

DUDLEY POPLAK

HISTORY ADDENDA A

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Dudley Poplak

Discreet designer of grand interiors for loyal (and royal) clientele

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A SHY and private man, Dudley Poplak had a preponderance of high-profile clients, for many of whom his courtier-like discretion and marked reticence with the press were major parts of his appeal. "I don't know how you found out," Poplak told *The Times* in 1989 when this newspaper broke the story that he was refurbishing Highgrove House for the soon-to-be-wed Prince of Wales and Lady Diana Spencer. "And I certainly won't tell you what the colour schemes are. That would be like disclosing the design of Lady Diana's wedding dress."

Equally popular at the top end of the interior design market, where he operated, were his flawless taste, the empathy that allowed him to tailor his work to each client's image, and his unfailing insistence, which his patrons could afford to share, that only the best would do. And his devotion to his clients' interests and his personal charm combined to ensure that he maintained working partnerships with many clients for decades, and that ambassadors' wives and duchesses alike claimed him as a friend.

In 1959, when the 29-year-old Poplak arrived on the London scene from South Africa, Britain's interior designers were only just emerging from their postwar doldrums, and Poplak (who was soon to acquire British citizenship) stole a march on many of his rivals with a seemingly intuitive understanding of the needs of his prosperous and prominent clients. Given his patrons' social and business lifestyles, their homes, he knew, had to have some degree of formality, but a great strength was that he realised, too, the importance of cosiness where appropriate, and could produce grandeur and/or comfort to order.

Friendships were an important part of his success, and he nurtured his friends every bit as much as he did his clients. An important meeting in his early days in London was with the lampshade-maker Betty Hanley, through whom he made many influential contacts. Crucially, Hanley introduced Poplak to the then Countess Spencer (later Frances Shand Kydd), who was to phone him years later, in 1981, asking him to work for her daughter Diana in the run-up to her marriage to the Prince of Wales. Another of Poplak's enduring friendships was with Francis Egerton, chairman of antique dealers Mallett of New Bond Street, who regularly recommended Poplak to his clients, and stalwartly told *The Times* in 1981: "Rest assured, there will be nothing vulgar about Highgrove House."

It was the widely viewed 1969 television documentary *The Royal Family* that first drew the nation's attention to another of Poplak's major projects: the substantial improvements made in that year to Winfield House, the official residence, in Regent's Park, of the US Ambassador to Britain. To the amusement of plain-speaking Britons, the then US Ambassador Walter Annenberg (who, with his wife Lee, generously funded this work) featured on the programme, presenting his credentials to the Queen and grandiloquently informing her of his "discomfiture as a result of the need for elements of refurbishing and rehabilitation".

Working alongside the veteran American designer Billy Haines (bizarrely, a former star of the silent screen) and Haines's junior partner Ted Graber, the 39-year-old Poplak was involved in almost every aspect of the 1969 refurbishment at Winfield House. As the "man on the ground" whenever his American colleagues flew back to the States, it was he, with his well-established contacts among the top London dealers, who spotted and acquired much important furniture and a considerable volume of other antiques on behalf of the Annenbergs.

The result was a rhapsody from Philip Howard of *The Times* at the time of the press view of the finished work: "Niagaras of crystal chandeliers cascade. Chippendale fireplaces brood at haughty Adam urns and consoles, which rub shoulders genteelly with Louis XV settees, which turn their elegant backs on the Regency lacquer tables, the yellow glaze Ming, the consoles, the lakes of gilt mirror, the bronze and ormolu lamps in the shape of plump nymphs, pillars, architraves, broken pediments and the framed picture of the President [Richard Nixon]." Poplak and his two colleagues could certainly do "grand", and Howard declared their achievement one of "spectacular splendour", amply justifying Annenberg's "sesquipedalian orotundity".

Poplak was back at Winfield House from 1983 to 1989 to renovate the interior for another beneficent ambassador, Charles Price, and his wife Carol, and back again in the early 21st century to restore the grand but comfortable state dining room (scene of Thanksgiving Day celebrations) and the entrance hall with its marble floor and Adam-style ceiling. As an embassy spokesman commented after Poplak's death: "Credit for the tasteful and sensitive renovation and decoration of Winfield House is rightly shared by numerous kind benefactors, including most notably Ambassador and Mrs Annenberg and Ambassador and Mrs Price. Yet few individuals can claim to have contributed more than Mr Poplak, who gave unstintingly of his time and talents over a span of more than three decades. His work has been appreciated and admired by untold thousands of guests over those years, and stands today as an example of harmonious

Typically, Poplak retained his connection with the Prices even after they had returned to the States, and he travelled 15 times to Kansas City to work on their home there. The results were "quite special", says Mrs Price. "He was inspiring to work with. I grew fond of him and will miss him."

Poplak told *The Times* that he considered his 1981 decoration of Highgrove House, the Gloucestershire home of the Prince and Princess of Wales, "the most important assignment I have ever had". For the Princess — possibly his only client who was still a teenager at the time of his commission — he produced a youthful variant of the chintzy country-house look that was seen everywhere that year. With a palette of clean, fresh colours — plenty of lime green and aquamarine — he created a gentle, relaxed mood with no flights of fancy other than the odd experiment with interesting textures. It was a more conventional approach, certainly, than Robert Kime's present scheme for the house, but Poplak had known the Princess since she was a child, and it was a look with which he knew she would be comfortable: ever a major concern with him in his relationships with clients. Later, Poplak designed more interiors for the Prince and Princess — at their apartment in Kensington Palace — and he also worked on the interior of the royal train.

Having semi-retired in his midsixties, Poplak continued to work for favoured clients such as the Princes, and also maintained good relationships with those, including the Prince of Wales, for whom he was no longer working.

As recently as June last year he was in the news as the man thought to have interested the Prince in Beata Bishop's book *A Time to Heal: My Triumph over Cancer*, which promotes a regimen of fruit juice, coffee enemas and vitamin injections as a controversial alternative treatment to chemotherapy. Just eight months later, he himself died of cancer.

He did not marry, and is survived by a niece.