Phoenix from the flames

Once cold and unloved, Gilmerton House in East Lothian has had a makeover and emerged a warmer and more welcoming home.

WORDS NICHOLA HUNTER IMAGES ANGUS BLACKBURN
In its heyday, Gilmerton House near Athelstaneford in East Lothian had it all: a beautiful setting, glamorous owners, and a bounty of servants, although as the current owner, 13th baronet of Gilmerton, Sir David Kinloch recalls, there was ‘no central heating!’

‘It was extremely cold,’ said Sir David, who grew up in Gilmerton House. ‘I don’t know how we actually survived. In the winter there was ice on the inside of the windows every morning but the hall fire was never out. There were six of us children and most of the time we were free to play in the woods and surrounding countryside. In the early years before being sent off to school a governess educated us. We also had maids, a cook, butler and chauffeurs. It was a privileged life although of course as children we didn’t see it like that.’

In the late 1800s Gilmerton was a country house for David’s grandparents, who lived in Eton Square in London and would holiday here with their three children. ‘As I child, I remember the house being very dark and decorated in shades of battleship grey and brown,’ he laughs.

David’s father spent the early part of his life in London and moved to America in the late 1920s. After the Wall Street Crash he returned.

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Above left: World War One forebears. Above: Sir David Kinloch with his daughter Alice. Left: The drawing room.
to Gilmerton with his then wife, Alexandra Dalziel, (the sister of Diana Vreeland, editor of American Vogue) and their two daughters. ‘You can imagine the circles they were mixing in whilst in Manhattan so coming back to the country scene would have been quite a change for them,’ says Sir David.

Unfortunately the marriage didn’t survive and in 1946 Sir Alexander married David’s mother, Hilda Anna Walker and they went on to have a further six children. Although the house maintained a sense of grandeur and continued to be fully staffed during David’s childhood, when David inherited the property in the 1980s things had changed somewhat. Having been in trust for a number of years it was lacking TLC and in serious need of upgrading.

With the help of Sir David’s then wife, Maureen they spent many years of hard work and serious investment to return the house back to its full potential, creating a successful business with a succession of private lets and at the same time raising a young family.

In recent years, changes in family life have bought about new beginnings for Gilmerton. To assist in the house’s new look David enlisted the help of his partner Mel Pumfrey, which in many respects was quite fortunate. ‘I have a background in interior design,’ Mel explains. ‘Having renovated many properties over the years I was aware that Gilmerton needed to match today’s demanding customer needs and expectations. In order to appeal in the market and in order to grow the business we needed to be competitive.’

Mel’s solution was a gradual one, as David
PHOENIX FROM THE FLAMES
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didn’t always share her end vision. ‘There was a tremendous amount of furniture sitting here just because it always had been. It was very difficult for David to part with certain items, but just because it had always been here didn’t mean it had to stay. There were a lot of discussions about furniture, some of which, really was quite hideous.

‘In the end it was quite cathartic – we emptied the whole house and started again. We sold some things at auction which allowed us to buy different pieces which I think work really well. We also replaced and updated all the bathrooms and enlisted the help of David’s son, Matthew, who runs his own plumbing business. He did a fantastic job and I am extremely proud of him.’

David’s eldest son Alex, having returned from travelling overseas, was also eager to become involved in the renovations and was happy to take on the job of project manager for the house and grounds.

‘His input has been invaluable to David,’ Mel explains. ‘David really needed someone in-house when he was away on business to
support and help Di who has been his loyal housekeeper for the past 20 years and to ensure the renovation work was completed on time and Alex has been brilliant in this role.’

Visiting today, it’s hard to imagine how gloomy the property was previously, but David reluctantly reveals a few horror stories: ‘On several occasions the sound of dripping water through sodden ceilings as a result of burst frozen pipes almost became the norm. This made me even more determined to create a warm and dry house.

‘When I returned to Gilmerton in the 1980s, apart from the lack of heating, decaying décor and not to mention the lack of hot water – a luxury which most of us never enjoyed – the house was going through 600 gallons of diesel every four weeks. We obviously couldn’t afford this so one of the first things I did was to install central heating and a wood burning boiler system. It’s a great system and now Gilmerton actually has a reputation as a warm and welcoming property.’

Gilmerton has been a house of extremes but what David and Mel have done is to find a middle ground that is still in touch with the past but very much with an eye on the future. The music room, situated in the oldest part of the house features an exquisite rococo ceiling along with a rare example of wood panelling which has been retained in all its grandeur.

‘David’s paternal grandmother, Lady Eleanor Lucy Kinloch, set up a showroom and workshops in Chelsea around 1916,’ Mel explains. ‘Queen Alexandra apparently bought quite a bit of the furniture and took it all to Windsor. The story goes that it was to help ‘poor but talented artists’. We still have three of the beds she painted.’ Today, these historical pieces are juxtaposed with contemporary bathrooms and elegant Farrow & Ball colour schemes which have replaced the battleship grey backdrops.

The latest project is the renovation of the drawing room which promises to be a stunning addition to the house. ‘Alex has taken the lead on this and it’s going to be very much true to the period,’ David explains. ‘I’m really looking forward to seeing the end result.’

In 2014, Gilmerton House is still very much a family affair and with this team at the helm it’s about ready to enjoy another heyday.