

T A H O M E E L L I S

Edited by GERRI GALLAGHER

Sculptor David Williams-Ellis in his Cumbria studio (in front of the chatting statues*)

Home is where the art is

*Statue One: 'Cool place, eh?' Statue Two: 'Yes, but you should have seen the state of it when they moved in.' How sculptor David Williams-Ellis and his wife Serena fashioned a derelict farmhouse into a Cumbrian classic. By Violet Henderson

Photographed by JAMES MERRELL



From top, David and Serena Williams-Ellis's daughter Phoebe in the drawing room, beneath a painting of all three children by Russian artist Evgeny Grouzdev; the fireplace in the study from the Williams-Ellis family home in Wales; a guest bedroom with freestanding bath



On a green hill, between the expanse of the Pennines and the idyll of the Lake District, stands Lazonby Manor. Its stone is reddish and rugged, its windows latticed. And in the middle of the façade rises a tower, just like the ancient fortresses – relics from *Braveheart* days – that pepper this windy part of northern Cumbria, 20 miles from Penrith and 29 miles from Carlisle. 'We wanted the house to appear as if it had always been here – as if it had grown out of the setting,' says the lord of the 15-year-old manor, sculptor David Williams-Ellis.

David is sitting in his crimson study next to an unmade fire and surrounded by shelves filled with books on Michelangelo. Behind him, through the window, are beech hedges in shades of burnished gold and one of his bronzes – a lissom merwoman who looks as though she's about to take flight.

David Williams-Ellis, 53, the great-nephew of architectural titan Clough Williams-Ellis, has exhibited all over the world. His work can be found at Hoare & Co bank in London, Glamis Castle, Bodnant House, Nostell Priory and Swire's Oxford House in Hong Kong. He's moulded busts of the Duchess of Abercorn, Lord Vernon, the Duke of Westminster's daughters and Bryan Ferry's sons Isaac and Merlin. His media are bronze, mostly, and sometimes glass, but the special quality of David's work is its suggestion of movement. Around the family home, his sculptures are everywhere, from miniature figurines balancing in arabesque to life-sized bronzes lifting their arms to the heavens. 'I'm fascinated by the capabilities of the human form,' says the man who sculpts from fiendishly athletic life models. These game bodies, sometimes recruited from the circus, are asked to do the seemingly impossible, like split-leg backflips, for hours on end. 'Oh, they get lots of breaks,' laughs David. Lately, he has been sizing up his daughter's pony as a subject. 'I need to get him into the studio,' he says, with a twinkle in his eye.

In fact, his studio – a converted barn just a hop, skip and jump from the main house – is a whitewashed oasis of calm. The north-facing windows look out onto rolling hills and the village of Kirkoswald, a peaceful distance away on the horizon. While David works – at his best in the morning, after a breakfast of coffee and home-baked Irish soda bread – he usually plays some low-volume music. David's an opera fanatic. It's a passion that started in Florence when he was studying art under Nerina Simi. 'I was in Italy for four years. It really was the good life. Too good – I had to come back home or I'd have ended up under a bottle of Chianti, like rather a lot of other English artists out there.'

So David spent the Eighties in London, in various peeling-walled garrets, living out the decadence, creativity and freezing temperatures of *La Bohème*. Then he met Serena, an antiques dealer who was the friend of a friend who came to life-model. In nine months, they were married, living in Fulham with a dachshund called Lettice. 'She was my dowry,' says David. 'She abandoned Serena and went everywhere with me.' Three years later, they were building a house in Cumbria. 'I was finding it difficult to work in ▷



*Clockwise from above, the drawing room, featuring a portrait of Serena by Howard J Morgan; David and Serena's eldest son Hugo in the kitchen; the statue *Helen* on the roof of the manor; unfinished pieces in David's studio; a series of figurines*





◁ London and Serena's family had an interest up here.' That interest was a ramshackle farmhouse on 'a lot' of land that didn't exactly scream 'easy conversion into dream home'. 'My thought was, "Help!"' says David. By now, the couple had two small children, Hugo and Phoebe, and Jack was on the way – yet Serena, a slim, indomitable woman who phrases her sentences as questions, site-managed the project. She's even become an interior decorator off the back of her struggles. 'It was really quite a major experience,' she recalls.

Lengthy and troublesome, Lazonby Manor's birth involved three sets of architects' drawings and three sets of planning permissions. In the end, they plumped for Digby Harris of Francis Johnson & Partners, whose beautiful hand-drawn plans now wallpaper the downstairs loo. And while Lazonby Manor might have a grand pink-terracotta hall, it's a family house at heart, with sensible seagrass carpets, chintz bedrooms, a bulging boot room and a kitchen stuffed with paper, magazines and piles of schoolwork. In the drawing room, the walls are hung with paintings by their artist friends. David points proudly to works by Neil Forster, Teddy Bream and Sue Macartney Snape, and one by a 'relation of a relation', EH Shepard (the original illustrator of *The Wind in the Willows*). 'It's amazing to think how we first lived here after it had been built,' Serena reminisces, shaking her head. 'We had no carpets, barely any furniture and upside-down tea chests for bedside tables. But it was totally worth it.' □

The manor's lengthy birth involved three sets of architects' drawings and three sets of planning permissions



Clockwise from top left, Serena arranging flowers in the hall; an easterly view of the manor; the downstairs loo; a piano in the hall; David with his youngest son Alex and their dogs Jamba and Inca



SERENA WILLIAMS-ELLIS WEARS DENIM JEANS, £190, BY MIH. VELVET SLIPPERS, £245, BY PENELOPE CHILVERS. ALEX WILLIAMS-ELLIS WEARS CASHMERE JUMPER, £219, BY N PEAL. NYLON COAT, £99.95, BY BARBOUR. DAVID WEARS CASHMERE JUMPER, AS BEFORE. FOR STOCKISTS, SEE ADDRESS BOOK. STYLED BY SOPHIE GOODWIN. HAIR & MAKE-UP BY MARGO HOLDER, USING AVEDA & SISLEY