

# HOUSE & GARDEN<sup>®</sup>

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# What's new?

On the site of a former vicarage in Hampshire, Andrew and Sarah Hills of Porta Romana have created an elegant and distinguished family house, which has an established feel despite its modern reconstruction

TEXT JENNIFER GOULDING | PHOTOGRAPHS MICHAEL SINCLAIR | LOCATIONS EDITOR GABBY DEEMING



**HALL** (*this page*) A fossilised hippo skull from a Parisian flea market is framed by an indoor garden of ivy, ferns and ficus. Some of the planters are Compton Pottery originals and the table was custom-made by Porta Romana. **DINING ROOM** (*opposite*) It took 10 people to install the Oxenwood 'Jan Table', which seats up to 16 people. Pierre Frey's 'Petit Parc' cotton/linen lines the walls





FAMILY ROOM This room lin  
creating a large, convivial space  
Tim Page Carpets complements th  
and woven paper wallcovering f  
table was made from a beam that







In the cult television comedy series *Only Fools and Horses*, Trigger, a road sweeper, wins an award for the longevity of his broom, which he claims is 20 years old. However, his declaration that 'it's had 17 new heads and 14 new handles' presents a conundrum. Forgive the comparison, but this house, belonging to Andrew and Sarah Hills, the couple behind lighting and furniture company Porta Romana, is similarly confounding. The renovations they completed in 2013 are so extreme that they raise the question: is the house old or new?

'It was built as a vicarage in the nineteenth century and the front was very pretty, but the rest of the house had been extensively remodelled in the Fifties,' explains Sarah. 'Our plan was to retain the shell, but no matter how hard we tried, we were unable to create a design that worked for us and our three children.' Reluctantly, they pulled down everything except the façade. In the end, this too needed dismantling. The only part of the original building that remains intact is the coach house, which has been converted into a guest cottage. The materials from the façade were then reused to create a new, taller front elevation that otherwise looks extremely similar to its predecessor. 'It is a rebirth rather than a reinvention,' says Sarah.

The couple first moved to this part of Hampshire in 2000. 'We were both raised less than 25 miles from here and many of the artisans who form the backbone of Porta Romana live in these villages,' says Andrew. However, finding the ideal house in this beautiful spot at the foot of the South Downs took time. The property they initially bought was a Jacobean cottage adjacent to their current home. 'We always loved the house next door and were fortunate to secure it when it came up for sale in 2009,' says Andrew. He and Sarah continued living in the cottage while the new house was being designed and built. 'At the top of our wishlist was orienting the new house around the view. Every day we wake up, look out of the window and find the landscape subtly changed. That is what this house is about.'

After two years of planning, work began in 2011. 'Anyone who has seen *Grand Designs* knows what happens next. It gets very muddy, things cost twice as much as the budget and the owners nearly get divorced,' continues Andrew. 'We avoided killing each other by dividing the responsibilities,' Sarah explains. 'I had the final decision on the garden and coach house, while Andrew had the last word on the house. He had a strong vision, but he couldn't have realised it without help from a large cast of characters - my father Clive Sturley, who is an architect, as well as a local architect, our builder and Anthony Collett of Collett-Zarzycki, who helped with the architectural design.'

'I envisaged a few generous, well-proportioned rooms, with a line of access from the front door to the view at the back of the house,' explains Andrew. Having always lived in cottages, the couple also wanted high ceilings and classical architectural details. The result is an elegant, airy interior with a wonderful flow. However, once the framework was complete, Andrew and Sarah had 'a house-building hangover'. Sarah explains, 'We needed help with ideas and keeping the momentum going.' An injection of energy came from the interior designer Paolo Moschino, whom they admire for his classic English style.

Paolo designed the main bedroom around one of his own fabrics, 'Aurora on Nivelles Oyster', which he used on the walls. However, for the most part, the interior design was a highly collaborative process, informed by Andrew and Sarah's desire to show off their treasured pieces - from works of art to flea-market finds. A neutral backdrop would have been the obvious solution. Instead, each item has been imaginatively framed. A



STUDY (opposite top) Farrow & Ball's 'Black Blue' paint adds to the dark, moody atmosphere in this room. COACH HOUSE SITTING ROOM (opposite bottom) The artist Dawn Reader hand-painted the walls and high ceiling here in a striped design to draw attention to the shape of the room. KITCHEN (this page) With its white Bulthaup units, this is a bright and airy space





fossilised hippo skull nestles in the 'indoor garden' – a mass of plants on a marble table in the hall. In the dining room, a modern photograph by Hendrik Kerstens is enhanced by an eighteenth-century-style fabric by Pierre Frey on the walls. 'We'd never have found that fabric without Paolo, but it was Sarah who suggested using it on the walls in here,' says Andrew.

The moods of the rooms are similarly diverse, moving from cool and refined in the sitting room to opulent and colourful in the dining room, then to ultra modern in the kitchen, and pretty and traditional in the main bedroom. Yet the shifts never jar. Everything fits together to make a great feast for the eyes.

Andrew and Sarah moved into the completed house in 2013 and sold the cottage next door. Once the builders had left, work could begin on the garden, which at that point was just mud, metal and bricks. Its well-balanced new design, which becomes less formal as it moves away from the house and blends into the landscape, is the work of Jane Brown. 'I love gardening, but I wouldn't have had the boldness to come up with a scheme on this scale,' says Sarah. However, as with the house, the creation of the garden has been a collaborative process. A secret garden, arboretum and wildflower meadow are now in development.

Within the garden is the coach house, which is now a winsome guest cottage. 'We do a lot of entertaining,' Sarah says. 'You can't have a house like this and not have people to stay' □

Collett-Zarzycki: [collett-zarzycki.com](http://collett-zarzycki.com)  
 Paolo Moschino for Nicholas Haslam: [nicholashaslam.com](http://nicholashaslam.com)  
 Jane Brown Garden & Landscape Design: [janebrown.co.uk](http://janebrown.co.uk)

**MAIN BEDROOM** (this page) The eighteenth-century Spanish chest of drawers is from a Parisian flea market. The walls are covered in 'Aurora on Nivelles Oyster' (green), from Paolo Moschino for Nicholas Haslam. **EXTERIOR** (opposite top left and bottom right) The house was built from stone chosen to match that of the rebuilt façade. The Regency-style windows were inspired by those at Sarah's childhood home in Surrey. **SPARE ROOM** (top right) A half-tester bed creates a traditional feel in this room on the top floor