

The woodworker's pride and joy

ELEANOR BENTALL

Centuries old oak panelling at Groombridge Place has been lovingly restored. Sarah Lonsdale garners tips from the craftsmen who breathe life into antique wood

In the recent film remake of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, audiences were captivated yet again by the humour and complexities of the much-loved characters. Yet for many, the main attention-grabber was the exquisite, mellow-bricked, moat-girdled Groombridge Place, the setting for the Bennets' family home.

Grand yet intimate at the same time, Groombridge, built in the years shortly after Charles II's Restoration, blends perfectly into its surroundings of wooded valley, lake and parkland. The Grade I house is owned by film producer Justin Bodle and so *Pride and Prejudice* offered cinema-goers a rare peek inside the Italianate loggia and the well-proportioned, surprisingly light and airy wood-panelled rooms. However, as with many aspects of film-making, there was much artifice and fakery and the real gem of Groombridge – its magnificent 17th-century oak wood panelling – was concealed behind artificially weathered chip board.

Empty since Bodle bought it in 2001, Groombridge is now undergoing an extensive restoration and it has fallen to antique wood restorer Vincent Reed to breathe new life into the neglected woodwork.

"I was originally just brought in to restore one of the four-poster beds," says Vincent, whose workshop is in Hurstpierpoint, West Sussex, "but while I was there, English Heritage had put a temporary stop to the restoration work because they were not happy with how the woodwork was being cleaned. I was shown around the house – all those panelled rooms, the pole-and-lathe-turned newel posts on the staircases, the fine floorboards, the absolutely stunning linen fold panels in the dining room – it was like a sweet-toothed kid being shown around a confectioner's."

Period wood panelling is a much treasured part of any home and owners lucky enough to have some in their house speak lovingly of its character and beauty. Nigel and Liana Fox live in a manor house near Canterbury, with parts dating back to



Labour of love: Antique wood expert Vincent Reed works to restore 350-year-old wood panels in the Great Hall at Groombridge Place in Kent

FOR SALE, WITH WOOD PANELLING



Yattendon Court, new Newbury, Berkshire: Ground floor apartment of country house built in 1878 by Arts and Crafts architect Alfred Waterhouse. Two bedrooms, large wood panelled drawing room and panelling in communal hallway. £450,000 through Jackson-Stops & Staff (01635 45501)



Poldhurst Manor, Upper Harbledown, near Canterbury, Kent: Medieval hall house with five bedrooms, solid oak staircase and panelling in main hall; three acres of grounds. £1.6 million through Strutt & Parker (01227 451123)



the 13th century and with a panelled hallway installed in the early part of the last century. "The thing about wood is that it is living and breathing, even when it has been in your house for hundreds of years," says Nigel, a self-confessed wood fanatic. "It has a depth and a glow that could never be re-created synthetically. But it has to be installed properly. Our oak staircase never creaks, yet there are no screws in it whatsoever, it is all down to the beautiful workmanship of the joiners and carpenters who fitted it."

While Nigel is a fanatic, for Vincent and his team of restorers, the relationship with period wood verges

on the obsessive. "You have to have a special kind of interest to spend all hours of daylight, several days a week, for three months, scrubbing away at the grain with a hand held copper wire brush, in two-inch square segments at a time," says Vincent, referring to the panelling in the Groombridge drawing room that in the 1900s had been coated with thick blue paint. You wouldn't think that now – the enormous 17th century panels that line the room are a dark golden honey colour, reflecting light from their fibrous depths. The room has an intoxicating smell of oil, shellac polish, wax and methylated spirits, substances Reed and his restorers have used to revive the wood.

Reed talks excitedly about taking the panels off the wall so his joiners could re-join them. "The animal glue they used to fix the joints – that hasn't been seen for 300 years or more." With equal enthusiasm, he points out the hand saw marks, the skill with which the almost invisible joints have been made, the tiny chisel marks in the brickwork, made to accommodate the frame behind the panels. "Imagine working on this in the 1660s – you've got no artificial light, just tallow candles, no electric tools, no clever substances, just natural oils and elbow grease. It

TIPS FOR MAINTAINING ANTIQUE WOOD

■ Modern heating can cause irreversible damage to period wood. Place bowls or saucers of water around rooms with panelling, or attach purpose-made radiator containers - but remember to keep topping them up. Electrical humidifiers are noisy, expensive and unsightly

■ **Ventilation and air circulation are crucial to the survival of wood and with good ventilation, period wood can survive fairly high humidity levels**

■ Wood must be allowed to breathe, so if you have to varnish, use air-permeable materials. Traditional oak panelling is normally oiled with linseed oil, which imparts beautiful colour and patina

■ **Tannic acid in wood reacts with iron and steel screws and nails, causing corrosion, rust and eventually loss of the wood. Use non-ferrous metal fixings**

■ Woodworm gets into the wood as the result of hatching from eggs laid on the surface or shallowly in the grain and chewing its way out to the surface and flies off and lays more eggs. Woods containing calcium such as oak, walnut, beech and pine are the most susceptible to attack. Chemical treatment is the traditional defence but can be smelly, obtrusive to apply and is now regarded as ozone depleting. Better by far is warm air treatment under which the insect larvae buried in the wood die at temperatures between 50-55C. This treatment can be carried out on buildings or furniture and is the expertise of West London firm Thermo Lignum UK (www.thermolignum.com)

Source: British Antique Furniture Restorers Association (www.bafra.org.uk)

Further contacts: Vincent Reed at Country Oak, (www.vincentreed.com, 01273 833869)

was a sheer labour of love."

As we move through the house – described by Arthur Oswald, and rightly so, as "the loveliest house in Kent" to which you could add "and probably most of England" – the magnificence of the panelling takes the breath away. The vast expanses in the drawing room, the simple squares in the lobby, the 'new' (post First World War) panelling in the library, the gold-painted panels in the master bedroom, and, possibly the oldest, the exquisite linenfold panelling in the dining room that may have been salvaged from an older house when Groombridge was rebuilt in the 1660s.

Here, Vincent points mournfully at three sections that look oddly out of place – the grain is less subtle, the panels look too clean. This is where a contractor used chemical stripper and caustic soda to try to clean the panels, and nearly ruined a work of art. Fortunately, English Heritage officers were around, took one look at the bleached bare panels and put a stop to all the work, until Vincent was brought in. "You can't just strip this wood, you'll take all its life and depth and history away. There are more than 300 years of dirt and dust in here that have to be acknowledged, they're part of the wood now."

As dangerous as neglect, over-

zealous restoration causes much damage to period woodwork, says Michael Barrington, chairman of the British Antique Furniture Restorers Association. "A great deal of damage is done by unknowledgeable builders and decorators to old interior woodwork, be it floors, panelling, staircases or applied wood decoration." He adds that modern heating can also cause irreversible cracking and shrinking because of its side-effect of lowering humidity



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levels in old houses.

But aside from being careful not to paint or dry out old wood, it's not as daunting to look after as many people fear, says Peter Walker, who lives in a 14th century manor house in Pulborough, Sussex, complete with minstrels' gallery and priest holes. "When wood is centuries old, it almost becomes fossilised and apart from a bit of beeswax polish, it requires very little maintenance," he says. "As long as you make sure your home is rainproof and not too dry, it almost looks after itself."



Film stars: Groombridge and *Pride and Prejudice*'s Elizabeth, Keira Knightley

The homes that sit on liquid assets

From spring or borehole, a private water supply can be a boon, writes Sarah Rundell

Just like the previous generations who lived in our remote West Somerset farmhouse, we draw our water from a natural spring. The well where it collects is housed in a dilapidated brick hut covered in moss and a multitude of bulbs that burst into flower in the spring. An aged hawthorn leans over the stream that bubbles with the overflow past our house. I feel a proprietary glee that the water belongs to us. Its taste is magical. It's always ice cold and beautifully soft. Best of all, it's absolutely free.

Our house is typical of many properties in rural areas that often predate the introduction of mains water and are too remote to hook up to it. Instead, residents

either draw their water from boreholes or are reliant on natural springs. The staff of the Dulverton office of West Country estate agent Stags, on the fringes of Exmoor National Park, estimate that up to a third of the properties on their books at any one time have their own water.

Buying a house on its own supply can unnervingly many potential owners, says estate agent Hilda England. "Many of our buyers come from the South-East and they are used to being on a mains supply, but once they realise it's normal, and it's a good supply, they prefer it and we've never had any sales fall through because of it."

But what are the pitfalls? Your search will show if contamination is a potential hazard. Environmental health officer Simon Moon



Naturally pure: more people are sinking boreholes to access spring water from their homes

has inspected every conceivable domestic spring supply, from an ornate Victorian water system in a cellar, to a basic pipe feeding water from a spring in a field to a house a mile down a track. "Because spring water works up through the ground via fissures and cracks it is one of the cleanest types of water but it can become contaminated if it's not properly contained. I've seen old water troughs and baths being used for tanks and that's when there is a risk of pollution."

Potential buyers of homes on their own water should carefully check the deeds. You could be legally bound

to supply water to other houses in the area and be responsible for upkeep and maintenance of the source on their behalf. Legislation due next year will boost local authority power to force homeowners to better maintain their own water supply. Some mortgage providers also require homebuyers to have the

‘Once they realise it's a good supply, buyers prefer it’

water quality checked. Natural springs can also dry up. Ours dries up about once a year, usually for a worrying 12 hours. Each time it's been at the end of the summer, around September and October, before the autumn brings more rain. We've fitted a bigger storage tank to give us backup, but some homeowners opt to sink a borehole, rather than cope with the vagaries of a dwindling supply.

Allan Hendy, who runs a firm of water engineers in Wiveliscombe, 11 miles outside Taunton, notices more people in the area sinking boreholes than ever before. He says demand is

FOR SALE, SPRINGS ATTACHED



Higher Spire, Liscombe, Somerset, has four bedrooms, stables and five and a half acres. The boiler room houses a water bottling works – the owners give their spring water to friends and neighbours. £850,000 through Stags (01398 323174, www.stags.co.uk)

Glebe House, on the edge of the hamlet of Oare, Devon, has stunning views of open moorland, five bedrooms, 26 acres and its own water. £425,000 (through Stags, as above)



coming from diversifying rural businesses, such as holiday cottages, and barn conversions.

But he also believes springs increasingly struggle to meet the greater demands of today's families, complete with dishwasher and washing machine – 45 gallons per person per day on average, according to Wessex Water. "Most of our borehole drilling used to be in the summer but it's a year-round job now. We sunk seven in the last month and have six more pending," says Allan.

It costs around £4,000 to sink a borehole and most companies only charge if

they find water. As long as you don't extract more than 4,000 gallons a day you don't need a licence. Occasionally, the soil is not stable enough to support the 100-odd foot hole and the water may not always be of drinking quality. There is also the possibility of not finding water on your own property.

But despite the potential hazards and occasional unreliability, we're not tempted to trade our soft spring water for a gritty, alkaline borehole supply that would fur up our pipes and kettle. With the price of still and sparkling going through the roof, not to mention utility bills, could we be

sitting on a valuable asset? "It's worth remembering many of these properties have been built because they are next to a really good water supply," says Simon Moon. "Initially people feel apprehension being on their own water, but it is part of rural life."

For more information: **Private supply regulation:** www.opsi.gov.uk; **General information on groundwater:** www.groundwateruk.org; **UK drinking water inspectorate:** www.dwi.gov.uk; **Rules on extraction** www.environment-agency.gov.uk; **British Geological Survey:** www.bgs.ac.uk