



In the little sitting room, the 19th-century Indian rug came from the Gerald Duckworth house sale in Devon. Sue replaced a wood-burning stove with a proper fireplace, by which hangs a nude of Nicolette Devas, painted by her husband, Anthony. The curtains are the sole vestige of the Pope-Hennessy era



EYRIE ON THE ARNO

Sue Townsend had long coveted a flat in Florence whose lofty loggia looked out over the river to the city's sights. Now the founder of soap-and-scent brand Ortigia has her prize, and she's filled it with grand English antiques and Oriental lacquerware brought over from her Notting Hill home. But it's the room with a view that first caught her eagle eye. Text and photography: Tim Beddow



Top: the pattern on the red screen formed the template for the painted hessian hangings in the dining room (opposite, top). Robert Kime supplied the sofa. Above left: a sedan-chair clock, which came from the Lacquer Chest in Kensington, London, faces out over yellow flowers gathered from Jerusalem artichoke plants in the garden. Above right: the apartment's owners, the Capponi family, put up the scenic Zuber wallpaper in the 1890s. Beneath sits a 19th-century Egyptian bench covered with fabric from Peta Smyth



Top: Sue acquired the George II dining-room table, made for the Earl of Macclesfield, from Edward Hurst. The rug it rests on is 19th-century Chinese. Above left: having bought the Baroque scrolling urns from a market in Arezzo, Sue had them converted into lamps. The Neoclassical columns beneath the sideboard were discovered locally. Above right: Zitto, Zonzo, Spotty and Dash, four of five resident rescue dogs, form an expectant group. The web motif in the panelling echoes the flat's wrought-iron entrance (opposite, bottom right)



WHEN SUE Townsend, the businesswoman, first arrived in Florence in the mid-1990s, she took ‘a sort of bolthole deep in a garden in Costa Scapuccia. I used to pass and look up at this loggia, with its views across the Arno to the city. I soon became determined to have the flat,’ she says, ‘and asked the porter about its owners.’ Anyone who knows Sue knows that when her mind is made up about something, the outcome is almost inevitable.

Unbeknown to her, the apartment had been occupied by Sir John Pope-Hennessy, high priest of Renaissance art history, until his death the previous year. The celebrated museum curator had retired here after leaving the Met. Known locally as the ‘Pope-Hennessy rooms’, the apartment had, to Sue’s dismay, just been let to the president of Gucci Italy and his partner. All she could do was contact the Capponi family, who also owned the adjacent palazzo, to request first refusal next time around.

It would be seven years before Sue finally had the keys to the loggia, but she spent the intervening period happily in the grand and comfortable piano nobile

of the Palazzo Corsini, built by that venerable Florentine family in the 17th century. It was from here that she began making extended trips to Sicily, staying at the San Giulianos’ estate near Catania, where she helped them with their jam- and biscuit-making enterprises and cared for the many stray dogs

that were brought to the castle. Here too Sue, having previously helped to found Crabtree & Evelyn, had her second soap moment, naming her new company after the small historic island of Ortigia, which lies by the city of Syracuse. Thus began another adventure.

Sue bristles with restless energy and mischievous fun, which I sense is perhaps most fulfilled when there is a challenge ahead. On leaving school – after her parents decamped to Africa in search of a new life – Sue worked for a greetings-card company and found herself at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 1972, where she met an American entrepreneur, Cyrus Harvey, who began importing her cards to the USA along with some English soap. Though the product was good, the packaging was not, so she enlisted Peter Windett, the graphic designer with whom



Top: in the library, Etruscan pots line the top of a bookcase that came from a house sale in Devizes. Sue was attracted to its curious doors, nearly all of which are different sizes. Above: in one corner hangs Biedermann’s 1807 portrait of the Wykeham family and their dog, Viper (the reason Sue bought the painting). Opposite: in the passage leading to the library (ahead) and up to the loggia (right), a carved wooden model of Giotto’s Campanile, part of Florence’s cathedral complex, sits on one of two Chinese lacquered coromandel chests





The loggia with views north across the Arno to the rooftops of Florence – the white façade of the Basilica Santa Croce can be seen just left of the leftmost column. The main table is 18th-century French – ‘especially nice as the mirror top has worn off to glass’





she was living at the time. And so began Crabtree & Evelyn. By 1990 the company was huge – in no small part due to Sue – but having split with Peter, she decided to head off in other directions, joining forces with Jacob Rothschild at Waddesdon, with Clifton Nurseries in Little Venice and with the Prince of Wales, relaunching his Highgrove shop and creating the ‘Duchy Originals’ range.

In her house in Notting Hill, Sue had amassed a treasure trove of furniture and objets. ‘In the beginning I liked only really old things, especially Chinese pots and the black lacquer my Irish aunt had left me.’ Endlessly inquisitive, though not brought up in grand surroundings, she developed her own preferences and gleaned knowledge from, among others, interior-designer friends and antique dealers such as Robert Bradley and Edward Hurst (*WoI* Dec 2006). Gretchen Anderson, who set up the famed Lacquer Chest shop in Kensington, ‘taught me a lot about china and the smaller things’.

‘Sue was very brave about buying things and always had the courage of her convictions,’ says Gretchen. The

Notting Hill house became a gathering place where ‘Sue always liked to mix people with different tastes to hers,’ says Gretchen. ‘She would hate to drown in the ordinary,’ says another friend.

But, given her involvement in so many interesting projects, why change anything? Sue explains: ‘I had got to about 45 and thought it would be good to spend the second half of my grown-up life in a foreign country. One night I thought: I’ve got to do something.’ It was Gretchen who dissuaded her from going to France, where her parents used to have a house, telling her the food is better and the people are nicer in Italy.

While at the Palazzo Corsini, she sold her Ladbroke Square house and shipped most of its contents to Italy. ‘Edward [Hurst] was brilliant at telling me what I should leave behind,’ she says.

‘When Sebastian [Capponi] unexpectedly called one day to say the apartment was now available, I had still never been inside.’ So she visited and wrote to the administrators saying she would take it if she could do certain things. ‘They never replied,’ says Sue. Then Sebastian – whom Sue admits to having lightly pes-



Top: in Sue’s bedroom, the 18th-century parcel-gilt settle from Warwick Castle was found by Edward Hurst, who had it upholstered in a cut silk velvet from Claremont. He also unearthed the Queen Anne japanned cabinet – flanked by 18th-century Rococo mirrors – next to which sits a George III elbow chair with original paintwork. Above: a Dutch armoire courtesy of Geoffrey Stead dwarfs a slipper chair draped with an Ortigia prototype silk scarf. Opposite: the four-poster bed is a Regency Chinese export with a 19th-century silk canopy





tered over the years – called again to ask if she still wanted the loggia. He had never received Sue’s letter. ‘All very Italian... I took it.’

The move took ten days, cost €10,000 and called for a huge crane to lift in the heavy pieces. Having thought she would stay just six months, Sue found that Ortigia was almost ready to go into production. She had recruited the Florentine perfumer Lorenzo Villoresi and sourced much imagery herself from Byzantine mosaics in Sicily, ‘so it sort of took over’. Initially she used the back rooms as offices.

Nearly everything here was once in Notting Hill. I comment on how well it all suits its new surroundings. ‘But I don’t think it does transpose,’ she says, laughing. ‘That’s my problem – it’s all such a mess.’ Here is a different, unexpected side to Sue, who seems – without any foundation – unsure about what she has created. There is always a feeling that it could be better.

She soon found that the room under the loggia, once Pope-Hennessy’s library, had a false ceiling. ‘I had no idea why it was put there, but I took it down and installed an open fireplace,’ she says.



It looks as though it has been there forever. For the oval dining room, Sue based a stencil on parts of the screen in the sitting room, and asked a friend, the special-effects artist Alex Hamilton, to paint and bleach the hanging fabrics. To maintain continuity, she then copied the edge of the 19th-century Zuber wallpaper in the hall for the dining-room cornice.

Living here with her five beloved rescue dogs, many friends and a flourishing perfume company is, one assumes, as good as it gets, though naturally there are downsides. ‘The telephone’s still not working after the storm three weeks ago,’ she says. Pope-Hennessy experienced the same frustration: ‘I thought a bit of high-level pressure would do the trick,’ he wrote in his autobiography, ‘but not a bit of it. Only when I mentioned my predicament to a painter friend who in turn had a friend who was employed by the company did a telephone arrive the next day.’ Sue corroborates, smiling: ‘It’s always good if you know someone. Then nothing’s difficult. Apart from working!’ ■

Ortigia. Visit ortigiasicilia.com

Top: faience, polychrome delft plates and a collection of lustreware jugs enliven the kitchen. Covered in its original green paint, a Windsor chair from Vauxhall Gardens sits beneath a ‘rise and fall’ lamp. Above: in the stairwell of the main entrance hangs a Canigiani family tree – when the last descendant died, the building’s ownership passed to the Capponis. Opposite: Sue has a large collection of stuffed animals and insects, which are useful for colour matching – a beetle’s iridescent hue might find its way onto an Ortigia box design

