

home was once a dark box but now we've seen the light

By Jane Hughes

When architectural antiques dealer Mike Roberts auctioned off his entire stock at Christie's, his intention was to leave the business and try something new. Instead, he ended up buying and restoring the biggest antique of his career: a derelict and dilapidated Victorian chapel of rest in Tunbridge Wells. The chapel – perched on the edge of the leafy hillside of Woodbury Park cemetery – was close to Mike's old shop. In fact, he'd often admired its stonework on walks to the old graveyard, which had been deconsecrated and turned into a park many decades earlier. So when the Kent building came up for auction in 2005, Mike snapped it up. 'I'd always thought this was a pretty and peaceful spot,' he says. 'And I loved the Tunbridge Wells sandstone of the chapel, which was also used to build the grand villas in the Calverley Park area of town. I'd never been able to afford one of those, but since I got more money than I expected from selling my stock, this was my chance to have a miniature sandstone house.'

The chapel had a special quality, says Mike. 'It's only later that I thought, what am I going to do with it?' Mike had sold antique fireplaces, lighting and garden ornaments from his shop, Architectural Emporium, for many years, and in 1999 expanded to the former Bald Faced Stag pub in nearby Ashurst. Here, he'd converted ground floor into a shop for garden statuary while his family lived in the flat above. He sold his stock in 2004 when the business was too big and the garden became overrun with statues. 'Buying antiques is like a very active form of gambling,' he says. 'I love buying beautiful things but I hate selling them. It was quite cathartic for me to offload everything in one go.'

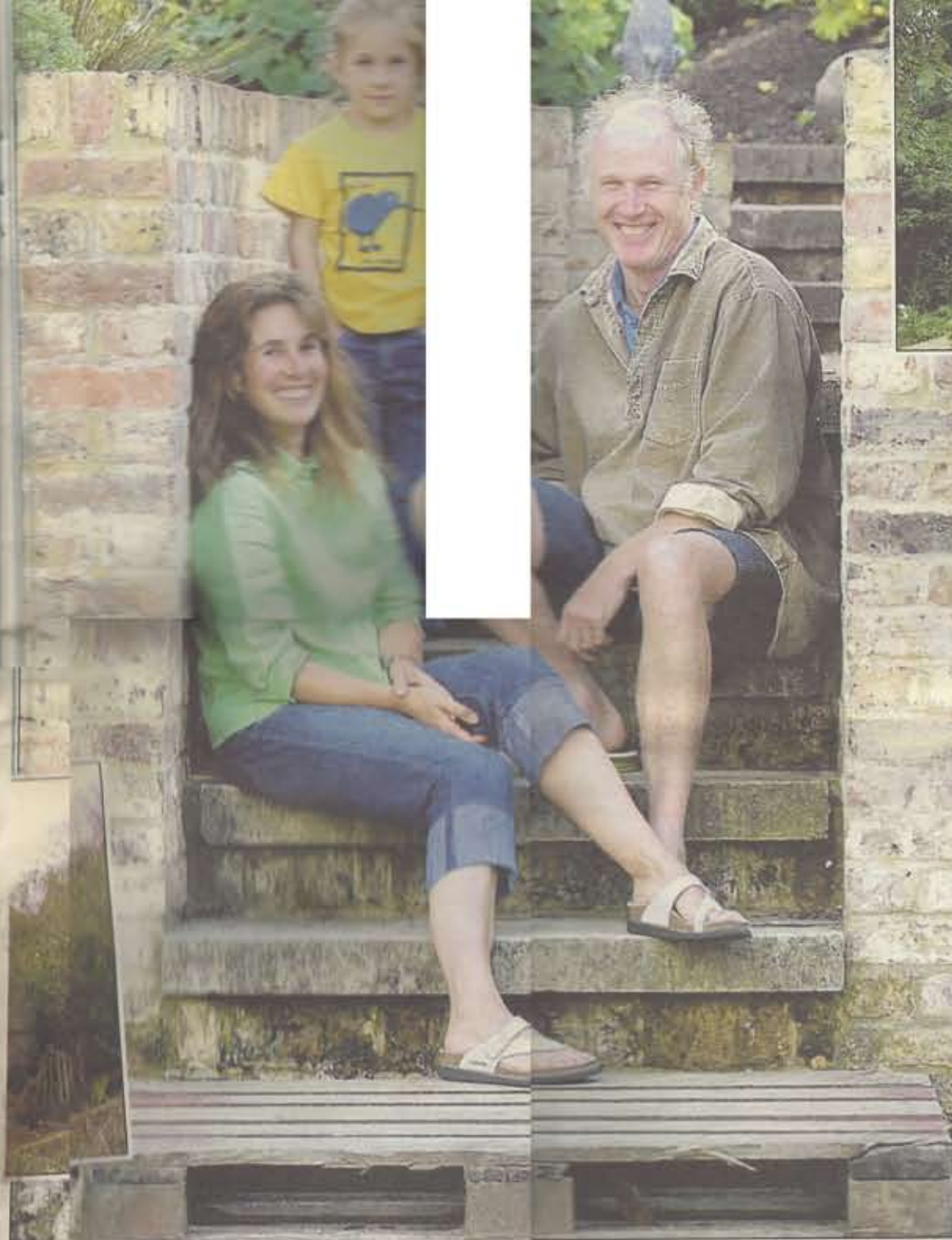
Mike, 44, his partner Pip, 42, a movement therapist, and two daughters Mattie, 10, and Holly, four, then went travelling for months in Australia and New Zealand. On their return, Mike bought the chapel thinking that, at £160,000, it seemed quite

FORSAKEN: The old chapel had been used as a store, but locals complained about its condition

cheap. Having since spent about £350,000 doing it up, however, he happily admits it was 'not the most financially astute investment'. The chapel had been used as a store, he says, but had deteriorated to the point where people had started to complain about its condition. 'While we were away, the council sold it with planning permission for conversion to a tiny three-bedroom house, but the new owner then put it up for auction.'

Knowing Mike's work, Pip had no qualms about what he was taking on. 'Mike has bought a couple of houses that I thought would be terrible and turned them into the most lovely places so I completely trust his vision,' she says. Indeed, after six months adjusting the original plans and nearly a year on restoration and building work, Mike has transformed the chapel into a beautiful and serene loft-like home. Working with the proportions of the building, he's extended the back and reduced the number of bedrooms to two.

The high-ceilinged, open-plan living space now unfolds into a studio-like area at its far end, with sunlight flooding in from hand-crafted, double-glazed casement windows that soar to about 16ft in height. With wonderful views down the hillside, it's the sort of contemplative space an artist or musician would love. Upstairs, Mike has built a simple double bedroom and contemporary wood and stone



SERENE: Mike Roberts, left with wife Pip and daughter Holly, snapped up the chapel at auction then spent £350,000 extending it, above, to create a tranquil studio-like area with soaring hand-crafted windows, right



FINISHING TOUCH: Original internal stonework has been left exposed, left, and solid oak floors laid throughout. Old chapel doors divide the lobby from the living space, above

bathroom in the eaves, both with views over the rooftops. There's another double bedroom with walk-in wardrobe and a bathroom below the living area. After proving to the council that the chapel met modern heat-saving regulations through new underfloor heating and ceiling insulation and the hollow core filling in its cavity walls, Mike was allowed to leave the original external stonework exposed. He's also laid solid-oak flooring through the whole house. The problem with some

chapel conversions, says Peter Wright of Humberts estate agents in Wadhurst, is that people try to do them cheaply or cram in too many bedrooms.

'A lot of hard work went into building these quite monumental structures – and you've got to get the stonework and proportions looking right,' he says.

That's something Mike understood implicitly. 'As with any antique, I was faced with the choice of repairing

something cheaply or in a way that would look great and stand the test of time,' he says. 'There was no contest. I had to do a job that would respect the fabric and history of the building.'

Early on, Mike brought in a specialist stonemason he knew from fireplace restoration to dismantle the damaged gables. He then worked with local builder and stonemason Andy Wyatt and his team.

'The builders obviously thought I was mad, but they were also excited

about working on the project,' he says. Throughout the whole conversion, unforeseen complications conspired to push up the cost. Mike underpinned a couple of cracks in the back wall that he thought were caused by subsidence.

But when the builders came to strip the roof, they discovered that it had been relaid in concrete tiles, and it was the weight of these that had caused the walls to push out. As a result, the whole roof had to be replaced with a tile-hung wooden structure.

Mike's passion for antiques is evident in his finishing touches. The solid-teak kitchen work surfaces are salvaged laboratory worktops and there is even a set of small chemists' drawers fitted into the handmade, Gothic-style kitchen units.

Old chapel doors divide the entrance lobby from the living space and there are Arts and Crafts catches on the windows and cast-iron balustrades with bronze handrails

on the stairs. Mike hadn't intended to develop the chapel for sale. After buying it, he'd also acquired a rundown farmhouse in the French Alps, and was thinking of the chapel as a UK base.

In the meantime, he'd turned the shop and family flat in Ashurst into a single spacious home. And recently, he and Pip decided that Ashurst is probably the most suitable place to live and have therefore put the chapel on the market for £595,000.

Selling agent Gavin Selby, of Knight Frank, says it's a one-off, characterful home with wow factor. 'Because it's so quirky, it will appeal to a niche market – possibly as a quiet weekend retreat. You certainly won't have to worry about neighbours from hell.'

Homes for the converted



MARIANNE PARK, HASTINGS, £349,950
Mediterranean-style, four-bedroom house in gated development. Balcony views to sea. Agent: Abbey Gate, 01424 772477.

HAWKINGE, KENT, £480,000
Three-bedroom, three-reception-room house with original features and mature garden. Agent: Browns, 0845 261 3713.



COOLHAM, WEST SUSSEX, £650,000
Chapel house, built in 1898, now has four bedrooms, a double garage and gardens. Agent: Henry Adams, 0845 231 6537.

Key Facts
Price: £595,000. Bedrooms: Two. Bathrooms: One. Reception rooms: Open-plan studio-like area. Gardens: Newly laid out around the house. Agent: Knight Frank, 01892 515035