



A Fine *Romance*

FEATURE CHARLOTTE METCALF PHOTOGRAPHS ANDREAS VON EINSIEDEL

A newly built house provides a dramatic backdrop for the merging of two families, along with the art and antiques they have collected over the years



TOP RIGHT David and Nikki. **RIGHT** An enormous ceramic tub from Brooke Pottery in Wiltshire holds logs in the entrance by the front door. A striking collection of large blue and white plates – a mixture of Moroccan and antique Chinese pieces – hangs on a wall that is the back of the chimney breast, in the main living room.



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espite being filled with wonderful antiques and works of art, Old Meadow House defies any notion of a conventional Cotswolds home.

Not only is it barely eight years old – designed by its owner, Nikki Williams-Ellis – but it's also unusual for having been built around one vast room. It's fair to say that Old Meadow House is the antithesis of the cosy, low-ceilinged, stone buildings that populate the villages surrounding it.

Nikki loves Africa and wanted to replicate the feeling of looking out at huge skies. 'Luckily, we're isolated enough never to have to close the curtains,' she laughs. 'We face south and what I love most is how the sun's rays play throughout the ground floor as they move from early morning eastern light to evening sunsets, all of which make the room come alive in differing ways.' ►



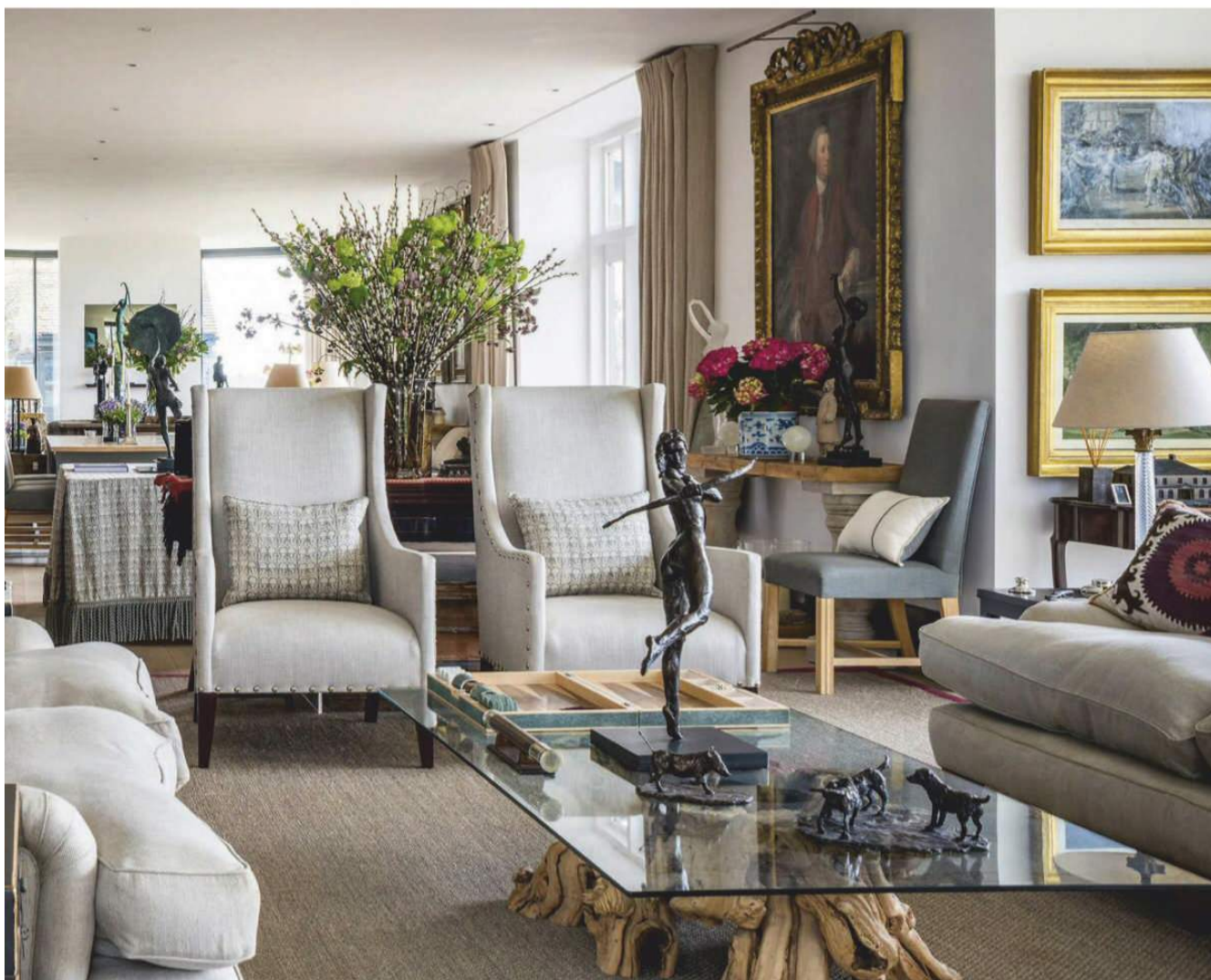
LEFT A cleverly designed custom-built cabinet, painted in Dulux Night Jewels I, houses the couple's collection of hats and the family's wellington boots. **BELOW** The 18th-century portrait is by Allan Ramsay, though neither Nikki nor David know who it's of. David liked the carved frame and bought it from a London antiques dealer in the 90s. The table is from Andrew Martin.



Although the view and the light give the house a contemporary feel, for a young building, Old Meadow House has a rich and dramatic history. It began life as a 1925 roadside house, which Nikki and her late husband Christopher Shale bought in May 2010. When they realised they couldn't improve the house as much as they wanted, they decided to demolish it, only to discover there were rare bats in the roof. 'We did everything we could to persuade them to leave,' says Nikki, 'even creating a separate block with a loft to rehouse them, but they resolutely refused to move out.'

Then in June 2011 Christopher died suddenly of heart failure. By the time permission to demolish finally came through, Nikki had all but given up on





the project and was living in a caravan as a grieving widow. Galvanised, she went ahead and had the house pulled down in February 2012. 'We did it while the bats were on holiday, taking the roof tiles off one by one in case we found one,' remembers Nikki. 'Then we started building. The builders thought I'd buckle but the building gave me purpose, a reason to get out from under the duvet, and a challenge to keep me focused and busy.'

In just 11 months, Nikki had built a new house in a better position back from the road and moved in. Next, she set about arranging the house exactly as she wanted it, not only for herself, but also for her three grown-up children, now in their thirties. The last thing she expected was to fall in love ►



ABOVE On the table are small bronze dogs by Mo Farquharson, David's sculpture of Diana the Huntress and an OKA backgammon set. The glass and black marbled lamps are by Vaughan.

LEFT The labradors, Inca and Jambo, lie in the welcoming hall, flanked by the terracotta Chinese army figures that Nikki found in a reclamation yard in Banbury.



The large table reveals the couple's love of entertaining. Nikki had the feature wall of shelving that faces the windows designed around her grandfather's grandfather clock to display books, paintings and objects. It cleverly conceals a walk-in drinks room and bar and built-in wine racks.



ABOVE One of David's *Elemental* sculptures, *Tempesta*, stands in front of the feature wall, showing the portrait that David brought from Wales of Mary Methuen, a relative. The frame was discovered to be 17th-century and extremely rare. **BELOW RIGHT** The clean lines of the kitchen provide the perfect foil for a few well-placed blue and white ceramics.

with David Williams-Ellis, the sculptor, whom she met on a blind date through a friend in February 2014. Two years later, in August 2016, they married. David also has three children by his previous marriage, all in their twenties, and the newly-weds faced the daunting challenge of amalgamating the two families.

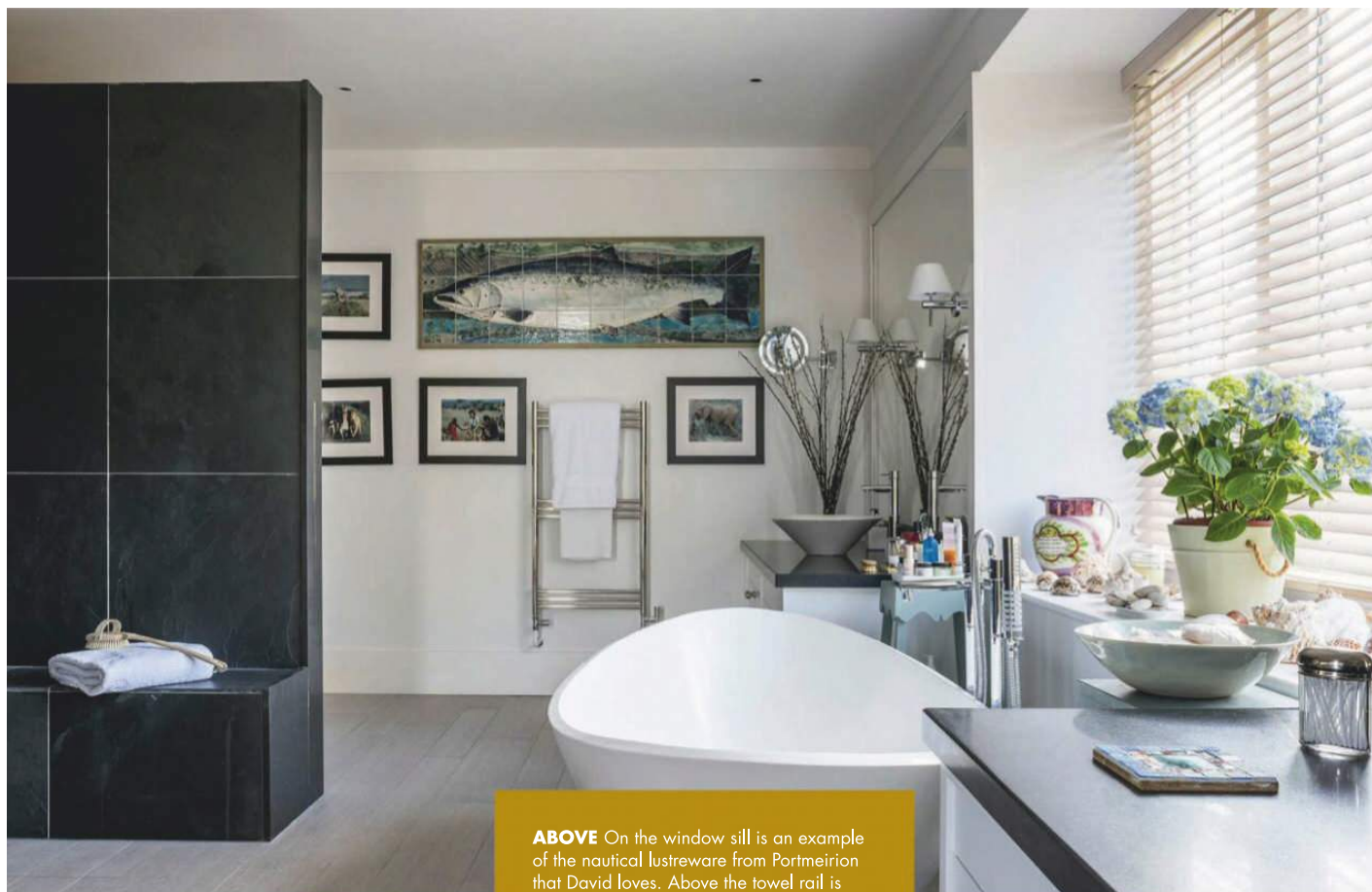
'When people marry later in life, merging two lives is far from simple,' laughs David. 'I came with loads of baggage – literally! I had masses of books and paintings, ceramics and antiques from Wales, where I grew up, and, of course, my sculpture – a whole shedload and more. Then there was the issue of our tastes – I love colour whereas Nikki likes a calm, neutral palette. But we got there in the end.'

Nikki's ordered home was duly invaded by colour, texture and antiques. Neutral sofas were pepped up with bright cushions, some of Nikki's family photographs made way for David's paintings, and space was given over to David's ceramics and antiques. The house became an idiosyncratic, vibrant and joyously creative fusion ►



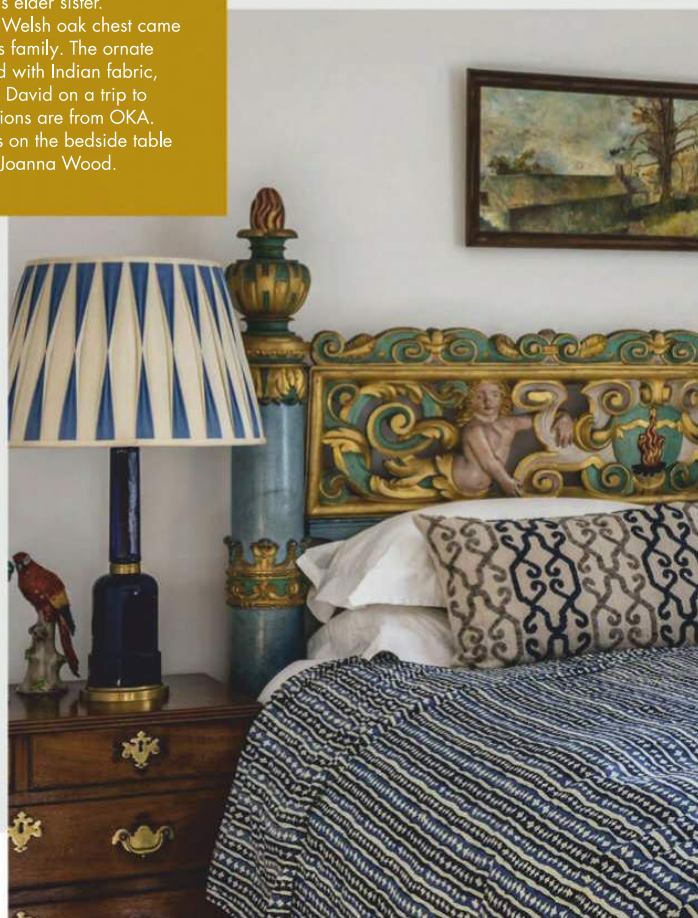
The dramatic staircase is flooded with light from the huge, double-height window above the front door. Beneath the backlit print of polo players is a clock that David inherited from his grandfather.





ABOVE On the window sill is an example of the nautical lustreware from Portmeirion that David loves. Above the towel rail is the fish made by the ceramicist Bronwyn Williams-Ellis, David's elder sister.

BELOW The carved Welsh oak chest came from David's mother's family. The ornate Italian bed is covered with Indian fabric, bought by Nikki and David on a trip to Kerala, and the cushions are from OKA. The porcelain parrots on the bedside table were a present from Joanna Wood.





of old and new. Their children often visit, now with three grandchildren, and so Nikki has sacrificed her large office to create two extra bedrooms. The office was relocated to an outdoor shed and another was created for David to use as his studio. They also made the master bedroom and spare bedroom smaller to make way for walk-in wardrobes and storage space for the children who, Nikki says, tend to dump things 'at home'.

David's antiques are now as integral to the house as Nikki's possessions. In the spare 'Italian' bedroom, a carved chest in 17th-century Welsh oak from David's mother stands alongside the ornate 19th-century four poster that came from Villa Mapelli Mozzi, the palazzo in Bergamo, belonging to Nikki's first husband's family. David's sister, Bronwyn Williams-Ellis, is a well-known ceramicist, with work in major collections like the V&A – one of her ceramic fish hangs in the couple's bathroom. David's great-uncle, Clough Williams-Ellis, designed and built Portmeirion, the Italianate town on the north Welsh coast, and David has ►



ABOVE The bedhead was made for Nikki by Lynn Padbury of Cullen & Padbury in Oxford with fabric from Tissus d'Hélène. The colourful Indian bedspread is made from a sari, one of many David and Nikki bought together on a trip to Southall to decorate the giant yurt in which they celebrated their wedding. **LEFT** Glass figures by David sit at the end of the bed. On top of the 18th-century English tallboy, which David brought from Wales, is a 19th-century Japanese pot.

Living with Antiques

always loved the nautically themed Gray's Pottery. Clough's daughter Susan bought Gray's in 1959, heralding the creation of Portmeirion Pottery in 1962. Walking through the front door, it's clear that their distinct styles have combined to create a welcoming home. Nikki's Chinese terracotta figures flank the front door opposite David's Chippendale chairs, while his cast-iron Persian dogs sit happily beside an Indian headdress Nikki bought at Portobello Market.

'What really made David agree to move here was building new kennels for his dogs and a studio for his sculpture,' jokes Nikki. 'It's so exciting having exactly the light and space I need,' admits David. It's here that he created the Normandy bronze, unveiled above Gold Beach in June 2019 to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the D-Day Landings. His formidable collection of past and present work has a home here, inside, outside and on rooftops. 'I think we're slowly becoming a sculpture park,' laughs Nikki happily. 📍



ABOVE David's purpose-built studio is flooded with northern light and hung with all the natural light spotlights and indoor lighting he needs for working during winter months or late into the night. Here, David works on the maquette for a bronze commissioned by the Normandy Memorial Trust to commemorate the D-Day landings.

BELOW David's *Three Graces* sculpture.



Generous double doors allow David to move large pieces of work in and out of his studio, theatrically topped by one of his *Deity* sculptures.

