



# OF ITS TIME

In one of Kensington's original 'genteel residences', designer Cindy Leveson has risen to the challenge of opening out and updating a nineteenth-century house to create elegantly functional twenty-first-century living spaces for the owners and their young family

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**I**n the 1850s, much of Kensington in west London was agrarian in nature; an area of orchards and pastures, it was a pleasant place and the first houses to be built on this land were advertised as 'genteel residences'. These houses remain equally desirable 150 years later, equally genteel and equally in demand by the same professional classes who signed the first leases in the nineteenth century.

This particular Kensington house, one of the originals, is still true in essence to the initial specifications. Although essentially the same, it looks of course very different now: the first leaseholders would be hard-pushed to see in these light-filled and airy rooms any echo of the dark, cluttered and heavy-curtained rooms that were fashionable when the house was new.

As in many London houses, a narrow hall leads from the front door to the stairs; on one side are the ground-floor rooms – the

At the front of the house, the sitting room has an 'Oak Leaf and Acorn' chandelier from Richard Taylor Designs, which centres the linen-upholstered ottoman-cum-coffee table from Julian Chichester





**THIS PAGE** The narrow entrance hall has been opened up with sliding doors, and a corner cupboard in the sitting room provides storage for coats (left). The back sitting room is used as a library and study (below and bottom left). **OPPOSITE ALL PICTURES** Stairs lead to the extended kitchen in the basement, with painted-tulipwood units custom-made by Holloways of Ludlow



parlour floor, so to speak. Now, though, the rooms have been opened up and the hall wall removed and replaced by almost invisible sliding doors, which disappear into deep reveals. A second pair of doors – equally invisible – separates, when needed, the two parts of the sitting room. These now fulfil several functions: a study/office that overlooks the garden (with all the techno-essentials concealed in a built-in unit) and a quiet sitting room on the street side, with the two areas designed to act as a generous entertaining room when the sliding doors are opened. The television is discreetly hidden and in one corner of the sitting room an elegant, painted corner cupboard opens to reveal a practical space for coat and boot storage – simple but brilliant.

Many of these clever tricks for making a twenty-first-century home from a nineteenth-century house are the work of designer Cindy Leveson who, in a reversal of the usual process, was introduced to the owners by the building contractors, Holloways of Ludlow, who were already engaged in replacing the steep, uneven and worn-out staircase, and extending the basement. It was a felicitous encounter and out of the meeting arose the idea of tweaking the whole house to make it work for a young family with two small children.

‘The proportions of these houses are not particularly good,’ says Cindy. ‘They are a little too tall and a little too narrow, so it’s important that there is a lot of initial work, that the bones of the design are worked out first and the perfect layout arrived at, before anything else is done.’

The designer, builder and owners did just that. Working together, they refined their way down the house from top to bottom, taking in their stride, en route, habitual domestic design issues found today in period houses. First up: the main bathroom on the first floor. Bathing expectations are high these days, with double basins, walk-in showers and oversized baths often seen as non-negotiables. In this case, the space allotted was slightly reduced for a bigger dressing room and to the credit of all involved, they have managed to create an uncluttered, even luxurious room complete with a large bath, amble-in shower and some storage space to boot.









The second common design conundrum is the role of the basement – how to make it into a pleasant space that combines family life with cooking and eating and, often, entertaining. Their solution started on the ground floor, where the enclosed plaster staircase wall leading to the basement was replaced with one of glass, bringing light to the rear of the ground floor and to the downward flight of stairs.

Down in the basement itself, the original space has been enlarged with a rear extension built out on to part of the garden terrace, in which the street end holds the kitchen area while next to that is a sturdy, rather elegant dining table that works well for family meals but can also be extended to seat up to 12 when required. Abutting this is the extended living space, effectively a second informal sitting room with a television and comfortable sofas and chairs, leading into the garden. And at the far end of the garden is a small, stand-alone building – a useful addition to the house, acting as an all-in-one studio, study and extra spare room.

Cindy did not come into the decorating business by the usual route. ‘It was all a bit of a mistake,’ she says. After going to art school with the ambition of becoming a painter, she realised that it would be hard to make a living, and so slipped into working for a living. First, she fell into publicity and then into styling, where she worked mainly with the photographer Charles Settrington, who then – as the Earl of March and heir to the 10th Duke of Richmond – took over the running of the Goodwood Estate in the Nineties and asked Cindy to design a club on the West Sussex estate called The Kennels.

She realised then that she had found her *métier* – a career where she could combine her artist’s instincts for colour and form with her styling experience in putting together good-looking rooms. She now therefore approaches her projects from a colourist’s point of view, leading clients towards suggested schemes through delicate watercolours of the rooms-to-be, window treatments and the like, so that they can visualise their house in close-up detail – something that can often be difficult for those not normally immersed in the infinitesimal finer points of interior design.

‘It’s fun for them and it’s good for me, because when the final result looks like the drawing, I know it’s worked.’ And that, as in this house, is after all, the point □

*Holloways of Ludlow* [www.hollowaysofludlow.com](http://www.hollowaysofludlow.com) | *Leveson Design*: 020-7622 8815; [www.levesondesign.com](http://www.levesondesign.com)





OPPOSITE FROM TOP The basement opens out on to a garden terrace, with steps up to a stand-alone studio and spare room. The main bedroom. THIS PAGE A free-standing bath from Victoria & Albert sits next to the marble-clad walk-in shower in the main bathroom (top left and right). In the main bedroom, a vintage sofa from Howard and Sons has a movable arm, allowing it to be unfolded