of being in the landscape."

Although some of his most striking work has been based on exotic landscapes such those of Venice and Tresco, Hugo has been truly inspired by the Suffolk coast, recently focusing on the water meadows near his home.

"You don't see bright turquoise landscape in the Waveney Valley but at certain times of day when the light is at its most pure and intense, you do see surprisingly strong colour."

Sometimes people are not aware of just how strong the colour is because they are used to it. If it is a late afternoon

or summer evening, the hills rising above the Waveney will go a pale violet against a yellowy orange sky."

Hugo does not go blindly along with the idea - now something of a cliché - that the light in Suffolk has a special quality "I think it has more to do with the fact that you see a great deal of sky. Because it is essentially flat, the angle of light envelopes you, especially if you are standing on the marshes behind Southwold or up on the big fields the other side of Metfield. The sky is lightness and when people come to Suffolk they feel exposed, naked, so I think there is a very strong experience of light rather than a different sort of light."

Even so, it is a long way from the dazzling colours and glittering seas of Tresco and if Hugo had his way, he would abandon the English winter for sunnier climes. Meeting Sophie and having a family has brought its own joys, however.

They met in Herefordshire 17 years ago when Sophie was 19 and Hugo 27 but "didn't marry until seven years later. Hugo is full of gratitude for the way Sophie acts as critic as well as support.

"It is very, very hard for a painter to live with somebody who is not sympathetic to their painting as painting is a desperately lonely business. Although Sophie is not a painter herself she is very interested in painting and she has an intuitive eye."

His vast garden studio, shared by students on the summer courses, is understandably out of bounds to the boys "That is not to say they don't come and paint in here but only by invitation and that's fine. But I need to have a space where I can come and think and work." •

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