



FINE AND DANDY

Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen's West Country



TRYING TO CATCH EVERY WORD that interior designer, television presenter and super suave dandy Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen utters is like

trying to eat sherbet pips one by one – mission impossible. Positively gushing with his views on country living I found out what the Llewelyn-Bowen family love about their West Country homes and why the region holds a special place in their hearts.

On one of the rarer sun kissed mornings this summer I caught up with Laurence at his base in the heart of the Cotswolds where he runs his highly successful design consultancy LLB Consultants. Well known for his many television appearances, foppish charm and cutting wit Laurence is immersed in projects galore this winter.

From bespoke carpet designs for Brintons, wallpaper for Graham and Brown, crystal for Dartington and china for Royal Doulton, he has also been appointed presenter of channel Five's 'I Own Britain's Best Home and Garden', not to mention his regular radio show on Classic FM.

In the spring of 2007 Laurence his wife Jackie and their daughters Cecile and Hermione said farewell to their urban lifestyles and moved to a rather grand 17th century country house in Siddington. The decision of moving to the country was made immediately on seeing the house and Jackie bought it literally within days. "It was pre-ordained really, we had always envisaged moving out of London to some gorgeous rural residence. Staying in town once one is over forty seems a rather vulgar

Left: Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen is enjoying life as a country squire; **Above:** Laurence & Family are injecting some glamour and glitz into their Cotswold's village



idea. Jackie and I had always talked of 'our country house' and we had even bought items for the eventual move, as far back as in our twenties we would spot something at a market and say 'wouldn't that be fabulous in our house in the country' years before even starting to look for one. It is a destiny fulfilled if you like"

Jackie was the driving force

behind the move and started to view properties in the autumn of 2006 when very few houses were on the market and a key factor was the travelling distance to London, where Laurence frequently works. A batch of particulars were viewed but many of the properties detailed were soulless, bland or even worse 'barn conversions' with no 'star quality' and totally unsuitable for a family who thrive on drama and glitz.

However, one house was pretty much perfect in terms of location, pedigree and

architectural style. "It was an instant thing, Jackie new straight away what the house could become and just went for it. We sold the London house shortly afterwards and Jackie and the girls moved down at the end of the Easter term in 2007 giving them time to get acclimatised before starting their new school in September."

The restoration of the house was filmed for a Living TV series, To the Manor Bowen, during the summer and was aired at the end of last year causing quite a stir with the

The vivid green kitchen is one of Jackie's favourite rooms

Right: Laurence finds Castle Drogo's grandeur truly inspiring. © NTPL/Charlie Waite; **Below:** Truro Cathedral boasts some exceptional modern architecture



neighbours. Known for his flamboyant dress sense and equally lavish personality Laurence said "I knew we were ready for the country, but the big question was whether or not they were ready for us. The house hadn't been lived in for centuries so we had to literally design our way out of a crisis"

The project was a massive undertaking and everything had to be done to budget and on time. A grade II listed manor house it necessitated some architectural wizardry, numerous planning permissions and pots of Laurence's creative input. The original dark and unattractive dining-room now houses a contemporary 'green' kitchen with central

island that works well for everyday family use but can also be glammed up for special occasions. The whole top floor was assigned a space for the girls and an airy loft style apartment has been created encompassing the original beams within a contemporary scheme which is feminine and funky. Laurence and Jackie's room makes a bold statement and is totally 'Llewelyn-Bowen' ravishing and ornate and draws inspiration from the black and white Hitchcock film 'Rebecca' a boudoir of impeccable class. The whole life changing experience took on a rather biblical tone at one point when torrential floods and black skies threatened the family's celebratory weekend which marked the end of the filming and Jackie's painstakingly designed garden was almost washed away.

Laurence's love of the West Country goes back much further though and he also owns a house in Port Isaac, Cornwall where the family have enjoyed many fun filled holidays. Jackie has a boutique in the town named 'Charmed' which stocks lots of gorgeous pretty things for the home, from fabrics to candles, chandeliers to cushions, the shop is 'all woman' but with a 'naughty girl' edge. "We love weekends in Cornwall it's wonderful to be able to walk to the pub, we especially enjoy wintertime when the sea takes on a much more dramatic quality, and the streets are free from the great unwashed".

"Most coastal cottages in Cornwall were built to withstand the rigours of the sea and have tiny windows, thick walls and were all about strength rather than beauty – a necessity at the time of construction. Properties overlooking the sea would not have had good views as the largest windows would have been at the rear of the house. With our cottage we had to inject as much light into the house as possible and fortunately after much re-jigging we do have stunning views."

Wanting to find out if the West Country has any not so gorgeous features in Laurence's eye, he was very quick to pin-point a very visible and rather embarrassing flaw. "The region is awash →



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with culture, it is glamorous, inspiring and rich place to live, so why do the local television reporters dress so abominably? You look at Manchester or Cardiff and they are well dressed and stylish you come down to Bristol and Exeter and they look shockingly bad, there seems to be an air of low self esteem, for Gods sake there must be at least one hairbrush in the studio somewhere". On a serious note Laurence explains that with so much to cheer about the local news reporters should step up a gear and take a greater pride in the region they represent.

Examples of Laurence's favourite architectural styles are celebrated in the some of the region's grandest structures such as Truro Cathedral the first cathedral to be built on a new site since Salisbury was started in 1220. A Victorian masterpiece it was constructed in the same architectural style as its medieval counterparts whilst features such as the classic pointed arches of the gothic style were adapted to modern building techniques. Another favourite is Castle Drogo one of the West Country's most awe inspiring pieces of modern architecture, the last castle to be built in England it is one of the remarkable works of architect Sir Edwin Lutyens and enjoys dramatic views over Dartmoor and the Teign Gorge.

A region rich in grand country houses and exciting architectural influences Laurence also mentions his love for Pencarrow, Llanhydrock and of course the Eden Project. "The Eden Project is one of the West Country's most impressive undertakings, drawing so many visitors to an area where transport links are minimal is a mammoth undertaking. I understand

plans are being talked about at the moment where a 'direct' train from the Eurostar Platform in London would have a designated route to St Austell allowing visitors from the city speedy access to The Eden Project, a fantastic concept".

Work commitments have somewhat curtailed Laurence's West Country existence and most recently Laurence and Jackie have been on the road in Northern Ireland filming 'Laurence and Jackie's Northern Exposure' where they visit a different county each week in there rather conspicuous and slightly temperamental convertible. "I think a lot of people know that the landscape in Northern Ireland is astonishingly beautiful but unless you really experience it yourself you have no idea quite how staggering the countryside can be, moving so quickly from coast to mountain to plain to moor,

its just beautiful."

With his heart truly at home in the Cotswolds Laurence is fast becoming a dapper country gent and since the move one passion which has developed with the LLB's is a love of tweed. "I feel I can whole heartedly indulge in my collection of 'squire' attire now we live outside of the city and I have always admired the caddish charm of Peter Bowels' character in 'To the Manor Born'. Jackie has some truly gorgeous tweeds in vivacious colours and I find that a well tailored tweed moulds itself to the owner, there is something very dashing about a 1930's style tweed suit, and on a woman a beautifully made tweed skirt is sculptural and coquettish - perfect." For more information on Laurence's products log on to www.tothemanorbowen.co.uk.

The Grand Hall displays portraits of Laurence and Jackie

