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# Time travellers

*Antiques dealer Tarquin Bilgen and his garden-designer wife, Isobel, have imbued this sixteenth-century farmhouse in Suffolk with an elegant, eclectic style, filling it with antiques sourced from round the world*



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OPPOSITE An eighteenth-century portrait of an unknown man hangs in the dining room against trompe-l'oeil panelling painted by specialist Alan Dodd. THIS PAGE In the front hall, more trompe-l'oeil panelling in striking dark green and red frames a collection of Ottoman portraits that Tarquin inherited from his father. The dining room, with its Suffolk brick floor, can be seen through the doorway



LEFT Two Victorian glass domes of mounted coral stand on a chest of drawers in the dining room. RIGHT Bookshelves flank an eighteenth-century English marble chimneypiece in the cosy drawing room; the cushions on the sofas were Tarquin's mother's. FAR RIGHT FROM TOP The kitchen, with a framed Delft tile of a goat, opens off the hall. Another view of the kitchen shows a painting of a zebra and the split-level brick floor. On the back landing, the original half-timbering is offset by more trompe-l'oeil panelling

At the age of 12, Tarquin Bilgen astonished his father by going off to spend his pocket money in a junk shop in Tunbridge Wells. 'I was a very inquisitive child,' he explains, 'and though it's a cliché, antiques do tell a story. I love to be able to say, "That was made by a one-eyed cabinetmaker who played the violin on Tuesdays." There's a great joy in filling a house with interesting and unusual things.' It is not surprising, then, that he grew up to be an antiques dealer, and that the home he and his wife, Isobel, have created in Suffolk is brimming with elegant idiosyncrasy.

The couple bought the sixteenth-century timber-framed farmhouse from a relative 10 years ago. For Isobel, a garden designer, the chance to landscape the four surrounding acres was the chief attraction, but only a determined modernist could resist the house's romantic interior – a symphony of ancient, wonky, exposed beams. 'It's like living in a whale,' says Tarquin delightedly. The floor of the guest bathroom slopes at 30 degrees; in the main bedroom, antique chests of drawers have had blocks of wood jammed under their feet to put them on an even keel.

Unusually for a house of this size, the two-storey, L-shape building has both a front and a back staircase, which suggests that it was originally two cottages. On entering the front hall, the first thing you see is a collection of Ottoman portraits inherited from Tarquin's half-Turkish father, dramatically displayed against dark green and red panelling. 'They are quite naïvely done,' Tarquin remarks, 'which suits an informal country house.' Having studied Arabic at Exeter, Tarquin originally hoped to deal in Islamic art, but openings were limited when he left university in the early Nineties, and spells at Sotheby's and Mallett turned him into a generalist instead. So, in the adjoining dining room, eighteenth-century Continental mirrors keep company with Chinese porcelain, ikat curtains and a seventeenth-century English oak refectory table.

Tarquin laments that dining rooms have fallen out of fashion, but this one dominates the ground floor, with a smaller kitchen and drawing room leading off it. Much of its character derives from the traditional Suffolk brick flooring it shares with the kitchen and the panelling on the walls – or rather, what looks like panelling. On closer inspection, you realise that, both here and in the hall, a skilful trompe-l'oeil painter has been at work. The artist in question, Alan Dodd, was originally brought in to decorate the back staircase. 'We wanted to hang some prints there,' says Tarquin, 'and he had the idea of framing them with geometric lines. But, as usual, when you ask someone to do just a little corner of your house, you suddenly find that all the rest needs their attention, too.'









**LEFT FROM TOP**  
The timber-framed farmhouse dates from the sixteenth century. The main bathroom, with its steeply pitched ceiling, is furnished with a floral armchair and a painted wooden chest. Beams line the wall in the main bedroom; the fabric used for the bedcover is by Bennison. **RIGHT** The kneehole desk in the spare room is made from an Indian ebony and ivory casket. **OPPOSITE** As in the dining room, the faux panelling in the spare room was painted by Alan Dodd. Prints and paintings of mountains, such as the one above the chest of drawers, provide a visual theme



The two cosiest rooms are the kitchen, with its Aga surrounded by Delft tiles, and the drawing room, with its floor-to-ceiling bookshelves flanking a marble chimneypiece. Muted colours are offset by an occasional blaze of brightness, as in the yellow silk drawing-room curtains.

Tarquin and Isobel's favourite room, however, is a second, larger drawing room on the first floor with a cavernous open fireplace and delightful views of the garden. Here, Tarquin has assembled some of his most eclectic pieces, including a pair of sixteenth-century ebony chairs from south India or Ceylon, a French leather trunk decorated with fleurs-de-lys, and framed Iznik-style tiles from Damascus. 'I love cross-cultural things,' he says, picking up a tea caddy. 'This, for instance, was made by an Indian craftsman who must have had access to English pattern books but decided to use local materials – tortoiseshell and ivory.'

Conversely, the main focus of the spare room is a kneehole desk, made – probably by an English craftsman – from a dismantled Indian ebony and ivory casket. Here, again, Alan Dodd's trompe-l'oeil panelling is in evidence, while in the main bedroom he has covered one wall with a faux tapestry of a stately home. As for the two children's bedrooms in the attic, the array of beams there is so fantastical that decoration would be superfluous.

The two rooms with the greatest sense of space are, surprisingly, the main bathroom and a room off the upstairs drawing room that Tarquin uses as his study. Both have high, steeply pitched ceilings that could comfortably accommodate a game of badminton if the court in the garden were unavailable. The bathroom is furnished with a floral armchair and a painted chest of drawers, as well as a behemoth of a bath with a marble top and panelled sides.

What the house and its contents have above all is a patina of age. For Tarquin, even a threadbare rug or damaged piece of china is something to be celebrated. 'The thing about owning antiques is that it should be fun,' he declares. 'They don't have to be perfect. Every piece of porcelain in this house has rivets in it, but that doesn't matter – it's still beautiful, and the fact that it's been broken and repaired adds to the history and makes it affordable. Just look at this wonderful piece of Delft.' He produces a large, very obviously cracked vase. 'The owner had come down from Liverpool to sell it; he strapped it on to his luggage trolley at Euston station and it fell off. But he had the initiative to pick it up and stick it back together. And he sold it to me. Thank goodness!' □

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