INDIA

A TIME TO TAKE STOCK

Jamb co-founder Will Fisher has a passion for acquiring new pieces, but his antiques and reproductions rapidly filled up the company's original warehouse. Cache-rich but increasingly space-poor, they had to adapt. Now, a former tank factory has been transformed into a spacious repository and second showroom. Sophie Barling wonders just what's in store. Photography: Simon Upton

Left: Jamb's copper 'Apsley' dish lights hang in Will's office. The flooring is made out of Dutch cheesemakers' boards, used to mature the rounds. The chairs – made for the old Reading Room at the British Museum – adjoin a George III library table. Top: this early 19th-century wood-and-paper model of York Minster sits in its original mahogany-and-glass case

Left: the pine floorboards of the antiques mezzanine were reclaimed from Dutch canal houses. Both the mirror and mantelpiece are 18th-century Palladian. Top: this Cuban-mahogany door came from writer Elizabeth Bowen's family home. Above: a view of the second mezzanine, with antique fire surrounds, a Victorian marble column and 17th-century figures

WILL FISHER has just confessed to yet another cache of antiques squirrelled away somewhere. His wife, Charlotte Freemantle, responds to this news with impressive composure and only a mild expletive. The question of storage is something of a leitmotif when you talk to the couple about their fireplace and lighting business, Jamb, and its sister company, Hawker Antiques. There was a perilous lack of it in 2001, when Will left valuable stock in a London alleyway while he went to Thailand for Christmas. 'Luckily it snowed, which concealed the boxes quite a bit, so nothing was nicked – that would have been catastrophic.' Then, when Charlotte joined him in Fulham a couple of years later, 'we had one container outside that held our entire stock,' she says. 'And of course,' Will adds, 'everyone would always want the fireplace that was at the very back of the container.' Many storage solutions down the line, each one larger than before, and it's clear that containing Will himself is the real problem. 'The part of the job every antique dealer lives for is acquiring,' he explains. 'That's where the ultimate fun is had.'

And boy, has he had fun. So much so that their latest solution is a hangar of a warehouse on the edge of London, formerly used for the construction of army tanks. The move to Mitcham from their previous warehouse came just in time, at the point 'where the seams really broke', says Charlotte. 'When we got it just over a year ago, Will said we were going to have to find someone to rent half of it; now we've got our Italian warehouse manager, Alex, crying every day trying to work out where to fit yet more stuff.'

This being Jamb, we're not talking about just any old stuff. Around us in their Pimlico Road gallery, splendid antique and reproduction chimney pieces rub shoulders with mahogany cabinets full of natural-history specimens; Neoclassical busts stare down a taxidermied mandrill crouching on a marble-topped Georgian console; the stately and the curious abound – and there's plenty more where that came from. Charlotte estimates it took Will and his team nearly two weeks to transport crates and crates from the old Wandsworth warehouse to Mitcham (and this all acquired since 2012, when Will sold off pretty much everything he owned in a sale at Christie's). They drove back and forth at night to avoid daytime traffic 'in huge, 18-wheel lorries', says Will of this Herculean task. 'It really was quite exciting, and the camaraderie of it all…'

The new home for this 'gear', as Will refers to it, has also provided a crucial second showroom. 'People think asking to look at seven particular antique fireplaces is just like trying on hats,' says Charlotte. 'But it would take us a whole day to bring them out and stand… We've probably got 250 antique mantels, and suddenly with this new space we're able to stand 70 of them at one time.' Typically, adds Charlotte, 'before we were able to make sense of these hundreds of chimney pieces, Will decided the priority was to build himself a really nice office – which I'm yet to see him sit in; and then a really beautiful mezzanine for all his antique furniture. But then, of course, it's now the nicest part of the warehouse.' As we leave Belgravia for Mitcham to see all this in the flesh, Charlotte issues a mysterious warning: 'Don't let Will get side-tracked – he'll want to buy you curry goat.'

Forty minutes or so later, we're on the terrace of Jamb's new industrial-estate hangar, Mitcham's finest curry goat on the table. It seems pleasant enough out here already, but Will is

Top: sitting on a lift used to move furniture up to the mezzanine, a carved-mahogany George II side table is flanked by a George II mirrored cabinet (left) and an early George III burr-yew chest on chest, right. Above: in the warehouse space, palettes are labelled with unique codes. Each holds the components of an antique or reproduction chimney piece. Opposite: to the right is one of a pair of 19th-century caryatids, copies of those on the Acropolis's Erechtheion

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'desperate to put in Crittall windows. And I want to make an outdoor gym – wouldn't that be great?' Now back inside, his Edwardian-style office is furnished with the antiques and glass-cased curios – stuffed miniature dogs, cathedral models – that are very much Jamb's bag. Elegant glazing divides this room from the rest of the office ('I wanted a bit of *Peaky Blinders*), where staff work at computers on a pair of enormous desks by Gillows. They're the only thing here Will wouldn't part with. 'It would be a bit like selling the dining table two days before Christmas, which is what my childhood mentor, Warner Dailey (*WoI* Sept 1998), did.'

Downstairs, we walk through a series of specially built machine rooms and workshops, where Jamb's craftsmen are noisily cutting stone and marble slabs for chimney pieces. Intersected by industrial pipework, the walls around them are a patchwork of plaster friezes, capitals and columns – all the decorative elements that might make up the chimney piece of a client's choosing. 'We'll take a cast off each original antique fireplace we have,' Will explains, 'so we've got all the detail, and then a reproduction can be hand-carved from that at a later date.' They keep a large stock of different marbles – gorgeous varieties such as Breche Violette and Occhio di Pavone, the results of 'marble-hunting mini-breaks to Italy with the guys – so that customers can take their pick'. Another corner of the building houses the lighting workshop, where antique lanterns and wall lights are either reproduced faithfully or remade and resized. 'Everything we do,' says Will, 'has an eye back to tradition, to the past; so we're not reinventing the wheel, we're just trying to make the perfect product, I suppose; if one can't find the original antique then to idealise what one would dream of finding... I think there's a real pleasure in doing things that aren't so easy to do. It's probably not so commercially viable but it's more fun.'

Two mezzanine spaces above the workshops have become showroom areas. The first is for their antique chimney pieces, several of them monumental, baroque examples that are too large for the Pimlico Road gallery. An old crane hook from the tank-building days looms overhead, looking ready to snare one of Jamb's classical statues. The second is for antique furniture, and doubles as a photographic studio with a working fireplace around which decorative scenes can be staged. Where images of fires and burnt logs are concerned, only the real thing will do: Will once travelled to his parents' house in Kent just to have a fire and bring the cinders back to London for a photo shoot – a mission that involved his car bursting into flames.

Perhaps the most awe-inspiring aspect of all this, however, is the main storage space. Row upon row of packing cases tower above our heads, reminiscent of the final scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, when the precious but lethal treasure is deposited among thousands of identical wooden boxes, surely never to be found again. For now, however, order has been imposed on the results of Will's 'six years of crazed buying'. Cases have been carefully labelled – N for Neoclassical, G for Georgian, I for Italian and so on. But there's still a door he opens and rapidly shuts against its teetering contents, muttering about a 'chamber of hell'. As the song almost goes, how do you solve a problem like Will Fisher? ■

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Top: a slab of Breche Violette marble is on the saw, while slabs of Derbyshire fossil from the Chatsworth estate sit on palettes. Above: in the lighting workshop, Jamb's 'Delaval' lantern is being finished with an antique brown-bronze effect with gilt highlights. Opposite: the classical plaster casts are taken from antique chimney pieces and are used for reference. 'The thing with chimney pieces is,' says Will, 'lots of the elements are interchangeable'

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