

NEW CLASSICAL HOUSES IN AN ENGLISH ARCADIA

CLIVE FEWINS visits a series of new country houses designed
by architect Stephen Langer in his native Weald, which draw
intelligently on Classical and vernacular traditions





(Facing page) 1—Hillyfields: a new house in the Queen Anne style. (Left) 2—Hillyfields is deeper on the garden side, with an elegant colonnade. (Right) 3—The impressive, top-lit staircase hall goes through four storeys

THE local building traditions of the Kent and Sussex Weald are a part of our familiar and cherished image of English architecture. They form the picturesque brick, tile and timber houses that make up some of the prettiest villages in the garden county, and they are made all the more engaging by the manner in which Classical architectural values merged with the practices of local builders in the late 17th and 18th centuries.

Architect Stephen Langer has made it his life's work to continue building in this tradition, designing numerous new houses across the Weald on the Kent/Sussex border. He has a lively practice, working in some of the choicest landscape settings (Fig 1). At any one time, about a dozen such are on the drawing board at his Tunbridge Wells office, or indeed, are in construction.

Mr Langer enjoys a clear commission for a new domestic project for which the brief is to reflect the Sussex and Kentish style, although like any busy local practice, he works on small housing developments and conversions at the same time. He believes that the vernacular 'must have been ingrained in me from very early on. I was born in Tunbridge Wells—the capital of the Weald—and brought up on a farm nearby'.

The son of an engineer turned farmer, Mr Langer studied at the Bartlett School of Architecture in London. He stuck defiantly to his personal passion for traditional domestic architecture, trying to avoid the overbearing orthodoxy of Modernism. The subject of his degree dissertation was the history of the architecture and archaeology of the Weald of Kent and Sussex. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that the

first complete house he designed after qualifying was in the manner of an old Wealden house, complete with an oak frame and a projecting wing at each end. Since then, he has designed more than a dozen in this style, including one for his own occupation.

After his degree, Mr Langer worked as a site engineer for Trollope and Colls, and then for six months for a London practice. But, in an ingenious piece of independent thinking, he established his own practice shortly after that. After gaining his diploma, he was required to do two years' Part 3 'practical' working in an architectural practice before sitting his finals. He asked RIBA if this could be done when you were working for yourself. There was nothing against it in the rules, so in 1982, at the age of 23, he set up his own practice with his wife, Susan, three years before he qualified.

Although the principal inspiration in his career has been the Sussex and Kent vernacular, Mr Langer is, not surprisingly, equally happy working in the Arts-and-Crafts and Queen Anne Revival manner—these turn-of-the-last-century styles were themselves modelled from traditional building techniques. Mr Langer has been a committee member of the RIBA Traditional Architecture Group, and also belongs to the Vernacular Architecture Group.

However, he does ask clients to be cautious in their use of the word 'Georgian' to describe a building they want. 'In my view, you can't really equate the evolution of design with which monarch happened to be on the throne at the time. The predominant influence in the period 1714 to 1830 that we generally refer to as "Georgian" for architectural purposes was Classical—but not entirely so—and it had many variants.' ➤

'The local building tradition of the Weald is a very rich vernacular'



(Above) 4—Abbey Lea: a new red-brick, Classical house with pavilion wings. (Below) 5—The chimneypiece in the drawing room

He takes a certain pleasure in placing his new houses in a fairly precise, but fictional, time frame. One example is a family home, Doozes Farm (Fig 6), in a pleasantly rustic site in East Sussex. He places this new, oak-framed house in the early years of the 18th century, and calls it 'Country Queen Anne'.

Mr Langer says: 'At the start of the 18th century, timber-framed buildings were becoming less popular, and many up-and-coming tradesman were flaunting their newly acquired good taste by disguising their oak-framed medieval houses behind symmetrical Classical façades. Indeed, many houses were still being built with oak frames in country areas. 'It was a transitory stage for domestic architecture. There were some key technological developments at this time, which were to have a major impact on future English houses.'

Doozes Farm has a massive central oak staircase, which is crossed, almost ostentatiously, by a large oak beam. There are three floors, above a basement, with dormer windows for the two attic bedrooms placed in the side elevation. 'Here, I have done something a little different. I call it "vernacular Classical", because it is quite unorthodox, although recognisably within an orthodox tradition. It has a relaxed look because it has much local precedent to it. But it also has a formal front elevation. It is meant to reflect the move to alternative forms of construction—the gradual transition from the old vernacular to new traditions.' For example, in the window openings, all the frames are revealed. In later brick-fronted houses, the frames were largely concealed behind, and protected by, the brick façade.

Doozes Farm is in a wooded setting, so the windows are large in order to let in light (Fig 7), and there is a band of oak weatherboarding along the front, as well as the tile-hanging characteristic of the area. The window frames are painted a pale green. 'It was the Victorians who invented the notion that all sash windows should be painted white: in Georgian times, they were painted many different colours, often dark. We have used green to reflect the surroundings.'

However, for Mr Langer, it is the interiors of new Georgian-style houses that present the greatest challenge. He tries to be as true as possible to the original model of the typical 18th-century plan forms, but still create an interior suited to the habits

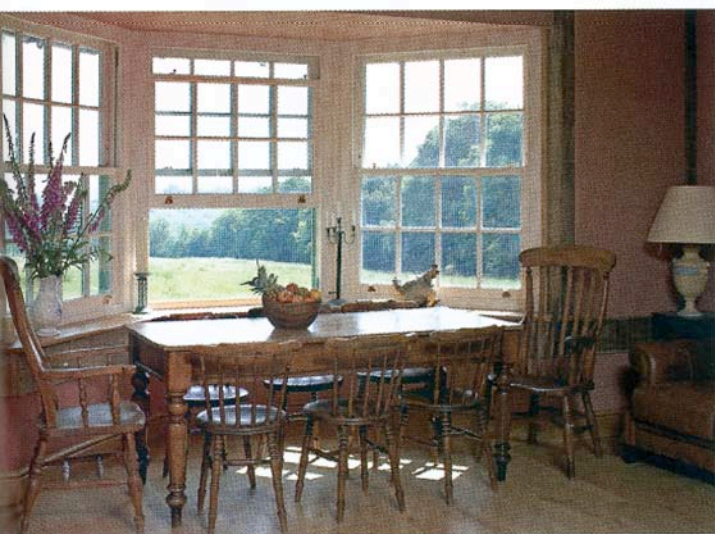


of a modern family. Mr Langer's preferred solution is to create a basement, if possible. The gyms, plant rooms, media rooms and wine cellars can all be placed there, leaving the ground floor for the principal reception rooms. The kitchen, the hub of a modern family home, is, however, incorporated into the main ground floor, taking the place of a reception room in the Georgian house of distinction. Historically, this would have been below stairs, in a single-storey extension, or even in a subsidiary wing across the yard. Today, the kitchen has become the central reception room, where everyone spends time together.

'The Classical form is sufficiently flexible to allow you to accommodate modern requirements in a plan



6—Doozes Farm: tile-hung in the Sussex vernacular manner. (Below) 7—The kitchen bay looks over a rustic setting



form that is true to the exterior of the building. The exterior is, therefore, an expression of the interior—which is effectively a Modernist axiom as well.'

The success of his staircases in design terms, and as a central motif in the articulation of the house, is very important to Mr Langer. At Doozes, the staircase is strongly 'country' with plain oak balusters, drawing on the setting and the tradition of the woodland cottage.

At Abbey Lea, he has opted for quite a different approach. The semi-spiral oak staircase is at the heart of the building. It rises through three floors to a domed lantern, positioned 24ft up in the roof. The four main reception rooms (Fig 5) occupy the entire ground floor, with the kitchen in one of two formal pavil-

ions, which stand on each side of the main block.

At Hillyfields (Fig 2), an elegant and substantial house in the Queen Anne style built for a retired industrialist, the impressive staircase hall (Fig 3) rises through four storeys. There is also a separate rear staircase from the ground floor to the second floor, which resolves building regulation fire issues, as the building is effectively four storeys, but not connected by one stair. There is a large top-lit lantern window that looks down from the second floor on the staircase. Yet, because of its position, it does not deflect from the formal layout at the front of the building.

Mr Langer believes it is perfectly possible to design within Classical parameters and achieve this level of formality in the interior, at the same time as producing houses in which families feel comfortable. At Abbey Lea, a Classical red-brick house with symmetrical pavilion wings (Fig 4), he points out, there is a strictly formal ground-floor layout, with a central hall leading to the main rooms, all of which have 10ft 6in ceilings. 'A good formal plan has very little external envelope and is thus very energy efficient. You can make it work for modern family conditions with very few compromises. It is timeless. It relies on powerful forms, and yet you can do all sorts of things with it. In other words, it is capable of infinite reinvention.'

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Photographs: June Buck.

NEXT WEEK: Llanerchaeron, Wales