

# IF THESE WALLS COULD SPEAK

*Once a prison for German  
prisoners of war, 1940s home  
for the US Army, and 1980s  
rotting shell, Woodchester  
Lodge has a fascinating  
and chequered history*

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The splendid Woodchester Lodge, built in 1896, has had an unusual history involving two different armies and German prisoners of war

**D**rowsing in the warm sunshine, the splendid Woodchester Lodge looks as if it has been a peaceful family home ever since it was built 120 years ago. So it's surprising to hear it has quite a chequered history, especially as it is in a quiet lane in a small village away from the road between Stroud and Nailsworth.

The Lodge was built as a splendid five-bedroom mansion by Henry Workman, a prosperous local timber merchant, using the finest materials. Henry owned a number of woodlands, hence his profession, and he lived here with his brother Ernest and his family. The property in those days included a coach house, two cottages – one for the coachman, the other for the housekeeper – and servants' quarters.

Anne chose a Laura Ashley wallpaper in here. All the beds are king-sized from Beds R Us and have extra thick mattresses



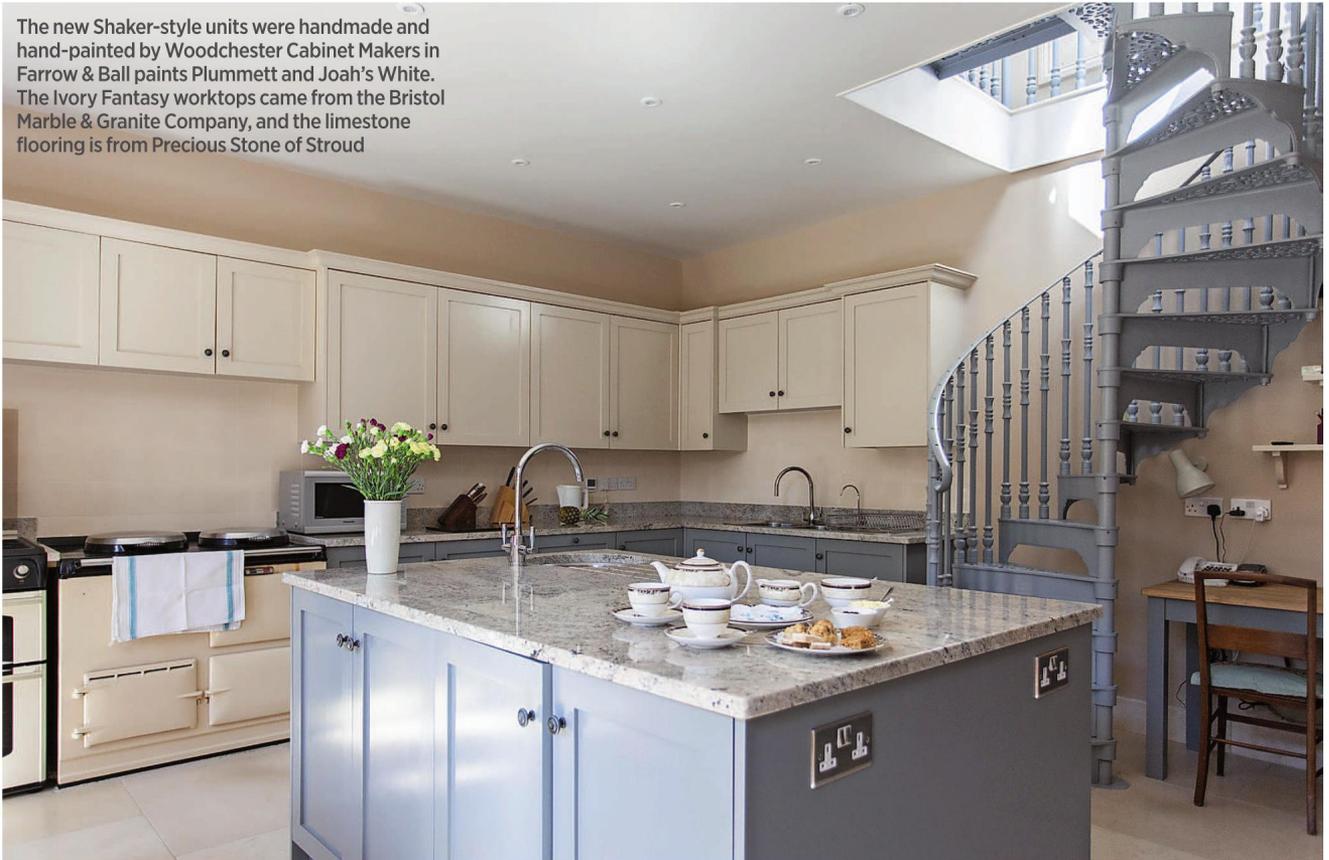
“But over the years all these properties have been sold off separately and now we own just the house,” says Anne Brooke-Smith, who runs a bed and breakfast business from it with her husband Nigel.

When Henry died his sister Annie lived at Woodchester Lodge for a short time but then she moved elsewhere in the village and the house was sold to Arthur's Press. The house was used as offices until the outbreak of the Second World War but then everything changed irrevocably. First the British Army requisitioned it as an officers' barracks and the regimental band used to play on the lawn on Sundays. Then, just before D-Day, the American Army took it over – “and a rumour began that they burned tyres in the grates, so ruining the surrounds of the lovely Victorian fireplaces,” says Nigel.

Then finally it became a prison. “It's where the German prisoners of war were incarcerated after the war,” says Anne. “One of them, Harry Herman, aged just 19, could speak English well so became their spokesman and as he was tall and agile he also joined the village football team. At first he had a guard watching over him but that soon stopped, as he showed no signs of wanting to escape, in fact he became a firm friend of the villagers. He never forgot his happy days in Woodchester and in 1994 came all the way back to see it again.”

“So despite its start as a family home our house has done its stint of housing large numbers of people,” says Nigel. ▶

The new Shaker-style units were handmade and hand-painted by Woodchester Cabinet Makers in Farrow & Ball paints Plummert and Joah's White. The Ivory Fantasy worktops came from the Bristol Marble & Granite Company, and the limestone flooring is from Precious Stone of Stroud



By the 1980s the house had fallen into a very poor state of repair. "There were holes in the roof, some of the ceilings had collapsed and rain used to stream in," says Anne. All the wonderful features such as the walled garden, magnificent oak staircase, encaustic tiles, parquet floors and even the old fashioned high-cisterned loo were just left to rot away.

"Luckily new owners arrived who worked hard to restore it; they rewired and reroofed it and this is when they divided it into two houses," says Anne. "However they kept all the Victorian features just as we have too."

The Brooke-Smiths bought the Lodge 24 years ago as a home for themselves and two sons. They loved the high ceilings and

sweeping staircase, the wonderful views across the valley on the east side of the house and the extensive garden with pond.

"We have however changed a few things – for instance we turned the billiard room into our beautiful new big kitchen and we completely refitted the bathrooms with handmade reproduction Victorian tiles and traditional Samuel Heath fittings," says Anne. There was a slight hitch when the couple discovered the new bathroom tiles were not actually waterproof which meant they had to send them back to be sealed on the backs.

"Amazingly, we heard quite recently from a very old gentleman, John Workman, a descendant of the original Henry, that Stroud Museum still held all the architects' plans for the house, going all that way back. We found them and saw that the architect, JSP Moore of Berkeley Street, Gloucester had left behind a wealth of drawings detailing everything from the oak banisters to the door hinges, from the chimney pots to the rainwater tank and even the hot house in the garden."

The Brooke-Smiths have added their own touches. "We uncovered a fireplace behind what looked like solid plasterwork in the large entrance hall so we've added a Victorian Carrera marble surround from a reclamation yard," says Anne. "It's the same age and same marble as the only one left, in the guests' sitting room. Strangely we found three flues leading up from this hidden fireplace, two of which were blocked up with lime (and for some reason rather a lot of bees!) while the third was a weird S-shaped one which travels

All the oak furniture in the sitting room was handed down from the family



all the way up through the house.” Inside the fireplace they have now installed a Squirrel wood burner. “We wondered if the fireplace had been boarded over because Henry Workman wanted to show off his new central heating system,” says Anne. “His house was the first in the area to have it installed – which in those days was in the form of huge cast iron radiators – and we still have them.”

As for the decorating, Anne has chosen William Morris wallpapers and curtains in matching fabrics for the hall, stairs and landing as these designs date back to the same era of the house. In fact she has chosen a Victorian theme wherever possible.

Anne has worked as a chef for the Ram Inn at Woodchester, the George at Frocester, Shire Hall in Gloucester, and lastly at the Stanton Manor Hotel, Chippenham. She decided to take up bed and breakfasting 10 years ago after retiring.

“When we first moved in, the original kitchen was too small so we moved it into the former billiards room which is much bigger,” she says. “It has a false ceiling put in by the previous owners as once there was a big glass lantern over the billiards table. When the house fell derelict the glass smashed and the rain came in. So in due course the lantern was removed and the house re-roofed.

“Then last year we refurbished the house and done thing was to install a Victorian-style wrought-iron spiral staircase in the kitchen so we could gain access to the loft above it.”

“The only way to get there before was to clamber up a ladder in the utility room then squeeze through a two foot gap into what is quite a spacious area,” says Nigel.

Previous owners had put three Velux windows into the loft roof but that was all. To properly use the space the Brooke-Smiths also had to reinforce the floorboards with three RSJs.

It took about two months to install them, with the builder Nick Miles accessing the loft via exterior scaffolding and the roof to lessen disruption to the kitchen. Then it was another day to install the new staircase, made for them



The couple put in new fittings by Samuel Heath in a Victorian style and had the metal taps specially coated to make them last. The green tiles were handmade by Craven Dunnill Jackfield Ltd of the Jackfield Tile Museum, Telford

by Cottage Craft Spirals in Lancashire. Once that was in the couple then refurbished the rest of the kitchen.

Out went their old pine units and in went traditional Shaker-style cabinetry, designed and hand-made by Woodchester Cabinet Makers then hand painted in Plummett Grey and Joah's White, both by Farrow & Ball. They chose Ivory Fantasy granite worktops and Victorian-style hand made pooled and crazed wall tiles from the same Victorian tile factory in Telford that had supplied the bathroom tiling. The couple also laid a new limestone-tiled floor.

New weather boarding, painted in the same blue grey, was fitted below the big bay window as a period feature and they replaced one of the large window panes, which was cracked, with reproduction Victorian glass.

“It had to be specially made to match the other window panes as modern glass would look far too sharp and bright if lined up with the existing originals,” says Anne.

She finishes, “We love living in this house – it’s a historic home in a peaceful Cotswold valley and we feel we’re very lucky to have found it.” ♦



The peaceful country garden with its pond attracts ducks and other wildlife