

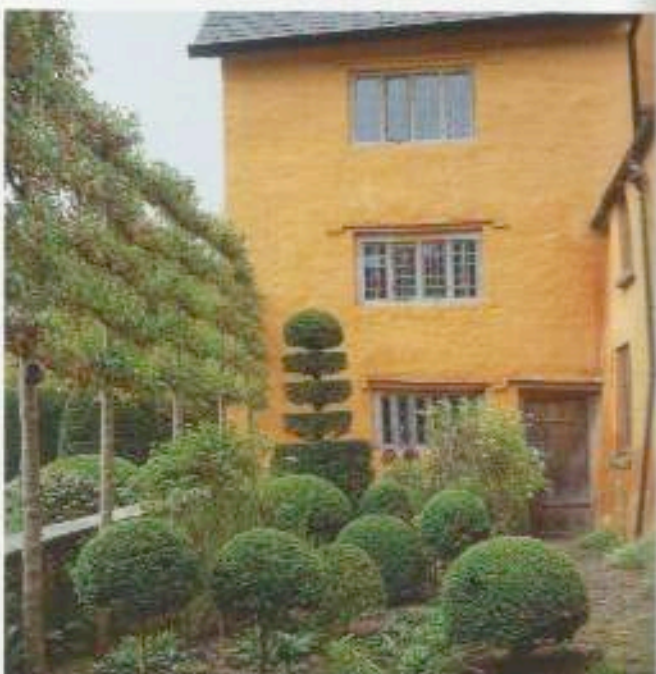
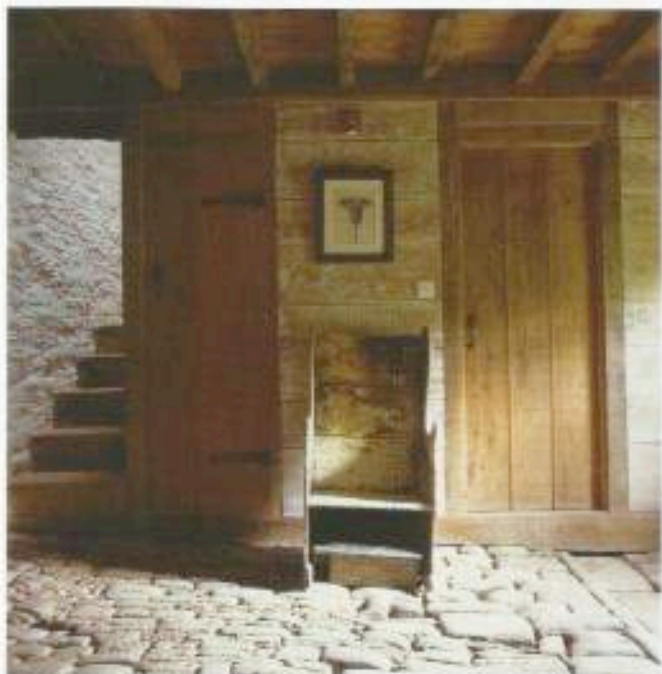


POSITIVELY MEDIEVAL

For years 15th-century Allt-y-Bela in Monmouthshire showed all the ravages of time and wilful neglect, its crumbling tower a place of repose only for sheep and pigs. But now, thanks to the Spiralfields Historic Buildings Trust, it all looks authentically Middle Aged, from the flagged floors to the iron-oxide limewash. No wonder the garden designer Arne Maynard and his partner, William Collinson, thought its rambling rooms and grounds a worthy setting for their treasures, topiary and (human) guests. Text: Ros Byam Shaw. Photography: Jan Baldwin



The linen sofa covers and velvet cushions in the drawing room were vegetable-dyed by Polly Lyster. The coffee table is from Baileys Home, while the 17th-century mirror is from Christopher Howe in London

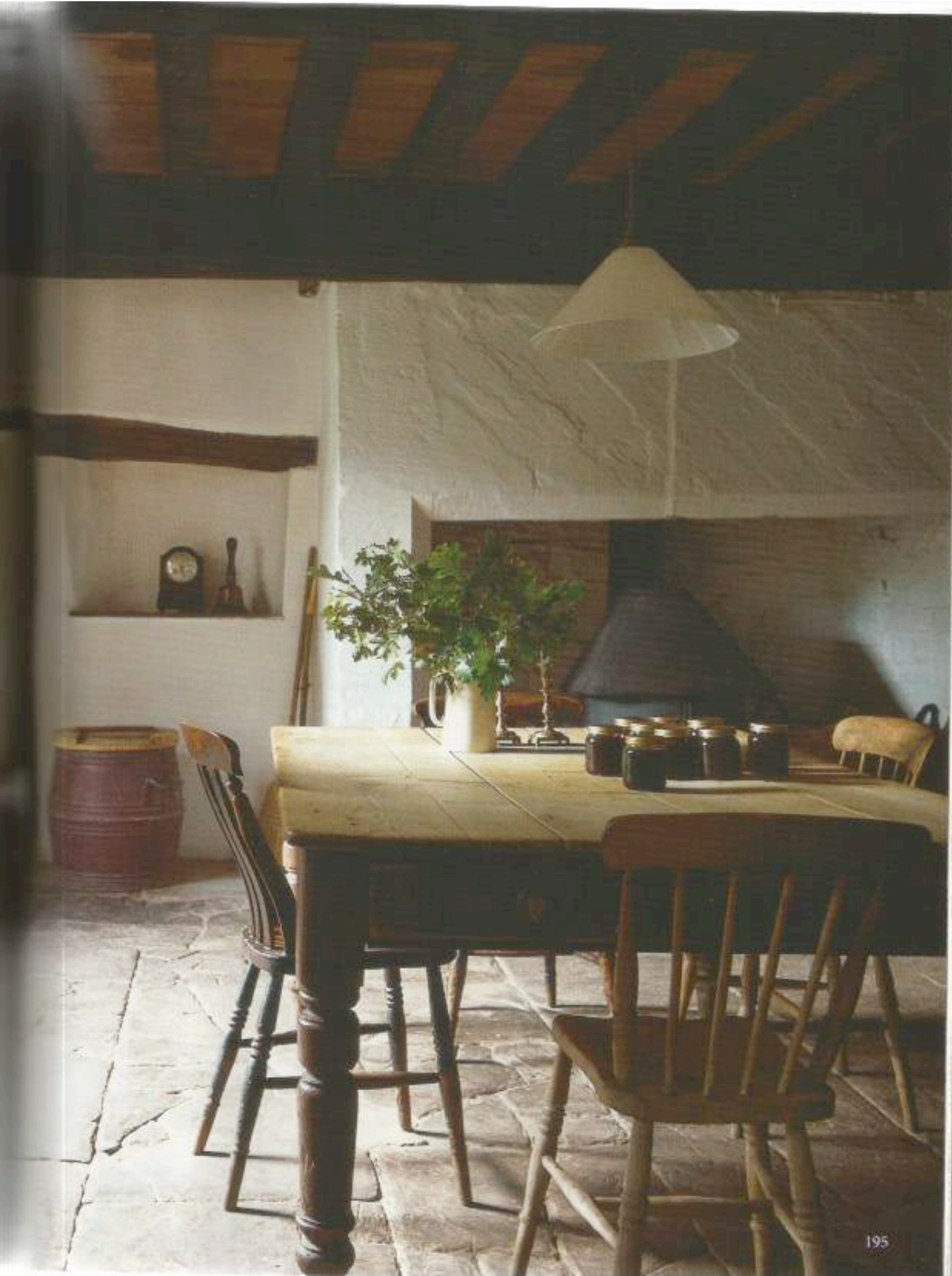


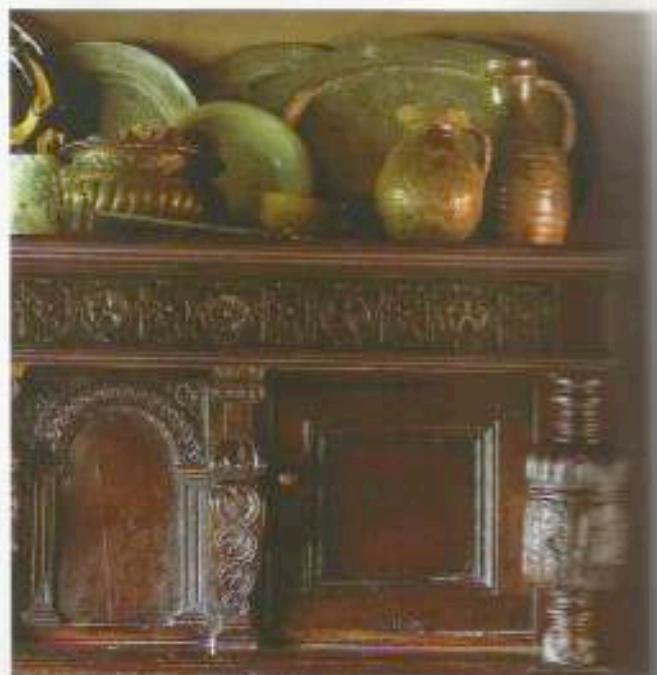
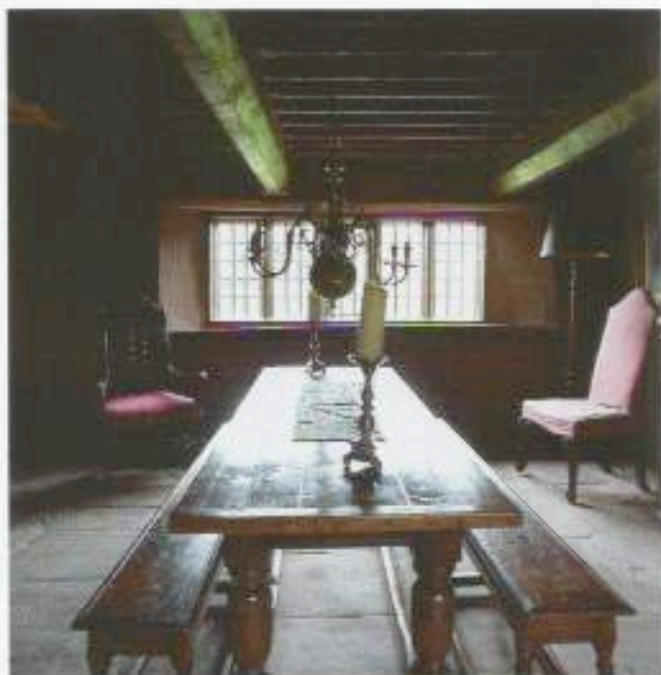
This page, clockwise from top left: the four-storey tower, which was added in 1599, and a row of pleached crab apples greet the visitor; the boor room, with its crazy paving of cobbles, was originally the stables, added to the house in the 19th century; the tower's mullioned windows look over the topiary yew, beech and box in the front garden; stairs from the boor room lead to the old hayloft, which is now an office. The shepherd's chair is 18th-century. Opposite: an 18th-century sideboard and mirror sit against Cornelia O'Donovan's limewash-and-chalk wall painting in the hall





Top: William Collinson designed the sink counter in the kitchen, the oldest part of All-y-Bela. Above: between the kitchen and dining room is a small sitting room, with sofas from Baileys Home, a 19th-century mirror and a plaster cast – a legacy of Arne Maynard's days working with Peter Horn at Clifton Little Venice. Right: in the kitchen the niche to the left of the fireplace was originally a bread oven. The Victorian table was bought at auction in Hereford two decades ago





ARNE MAYNARD and William Collinson met at sixth-form college in Poole. Arne was already immersed in gardening, working locally to earn pocket money, and learning about plants. William's thing was sailing. What they shared was a love of old buildings – an unusual interest for boys from 'perfectly ordinary backgrounds'. It was a love that saw them cycling for miles through Dorset lanes, seeking out the romance of crumbling cottages and faded manor houses, climbing through the windows of abandoned rooms, imagining past lives illuminated by candles and firelight, dreaming about one day restoring somewhere of their own with the lightest of touches.

William studied dentistry, and became a dental surgeon; Arne studied architecture, but didn't graduate. They lived in London and, after an apprenticeship of sorts under the wing of Peter Hone at Clifton Little Venice (*Wof Sept 1994*), Arne began designing gardens. He has since become one of the most sought-after garden designers in the country. Twenty years ago Arne and William bought their first old house. It was isolated, 17th-century, unmodernised, and featured in this magazine in April 1995.

The history is important in order to understand how the couple, now in their fifties, came to settle here in rural Wales in a house that dates back to the mid-15th century, was extended with an ambitiously fashionable tower in 1599, and doesn't appear to have changed much since. Inside, there are flagged floors, limewashed walls,

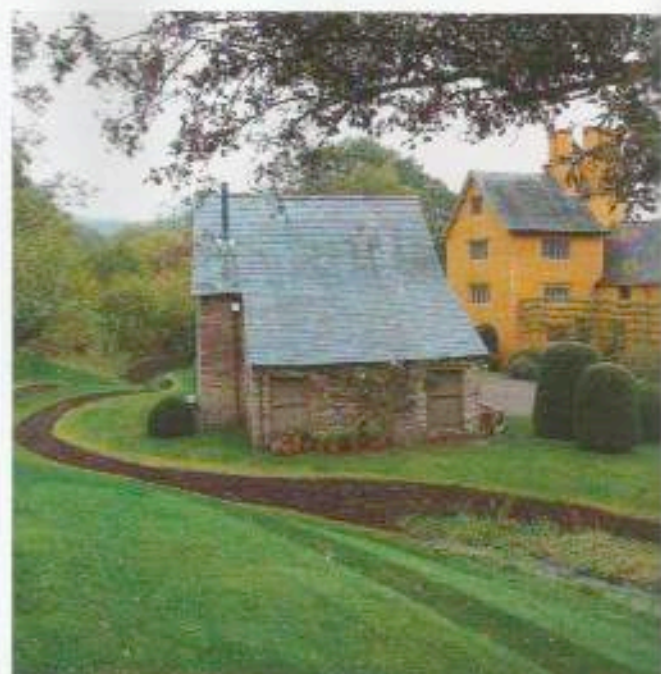
strapping oak beams, pieces of furniture dating from the 16th and 17th centuries, candle sconces, pottery. There are no curtains, but embers glow in the bedroom fireplace, and there is fresh ash mounded in every hearth. And this Hardy-esque, poetic simplicity is an aesthetic that goes back to boyhood, and has been maturing ever since.

Allt-y-Bela translates as 'high wooded hillside of the wolf', which is evocative but misleading. In fact, the house is cradled in its own miniature valley, which opens out at the end of a long, narrow lane, once the main road between Usk and Chepstow. Arrival is announced by a blast of burnt orange as you round the last wooded corner and the four-storey tower rears up ahead. The colour is traditional, a limewash pigmented with iron oxide, and joyfully bright. Sloping fields create an emerald backdrop and, clustered around the house as if for warmth and safety, are the smooth mounds, balls, domes and cones of topiary yew, beech and box. Along the two-storey wing beyond the tower, a screen of tightly clipped pleached crab-apple trees encloses a narrow front garden. Opposite is a granary, and at the end of the drive, above the house and across the stream, is a barn where cars are parked at a discreet and unobtrusive distance.

Over the house, outbuildings, garden and landscape hangs a comfortable, comforting sense of permanence. There may once have been wolves preying on the lambs, but for more than 400 years there has been smoke rising from these tall chim-

Top left: the 17th-century refectory table and benches in the dining room were bought from Phoenix Antiques for Arne and William's previous country house, in Lincolnshire. Top right: the buffet is late 16th-century and bears Medieval pottery and plates. Opposite: until the house was bought by compulsory purchase order, the spiral staircase, with its oak treads and pitch-pine newel, was all that held up the crumbling tower.





neys. But that isn't the whole story. The house survived intact but unmodernised because its last wealthy owner changed his will. Wool merchant Roger Edwards, the trendsetter who added the tower, is said to have discovered that his nephew and heir had meddled with his saddle – the Elizabethan equivalent of tampering with car brakes. In response, Roger left Allt-y-Bela in trust to an educational charity. The house was subsequently tenanted by generations of farmers, none of whom were inclined to spend more money on it than necessary.

More recently there came a farmer who spent less than was necessary. By 2001 the tower was crumbling, and the downstairs rooms were sheltering sheep and pigs. Monmouthshire County Council served a compulsory purchase order and the Spitalfields Historic Buildings Trust took on the delicate task of restoration in its first venture beyond east London. Meanwhile, with a flat in London, a large house and garden in Lincolnshire, and a pilot cutter moored in Cornwall, Arne and William had been house-hunting for several years, hoping to find a base in the country more conveniently situated somewhere between London and Cornwall. They saw Allt-y-Bela in *Country Life*, and made a detour from another viewing. 'We got out of the car,' Arne says, 'and knew we had found what we wanted.'

Initially, they rented the house, allowing them to move in slowly. 'We did it room by room,' Arne says, 'and it was easy because our furniture from Guanock [their house in Lincolnshire] fitted per-

fectly. The Spitalfields Trust had put in a posh oak kitchen that we sold back, along with 19 cast-iron radiators. We put in some bookshelves, and we commissioned Cornelia O'Donovan to do a wall painting of favourite flowers and animals in the hall. There are a few things we would still like to do – maybe a plaster frieze of oak leaves.'

The interior is English vernacular at its no-nonsense finest: the kitchen has a sturdy table, a dresser, an Aga; next door is a living room where dogs stretch out on crumpled sofas; the dining room is a period piece of polished oak and glinting brass; the boot room has a cobbled floor. Upstairs there are big beds, roll-top baths, and old rugs laid across wide boards. Arne and William sleep in the tower, in a room with views from windows on three sides. Below them, on the first floor, is a formal sitting room, its high-backed 17th-century sofas padded with lambswool under covers of vegetable-dyed linen.

The garden has been extensively written up elsewhere and is delectable, hugging the house and loosening as it melts at its edges into the surrounding fields and copses. Arne admits that initially he found its design problematic, partly because of the lack of symmetry. 'William gave me the key by describing the house as a beautiful pearl set on a velvet cushion' ■

To contact Allt-y-Bela B&B, ring 07892 403103, or visit alltybela.co.uk. To contact Arne Maynard Garden Design, ring 020 7689 8100, or visit arnemaynard.com. *The Gardens of Arne Maynard*, by Arne Maynard, will be published by Merrell in September

Top left: glimpsed through a door at the foot of the spiral staircase is a guest bathroom in what was the cider cellar. Top right: the old kitchen, detached from the main house, now houses Arne's studio. Sculptured terracing leads down to a stream. Opposite: new oak panelling separates the guest bedroom and bathroom on the ground floor of the tower. The portrait is thought to be of Cardinal Richelieu, while the quilt is from Baileys House

