



# A Georgian revival

Rob and Victoria Ayling had to deal with the aftermath of a 1970s' renovation to reveal the true glory of their Georgian house

**Words and photographs:**  
*Jenny and Chris Webb*

*Below: Rob and Victoria Ayling*

*Opposite page from top: Stickford House*

*The black-and-white marbled hallway*



Appearances can be deceptive, as Rob and Victoria Ayling discovered when they first went to view Stickford House, near Spilsby. The building's dignified Georgian exterior concealed a shocking truth: a 1970s' interior in all its colourful glory. "It was like stepping into a time warp," Victoria confided to me. "We had to look beyond the floral wallpaper and let our imagination run riot to realise the property's potential."

This, and the rural location of Stickford, a peaceful village between Boston and Spilsby, convinced them to purchase the house. The couple returned to their Victorian Mill owner's house in Yorkshire and began planning the extensive renovation programme which was to take up nearly two years of their lives.

I was invited to meet Victoria and Rob in their newly refurbished home. A curved drive led to the entrance of the grand house, resplendent in its summer mantle of Boston ivy.

No vestige of the 1970s' décor remains. Now paying homage to Georgian classicism, the interior is breathtakingly beautiful.

After a friendly welcome Rob took me through to the delightful, pale green and white sitting-room for a chat, whilst Victoria went to get tea and cakes. His unassuming appearance and his softly spoken, modest persona belie the fact that he is an extremely successful businessman and managing director of Voiceprint, a group of independent record companies, whose impressive client list includes such 'rock' notables as Pink Floyd, Hawkwind and Rick Wakeman. Rob began his working life as an electrician with a passion for contemporary music. When he couldn't get records of the groups he liked he contacted them and produced his own. Thus began his illustrious career in the music industry. He has a fund of humorous stories to tell after sixteen years of producing records for rock bands.

I asked him what prompted the move to Lincolnshire. "We liked the open countryside and village life. We have three sons and I wanted them to have a proper childhood in a good environment. This is possible in a smaller com-

munity. Lincolnshire state schools have an enviable reputation so this was a main consideration. Victoria and I love the Georgian era and belong to the Georgian Group, therefore this house was ideal for us although we realised it was going to take a lot of money and time to renovate it. We have lived here for two years now and have no regrets."

Victoria joined us. I enquired where her decorative inspiration came from.

"I read extensively but I have always had a passion for all things Georgian so it really was a labour of love remodeling the house. I was appointed project manager as Rob was busy working. After a few setbacks I got together a good team of professionals. The previous owners had kept the house in good condition but had ripped out lots of the original fittings. There was no heating to speak of and the rooms were small and dark. Firstly lots of walls were knocked down to create larger living areas. We had the whole building rewired, re-plumbed and a new oil heating system installed. I chose pale colours to lighten the rooms.

"We knocked down the passage wall to make this a large sitting room and installed two new windows which were specially made. I tried to keep the covings and skirting as authentic as possible and used the same design throughout the house. They were painted off-white as the Georgians wouldn't have had brilliant white. In preference to an RSJ (rolled steel joist) we chose two supporting columns which were constructed to National Trust standards. The floorboards have been replaced with solid rustic oak, which looks old. A friend of my mother's gave me the two white brocade sofas and we just cover them with sheets when we all sit in here. With a growing family everything I chose had to be both practical as well as aesthetic."

Victoria has achieved this to stunning effect in all the rooms. She and Rob spent months sourcing classically patterned, white marble fireplaces and black cast-iron insets. The slate hearths were placed flush to the floor as they would have been in the eighteenth century. They were probably the cause of many house fires, but as Victoria's are living flame gas ones there is no danger.



Rob's study overlooks the rear garden, planted with mature shrubs and two impressive, graceful, *Deodara conifers*. The walls are painted a soothing 'Georgian grey' shade and he has sofas to match. A brightly coloured Sri Lankan mask - to ward off evil spirits - hangs above the fireplace. Two modern, designer, halogen wall lights and a large matching ceiling light provide contrasting accents. He is a keen amateur photographer and several of his pictures adorn the walls. Before the renovation started he took many photographs of the house. The difference between then and now is amazing and it is easy to understand why the work took so long to complete.

Rob had been investigating the history of the house: "We think the building had seventeenth-century roots as we discovered small doorways which we have kept, but skimmed over. Documents indicated it had been a farmhouse that had been altered in 1751 and evolved to become the Georgian house it is today. There were reeds under the floorboards and between the walls which were a primitive form of insulation. We have left some in situ. This was probably a steward's house as it was too grand for a farm worker. He would have been a VIP in the area and his job was to run the Lord's land and oversee the labourers. The previous owners inherited the house and we think it was in their family for a long time. It has been exciting finding original fittings and, where possible, we have preserved them."

Victoria showed me round the rest of the house, starting with the dining room. A lovely feature of the room is the four tall Georgian, bay windows which face toward the garden and the fields beyond.

"There were 1960s' double glazed windows of half the height here before. Like all the ones we've replaced they had to be specially made but it has been worth the expense. I deliberately chose not to hang heavy curtains or drapes at any of the windows but have used roller blinds instead. We have complete privacy here as we are surrounded by eight acres of land. In Georgian times they would have used linen or even velvet blinds. The white marble fireplace matches the ones in the study and



sitting-room. I've had the gold-framed, antique mirror above it for a long time. The mahogany dining furniture came from a previous home but the dainty settee and mirrored cabinet were a present from my mother. I've hung small prints of nineteenth-century London in preference to large paintings which I thought would look overpowering. We have radiators in here, and after suffering freezing conditions during the alterations, I don't care if they show!"

In fact circumstances became so bad, with dust and debris everywhere, that the family decamped to the pool house which fortunately had its own kitchen, bathroom and changing room. It was supposed to be a temporary move but lasted five long months. In desperation they moved back into the house and coped as best as they were able. Victoria said she immersed herself completely, sometimes literally, in the project and some days resembled a 'bag lady'. She could barely remember that in a former life, among other things, she had been a barrister, and a Tory county councillor. At the time when she had ambitions to become an MP, she met Rob at a party. "We are total opposites but they do say they attract. On one of our first dates he took me to a Billy Bragg concert, I'm sure to see my reaction. I was unaware he was into rock music in a big way. It was a surprise when I discovered what business he was in." Things turned out well and the couple have been happily married for six years.

Now the renovation is finished Victoria wants to proceed with her own interior design business, Interiors by Victoria. "I have had lots of experience styling my own and friends' properties. I am really keen to get started. I think I have inherited my passion for design."

Earlier I had admired an escritoire which Victoria said had

been made by her grandfather as part of his apprenticeship: "My ancestor was a French general who was executed by Cardinal Richelieu, as the authorities were fed up with him leading the Huguenots against the King. After his demise the family had to flee La Rochelle and ended up in Spitalfields in London. They lost all their land and wealth so in 1702 they began making furniture. My grandfather started up his own factories and my parents carried on the tradition by owning furniture shops."

We continued upstairs to the boys' bedrooms each with their own white tiled en-suite bathroom. Anthony, thirteen, and William, twelve, chose the colour schemes for their bedrooms. The furniture is a mixture of modern and Victorian. Hunter, five, loves helicopters and aeroplanes and his bedspread, and accessories are patterned with these. William's room was the servants' cramped quarters. It was opened up and the roof raised with huge wooden beams. The older boys are allowed computers but no televisions. An integrated wireless network and telephone system have been installed and serve the whole house.

Rob and Victoria's bedroom is calm and spacious. Her antique, pretty, white dressing table has been recovered to match the bedspread and cushions. The dressing room is lined with built-in wardrobes.

Victoria is thrilled with her walk-in airing cupboard but even more with the couple's luxurious bathroom. A huge, white, spa bath is set on a tiled plinth in the centre of the room. It is easy to imagine relaxing in it. The impressive shower has powerful body jets.

From the far window are views across the countryside. A lake and wood are visible from the side window. In the middle of the





lake is a small island. Victoria said that herons and geese are frequent visitors and the tall bulrushes are home to hundreds of frogs and toads. In addition to pheasants and foxes, there are tawny owls in the woods. Whilst we were looking I saw several rabbits hopping about. Victoria affirmed they were a nuisance. She told me she has employed a brilliant gardener who is tackling the extensive grounds. A lot was dug up when a new drainage system was put in and she recalled it was a nightmare at times. The previous owners were keen gardeners so there are many mature trees and shrubs surrounding the house, including horse chestnuts and weeping willows.

Downstairs in the hall the couple chose stunning white marble tiles with a black border to replace the 70s' parquet flooring. The original flagstones had been used on a patio outside. At the far end of the hallway is an enormous blue brocade settee, with 'cloven hooves,' which is rumoured to have come from Versailles.

Across the hall is the generous sized modern kitchen, fitted with buttermilk coloured units. Victoria enjoys cooking so chose a large range oven and allowed the boys a huge American style fridge.

With practicality in mind she had the floor tiled in dark grey stone. There is a table and chairs in the original fireplace alcove.

Because of the nature of Rob's business the couple often have people to stay. To accommodate them, the old farm offices have been converted into two comfortable guest-rooms with an en-suite bathroom.

Outside, in addition to the pool and tennis court are several large barns which have been granted planning permission to be converted into cottages. They would have their own access and views of St Helen's, a fully restored fifteenth-century church.

Rob and Victoria have achieved their aims: they are enjoying village life, their sons are happy at their schools; a 250-year-old house has been renovated. The couple's thoughtful choice of interior décor has transformed the rooms of their Georgian house into a symphony of tasteful elegance. However, most significantly, they have created a wonderful family home.

Rob Ayling: [www.voiceprint.co.uk](http://www.voiceprint.co.uk)  
Victoria Ayling: [www.lifestyles-by-victoria.co.uk](http://www.lifestyles-by-victoria.co.uk)

*Previous page left to right: The sumptuous bathroom with its spa bath*

*Garish seventies' colours have been replaced with subtle shades*

*Below: The dining room showing the floor-length windows*

