



# Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen

The flamboyant interior designer and star of *Changing Rooms* champions countryside sports but insists his role is mainly a decorative one. By **Charlotte Reather**. Photograph by **Charles Sainsbury-Plaice**

**T**HE Llewelyn-Bowen manor house, situated in the village of Siddington in Gloucestershire, is bustling with activity. Jackie, Laurence's wife of 25 years, is in the middle of a training session. Dressed in tight lycra and sitting on a large, inflatable ball, she determinedly punches the air in front of her. A woman is busy tidying up and the four family spaniels are coughing up foam on the flagstone floor as Kevin the butler tries to round them up and whisk them off to the vet – they've got suspected kennel cough. Laurence wafts in, seemingly immune to the chaos.

The Llewelyn-Bowens traded London for the Cotswolds 18 months ago. Their urban uprooting and rural replanting was documented for the television show *To The Manor Bowen*. Laurence says, "The cameras and crew actually acted as ice-breakers with the local people, plus the show really made us throw ourselves into country life."

We go through to the drawing-room-cum-library. Laurence shows me his secret passage, a door hidden in the bookshelves. It's disguised by fake spines of modern and old leather-bound books. "A bit Eighties, I know," he says.

"We're country folk now but in rather a Louis XIV kind of way. I see my role as ornamental. Wardrobe choices are particularly important," he says languidly but with a glint in his eye. Is he bating me? I ask him whether he owns a pair of gumboots. "No, hate them. I have a pair of cowboy boots instead. I don't like the way gumboots wobble. I have a pair of waders." Ah good, he fishes. "No, I bought them to launch the boat in Cornwall. Jackie sea-fishes though – she loves it. We went trout fishing together in Northern Ireland last summer but I wasn't any good. After an hour I caught one this big." He demonstrates something the size of a cocktail sausage with his elegant fingers. "Then Jackie brought in this dirty, great monster of a fish. It's so irritating, she's always better at things than me. It's like being married to Lara Croft's granny.

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"She's a good horsewoman too. My daughters do a lot of riding as well, mainly as a bit of a mantrap. They have perfected the art of looking extremely stylish in equestrian kit. There is nothing hornier than a well turned out lady on a horse. I have a lot of affection for horses after riding as a boy at my uncle's farm in Kent. I've never hunted but am keen to try it, if only to wear the clothes – but to be honest I hardly need an excuse. I'd wear full hunting dress down the Fulham Road."

I'm beginning to realise that Laurence's approach to life is resolutely stylistic. I've heard that he shoots, so I ask him whether his gun of choice is a duelling pistol. He laughs, "Yes, that would be good. As yet I don't own a gun. I've shot a lot locally near Northleach and in Wiltshire but only clays. I went shooting

with a semi-automatic while filming in Northern Ireland, great fun."

Jackie enters with a cat litter tray and starts filling it with ashes from the fire – the chickens need a dust-bath. I ask Jackie whether she enjoys shooting. "Yes, I've been taking lessons. Having not grown up in the country, it isn't the accuracy of my shot that concerns me, it's the etiquette that goes with it which you really have to be taught. So, as part of my education I'm learning by watching my accomplished friend, Sara Apsley, and going out with her on shoot days. The lovely thing about fieldsports such as shooting is that you get to see the countryside, notice the changing seasons and breathe the air. Plus there's a real honesty to eating what you shoot."

Laurence says: "We shot pheasants up near Aberdeen in November. It was my first clay shooting game, though I wasn't as excited

about bagging something for the larder as much as finding some plumes to put in my beret. New romanticism's back. I need a stylistic aim to get the sporting lust up."

Fieldsports are proving to be influential in Laurence's designs and style. "I love shooting and hunting scenes. I was delighted to find hunting wrapping-paper a couple of Christmases ago – it set the theme that year. At the time of the Hunting Act I passionately suggested it was a bad idea because what else would you put on table-mats? There would be waste-paper bins without anything on them. Pubs would have no method of shielding naked light-bulbs.

"But I do feel very strongly that we, in the country, are held hostage by Islington. I got very involved in the rural post office issue. It is quite extraordinary how unintelligent politicians are. There's a total lack of commitment to legacy and history, which is criminal – it's this ridiculous political correctness thing." Laurence helped save the Siddington post office but others were lost. "Actually, issues such as hunting are about how a community works properly and

we know that doesn't happen in the cities.

"We've found that rural life is far more satisfying than London. People have a much more symbiotic relationship with their surroundings – they belong to the country and the country belongs to them. Town dwellers don't have that same relationship – that's why they are all depressed, fat and unhealthy!"

Despite his hectic schedule, running a successful design company, launching a home furnishings range for Matalan and doing more television shows and newspaper columns, Laurence still makes time to enjoy and participate in local events, from the VWH point-to-point to the pub quiz. And he's involved in a number of interior design projects locally, including helping Lord and Lady Apsley redecorate the mansion house at Cirencester Park. "I'm overseeing what they are doing to the Hall. I see it as my feudal duty!" ■