

UK HOUSE & GARDEN MAGAZINE - ARUNDELLS - 1992

Client: The Rt. Hon. Edward R G Heath MP MBE

INTERIOR DIALOGUE

HEATH AND HOME

Sir Edward Heath required a decorator with an understanding of both his way of living and his exquisite Queen Anne house in Salisbury. Derek Frost was an inspired choice. By Kirsty McLeod



Derek Frost inherited his famous and exacting client from another decorator who had 'commented', to use Sir Edward Heath's term, on certain rooms at Chequers and at Number Ten. But, faced with the wholesale renovation of a listed Queen Anne house in Salisbury's Cathedral Close, she chose to hand on the torch.

In stepped Derek Frost. On the strength of this personal recommendation, he was taken on by Sir Edward Heath. Whoever it was – his decorator, his landscaper, even the painter of his Chinese wallpaper – Sir Edward hand-picked them all.

It was a demanding brief. With Heath's exquisite, four-square canonry, the size of a Jane Austen vicarage, came 3,000 CDs, fourteen-and-a-half tons of prime-ministerial archives, a piano groaning under the weight of framed photographs of the great and the good, an extensive art collection, a guardhouse of watchful policemen and, as Frost recalls with rueful good humour, the owner's forceful personality.

It is common knowledge that, as well as having ascended to the very top of the greasy pole, Mr Heath has a far wider range of interests than most politicians. His new home needed to accommodate these varied elements, from the uncompromising quadraphonic speakers in the drawing-room, to the display of Disraeli's plate in the dining-room. In the hall, a fleet of carved bone and ivory sailing vessels reflects a passion for the high seas dating from the mid Sixties.

By some miracle, Derek Frost has managed to fit it all in without muffling the house's good bones or cluttering its spacious serenity. Chintz is out; restraint is in. Today, as they survey their creation, an air of well-deserved satisfaction is detectable between client and decorator.

Sir Edward, who is not known for his levity, demonstrates his approval of Frost with a joshing stream of mock complaints; Frost's easy style tempers a certain prime-ministerial *gravitas*. And in deed, if not in so many words, Sir Edward has shown that he backs Frost all the way. When Frost sent out a brochure canvassing for work, it was Sir Edward who asked for five to distribute himself, so that he could help him properly.

DEREK FROST: I get the impression that Sir Edward has never been as personally involved in anywhere he has lived before, when his ambitions and energies were elsewhere. This house is, therefore, particularly special to him – it's as if it's his first.

Decorating was not a subject which he knew much about. But successful people know how to delegate. Once he picks an expert, Sir Edward actually listens to them, though that will not necessarily dilute his opinion. He has his own voice and his own way of doing things. As a result, I think the house expresses a very loud personality very loudly.

We both wanted to do more than just restore the house. We wanted to give it the character of someone who lives here today. Sir Edward is forward-looking. He wanted the latest telephone and music systems, and would have been scornful of anything else. We also have the most up-to-date halogen lighting.

Because of the house's age and its position in the cathedral close, obviously a lot of other people had opinions on what we did here. But we were determined that this should not be just an historical show-piece but a properly organized private house. The architecture is good and we didn't want to fuss the interiors. We wanted a fairly crisp, modern approach. Besides, heavy chintz curtains would have spoiled the lovely classical windows. Sir Edward keeps the blinds rolled up even further than I would, so keen is he on an uncluttered look.

I am pleased with the slightly ascetic, pure feel to the house, which is remarkable when you have in Sir Edward someone who collects so many things. We tried to find ways of lighting and dis-



playing the collections which could be absorbed into the architecture. The mirror-backed glass shelves make everything seem to float; you end up seeing the objects, not the fuss around them.

Sir Edward commissioned some furniture from me – including the dining-table and chairs – because he wanted to have some pieces that were made today. It creates vibration, putting modern pieces in a period setting. And, besides, my chairs and tables all pay attention to classical eighteenth-century English furniture. The table is amboyna and satinwood with a dash of scarlet stringing. The chairs are tall-backed, Queen Anne style, but they have 'racehorse legs'. There is a tradition in English furniture of using stylized animals' feet and legs. This is, I hope, a witty variation. I also added

a bit of fun by setting a scarlet stripe of PVC into the mahogany, as in a pair of military trousers.

I make my clients work hard to make clear what they think and feel, so that the end product is tailored to them. Sir Edward chose to give quite a lot of his time. I towed him round the antiques shops. He would come to my studio, and even get down on his hands and knees to look at fabrics. We did it all in six months, so it was hard work. But I secretly think he adored the whole process.

EDWARD HEATH: I had been looking for a house for thirty years. I always imagined I would end up on the Isle of Wight. It looks so splendid from a boat. Then, when I was staying there one weekend, I noticed that you looked straight across at an oil refinery. So that was that.

When I got this house, I asked Jo Pattrick, the very nice lady who did Wilton Street, if she could help, but she wanted to retire. It was she who recommended Derek, assuring me he was the latest genius.

Everything had to be done. The house was extremely dilapidated, and the insurers wouldn't insure unless it was done from top to bottom. I said to Derek what I always say: 'I want life, light and colour.' Also, that when it came to plans, there would be no point in arguing with me as it would only waste time.

We did a lot of major structural things. We made a door from the hallway through a very thick wall into what was to become the dining-room in the medieval core. While doing so, we found traces of a doorway which had been there long before.

*'I found it exciting
to use such
contemporary
design ideas in a
house of this age'*

The dining-room was a cold, dark, north-facing room with a very high ceiling. I was worried that people would be craning their necks upwards the whole time. But Derek solved the problem through the skilful use of colour. I toned down his ideas for bright colour in the rest of the house, but the dining-room needed the warmth of this deep pink, so I supported him on that.

I know Derek thinks there is too much displayed on the shelves, with my Tang horse, the Blind Earl plates and the Chinese porcelain. But I like it all.

We grouped everything to do with boats in the hall – mostly on glass shelves with mirrors behind them. I found it exciting to use such contemporary design ideas in a house of this age. The hall has apricot-striped wallpaper. Sir Geoffrey Agnew, who helped me hang my pictures, said it was the best background for pictures he had ever seen.

Two or three years after we had supposedly finished the house, I went to Beijing. The ambassador had had some wallpaper made in a general spruce-up for a visit by the Queen. I found the only remaining Chinese manufacturers who still made it, and told them: 'I don't want trees and flowers, the usual sort of thing – give me drama.' So here, going up the stairs, on Chinese silk hand-painted wallpaper, you have the fable of the Monkey King. It took a long time to paint, and a long time to put up. I was so frightened, I went away.

I can't honestly think of anything I would change in the house. It works extremely well. I had ten to lunch on Sunday. We had drinks in the library beforehand, and milled around in the drawing-room afterwards.

One canon lived here until he was ninety-eight, followed by a Wiltshire widow who died aged ninety-four. I find that quite encouraging □



