

OPEN SECRETS: OUR GUIDE TO HISTORIC SUMMER DAYS OUT

PERIOD LIVING & TRADITIONAL HOMES

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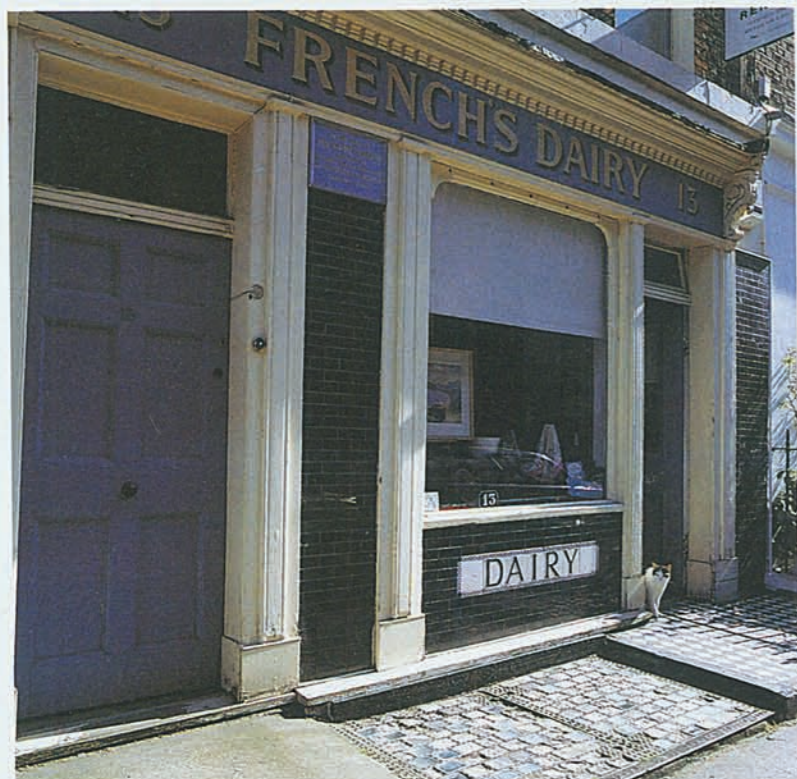
PROVENCAL STYLE

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country kitchen**

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Real period homes



Dairy fresh

FEATURE OLIVIA TEMPLE
PHOTOGRAPHY DAVID GEORGE

In London's leafy Bloomsbury, a former dairy in a Georgian townhouse has provided perfect working and living space for Karen and Paul Rennie



ABOVE This area of Bloomsbury was developed by speculative builders after the Great Fire of London. The building dates back to around 1740, and the shop front was added in the middle of the 19th century.

LEFT Paul and Karen with Ruby the cat. They met at Sotheby's in the Eighties – he was in the picture department, she was in ceramics and silver. 'It was a great training ground,' says Paul.

RIGHT In the light upstairs sitting room, a comfortable arm chair is draped with a black and white Welsh blanket and on the floor an antique kelim rug softens the footsteps. The hearth is painted white and unadorned – there were boarded-up fireplaces but Paul preferred to keep the simple shape. Above the fireplace is a rare Shell poster, and on each side are London Transport posters from 1930 to 1960





ABOVE On the ground floor is the shop and showroom of the Rennie's expanded business. There they sell furniture, kitchen ephemera, jewellery, china, glass and vintage scarves as well as books and sheet music from the Twenties to the Fifties. Paul specialises in posters and prints, Karen in artist-designed ceramics. Both are keen to concentrate on the work of artists working as designers.

BELOW This wonderful assortment of tins, mostly dating from the Forties and Fifties, includes Mackintosh's toffees, St Bruno tobacco, Pacific-packed salmon, Burdell's gravy salt, and the distinctive stripes of Huntley & Palmer's Cocktail Biscuits



On a spring morning in 1994, Karen Rennie was strolling through London's leafy Bloomsbury. She was on her way from the Thames-side shop she ran with her husband Paul to deliver a vintage poster to a customer.

As she took in the graceful houses and quaint little shops in Rugby Street her eyes lit on a 'To Let' sign above French's Dairy. 'It was a five-storey Georgian building with a 19th-century shop front. Even the tiles outside were original,' she says, 'It was absolutely irresistible.' Karen noted the number and hurried on, eager to share her find with Paul.

When the Rennies phoned the contact number to find out more, they found they were talking to an agent for Rugby School, which owns a lot of properties in the area,' says Karen. 'The lease was still available, so we snapped it up.'

Paul and Karen met in 1979 at Sotheby's, where he was in paintings and silver, she in ceramics. By the time Karen was walking through Bloomsbury, they had spent 15 years building up a business at Butler's Wharf, selling vintage posters from their own personal collection. But their premises had become too small. 'We were eager to extend our range to artefacts and ephemera, and had been thinking about somewhere larger for some time,' says Paul.

They found that they had taken on a time warp. There has been a building on the site since about 1740, and since 1887 three generations of dairymen had provided the local community with milk,

PORTFOLIO

PAUL AND KAREN RENNIE'S HOME AND SHOP IN BLOOMSBURY

Built: After the Great Fire of London in around 1740.

Location: Rugby School-owned estate in Bloomsbury, central London.

Materials: Brick with timber floors and a slate roof.

Rooms: Downstairs shop, upstairs kitchen/dining area, sitting room, two bedrooms, a bathroom and 'book' room.

Major problems: Five generations of floor and wallpaper which needed to be removed. Erratic wiring. Old floorboards full of nails.

Best features: Historic associations, location and size.

Old style: A traditional dairy serving the local community, with accommodation over the shop.

Now: Simple, bright and uncluttered living space with original period features decoratively enhanced, over a charming specialist shop with an 1880s front.



cream, cheese and eggs from the shop. In the vaulted stone cellar, a rusting fridge gaped open and faded orders for milk and cream were still pinned to the wall. The cellar door was painted pea soup green – a colour much loved by Victorians. The Rennies like it too. 'We've no intention of changing it,' says Karen.

There were no major structural problems. 'All you do if you knock walls down is lose hanging space,' says Paul, thinking of his posters. 'This type of house was built of brick with timber floors, but the interior specification would have been at the client's expense.' The electrics, however, left something to be desired. 'We had four systems – all illegal,' Karen laughs. After rewiring the whole building, they turned their attention ▶

ABOVE In the upstairs dining area, four late 19th-century ladderback chairs originally from Heal's surround an oak dining table and two wrought-iron candles. More vintage posters decorate the white walls.

RIGHT A late 19th-century cast-iron range has been left in place in the dining area. It is presided over by a replica Michelin Man and early 20th-century cake tin moulds in the shape of numbers





TOP A splendid scrubbed oak sideboard, an original by Ambrose Heal, displays an ever-changing collection of treasures. Here it holds

a brown and green Upchurch Pottery vase, a Poole Pottery vase, and two Wedgwood Rebus plates – the one on the right spells out 'For your good health, sir' in pictures. The enamel 'P' (bottom left) would once have been part of a shop sign.

MIDDLE & BOTTOM In the bathroom, as in the rest of the house, the Rennies found the original Georgian panelling still in place under generations of wallpaper. They also took up successive layers of floor covering to uncover the original wooden floor, which they've painted blue. Since they don't like clutter and hate fitted cupboards, they've improvised when it comes to storage space – beneath the wash basin a wicker picnic hamper acts as a laundry basket; bed linen and towels are stored in a chest of drawers. The Rennies delight in putting the piquant and practical side by side. Over the roll top bath hangs a huge blue and yellow flag which signals that the vessel to which it's attached is an aircraft carrier. The window blinds were made to measure at John Lewis



to decoration. 'We peeled off five layers of various floor coverings and lino, and found so many nails we couldn't use a sander,' says Karen. 'So we decided to paint the upstairs floorboards, and cover the downstairs ones with natural jute.'

The Rennie's business now takes up the entire ground floor, with the old parlour incorporated into the shop. 'This is where we offer friends and customers lemonade or tea and sponge cake,' says Karen, 'on a Fifties tray of course!'

The hallway and wooden staircase beyond are painted with ox-blood red floor paint. 'I've liked the colour ever since I saw it on the deck of HMS Victory as a boy,' Paul says. Elsewhere the floors are painted pale blue. This adds to the prevailing nautical feel, as does the bunting up the stairs. 'It's like being at the seaside in central London,' says Paul.

Upstairs in the living area, there are no curtains – the Rennies don't like fuss and clutter. Natural-coloured cotton window blinds manage light and shade during the day, while at night blackout blinds keep out light from the bedrooms. 'We spent some sleepless hours until someone told us about them,' says Karen.

The sitting room, with its three big windows, white walls and unadorned hearth, seems permanently sunny and warm. There is a strong Scandinavian influence here, and the table is by Alvar Aalto, a Finnish architect who designed a lot of plywood furniture in the Thirties.

There are no fitted cupboards. 'We use metal catering shelves for books and storage,' says Karen. At the top of the house an iron ladder with pulleys and ropes hangs from its moorings. A huge counterbalance lowers and raises it for access to the roof. There is a large hatch, left open in the summer. 'We let in sun, air, and a patch of sky,' says Paul.

Outside, the house looks much as it did in the last dairyman's day, with bright blue paint still on the windows and doors. He would recognise his shop quite easily, but find an intriguingly different world within its walls. ■

ADDRESS BOOK

Bath and Belfast sink in kitchen salvaged from the builder who did all the decorating: **Colin Law**, 26 Denmark Hill, Folkestone CT19 6EJ.

Original Heal's furniture on display and for sale at: The Antique Trader at The Millinery Works, 85-87 Southgate Road, London N1 3JS, from 3-21 June, tel: 0171-359 2019 for more details.

Paint used on floorboards from: J W Bollom and Co, 15 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SN, tel: 0171-242 0313. For a paint chart, technical help and to mail order, tel: 0181-658 2299. + **MOB**

Window blinds made by: John Lewis, tel: 0171-629 7711.

Seagrass matting on ground floor from: Crucial Trading, 79 Westbourne Park Road, London W2, tel: 0171-221 9000. + **MOB**

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