



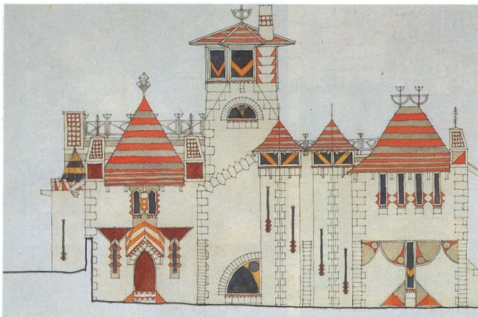
1--THE HOUSE FROM THE EAST. The walls are faced in granite rubble with granite quoins cut from curb stones. The kitchen dining bay shown in Figure 4 is on the left

BARLEY SPLATT. CORNWALL

THE HOME OF Mr and Mrs GRAHAM OVENDEN

By CLIVE ASLET

The painter Graham Ovenden moved to Barley Splatt, on the edge of Bodmin Moor, 11 years ago. He has been building and decorating the house himself, to be a setting for his collection of High Victorian furniture.



2--DRAWING BY MARTIN JOHNSON. Polychromy is of the essence. The house was designed by Mr Ovenden in collaboration with Mr Johnson

WHEN you wake up at Barley Splatt, you may well feel bemused. For a moment you may want to ask what time it is, where you are. As the room is lit only by two slits of windows, one of which is filled with red glass and the other with green, the light has a mysterious quality which remains constant throughout the day. The ceiling is high, but slopes not on one or two but all four sides, making the room a truncated pyramid. With every surface panelled in wood you have a slightly *Alice Through the Looking Glass* sense of being inside a cigar box--a not disagreeable sensation. Outside the only sounds are the birds, the river and cockerels. It could be dawn or the middle of the afternoon. All very disconcerting to a town-dweller.

This is the home of the painter Graham Ovenden. As a member of the Brotherhood of Ruralists, the group of painters originally centred on Peter Blake, Mr Ovenden is drawn to a pre-industrial, Pre-Raphaelite view of life. He and his wife, Annie, who is also a Ruralist, had been living in a semi-detached in Hounslow when they saw their present 22 acres advertised in *Dalton's Weekly*. The holding, which lies on the edge of Bodmin Moor, then comprised an old cottage and open fields used by a pony-trekking establishment. The Ovendens sold their house and exchanged their London way of life for one of deep rural seclusion.

The little B road from Mount crosses a stream, and just past the bridge the lane to Barley Splatt leads off through an ancient tunnel of hedgerow. Beyond the house the land rises steeply to the hamlet of Warleggan. As you look back from the head of the valley, Barley Splatt, with its cluster of turrets and roofs, looks part like a castle, part like a complete little village--although in reality it is as yet quite small.

Inspired by the architects of the Gothic Revival, Mr Ovenden is being more Victorian than the Victorians. It was widely acknowledged by William Morris and his circle that there was a special virtue in handwork. In theory this should have extended to building houses, the houses of the idealists who expounded the belief; but in reality it rarely did. The owner might plaster a cornice or design idiosyncratic additions. But generally the bulk of the work was carried out by professional craftsmen, who after all knew how to do it better.

Mr Ovenden is putting Arts and Crafts theory into practice. The house was not only, in the main, designed by him, but over the past 11 years he has been steadily building it with his own hands, ornamenting it as he goes. There is necessity as well as theory behind this method: by selling the house in Hounslow, Mr Ovenden found he could afford his property in Cornwall, but little more. The Barley Splatt you see today is half-finished. Perhaps, being more a work of art than of architecture in the conventional sense, it will never be fully finished. But what has been done so far shows genuine originality on several levels. Mr Ovenden has so thoroughly entered into the spirit of the past that the forms have emerged in a new and personal way. Yet they remain clearly in the tradition of their models--the tradition of Butterfield, Street and, above all, Burges. He has been post-Modernist before the post-Moderns, and will go on being so long after the fad of post-Modernism has been laid to rest.

He is also a collector, and that helps explain the scheme on which the house has been built. He was alert to Victorian furniture in the 1960s. It was a time, almost inconceivable now, when to buy genuine pieces of Pugin was probably cheaper than buying from new. He was swept up in the hectic '60s art world (he lived in Peter Blake's house for a time). But he also met the legendary Charles Handley-Read, the champion of Burges. A friend was Clive Wainwright of the V&A. Mr Ovenden bought from the furniture dealer Michael White-way before the prices rose. It is astonishing what has passed through his hands--the Seddon desk now in the National Museum of Wales, for

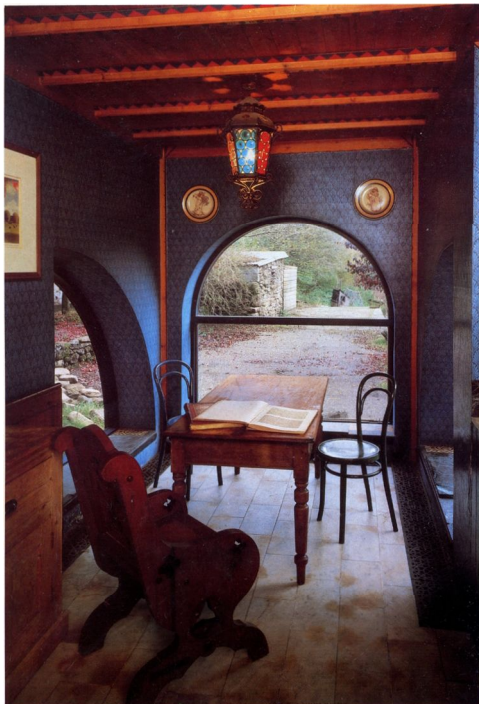
Although, through the traditional vicissitudes of an artist's life, his collection is now only a partial reflection of what it once was, there are still plenty of genuine Victorian pieces to complement the neo-Victorian framework. Some are portable, a number built-in. Some of the door furniture is from among that stripped from Louis Sullivan's Guaranty Building in Buffalo, New York State: Mr Ovenden happened to be there when the vandalism was done. Other fingerplates come



3--THE EAST WALL WITH MOTIFS IN LEAD AND CUT GRANITE. The kite-shaped symbols represent crossbows and bolts



4--THE SOUTH SIDE OF THE HOUSE. The old cottage is to the right of the kitchen dining bay. The deep cove shows a Frank Lloyd Wright influence



5 (Left)--THE DINING BAY IN THE KITCHEN. (Below) 6--LOOKING TOWARDS THE DOOR TO THE STAIRS. The window arches mirror the arches that bear the weight of the tower



from the sets made for the House of Lords.

For the sake of planning permission, apart from anything else, drawings (Fig 2) for Barley Splatt had to be made. These were done by Martin Johnson, who trained at the Architectural Association but has since become a maker of lutes and viols. Barley Splatt was a joint creation. In their gay colours, the drawings emphasise the festive side of the house. When you approach it, perhaps under a rich Cornish sky, the textures of stone, slate and tile--brown and grey--express a different aspect of the place. On the north front lichen is actually encouraged for its velvety greens.

At the end of the lane you first come to a big expanse of rubble-built wall in granite, varnished a deep golden brown by the weather. It is an irregular-shaped wall, but with sharp, grey quoins of cut granite, strange slit windows (what seem to be windows, at least) and mysterious symbols like kites. The last, Mr Ovenden explains, represent crossbows and bolts, while the motifs above (they are not windows, it appears on a second look) are rockets personifying the nuclear age. The point, however, flies less in the symbolism than in the way they were carried out. Made of lead, tile and stone, they are constructed ornament in

the spirit of Pugin and Ruskin. The quoins are made from curbstones.

Cutting them is a summer job, but unpleasant enough all the same. Given the hardness of the stone, water has to be sprayed continuously on the blades of the cutter to keep it cool. The quoins contrast with the rubble, some of which was found on neighbouring fields. The planners insisted on hollow cavity walls, so that smaller stones than he would have wished had to be used. This Mr Ovenden regards as a nuisance; but it does create a contrast in texture with the smooth quoins.

Moving along this wall you come to a curved tower with a single long window and a cone of glass on the top. This contains the stair. Next, another rubble wall with the crossbow motif. The great pyramid of a roof is tiled with hexagonal slates, with stripes in red and green. The colours here are not structural and Mr Ovenden has come to regret it, now that the paint is coming off. In time Barley Splatt will doubtless become as much a conservationist's headache (for one day it will surely be preserved) as Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant's Charleston in Sussex.

What there is not, on this front, is the door. The grand main entrance will in fact lie on the

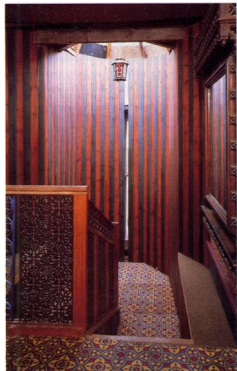
other side of the building, but has yet to be built. When it is, the drive will have to be moved. So visitors squeeze round past a wall of concrete block to the south side (Fig 4). Here you can see the original cottage that forms the nucleus of the house.

The kitchen block that comes forward from it was the first of the new part that Mr Ovenden built. The painter was then in a Frank Lloyd Wright phase. He was also as yet unskilled in craft techniques, and therefore, he says, the quality of the building is rougher. There is also more use of plate glass. But the frames to the glass are richly ornamented. The arch to the kitchen window on the ground floor is painted with blood-red triangles and darts. The lead cills and mullions to the first-floor windows are cut out with a dragon's-tooth pattern painted bright green and red. Six Minton rosette tiles have been set into the stonework below the cills.

Round the corner there are more tiles, these ones by Pugin, in squares below the caves. You do not notice them at first sight, but they add richness as your experience of the house unfolds.

The end of this wing is still in its grey concrete-block underclothes. It comprises a big

(Right) 7--THE GALLERY. The wallpaper is by Pugin but eventually the owner will design his own. (Below) 8--THE STAIRCASE. The ironwork is from G. E. Street's Convent at East Grinstead



ground-floor room with Mr Ovenden's studio and the rooms for his children above. He has resisted the temptation for a double-height great hall in the Victorian manner. One day a large new wing will come forward from the north end to create a court. Here it will be possible to watch the sunset, sheltered from the winds coming down the valley. There will be a massive chimneystack twice as tall as the house.

Farther round again is the north entrance: a composition of striped triangular roof, slit windows, tiled mullion, hood over the door and leadwork let into the stone. The door surround is a piece of Ruskinian polychromy in pink and grey stone. Also in the true spirit of the Gothic Revival, strict symmetry has been shunned.

Inside, Mr Ovenden intends ultimately to cover every surface with decoration. In the big kitchen (Figs 5 and 6), by which you are likely to enter, squares and borders of tiles are set amid the Carrara marble of the floor (the marble, ironically, was cheaper than local Delabole slate). The pattern follows the way the room is divided by arches bearing the weight of the central tower. The beams are painted with red and blue dragon's tooth: all the woodwork is to be painted when the final vision

is realised. And if the paper at the moment is a reprint from Owen Jones, commercially available, Mr Ovenden will make his own eventually.

The object, he explains, is to create the house a complete work of art, in the spirit of Burges's Tower House. In Figure 5 the lamp was designed by G. E. Street for his Convent at East Grinstead, while the big chair, bought at auction, came from the bank at St Columb Major, designed by William White. Although Mr Ovenden's manner of working is radically Arts and Crafts, his taste in furniture is High Victorian rather than Late. So for the most part are his architectural models.

But it is not the all-encompassing ornament that distinguishes this as an artist's house so much as the quality of light. From the bright kitchen you go up three steps into a dark corridor, the boards with which it is panelled painted alternately red and blue. You are now in the old cottage. But a mysterious light draws you on to the staircase (Fig 8). It has a single, tall slit window, and is lit from above by the glass turret. The iron balustrade is again from Street's East Grinstead Convent.

On the landing is an early Philip Webb cupboard containing a Vienna Secessionist

dinner service dating from the turn of the century. The landing opens into a broad gallery (Fig 7) which has no natural light and is hung with one of the Pugin House of Lords papers. The dark, rich atmosphere is appropriate to the hothouse confections with which it is hung—for example, Lewis Carroll's collection of Colman greeting cards of idealised young girls. The big painting at the end is *Dolly*, 1928, by the Newlyn School painter, Dod Procter.

A narrow bookcase in the wall contains some of Mr Ovenden's library. Although subject to the same laws of ebb and flow as the furniture, the books contain such treasures as William Holman Hunt's copy of Christina Rossetti's *Speaking Likenesses*, with a letter from Hunt tucked inside.

The books are a reminder that Mr Ovenden is himself also a book designer and author; and the harpsichord also in the gallery recalls that he studied at the Royal College of Music as well as painting at the RCA (his grand piano is in his studio). When the history of the Ruralists comes to be written, his many-sidedness will be a gift to the biographer. And Barley Splatt, which reflects his interests and philosophy so fully, will take a central place.

Illustrations: Mark Fiennes.