

# Unpolished but handsome

39, Camberwell Grove, London SE5

Mary Miers talks to antique trader/manufacturer Will Fisher about dealing, decorating and the beauty of accumulated grime

Photographs by Simon Upton

**W**ILL FISHER, aged 46½, has been in the antiques trade for 30 years. That makes him just 16 when he got his job at Christie's, although, actually, he'd already cut his teeth dealing at the age of 12, when he bought a cast-iron Victorian chimneypiece in Thame, stripped it down and sold it through *News Shopper*.

As a schoolboy, he worked in Leaded Lights, a fireplace shop in Greenwich, and befriended his best mate's stepfather, the American antiques dealer Warner Dailey. 'I'd accompany him on running trips, buying and selling mainly in Bond Street and Pimlico. Warner was junkman to the gentry. His life was very glamorous, but he understood that there can be as much pleasure in something costing £100 as £1,000. He had this extraordinarily eclectic mix of country-house antiques, arms and armour and taught me how you can incorporate these things into a domestic setting. Many of the people I trade with today I met through him when I was a schoolboy.'

Will's obsession with architectural fittings started even earlier, when, as a young boy growing up in Lewisham, he developed a 'weakness for country houses'. The son of Marxist teachers—his middle name is Fidel—he had to force his parents to take him on trips to see them. 'I particularly loved the Palladian; Ragley Hall was my first big influence. It was always the interior decoration and contents that interested me much more than the ancestry.'

After a brief spell reading History of Art at Manchester University—'I didn't adapt to academic life'—he combined working as a forklift-



Will Fisher cut his teeth dealing at the age of 12 and founded Jamb in 2001,

truck driver with trading from a stall at The Galleries in Bermondsey. 'It was a time of great vibrancy in the business. The Dorchester was being refurbished; there was lots of interesting stuff coming out of central London and I met this whole other group of dealers I hadn't encountered before.'

He became a runner, buying and selling from his own van, and so enjoyed the itinerant life that he hesitated seriously before, in 2001, joining a newly established collective of dealers in Fulham.

Over the following few years, Will honed his experience in what he calls 'pure country-house dealing', while building up a specialist knowledge



**Above left: Will Fisher, founder of Jamb, which sells antique and replica chimneypieces, lighting and furniture**

of historic chimneypieces. 'I'd always loved them, particularly English ones, and that side of the business grew because of my obsession.'

In 2003, he renamed his company Jamb and began making replica and new chimneypieces modelled on historic originals (Jamb now employs 10 craftsmen in its Wandsworth workshop, making furniture, lighting,





chimneypieces, fire grates and irons, and garden statuary based on old designs). By 2007, the showroom had moved to the vast, toplit gallery in Dove Walk formerly occupied by antique dealers John Hobbs and Christopher Gibbs. When 'Walmart', as Will calls it, sold for redevelopment in 2011, he relocated the shop to its present Pimlico Road, London SW1, address.

**The drawing room, with the Palladian chimneypiece that inspired Jamb's Oxford design and a Bergere chair with Bennison fabric**

The move coincided with a sale of virtually the entire contents of Will's house and showroom, including 'personal belongings that formed the backbone of who I was that I'd thought would never leave me. Christie's is the ultimate seducer; it wheedled everything out of me. But I did want the auction to be a celebration of my early career and to be exciting'.

The huge success of the sale—it made nearly £4 million for lots ranging from a chimneypiece attributed to Isaac Ware to a stuffed chihuahua—testified to the bravura of this antique-dealing young blade with a mischievous humour and roguish air.

By then, he and his wife, Charlotte Freemantle, had moved back into their new home at 39, Camberwell >





## ‘The trick is to use pieces in a room that give a feeling of authenticity,’

Grove, SE5, after submitting it to a three-year restoration; they relished the opportunity the sale gave them to start with a clean slate. What they have created in redecorating and furnishing the late-18th-century house is an essay in contemporary Georgian living. ‘It’s such a dilemma as to whether we go for a completely disciplined, sparse Georgian environment or fill the rooms up with stuff again,’ says Will. ‘At the moment, it’s somewhere inbetween.’

The precise nature of that ‘stuff’ is open to question: Will’s mobile bleeps continuously—‘Jim, sorry I haven’t rung you back mate,’ he tells a runner who’s trying to deliver some antiques from Galway; 10 minutes

later he’s greeting Bill from Peckham, who’s dropped by with a marble plaque for his collection. Yet Eliza (seven) and Monty (four) have other priorities: Eliza laments the lack of TVs and the fact that ‘everywhere I go, I face just two colours; I want more pink and purple’. Her family of YooHoos looks surprisingly at home, however, surrounded by Charlotte’s Bennison fabrics and Will’s ‘graffiti’ of carved 18th-century tablets mounted on the slate-grey sitting-room walls.

Their restoration of No 39 involved careful structural repairs, the reversal of Victorian alterations, reconfiguration of the upper floors and replicating original detail. But the extent of all this intervention is cleverly disguised by the seemingly effortless way in which they have conjured up an authentic air and the Georgian simplicity of rooms that have none of the preciousness that so often accompanies such restorations.

Handsome marble chimneypieces and carefully placed antiques are integrated with shutters (rather than curtains), bare wooden floorboards

**The Fishers converted their bathroom from a former bedroom, installing pitch-pine floorboards and other woodwork to suit the period of the house. Over the bath is a Jamb Art Deco dishlight**

and old rugs, downplaying any grandeur. Will describes certain ironic touches as ‘naughty, but I couldn’t resist them’—he’s played with the hierarchy of floor timbers and doors, for example, so that the ground floor is pine-boarded and the basement oak. The Cuban mahogany doors he’s introduced to the ground-floor rooms are, he suggests, ‘a little over the top for a house like this, but they work—they give the rooms a lift’.

All the design decisions in the house are his, says Charlotte, who chose the fabrics and paint colours. ‘Will plays this great charade that it’s a shared thing, but he’s a despot; he asks what I think of something and then throws a tantrum if I disagree,’ she laughs.

Will, however, credits Charlotte ‘with her brilliant visual style, for changing me from being the Ghengis Khan of design to understanding that less is more’. He admits to being a complete perfectionist: ‘I spend hours agonising over which mouldings to choose; it’s when I’m at my most anxious and most fulfilled.’





*Above:* The dining room opens off the kitchen in the basement and has reclaimed panelling and English oak floorboards. The table was designed by Lutyens for a yacht. *Below:* The master bedroom features an English 18th-century Italian marble chimneypiece that inspired Jamb's St James design. *Right:* The kitchen is decorated with tiles salvaged from a New York subway







**Above:** The dining room's stone chimneypiece of about 1740 inspired Jamb's Montford design. **Right:** The Fishers' Italianate water garden is overlooked by the spire of Sir George Gilbert Scott's St Giles's Church, Camberwell

In the basement, where the look is consciously more functional, his pride is the floor of handcut 18th-century Purbeck flagstones. 'I bought them in Bristol and then took the family on endless country-house trips to see how they should be laid. I experimented with different formats, laying them all out in a field. Eventually, I realised the stones should be in courses rather than randomly placed.'

Will loves the austerity of the kitchen, with its walls of white tiles salvaged from a New York subway, plain wooden cupboards and Jamb's Scholar's Lamp, based on the V&A's reading lights. The doorways have been widened to admit more light and, most importantly, to make more of the garden view that is arguably the house's most outstanding feature. It's best seen from the floor above,

where the drawing-room windows frame the Gothic spire of St Giles, rising at an angle beyond the Italianate water garden that the Fishers have created with the help of some ingenious landscaping and excavation.

Years of working with antiques have refined Will's eye. 'I remember, as a young man, trying to work out the language, what was a good or poor example. By handling things, you learn; I've absorbed everything through the trade and taught myself, with the help of hundreds of mistakes, that just because it's old, it's not necessarily good.'

But what of his aesthetic when it comes to interior design? 'I like quite masculine things,' he says. 'Architectural, strong. The chimneypiece holds centre stage in a room; you need to start with that and work back in decorating.'

Most of all, however, it's the surfaces that excite him: 'the beauty of something unrestored, that sense of sleepiness, as if you're viewing it through a mist. Too many mistakes have been made by the overzealous trying to smarten things up. If it was just me, I'd never paint the house again—I'd let the dirt work up a good surface'.

Later, in his shop, he shows me a superb carved mahogany table that's just come in. 'Look,' he says, running his hands along the 18th-century marble top, 'it's untouched. See how beautiful the surface is, unwaxed, slightly undulating. That's the Holy Grail. The trick is to use pieces like this in a room to give that feeling of authenticity; you want a thing to look as if it's grown roots.'

There's plenty to choose from at Jamb, ranging from an 'extremely important pair of mid-18th-century Irish carved giltwood Rococo mirrors from Bantry House (£58,000)' to a 'late-19th/early-20th-century horse skeleton (£22,000)'. Anthropological curiosities tend to work well with antiques. Back at No 39, the Fishers are contemplating the imminent arrival of a purchase of tribal artefacts, which Will thinks will look great beside the alligator and ante-lope's heads in the hall.

For further information, telephone 020-7730 2122 or visit [www.jamb.co.uk](http://www.jamb.co.uk)

