

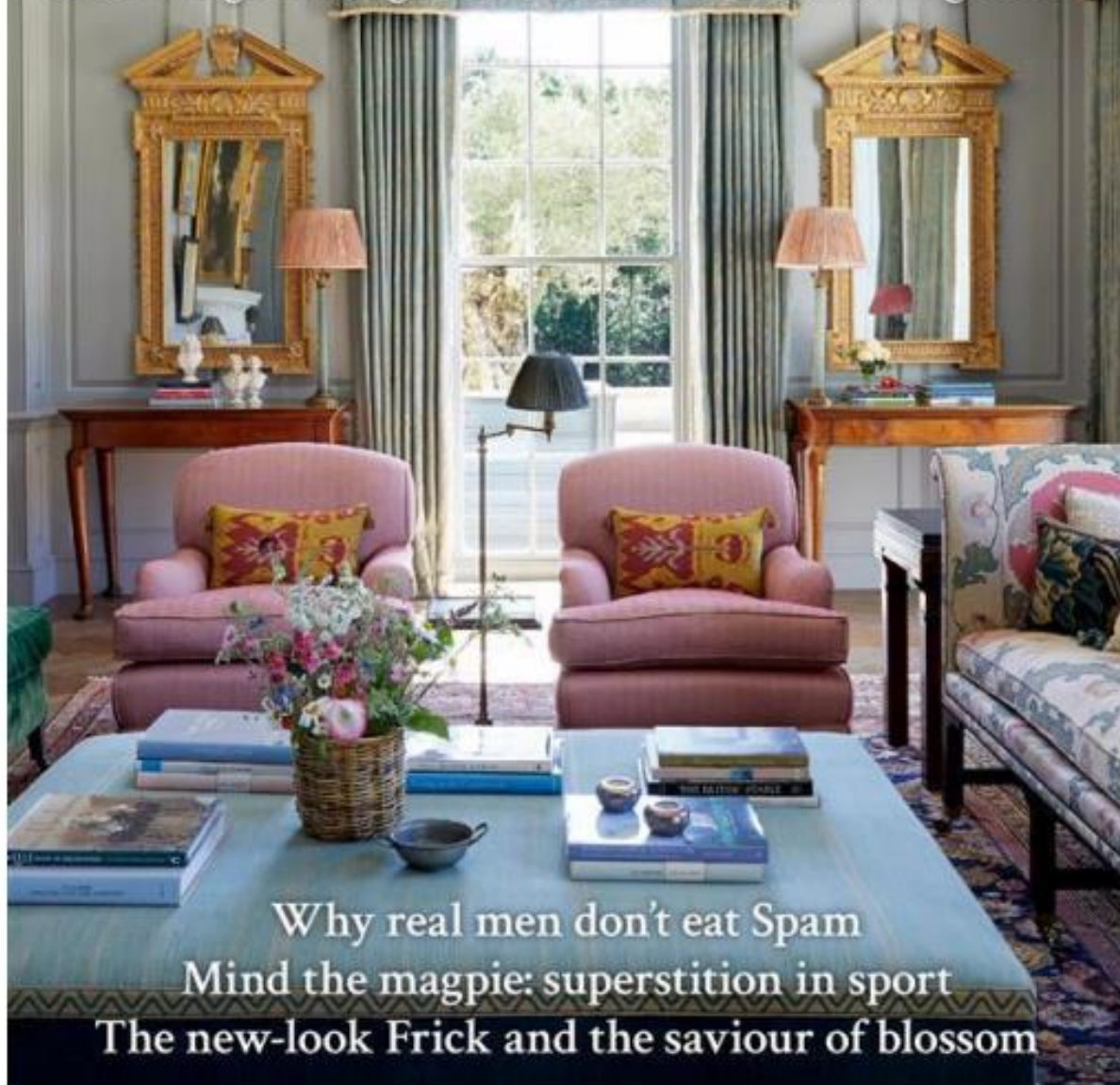
COUNTRY LIFE

EVERY WEEK

APRIL 9, 2025

Interiors special

Shall we go through? The return of the drawing room



Why real men don't eat Spam
Mind the magpie: superstition in sport
The new-look Frick and the saviour of blossom

Interiors



Interiors should evolve, according to Stella Weatherall, pictured at her Kensington home

degree from Ryerson University in Toronto under his belt, Mr Symington took advantage of his mother's dual Irish-Canadian nationality by moving to London in 2015 with nothing but a suitcase or two. He secured a position first with the designer Samantha Todhunter and later with Sims Hilditch, before setting up his studio in 2019. 'I learnt that not everything had to match, to be brave with colour and was introduced to English country-house design.' The combination has proved hugely successful and he works on projects in London, the Cotswolds and East Anglia. 'I think people are a bit tired of seeing the same thing again and again. Being North American and one step removed, I can do traditional decorating or I can be more playful. My clients may have grown up with carpet in the bathroom, but they want a fresh take on their parents' decorating style.'

‘Formality has fallen away. It affects how rooms are now used’

A key skill in decorating remains as true today as it was 40 years ago: listening to a client's brief, understanding what they need and seeing the opportunities that might otherwise lie hidden. 'It's about giving them something they didn't know they wanted that elevates how they live in their home,' says London-based interior designer Pandora Taylor (www.pandorataylor.co.uk), who trained at the KLC and cut her teeth at the interior-design practice Kitesgrove. 'Interior design is a bit like your clothes—you want to wear them, you don't want them to wear you. An interior design should reflect you, not define you.' However, all the content available on social media can detract slightly from these aims, she agrees. 'I get design fatigue. There's so much to see, much of which is the same and, as a designer, you ask yourself: what can I add? On the positive side, it forces you to push things because the clients are very often design-savvy.'

What's easy to miss in the image-dominated world of the internet is that the value of using a professional interior designer lies in what they do long before decisions are made about fabrics and upholstery. Space planning and layouts are key. 'A big thing that has changed in the past few decades is the way people live in their homes,' says Isabella Worsley (www.isabellaworsley.com), who also trained at KLC after studying Architectural History and History of Art at Edinburgh University. 'Formality has fallen away in many ways. It affects how rooms are now used. For example, →



Designer Isabella Worsley at the Walmer Castle pub in Notting Hill, London W11, the complete transformation of which she oversaw

Shaping the future

How is a new generation of interior designers responding to changing lifestyles, proliferating choice, the challenges of sustainability and the tireless demands of social media? Arabella Youens asked some of the profession's brightest lights

Photographs by Simon Brown

OVER the past 50 years, the British interior-design industry has grown up; back then, the land where the three glass domes of Design Centre, Chelsea Harbour stands was an unloved waterfront and the profession was still in its infancy. Today, London is home to some of the world's most prolific multi-disciplinary practices that undertake work around the globe, led by founders who have become household names, garnered honours and written books.

It is also a sphere that has become much more democratised; Instagram and Pinterest have fuelled a greater interest in the subject and, in many senses, it has lost its mystique. Previously, the only way to see inspiring interiors was in the pages of magazines and finding specialist painters, artisans and specialist upholsterers relied on those in the know. 'Decorators held their cards and contacts close to their chest,' says Stella Weatherall (www.stellaweatherall.com).

'People are a bit tired of seeing the same thing again and again'

'Now, several leading names, such as Rita Konig and Beata Heuman, are happy to share their knowledge and sources through online classes. Technology has meant that it's a much more open field these days,' adds the decorator, who studied at the Inchbald and worked with the Dorset-based interior designer Flora Soames and Kit Kemp before setting up on her own. 'It's not only what the client sees. We use software to manage projects and procurement that allows small businesses such as mine to operate in a way that would have previously been impossible.'

Bath-based Canadian decorator Sean Symington (www.seansymington.com) admits that social media has been a big boon for his young business. His brightly coloured rooms feature clever and unexpected mixes of patterns that are hard to miss on Instagram. With a design →



Sean Symington with his dog Penny at the designer's Victorian home in Bath, Somerset

Interiors

although dining rooms might still exist in their traditional form in larger country houses, elsewhere we're swapping out polished mahogany tables for those made of limed oak so that they can double as a homeworking area.'

Although open-plan living spaces have dominated in recent decades, Miss Taylor believes it is being reconsidered. 'There's definitely a move towards having more walls and doors to close,' she says. Having more broken-up spaces allows for greater experimentation with design, creating different moods in different rooms. 'As you're not committing to a colour or a pattern on a big scale, you can be bolder with design choices,' says Miss Worsley. Another flash in the pan was a desire for two work-from-home spaces. Adding sofa beds to studies makes them more usable now many have gone back to work in the office. In other adjustments, Mr Symington senses tastes are heading back to the 1980s with more schemes that match, lots of layering and a focus on cosiness. 'It's a nostalgia for simpler times. No one is squeezing bathrooms into bedrooms for the sake of it; others want carpets back in bathrooms. People want a sanctuary, not a show-room. I think decorating is coming full circle.'

'Timeless decorating starts with using antique furniture'

using natural materials and choosing timeless designs. 'The mantra that you should do something once well is evident when I talk to clients,' says Miss Weatherall. She advocates slow decorating and taking time to put a scheme together. It's a concept that might seem at odds with running a successful business that relies on a high turnover of projects. 'Timeless design is not about completing a house in one go. Interiors should evolve, that's fundamental to achieving rooms that feel settled.'

Timeless decorating starts with using antique furniture, adds Miss Taylor. 'I can't create a room that is full of new pieces. The vast majority of my projects use almost all antiques — some are re-upholstered to give them a fresh start.' This approach addresses a central truth about interior design: the waste it generates. 'We work in an industry that relies on getting rid of the old,' she says, before adding that she is 'semi-strict' with clients, underlining that it's not necessary to strip out everything. 'These pieces have an important role to play in preventing a house from looking identical to another, which can be a problem these days with the deep penetration of social media.'



Listening is key: interior designer Pandora Taylor at a client's south-east London home