

PLENTY MORE FISHER

Jamb's founder, Will Fisher, couldn't forget the one that got away – a house in Spitalfields that passed him by 20 years ago. But then he fell for an old shop round the corner... Here, having tempered his usual 'country house' look with Deco fittings and a slick kitchen, he tells Charlotte Edwards how moving on is the only medicine. Photography: Simon Upton





Will and his builder friend, Robert Hilton, designed the partition glazing dividing the drawing and dining rooms. It was made on site by a joiner recommended by the Spitalfields Trust. 'He was like Edward Scissorhands,' says Will. 'He was so fast. Keeping up was a nightmare'



Top: in the drawing room, a Richard Harrison painting hangs over Jamb's 'Bucknell' table, which holds a selection of 1920s ceramics from Christopher Butterworth. Beside it is a glass dome containing early wooden clubs – a purchase from Will's mentor, Warner Dailey. Above: the pewter door panels in the kitchen were custom-made by architectural metalworkers Eamonn P. Kenward. The worktops are Irish fossil marble. Right: the dining room is dominated by Jamb's 'Cruxton' table, 'Cobbler's' stools and 'Apsley' copper lights





WILL FISHER just can't help falling in love. He never simply likes. He is 'passionate'. He is 'obsessed'. And the objects of his desire are just that – objects. A door handle, a glazed partition, a desiccated greyhound once used as an advertising prop; these things can move him to rhapsodies, to tears, or even to the kind of whistles and exclamations that echo down from builders' scaffolding. A colleague once saw him positively canoodling with a very attractive table in a Sotheby's sale; if he could've done, she said, he'd have taken it out to dinner. So it's not surprising to hear him describe the experience of being gazumped with the ferocity of Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction*.

'It was a proper, terrifying, crazy love affair,' says antique dealer Will of his tragic encounter, some 20 years ago, with a house in London's Spitalfields. The place was a wreck, converted into an office, with 'horrific 1970s-type things done to it', and going for a song; even so, at that time, as 'a man with a van, touting my wares', he was barely able to afford it. 'I became obsessed with this house. It was my dream. But on the day we were meant to be exchanging, I got a phone call to say they'd gone with somebody else. I was bereaved. I grieved for years; I literally could not get over it. And then prices in that area started to escalate, and I felt I would never have that chance again.'

Fortunately for Will, he's proved as good at sharing his enthusiasms as he is at forming them. Having built up his Hawker Antiques business, and founded fireplace and reproduction company Jamb, all the while amassing containerloads of 'furniture and chattels and private bits of nonsense', he sold off his entire collection, including a great deal of Jamb's stock, at a 2012 auction at Christie's. 'We were phenomenally lucky, and it did very well,' he says. 'All my life's work was gone, and there was a space that needed filling.' He grins. 'There's nothing worse than giving an antique dealer a load of bloody money.'

Against the advice of just about everybody – his lawyer, his friend and builder Robert Hilton, not to mention his wife, Charlotte Freemantle, to whom the word 'long-suffering' seems naturally to append – Will acquired a semi-derelict, turn-of-the-century building, with a shop occupying the basement and ground floor, plus three further storeys above, just a few minutes' walk from the scene of his earlier heartbreak. 'It's fabulously confused,' he says, with the enthusiasm of a newlywed. 'It doesn't know whether it should be industrial or residential. It's a really pared-down, utilitarian-type aesthetic, but with a very charming Victorian or Edwardian fascia. It looked very tired, very sad and desperately in need of saving.' The building was occupied by friendly squatters who ran an underground music magazine, with a telesales team hawking advertising space for it in the rooms downstairs. 'I don't know how many people lived there,' says Will. 'There were layers of clothes trampled over layers of clothes, there was dope everywhere...' 'I walked around one room for ages before I realised there were two people in it, asleep in a sleeping bag,' Charlotte adds. 'It properly stank. Will said: "I



Top: Will held out for exactly the right kind of 19th-century chimney pots – these ones were found in Bristol just 24 hours before the scaffolding came down. Above: a reproduction of the first-known photo of the moon hangs above a bespoke marble fireplace in the third-floor bedroom. Jamb designs appear throughout the house, such as the 'Art Deco' dish light with antelope heads (opposite). Many pieces used in this project, such as the 'Ducane' side chair shown here, are now part of the company's reproduction range





Right: in the second-floor bathroom, two Soanian mirrors – made to Will's design – hang over a double sink. Perhaps in tribute to the 18th-century interiors of that dream house he loved and lost in Spitalfields long ago, Will chose to have the house panelled throughout. Top: the shower is lined with book-matched Breccia Verde marble worked in Jamb's workshop. Its doors are made of powder-coated steel. Above: Jamb's solid-oak 'Kemble' stool stands next to an oversized antique tub in the third-floor bathroom





Opposite: the Fishers found the second-floor bedroom's copper reading lights – once used at Cambridge University – at the Newark antique fair, on a detour while collecting the family's new dog, Cookie. The bolster-cushion fabric came from Katharine Pole. The chimney piece (top) was made to an amended Lutyens design, cut of 'random chunks' of Derbyshire fossil marble from the remains of a Vanbrugh temple on the Castle Howard estate. Above: Jamb's 'Melbury' mirror and 'Bainbridge' lantern hang in the entrance hall

can't do this unless you're 100 per cent behind me," and I thought, you're going to do it anyway...'

Although Will admits to having 'minor fantasies' about relocating to Spitalfields, it was never the couple's intention to move their family from their home in southeast London, itself a marathon period-restoration project completed just before the Christie's sale (*Wol* Feb 2012). Instead, Will says, he used the venture as therapy of sorts: a self-indulgent escape from the stresses and constraints of working with clients, a way to immerse himself in a fantasy world with no definite purpose, no budget, and only himself to please ('because it's hard doing things for somebody else when you're basically a three-year-old child with a tendency towards tantrums').

Unlike so many of the neighbouring Georgian houses, his new acquisition wasn't listed; nor was it under the aegis of the Spitalfields Trust, which nevertheless had a record of it – as a former wig-maker's – and was generous with its advice. Given that the building was so mixed up to start with, Will felt able to depart from the disciplined, strictly Georgian approach that he and Charlotte had taken to their own home. 'I have an enormous passion for the English country house, but I'm not a purist; my interest doesn't stop there. It was time to have something more eclectic: a modern language, but with its aesthetic steeped in or reinventing the past.' Charlotte agrees: 'It's definitely more playful. We made everything ourselves, working with our ideal designs, in the materials we wanted to use.'

The new panelling, internal glazing and floors throughout may keep things rooted in the 18th century, but the sleek industrial kitchen added to the back of the building almost exactly replicates the facilities at Will's Edwardian bachelor flat (*Wol* June 2001), while at the top, a new reception room and roof terrace are a nod to New York's Art Deco and Neo-classical architecture. 'Proportionally, the house is like a miniature version of an American downtown building – like a Ford Consul Classic to a Cadillac,' Will enthuses. 'And there's nothing better than being in Manhattan, raised high and looking into the skyline. I'm absolutely terrified of heights, but when I saw the view from the little loft hole that was here before, it was one of the defining moments.'

Another of those arrived when Will hung one of his father's pictures in the new stairwell. 'My dad was an Op artist in the 1960s; when we were children, our whole house smelled of paint,' he says fondly. 'I've always loved his dot paintings, although you have to get the right one in the right space otherwise they can make you feel a bit seasick. I've had this one for years, but never had anywhere to hang it, and suddenly, in this environment, it looked amazing.' The house is now let; having put so much heart into the project, wasn't it difficult to let it go? 'There were times I was praying that the whole thing would never end, because I didn't want it to,' Will agrees. 'But the funny thing is, when it was done, I could walk away. It was the creation that's important. Now I've got the burning hunger to find something else' ■

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