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Alison Henry in the master bedroom with daughters Olivia, Rebecca and Sophie. ***Opposite,*** *Rebecca and Olivia in the garden*

Run of the house

Designer Alison Henry has created a Cotswolds wonderland for her children

Words by Alice Rose. Photographed by Edina van der Wyck

The Great Room. ***Top right****, view of the house from the pool*

Not the best start: seconds after I arrive at Alison Henry's Cotswolds farmhouse, my dogs chase her chickens round the orchard – squawk! bark! squawk! – and hurl themselves at the hutches of three trembling rabbits that belong to her nine-year-old twins, Rebecca and Sophie, and their sister, Olivia, who's six. Luckily, the ladies of the house are not at home. Alison is based in London during the week, running her interior-design business from a Chelsea townhouse.

I am given a guided tour by Carlos, half of Carlos and Carolina, the Portuguese couple who keep the Alison Henry show on the road. I indulge in the quiet fantasy that I am a prospective buyer and Carlos is an estate agent. He does a great sales job, opening cupboards for me to admire the black silk door-linings, demonstrating the hidden TV that whirrs up from a blanket box at the foot of Alison's vast, velvet-draped bed and regaling me with tales of house parties and shooting lunches.

Photographs of Alison are everywhere, showing a woman of obvious confidence. This is reflected in her dramatic taste in decor. Everything here is black, white, cream and gold, with a mad, brave foray into leopardskin in the TV room. Forget winsome, chintz-some cosiness – this is glossy, ▷

The dining room

◁ hotel-style luxury. Double-height ceilings, ensuite bathrooms, wireless internet in every room. It's all very nice – I'll take it.

Outside, Carlos shows me the Chinese garden, swimming-pool and Astroturf tennis court, then the sauna, Jacuzzi and gym. It's country living, Cotswolds-style: gates painted an exasperatingly chic shade of sage; Friesian cows batting their eyelashes over immaculate stone walls. Debo Devonshire owns the pub and the village graveyard is full of Mitfords (the Hons and Rebels grew up nearby at Swinbrook House, which they loathed and nicknamed Swinebrook).

Back in the real world, I catch up with Alison at her London office a week later. When she and her late husband David took on the house, they attacked it head-on. 'The problem was that it had been broken up into lots of spaces,' she says. 'Every bit of old stonework had been covered up and there were tiny ▷

Mother and daughters go into their art studio every week

Alison and her girls on the terrace, with her fiancé's daughter, Emily Barnouin, on her right

Rebecca's bedroom

◁ fireplaces in all the rooms. We just decided to rip everything out and start again.' The work paid off, exposing timber features from the 15th century and an inglenook fireplace that had been boarded up with the pot and cauldron chain still inside.

From the outside, the farmhouse looks like an attractively higgledy-piggledy group of buildings and barns. On the inside, its wings are joined together by a clever configuration of passageways, galleries and stone spiral staircases. Alison hired a local craftsman to supervise the project. 'I was clear what I wanted to do, but I had to make sure I was keeping in line with the Arts and Crafts tradition,' she says.

'The other thing I felt very strongly about was getting a uniform look throughout. Before, there were carpets everywhere and a different colour in every room. I don't like that.' She chose a simple render for the walls, exposed beams and old stonework and put in reclaimed stone floors with underfloor heating. Alison designed a great deal of the furniture herself and had it made by local craftsmen to look antique. 'If we'd bought real antiques, the proportions wouldn't have been big enough for the scale of the house.' The kitchen in particular feels surprisingly old-fashioned. 'I wanted it to look like the original kitchen. We used figured elm, which turned out to be very unpopular with the builders because it's got a lot of movement in it. We had to make the butcher's block three times because it kept on splitting.'

She thought of selling up when David died of cancer, but after moving to London she found herself returning 'and it became such a home that now I love it again'.

These days, when the farmhouse is full, everyone heads for the kitchen. Last weekend, 17 guests stayed here; next weekend, 14 adults and 11 children are coming for lunch. The shelves in the cellar are divided into numbered compartments, so Alison can fax Carlos from London to tell him to open six bottles of, say, 43 for Friday evening.

One barn, now converted into a medieval banqueting hall, easily seats 50. Up a spiral staircase is a dormitory packed with single beds, ideal for giggly sleepovers. 'The twins had a party for their birthday – there were about 20 of them up there. I don't think they slept at all.' Village life sounds fun too – a busy calendar of river-rafting competitions, fêtes and cricket matches. 'I love the way the whole village gets involved. We pretty much know everyone,' says Alison.

The family is always on the move: if not in London or the Cotswolds, they're at the house in New Zealand, where Alison was born, or her other house in Thailand. After studying for a degree in interior design, she moved first to London and then to Hong Kong, ▷

We decided to tear out everything and just start again

Alison's bathroom

Copper pans and Asian porcelain in the kitchen

Everybody heads for the kitchen when the house is full

◁ where she supervised the redesign of the Peninsula Hotel on behalf of her employers. 'I said I'd be there for two years, but then I met my husband and set up my own business designing hotels, restaurants, yachts, private clubs... We ended up staying for 10 years.'

Now engaged to City financier Vincent Barnouin (whose children, Emily and Michael, live in America), Alison is concentrating on smaller, mainly residential projects. She has also produced a covetable collection of clothing, furniture and home accessories. Her girls have inherited her design gene and at weekends, mother and daughters converge on the art studio in one of the garages. 'We go in there and we create – at the moment there's a table-sized papier-mâché shark hanging from the ceiling.'

As with everything else, Alison has very definite ideas about how she wants her daughters to grow up. 'I want them to have their feet on the ground. That's why I love coming to the country – I don't want them going down the King's Road every weekend. I want them to have fun and get muddy, and be children for as long as possible.' □

For Alison Henry's design services and products, ring 0800 731 0299 or visit alisonhenry.com.