

# The man who mixed colours

Tom Helme is a leading name in country-house decoration, with a flair for manufacturing. Mary Miers visits his Scottish retreat for tips on reviving a historic interior with sensitivity and innovation

Photographs by Simon Jauncey

**T**HE interior decorator Tom Helme is best known as the paint specialist who turned Farrow & Ball into a household name. However, when he became the co-owner of the Dorset-based business in 1992, he'd already carved out an impressive career as heir to John Fowler and David Mlinaric, doyens of English country-house decorating.

Of all the houses with which he's been involved, through working as assistant to Mr Mlinaric and advising the National Trust in the 1980s and 1990s, and running his own interior-design company, there can scarcely be a less likely candidate than Carskief, the stark white Edwardian mansion built for a Paisley chemical manufacturer that he bought in 2011.

Set among wind-sculpted woods overlooking the Mull of Kintyre, the house forms part of the 7,500-acre Carskief estate, which Tom admits he acquired

almost by mistake. 'I was looking for a remote retreat to indulge my love of sailing and fishing, but not a big place—I know how much work they are. There was another house in Argyll that I was keen to buy and I'd ring the agent every six months to see if there'd been any development. Then, he sent me the sales brochure for Carskief and I got excited. There was very little time, but, luckily, I managed to get up to see it 10 days before the closing date.'

Tom's knowledge of historic buildings meant that he 'immediately clocked the quality of Carskief', which, thanks to its patent sash windows made of teak and excellent roof fitted with copper nails, was bone dry. Built in 1905–8 for James Boyd and his cotton heiress wife, Kate Coats, the house has been sold only a few times and always lock stock and barrel, so that it must have one of the



*Above:* The hall, with Fermoie's plain linen used for upholstery and lampshades, sofa designed by Tom and Pulcinella by David Hockney above the stairs. *Facing page:* The dining room, with one of a set of chairs made by Nick Coryndon to Tom's design, based on a 1930s neo-Georgian model. The curtains, in Marron Glace plain Fermoie linen, were made by Janette Read in Suffolk. This is the only room in which the shutters and doors were made by the leading cabinetmaker Whytock and Reid, the firm that provided much of the original furniture. *Below:* Tom Helme at his Fermoie workshop in Marlborough, Wiltshire



most intact and fully documented Edwardian interiors to survive.

Here you will find an array of curiosities, from a photographic dark room, a hydrotherapy suite with sinister-looking equipment and an intact footman's bedroom, to a fully equipped gunroom, a flower room and service quarters, the latter with a complete complement of kitchen utensils, cookery books and gadgets such as a Boreas Sweeper vacuum cleaner. Advanced Edwardian plumbing, heating and ventilation systems service cupboards installed with hidden radiators, a 'needle bath' with nine taps including Cold and Hot Salt, tinned copper baths—the list goes on.

All this provides an unending source of fascination for Tom, who has relished the challenge of repairing the house and preserving its contents while updating the decor with a stylish modern layer. He hates describing Carskief as a 'project', preferring to think of it as the gentle







resuscitation of a place to which he has become increasingly attached. As with all his professional jobs, however, the interior owes much to lessons passed down to him, such as Fowler's tradition of instructing the painters to do over the entire interior in off-white before his arrival at the house.

Mr Mlinaric taught him to 'look at your objects, for it's around these that you want to build your rooms' and from COUNTRY LIFE's former Architectural Editor, John Cornforth, he learned always to consider the textiles first, particularly old carpets, because these are much more difficult to source than paint colours. Other tips include using cleaner, brighter whites when hanging modern wallpapers, as their colourings do not often suit traditional off-white paint colours and, where possible, going for block-printed papers (Tom favours Claremont and George Spencer for their beautiful designs).

Wall colours are the easiest part of the process and should come last, once the rooms have begun to take shape and most of the furnishings and fabrics are in situ. Carskley was white throughout when Tom bought it and paint scrapes confirmed that this had always been the case, with the exception of the drawing room, where traces of colour in the cornice suggested that the walls once

**The Paisley Bedroom, named after the painting *Paisley Fair*, seen here with a bureau, a sofa and Mrs Boyd's four-poster bed, all of which came with the house**

## Tom Helme is best known for turning Farrow & Ball into a household name

had a green paper. Tom has changed all this, adding warmth and texture to rooms that might otherwise feel somewhat gloomy and overscaled.

He mixed all the colours himself: soft greys, drabs and stones that change subtly in the Kintyre light. For the passages, he used 'that popular shade of apple green you find over and over again in Georgian houses'. The guest-bathroom suite has a bright-red gloss in homage to David Hicks's Grand Staircase walls at Barons Court; the gunroom and Mrs Boyd's bathroom are red, too, but in flat paint.

Tom credits his friend John Sutcliffe, the artist/decorator and former National Trust Historic Buildings Representative to whom he was apprenticed in 1978: 'He taught me how to mix paint and about colour and decoration.' Another mentor was John Cornforth, who was so good at finding promising young bloods to be schooled for the National Trust—indeed, a whole generation of conservators owe their careers to him. He got Tom the job of assistant to Mr Mlinaric, who was working for the Trust in the early 1990s, and this

trained him to take over the role of the Trust's Advisor on Decoration in 1991.

With Mr Mlinaric, he worked on projects such as the Bath Assembly Rooms, Nostell Priory and Beningbrough Hall: 'It was all restoration work—mixing historic paint colours and getting estimates for remaking curtains.'

At the same time, Tom was building up his own interior-design business, working on many public and private historic interiors, including embassy residences, clubs and banks. It was while at Castlehill in Devon in 1990 that he came across an old tin of Farrow & Ball paint that turned out to be exactly the right shade of red for the dining room. 'When I went back two weeks later, they'd mixed the required amount and I realised that this could be the solution to my having to spend endless hours in cold country houses splashing paint everywhere as I attempted to mix up vats of different colours.'

The Trust at this time was considering setting up its own shops selling traditional paints and other decorative items whose revival it had pioneered and Gervase Jackson-Stops asked Tom



**Above: The drawing room mixes an 18th-century tapestry bought in Paris specially for the room with a B & B Italia sofa (with Fermoie cushions) and a carpet replicating an Eileen Gray design. Tom mixed the shade of blue for this room, as he did with all the colours in the house. Left: The dining room table is a large piece of ash wood painted by the automatist artist Sara Allen**



to look out for a small paint manufacturer. 'Farrow & Ball had been operating from the same premises in Wimbourne since the 1930s and was still using its old recipes and I'd kept all the colours I'd worked with, with names such as Drab and Dead Salmon. And so we collaborated on bringing out a range of 57 historic colours.'

'I thought only owners of country houses would be interested, but then Min Hogg wrote an article in *World of Interiors* and the firm was inundated. It could, however, be said that Farrow & Ball was somewhat uncommercial and there were problems with supply.'

It was then that Tom and his old school chum Martin Ephson decided to become involved. 'I knew all about commissions and decorating for demanding clients, but little about business. We had two years of fire-fighting, but then it took off and we had lots of fun for 15 years.'

Painting was Tom's first love and, when they sold the company in 2006, he went back to art school. However, 50 felt too young to retire and so, in 2011, he and Martin set up their fine-fabrics business, Fermoie. 'We'd often discussed doing fabric and both really enjoyed the manufacturing process—that's what got us out of bed at Farrow & Ball and spurred us on with Fermoie.'

Tom heads up the studio, where all the designs are drawn by hand; the printing is also done in-house. 'People say we're completely mad; everybody else is printing digitally, but you can't get the same effect with a digital machine. What's special about our method is how gentle it is—just kissing the surface of the fabric' (they use a rotary screen printer).

Establishing Fermoie coincided with buying Carskley and the house ➤





Above and below: Fermoie fabrics, their palette based on historic paint colours, are used throughout the house for upholstery, curtains and cushions



has become a showcase for the firm's textiles. Curtains, cushions and lampshades create pools of vibrant colour against the more muted tones of the interiors, their palette of Suede Shoes, Kintyre Green, Marron Glace and other enticing shades based on historic paint colours.

Fermoie fabrics are known for their small patterns, produced in more than 200 carefully edited colourways. Uniquely, its 'plain' cottons and linens are also printed—enlivened by artwork that emulates dragged paintwork, an effect Fowler understood so well.

The house contains much original furniture by the leading Edinburgh cabinetmaker Whytock & Reid, to which Tom has added his own designs, made by Nick Coryndon. These include the dining-room chairs, sideboard and table, the hall sofas, a bookcase and 'golden section' table in the South Hall.

Throughout the house, existing brown furniture is juxtaposed with B&B Italia sofas, works by Fornasetti, resin vases by Dinosaur Designs and other contemporary decorative pieces, as well as framed antique African and Indian textiles and vintage photographs.

**Carskies is remarkable for its Edwardian plumbing by Alex Forsyth & Son of Paisley. Mrs Boyd's bathroom is one of several still retaining its original tinned-copper bath**

**‘Look at your objects, for it's around these that you want to build your rooms’**

There's also a good collection of 20th-century British art, including works by Duncan Grant, David Hockney and Augustus John. Tom likes grouping works by one artist together, so one bedroom is hung with his collection of Peggy Angus paintings and the flower room sports a group of John Sutcliffe's 'Pulcinella' watercolours.

All this, along with beaches, cliffs and island views, can be widely appreciated, for Carskies and Shore Cottage are available to rent throughout the year.

The rose garden and bowling green have been restored and there is good stalking, woodcock shooting and fishing. There can be few country houses so remote that encompass such a sophisticated knowledge of colour, textiles and design. And now that Tom has turned his hand to reviving the farm and woodlands, a new chapter awaits.

*Carskies Estate, Mull of Kintyre (www.carskies.com).*

*The Fermoie showroom, at 2, Pond Place, London SW3, offers a blind-and curtain-making service. The factory in Marlborough prints to order and all dispatches are made within five days of order. £96 per m for cottons and linens (01672 513723; www.fermoie.com). Nick Coryndon (01672 562581; mail@coryndon.co.uk).*

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