

Hall or nothing for revamp

FOR SALE: Mix money and passion with a dash of English eccentricity and you have one of the most stunning country houses in Yorkshire. **Sharon Dale** reports. Pictures by **Gerard Binks**

THE gargantuan plant pots holding tall spirals of topiary at the door of Howsham Hall are the first signs that someone here is thinking big.

We are greeted inside by a huge bust of Juno, imperious and unfazed by the opulent surroundings and seven-foot high mirrors. It is confirmation that this is a monumental project backed by a king-size budget.

The interior is grand with an *Alice in Wonderland* feel, like Lewis Carroll and Georgian architect Robert Adam had a brain-storming session and threw caution

to the wind. They'd certainly be impressed with the no expense spared restoration of this grade one listed, 17th century pile at Whitwell-on-the-Hill, north of York, which is the work of a wealthy businessman and developer-designer James Perkins.

James is a charming whirling dervish bursting with original ideas and he's backed by a crack team of builders and craftsmen headed by right-hand man Jonny.

At 18, he was organising balls and acid house parties in big houses and ran the Fantasia dance music label, before setting up his property development company GL50.

He sold Simon Cowell his Holland Park house and bought another from Robbie Williams. But rescuing decaying country piles is a speciality. He saved Dowdeswell in Cheltenham and transformed Aynhoe Park in Gloucestershire, now his own

home. He also finds and revamps properties for high net worth clients.

He bought Howsham Hall for an Englishman who has a fruit import business in Asia. "I looked at a lot of properties but I knew instantly this was special," says James, who bought the house for £2.05m for his client in 2007.

It had been a prep school and before that

home to the Cholmley family. Many of the Jacobean and Georgian features survived including the Doric columns, elaborate cornicing, stucco friezes and fireplaces, but the place was in a sorry state, plagued with leaks and damp. It also came with a curse after stone from Kirkham Priory was used

to build it after the Reformation. This was considered sacrilege.

"It was the same time they were drowning women for being witches," says James. "I bought Howsham because it felt like a very positive place and it still does."

Still, a small fortune was required, which was fine because the client had one. Howsham was re-roofed, re-wired, re-pointed and a state of the art lighting and heating system was installed. There are six miles of copper that makes it toasty warm in 15 minutes. Just making it habitable took two and half years.

After a spend of "millions" it is now on the market and is the most expensive house for sale in Yorkshire at the moment with a price tag of offers in excess of £5m.

The owner decided that he wasn't using it enough. Five or six times a year is James's estimate, while the housekeepers have it to themselves for the rest of the time, apart from being used for an occasional film location or photo shoot. *Tool Academy* was filmed here and *Vogue* and *Tatler* are about to use it as a backdrop.

It is on the market for the second time after a sale fell through and



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while it may sound pricey, the original asking price in May 2009 was £6m. Since then, a further half a million has been lavished on the house.

"We had interest from football managers and local and overseas business people. We sold it but at the last minute the buyer pulled out," says James, who is still spending on the place.

He has just given a stunning monochrome master bedroom suite its second makeover in as many years. It is effectively a sumptuous apartment with a sitting room with Designers Guild wallpaper accessorised with a flamingo from an Isle of Wight museum and a gold harp. The adjoining bedroom, dressing room and make-up room make it as big as the average terrace house. "It's a big house, which is why I've made each part of it useable and useful," says James.

The 37,000 square feet of space set in 83 acres has five formal reception rooms, seven bedroom suites, a kitchen, snooker room, family and leisure wing, offices, staff quarters and wine cellars. There's planning permission for a pool.

While layout and restoration are all part of the remit, James specialises in décor and describes his style as theatrical meets "English eccentric". He enjoys sourcing and buying and the beautiful and unusual from sale rooms and museums including the V&A in London and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The faux organ drinks cabinet came from a private members club in London, the sofa is a cast-off from Cliveden. "Christine Keeler could've had some fun on there," he says.

The elephant head came from a theme park and the Elgin marbles replica from York College. Taxidermy features heavily with exotic birds, swans and a stuffed

cougar ready to pounce from the top of the stairs. Plaster casts are in every room. James bought his first aged 16 and he now has a collection over 4,500 friezes, hands, feet, busts and full size classical sculptures.

Contemporary buys include a chair by Zaha Hadid and they sit alongside antiques including a gilded sofa that cost £10,000. It all makes the Mark Wilkinson kitchen, painted in James' favourite muted Farrow and Ball colours, look rather staid.

"This is a Marmite house. You'll either love this or you won't. The idea is that the people who built and lived in these kind of houses would've had brought back all kinds of wares from Grand Tours. So what I've given it is a world traveller, English explorer look," adds James, who is busy overseeing another inspired installation – a collection 36 old globes that will be placed on individual shelves up the wall.

But why bother with these further embellishments is the obvious question, as workmen scurry around and craftsmen create giant gold headboards for a guest room.

"The client is coming up to stay soon and anyway he may end up keeping Howsham," says James, who admits that if he sells it may not be at a profit.

"Money isn't the point. My client enjoys the project and feels he has helped save an important home.

"I'm hoping he'll want to do another one. We're a good team. He has the money and I have the experience and passion. Basically, he doesn't have time to go shopping, so he pays me to do it for him."

■ **Howsham Hall is for sale jointly through Knight Frank tel: 01423 530088 and Savills tel: 01904 617800.**





SECRET DRINKS: The drawing room with what appears to be an organ, but is a drinks cabinet, top; the over-sized Juno head gazing over curios, above left; a flamingo in the sitting room, above right.





CREATURE COMFORTS: Clockwise from far left, a horse head adorns one corner; the sitting room that is part of the master bedroom suite which has wallpaper from Designers Guild; some of the many curios; one of the many luxury bathrooms and the hall itself.







RURAL IDYLL: Jacobean Howsham Hall is grade one listed thanks to its period features





left, not forgetting the fake elephant's head in the games room; the sitting room in the master bedroom suite, top right.



