



This page: the dining room with a view of the kitchen. Facing page: the exterior of the house.



New World COTSWOLD

Architecturally, Great Falls is about as far from the quintessential English countryside and its old limestone homes as you can get.

Or is it? Alderley estate, an impressively modernized version of an English farmhouse, is surprisingly cozy and unostentatious. As one of the owners says, "It is large, but when you walk in, it doesn't feel that way."

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Photography by Gordon Beile



A fair number of newly built homes in Northern Virginia, as many will attest, are not as thoughtfully constructed as perhaps they should be, or could be. There are the variables of cost and taste, of course, and the wrong combination can result in, say, rather inauthentic Georgian colonials, large asphalt driveways, stucco substitutes and perhaps a bit too much vinyl siding. Sometimes, the issue is the level of collaboration among architects, builders and owners—there is not enough communication or there are mixed signals, either of which can have unfortunate aesthetic consequences.

Happily, none of this applies to Alderley, a five-acre Great Falls estate named for the homeowner's birthplace in England. Alderley, owing to the confidence and vision of its owners (who asked not to be named) along with their intuitive relationships with the architect and builder, is an English-style stone farmhouse. At 21,000 square feet, it is a large home, but it doesn't feel that way. Indeed, the home's chief achievement might be that it is unostentatious—as subtle as it is exquisite. According to the female owner, it was crucial that the house “maintain a sense of coziness—that was a very important criterion.” She added: “It is large, but [the intention] was that the scale of the rooms be in proportion, and that there be no terribly grand, huge rooms.”

Upon entering the gravel drive—a circular path of translucent pebbles in lieu of asphalt—Alderley looks distinctive enough, but does not overwhelm. Its angular, massive arches cut triangular peaks in the sky, while the house, wrapped in earth-colored stone and stucco, and covered with thick slate, rests on a delicately sloping lawn. Most of the land surrounding the home is clean, open space. Though meticulously landscaped, it does not appear overdone.

Closing in, however, some more intriguing details begin to reveal themselves: a library garden here, a kitchen garden there, a zinc fountain, a stone sculpture, a pool, a pergola, a variety of species trees—and, finally, the fact that the main house is flanked by large, nearly symmetrical wings. These include, to one side, a guesthouse and, to the other, a section with multiple bedrooms for visitors, while the master suite, master bath, their dressing rooms and master den exist just off of the main house on the first floor.

None of this spaciousness is immediately apparent, says Josh Baker, president and founder of BOWA, the McLean-based design-build firm tapped by Alderley's owners to oversee construction. “The height is not [towering],” he says of the exterior. “It's almost a story and a half—not really two full stories. So all of the ceilings on the second floor are interesting because they are sort of vaulted, if you will. They have more of an attic feel.”

The meticulous detailing that defines Alderley is apparent from the moment one enters the house, which has floors of reclaimed antique wood. One is struck by the feeling that every bit of detailing and décor holds personal, functional or aesthetic significance. It is, on one hand, a grand home filled with a lifetime of collected books, art, stunning antiques and modern amenities, yet it is also very intimate. And light pours into every corner of the interior.

Alderley is a new home, completed in 2007, and the owners were involved with every facet of its construction. They were, according to Baker and Patricia Tetro, a principal at BOWA, meticulous in the selection of materials and the detailing of the structure, tackling a slew of complicated aesthetics like the position, or “approach,” of the house, the balance of interior light, the selection of exterior stone (Shoreline Buff, from an Ohio quarry), the roofing, the custom windows and the landscaping—the last including a way to keep deer at bay along the perimeter of the property. “We got into a lot of detail about exactly where to put the house on the lot,” says Baker, “and how far back it would go, how it should relate to the sun, and how the windows relate to the sun at particular times of day.”

This collaborative arrangement says Baker, helped to get the house built expeditiously. Planning for the house took two years with architect David Cooper of ACG Architects in McLean. The goal, says the female owner, was to build an Americanized, modernized version of a Cotswold country stone house. “We wanted it to have a timeless look,” she says. When an architectural plan was settled on, the construction and landscaping was completed within about 18 months. “They have a very strong aesthetic sense and opinion,” says Baker of the owners. “They didn't cut corners. In terms of value, what they've invested in made a lot of sense because they wanted a

This page, top: a view from the patio facing the home's guest suite. Facing page, top: the kitchen, featuring hand-finished walnut countertops; below: the master bedroom and gallery at the front of the house.





house with integrity; they wanted a house where things were built and where the materials were appropriate for what they were trying to accomplish.”

To the owners’ way of thinking, the entry hall would serve as the axis from which the rest of the house flowed. And so the house “core”—the portion in the center with the gabled roof—contains the living room, the library and dining room. From the entry, all three of those rooms are within eyeshot. And, unusually, one can steal a lovely glimpse straight out the back of the house to a terrace and pool. “In so many houses in this area, the big Georgian colonials, you walk in and there is a huge grand staircase,” she says. “You don’t even see our staircase. It’s tucked away. It’s a nice staircase, but it is not sweeping or grand.”

What is grand is the fireplace just inside the main entrance, another unique feature of the space. The fireplace is arguably the most authentic and romantic English style element in the home—and certainly not something often seen in these parts. “The main hallway with the fireplace in it was something that we had seen in England and particularly liked,” the wife says. “In the old country homes, that was the greeting hall, and you have a fireplace in that area.” Adds Baker: “The fireplace sets the tone for the kind of house that it is.”

Having lived for years in a Great Falls home surrounded by woods on the Potomac River, the owners certainly wanted their new home to capture as much light as possible. Alderley sits on a flat open piece of land. When the couple found the property, it was surrounded only by a boundary of several dozen fully-grown Cryptomeria. The massive hedge of conifers, which they decided gave just enough privacy for the entire home, still line the perimeter near the gated entrance.

To promote the flow of light, there are two bright, long hallways on the front and back of the main house. One of these horizontal “galleries,” as Tetro refers to them, runs along the length of a front courtyard and the other along the back terrace. While functioning as corridors—with their distinctive floors made of bright honed Courtaud stone, trimmed in antique wood—they manage to channel natural light in every direction. Though French terminology was jokingly disallowed during construction, the owners concede these halls are a variation on the *orangerie*, a French term for a fashionable greenhouse or glass garden room. “They provide our northern and southern exposure,” says the

wife, “and on a sunny day, we get a lot of light. The *orangerie* at the back was kind of a version of an English conservatory in an inside space.”

More than anything in the quest to attract light, the owners, architect and builders focused on the windows. There are dozens of custom-made windows throughout the house. Tetro describes them as “things of beauty.” She and Baker spent an enormous amount of time with the owners figuring out not only the design of the windows, but who would make them, and what they would be made of. Though painted now, the windows are solid mahogany. “We had a discussion about the actual profile of the muntins,” says Tetro—“how wide they were, how tall, how many ridges they would have in them.”

Baker notes that Alderley’s windows have “real counterbalances.” That is a mechanical device used in hung windows to offset the weight of the sash. “The actual weighted chains are solid brass, and the hardware is all custom made,” he says, adding: “Some of the double-hung windows weigh in the range of 700 pounds, and you can open them and lift them with two fingers because they are balanced so well.”

The British-born owner of the house spent much of his working career in the Washington area, and the couple settled on building in Great Falls for several reasons. “Our main goal was to stay as close to grandchildren as possible,” the wife says. “We had other criteria: proximity to a good airport, proximity to good medical care, proximity to England, friends and family, and we realized we love it here. The Virginia countryside is about as close to England as you can get.”

The house is not meant so much for grand entertaining as it is to convene family and friends, as was the case over the Thanksgiving weekend. With three grown children, six grandchildren and relatives frequently in from England, the guesthouse and especially the family wing were priorities, she says, when they decided to build.

“There are no great large spaces for [entertaining] people,” says Baker, “but the house is certainly fantastic for families if you look at the guest suite. It’s delightful. It has a private entrance, and it’s private in terms of its proximity to the other bedrooms and master suite.”

The husband is a movie buff and audiophile, says Baker. The basement houses a tiered theater that seats upwards of a dozen people as well as an audio “nerve center” from which music is piped throughout the house via concealed speakers. The understated entertainment areas also include a well-equipped gym and a spacious wine cellar. A handsome solution to a lengthy basement corridor is a display of framed movie posters—a glass mosaic of scores of classic film images that brighten the space all at once.

Alderley’s owner has another passion—Horatio Nelson, the most famous of 18th century Royal Navy admirals. A series of Nelson paintings are enshrined in a gallery on the balcony level of his home office, amid exposed wood trusses, and a library devoted in part to Nelson’s famed naval career. “The open two-story office and exposed beams create an element of drama,” says Tetro. “He wanted a library feel on the second level with the ability to have the railing and sort of overlook the office.”

A beloved, if fabled, military figure in British history, 1st Viscount (or Lord) Nelson, a fleet commander during the French Revolution, is best known for leading a remarkable victory over the French in The Battle of the Nile in 1798, and for delivering a series of checks to Napoleon Bonaparte who sought to destroy the Royal Navy and break down the British empire. Blinded in one eye, and having lost the lower half of his right arm in 1797, Nelson nonetheless commanded numerous vessels and engaged in battles across European seas establishing British naval control of the world’s oceans for more than a century. He died aboard the British vessel *Victory*.

“It is a love affair that British gentlemen have with Nelson,” says the female owner. “They learn about Nelson very early, when they are very young in school. He is the hero of English history, I think. My husband is very interested in history, and Nelson. That space was built specifically for those paintings that he has collected over the years.”

Asked whether she had a favorite feature at Alderley, the lady of the house named the library. Roughly the same size as the living room, this neutral toned space isn’t all that sizable, but it is charming. Light pours in from one of the gallery halls and from the living room, while outside the library window there is a courtyard garden, whose centerpiece is a stone songbird atop a pedestal, created by British sculptress Bridget McCrum. Inside, the library walls are lined floor to ceiling with bookcases that wrap the room, rendering it, to an onlooker, utterly inviting.

“When visitors come, this is where everybody likes to go,” she says. “We have quite an extensive collection of books ... and they love being surrounded by books—and the things on the bookcases hold a lot of memories. When I sit there, every shelf I look at [has] a story or memory, or an element of who we are and where we came from.” She and her husband met as teenagers in Hong Kong, where their parents worked in the U.S. and British civil service.

In the garden, given the flat topography of the five acres around Alderley, landscaping was an important consideration—and a challenge, says Baker. The wife is a serious gardener, and the couple wanted mature looking trees in a place where there weren’t any. “It is spread out,” Baker says. “One thing is, with a piece of property [like this], you can have a lot of landscaping and it still looks not overdone, but we brought very large species trees in—the trees are 50 feet tall.”

He says there was a “huge discussion” about managing the deer population, which resulted in extra tall fencing that encircles the entire property and is hidden in the various growth and plantings to prevent deer from jumping. “You’ve got formal English gardens that would otherwise be a buffet for the deer,” says Baker. “So, it was critically important to create a deer-proof area, but in such a way that you didn’t notice.”

What one does notice about Alderley is simply the end-to-end, top to bottom attention to detail. Tetro, who was particularly involved with the couple, says that in addition to discussions about window detailing and the balance of light, there were conversations about the rafter tails below the roof line, and even the manner in which the exterior stones were cut. “We just had to keep going,” she says. “They had a picture in their head, and you have to re-create it.” Baker adds that, inside, an “army of wood specialists” was brought to work on interior trim. “If you run your hands across that interior trim, it almost feels like glass because we spent so much time sanding and painting and getting it to a really fine level.”

In the end, he says, “It’s nice when everything comes together. You’ve got a great architect; you’ve got a great client who knows what they want; it was a great piece of land to work with.” ●

Facing page: the library. This page, top: the wine cellar; middle: a display of movie posters in a basement corridor leading to the home theater; bottom: the garden terrace.

