

OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Speronella had curtains made from blankets for this room. Farrow & Ball 'Citron' paint brightens one bathroom; another features Molly Mahon wallpaper. An antique suzani covers the blue bedroom's headboard. BELOW A Penny Morrison rug adds pattern to the main bedroom

When Speronella Marsh embarked on the restoration of her husband Ben's family home, a Victorian red-brick Shropshire manor embraced by low, forested hills, there was, she sighs, 'a great deal to do'. Pipes clanked in the night. Floorboards

sagged. The garden was so overgrown that a branch had punched, like a gnarled hand, through the wall into a bathroom. There was also the pressing question of curtains. 'One of the first things I did was to count the windows,' she says. The total? Ninety four, and all in need of new curtains to replace the sun-scorched chintzes and silks installed by Ben's grandparents in the Fifties.

Expensive fabrics would have skewed the renovation budget, so Speronella decided to make her own. 'For years, I had been hoarding antique French sheets I found in markets. I realised they would be ideal.' The texture of the linen, she explains, lends itself to block printing, which she had learnt by enrolling on a workshop at Chelsea Physic Garden. The dining table became a workbench. As the prints emerged, friends took note of the painterly designs – acorns, leaves, seaweed – in rich, earthy colours. Orders trickled in and a business, Hare's Tail Printing, was born.

'Necessity is a good thing, because it forces you to be creative,' she reflects, ushering me into the hallway. Junk-shop oil paintings, accumulated since her twenties, when a dealer allowed her to pay in instalments, jostle for space in corridors where restored parquet glows in the sunshine. No two rooms are alike. One is powder blue, another luminous yellow. Toiles collide with stripes. In her former career, Speronella worked for garden designer Tom Stuart-Smith and she has an instinct for colour and form. Not for this resourceful Italian the agonised-over mood board. The look here is artistic, expressive: 'There is always one thing – a rug, a painting – that inspires me and then everything falls into place.'

'Handsome, not beautiful' is how she describes the property, which Ben, an entrepreneur, inherited in 2013. Dating from 1840, the gables and stone-framed bays give it the benevolent air of a theological college. It was Ben's grandfather, managing director of Marsh & Baxter, a Midlands firm once famed for its sausages and pork pies, who bought the house in 1950. Ben's father, who moved here in the Nineties, spent his latter years here alone. The two-storey house has 27 rooms. 'So, sensibly, he lived the life of an English country gentleman in just three rooms,' recalls Speronella. Meanwhile, the house slid into a state of benign neglect. 'Despite that, Ben has very happy memories of spending time here as a child,' she adds. 'Our task was to make it a lively family home again.'

For the couple, who have four children between them, it was important that the house had a relaxed, communal living space. Pooling their technical and artistic skills, they began by tackling the *Downton Abbey*-esque warren of former staff quarters on the ground floor. Down came the light-blocking internal walls to create a bright, open-plan kitchen, with dining and sitting areas, in which generous sofas flank the original chimneypiece. The catalyst for the kitchen was nearby Ironbridge, crucible of the

Industrial Revolution: 'I wanted it to have a utilitarian feel,' says Speronella. She worked with local building firm Thackway & Cadwallader to design a large red-painted glazed dresser, made from metal and wood in 'a feat of engineering', as well as the Crittall-style metal doors leading to hallways on either side. Elsewhere, thrift prevails. A set of 'banale' (an Italian word meaning ordinary) upholstered dining chairs was reinvented with Hare's Tail fabric covers and the bar stools are a street-stall steal.

Tailed by Iris the Sealyham terrier, we head upstairs. In Ben's childhood, there were 12 bedrooms, two bathrooms 'and lots of kettles bubbling on the Aga'. That imbalance has been redressed and there are now six bathrooms, each with its own character. One is painted in a yellow gloss; in another, her collection of Victorian sailors' valentines with shell-encrusted frames stands out against a leaf-green Molly Mahon wallpaper. Family heirlooms have been revived, too, with one armchair being re-upholstered in an Ikea bedcover. 'It's a lesson I've tried to teach my children,' explains Speronella. 'Spend on important things, cheat on the rest.'

Which brings us back to the subject of those antique fabrics, stashed in drawers for years, now reborn as headboards and valances. Her local heroes, Ludlow Curtain Company, whipped up blinds from tablecloths and made curtains from blankets bought at The Cloth Shop in west London. Inevitably, the house has become a testing ground for Speronella's designs, some of them named after close friends. 'It's a personal business. People visit and discuss ideas and colours. That's the wonderful thing about doing things yourself – you can have whatever you want' □

Hare's Tail Printing: harestail.co.uk

Thackway & Cadwallader: thackwayandcadwallader.co.uk

