

Big is beautiful

*A dedicated team and plenty of time were the keys to successfully renovating the stunning East Lothian mansion Yester House, finds **Nichola Hunter***

PHOTOGRAPHY: ZAC AND ZAC

Make an entrance:

The expansive entrance hall at Yester House sets the tone for this impressive stately home.



Clockwise from top: The kitchen is the heart of family life at Yester; the formal dining room seats up to 24 people at an original table by Elizabeth James Antiques, and rests on a bespoke rug by Turnberry Rugworks; the grand saloon includes original William Delacour paintings which have been painstakingly refurbished; the porte-cochère was a later addition to the property; the kitchen island surface is formed from one large piece of marble and the floor was reinforced to accommodate it; aerial view of Yester House and grounds.

Forty years ago, Scottish Field featured Yester House in Gifford under its guise as the home of Italian American composer, Gian Carlo Menotti. It's now the family home of philanthropists Garreth and Nicola Wood and looks just a little bit different.

The 66-room mansion had been on the market for several years when Garreth first viewed it. At the time the couple were living in a Georgian B-listed property in West Lothian which Nicola had renovated, and they had just had their first child. 'I genuinely thought Garreth was looking at Yester as a business opportunity, making it into a private country club,' Nicola recalls.

Her thoughts made sense as at that point Garreth had interests in the hospitality industry, but he had taken her there to surprise her with the idea of a new family home. 'I have to admit it wasn't an instant yes,' she says. 'I could foresee the work and dedication required to restore the property.' But as time went on the lure of Yester captivated them both, and in 2013 they took ownership with the intention of making it the family's full-time base.

Designed by Scottish architects James Smith

and Alexander McGill in the 17th century with later additions and alterations by the renowned William Adam, Yester covered 3,200 square metres over four floors and while still impressive in its looks now required significant refurbishment.

'The house and the estate had become significantly run down in so many ways, and yet it was still so beautiful,' says Garreth. 'The walls surrounding the walled garden, gardener's cottage, stables and all the outbuildings were falling in, the bridges and tunnels were no longer safe for use, and the woodlands hadn't been touched for 50 years.'

'It actually turned into two projects, the house and gardens, and the wider estate. However, once the deal was signed that was my part done.'

Nicola took on the huge task of the renovation for the couple, but it wasn't just the creative part of redesigning all 66 rooms. The guts of the house also had to be completely overhauled and services renewed, while the damp in the basement was a major concern.

'The ground, first floor and attic were in pretty reasonable condition given the age of the building, primarily because the roof was in good

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TOP TIPS

Nicola on refurbishment on a grand scale...

1. Get the basics right. Warmth was my only priority. Heating a house of this scale is so important and while many questioned the heat that I wanted to achieve in each room by adding additional radiators, the warmth in the midst of cold winter days is what has made this house feel like a welcoming home.

2. Be confident to question solutions offered by experts and offer alternatives if you have ideas even if they seem too obvious or simple. Sometimes these will work or trigger thoughts that can be worked through and end up being the solution that you go for.

3. Build a team that supports you on a daily basis. I had to accept that I couldn't work on Yester myself. I hired a personal assistant and she was an integral part of the success of keeping up to date with the answers required in order to maintain the pace of the project. My interior designers and my husband's uncle, who was a retired solicitor, were equally important helping me keep on top of the huge amounts of paperwork.

4. Push your creative edge. I fell in love with a huge LED tree and wanted to use it instead of a hanging light in a corridor. Quite a few people thought it would look a little 'out there', but don't be swayed when you have a vision because if you instantly love something you will always love seeing it.

5. Mix old furniture with new. We kept a lot of the old furniture but most of it required a huge amount of work - upholstery, re-stuffing, wardrobe doors rehung, chairs sanded, varnished etc. However, when juxtaposed with the new pieces they bring the house to life with a sense of history.

6. My mother-in-law insisted that I would not regret putting in two dishwashers, and it was the best thing we ever did. It makes such a difference when we entertain and even on a daily basis they are very well used.



repair,' she says. 'However, the back garden slopes towards the rear of the property caused continual water ingress.'

Despite these issues, Nicola took her time and started work on the wider estate first. 'We had to put in new services and build roads that could withstand lorries, so we almost made our way back to the house and then started work on it. We tackled

'We bought this house because we loved its old features'

the walled garden first, restoring the derelict gardener's house, which we made into our estate office. Then came the two gate lodges.'

'We had a fairly generous budget to do the project,' Garreth explains, 'but it wasn't a bottomless pit and sometimes sacrifices needed to be made. Initial feedback from Historic Environment Scotland was for us to reinstate the old equestrian centre which would have cost £2.5 million.

Fortunately, our architect suggested building a new stable block within the old internal stable walls and retaining the old features around the perimeter, which thankfully the planners agreed to.

'There's been a lot of give and take,' says Nicola. 'We worked carefully with our architects to restore and breathe new life into the property. We bought this house because we loved its old features, and most importantly we didn't want it to lose its character or history.'

'HES allowed us to move a couple of the fireplaces to more prominent locations and we agreed to keep the Victorian Dairy. We also reinstated the original enfilade (a suite of rooms formally aligned with each other) which creates a more natural flow between the bedroom suites.'

The couple were also allowed to reconfigure the layout on the ground floor. They brought the kitchen into the centre of the main living area, creating a family sitting room on one side and opening through to a



Clockwise from top left: The master bedroom is the central point of the reopened enfilade; the informal living room features bespoke sofas; Nicola and Garreth in the saloon with the grand piano which was previously owned by composer Menotti; the curved walls in a child's bedroom made a perfect canvas for a carousel mural by Edinburgh artists Mr and Mrs Bell.



children's playroom and an office for Nicola on the other.

It was an office that Nicola desperately could have made good use of at the start of this project which took a staggering three years before the family moved in. 'When you're presented with a project of this calibre you must give it all your time, it is very consuming. I have always had a huge love for interiors, and have always felt that when you choose or buy something for your house you must love it. That is what makes a home 'home' to me. However, having just finished a much smaller house I knew I couldn't do it all by myself, I knew I would have to work with a team of people to keep up with the pace of the project.'

After meeting with Alison Vance and Jo Aynsley of Jeffreys Interiors in Edinburgh, Nicola knew she had the foundations for her team. 'Alison has worked on countless large houses, had a beautiful way of combining modern with traditional elements in her showrooms, and most importantly she knew how to scale up to make dimensions of furnishings work, and



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I felt Jo instantly understood my taste. She was brilliant at pulling together fabrics, furnishings and samples ahead of our weekly meetings so that we could cover as much ground as possible. However, neither had anticipated the level of detail that we had to cover, from positioning of all sockets and switches, to locations of radiators, fire alarm sensors etc. The work we covered extended past the norm of interior design.'

Aside from redesigning every single room, the task in hand was also how to incorporate the furniture, fixtures and fittings that the couple had inherited with the house. New furniture was commissioned, carpets were designed (by Jo and Nicola), old furniture was restored (some of which still resides in the rooms where it was found), and specialists were sourced to bring listed artworks and original features back to life. 'It was a seven day a week project and I met with Jo and Alison every Tuesday from morning until early evening for

From top: One can enjoy views of the estate from a free standing bath tub in the guest quarters; space has been used well in the eldest child's bedroom with the addition of a palace-themed mezzanine with storage beneath and a secret play area on top; the basement houses a fully working 12-seat cinema – the perfect rainy day escape; original Zuber wallpaper was discovered in one of the bedrooms and carefully restored.



Clockwise from top left: Garreth's study includes the original library shelving; the basement level has become the playground and includes a fun pool room; Nicola in the stables.

nearly three years. It felt like they were family, and I have to say it was a mix of sheer happiness when the house came together and we moved in with our two daughters to start life at Yester, but tinged only a little with a sadness that while a huge feat had been achieved it had also come to an end.'

Although the house may be finished the 550-acre estate is still in its infancy and Nicola has turned her focus to dealing with the ongoing works. 'I realise now how much work an estate is, which we couldn't have anticipated when we first took it on but having an excellent estate manager has allowed me to free up my time more.

'We rear animals for our own produce, and we now have chickens, pigs, turkeys at Christmas, Ryeland sheep and a small herd of Highland cattle. Our next project is a large indoor riding arena and we're also hosting weddings in the walled gardens, community events for the village, and our plan is to extend this to public events, and small private shoots.'

Just as Nicola's focus has changed, so has Garreth's. Having co-founded Kids Operating Room with Nicola in 2017 the charity has become the couple's primary focus, along with running the busy estate. 'Two billion children around the world can't access surgery and more children die from not accessing surgery than from HIV, malaria and TB combined,' Garreth explains.

'We hadn't appreciated that 10 in every 11

children in the world cannot access essential health care. Realising the scale of the problem across Low Middle Income Countries, and having already built three operating rooms, Nicola and I decided to sell our business and start Kids OR. Initially, we talked about doing two or three operating rooms a year and now we're shipping out an operating room every 12 days.

'We want to stop the dependency on foreign aid by investing in local surgical teams to care for their own children, we think that's a sustainable and respectful approach to the countries we work with. This includes working directly with health ministries, governments and hospital directors to support their surgical plans. We also train local paediatric surgeons, anaesthesia providers, nursing and biomedical engineers, meaning we ensure a lasting legacy for healthcare.'

Like the renovation of their home, the Woods don't do anything by halves. They have a talent for scaling up; not just furniture but lives too. ☺



Field Facts

Kids OR, kidsor.org

Jeffreys Interiors Edinburgh,

jeffreys-interiors.co.uk