



Master Bedroom—photo: Roelof Bakker

ARTS & ANTIQUES

Dennis Severs' House: 18 Folgate Street

By Abby Cronin

Setting the Scene

This is the story of an American who fell in love with England even before he left his home town. His name is Dennis Severs. He was a young Californian who pursued a unique and passionate vision of life in Britain long before he ever came to live in London. By the age of seventeen, Dennis had absorbed visions of England while watching black and white adaptations of Charles Dickens stories on television. The films were windows “where I saw life set in locations which were so different from the bleached light....in southern California. Deep down, I always believed that a day would come when I would travel past picture frames and into the marinated glow of a warmer... more romantic light.... identified as *English*.”⁽¹⁾

After a brief visit in 1965, Dennis moved to London just five days after graduating from high school in 1967. He found temporary digs in the run-down inner suburb of Spitalfields where he fell in love with the atmosphere of this historic Georgian village. At the time the area was still a wholesale vegetable and fruit market, not at all like today's regenerated and gentrified district so popular with tourists seeking chic

restaurants and a variety of arts and craft market stalls. In the 70s, however, Spitalfields was still a deteriorating neighbourhood. When Dennis found his ideal home in 1979, it was a decaying George I brick terraced house at 18 Folgate Street built in 1724. His task was to restore the house to reflect its original state. He moved in as the sole resident, camping inside while he worked his way from one room to the next, ten in total. Gradually he understood how each room functioned, the use of space and crucially, the importance of interior light. When his restoration project commenced, he had no intention of modernising or updating. There would be no electricity or plumbing; chamber pots and candles would be sufficient.

Severs learnt that a large population of Spitalfields residents in the 18th century were Huguenots, French Protestants, who fled religious persecution in the 1780s because they were unwilling to convert to Catholicism. By profession Huguenots were skilled master silk weavers and their presence meant that the textile trade and silk weaving industry flourished throughout the 1800s. Indeed, the East End was well known as a prosperous textile centre in this

period. Historical records show that Huguenots lived in the well-appointed Georgian terraces built between 1718 and 1728, very close to the major commercial centre of the City of London. Dennis was fascinated to learn about the original inhabitants of 18 Folgate Street.

How, Severs wondered, would the family of an affluent Huguenot silk weaver organise their domestic household? He set about finding out with meticulous attention to detail. He would furnish each room in the house to reflect the purpose and function it would have had for a Huguenot family. His passion for collecting was insatiable and in the 1970s and 80s antiques and artefacts were plentiful and cheap. They were easily found in East End street markets, at auctions and from dealers. He bought and stored bric-a-brac, textiles, furniture, crockery, china, an array of paintings, and all forms of art which suited the period—whether they were absolutely the right or not. All domestic needs were to be met. In his earlier student days his visits to the Victoria and Albert Museum introduced him to a room seen through a window in the Furniture Department. He wrote in his memoir, “At least once a week I left my



Regency Room-photo by Roelof Bakker

student squalor to gawk through a plate glass window at a museum display, 'a room of the early Georgian period.'⁽²⁾ Today his collection of art and antiques fill every nook and cranny in the rooms at 18 Folgate Street.

**On Location
Travelling Through Picture
Frames, Into The House
Itself To Find Out Who
Lives There**

The front door opens and visitors pass through a picture frame into an 18th century home: time seems frozen. In the marinated glow of a warmer...more romantic light, we can understand that this is what Dennis craved. But - shush! Walk carefully and whisper: 'Do not disturb the Jervis family'. Do you see the owner's name? A French name, Mr Issac Gervais. The Gervais family, now the anglicised Jervis family; they are Severs' imaginary Huguenot residents. When the house is open to visitors, they have left so that movement can be conducted quietly around the house without disturbing the residents. Halls and staircases are dark brown aged varnish; fire burns in the grates, beds are unmade as though their occupants have just left—but we don't know where they have gone. Drapery draped across chairs. Lace covers windows; furniture and shelves are filled to overflowing with china, trinkets, clocks, clothing, fans, books; pamphlets are strewn here and there. Wood floors are warmed by an array of oriental rugs. Is the clutter in the way of domestic life or is it just an integral part of it? The atmosphere is of a home well lived in - if a bit over-furnished.

The tour takes visitors along the entry hall and down the narrow staircase. There are two small rooms: the cellar and kitchen where a fire glows and a table is laden with bowls filled with fruit and bread. Jugs, kettles and pots sit on grates in the fireplace; a dresser seems stressed as it supports shelves of assorted crockery. On the soundtrack we hear clanking, the creaking of floorboards, footsteps, bells ring reminding us of the time when there were horses hooves in the street. Severs reminds us to go upstairs. His phrase: "join smart Georgians in rising above low prejudice" by which he means the best floor is yet one more flight up—the 'first' or 'best'. Here you will find order and refinement and be safe from the bully below.⁽³⁾ Upstairs move toward the front room -the Smoking Room---which Severs sees as accommodating all-male extremes - pure Hogarth. Don't miss the stunning crystal chandelier on the landing ---but be careful not to disturb the lit candles.

The Jervis' affluence is more conspicuously on show in the Drawing Room. Portraits of (presumably) Mr and Mrs Jervis and the King hang handsomely on the far wall. Period chairs sit casually around the table suggesting that the family has just left the room. Their wealth is overtly displayed in the bedrooms. In the main bedroom on the second floor a huge bed



Drawing Room closer



Dickens Room-photo by Roelof Bakker



Master Bedroom Dressing table detail Justin Barton



Outside 18 Folgate Street-photo by Abby Cronin



Simon Pettet pottery detail-photo by Roelof Bakker



Master Bedroom-photo: Roelof Bakker

with its sumptuous silk coverlet and drapes ensures a warm night's sleep. Pictured here is a luxuriously crowded dressing table: jewellery, feathers, candlesticks, and a fan - everything the well-appointed Georgian woman of the house needs to complete her wardrobe. Tea is on the table, a dress is waiting to be donned. A remarkable collection of Delft is displayed above the mantelpiece. Ascend to the attic,

which is perhaps less engaging. Well-worn clothing and cloths hang as though forgotten. Stay a moment longer to study the Dickensian garret with a desk placed next to a window in the corner; books, paper and pens are scattered in this office-like space.

A tour through Dennis Severs' Georgian home ensures that you will see arts and antiques in a real domestic setting. Here is a living painting of

the domestic life of an 18th century Huguenot family in the East End of London. A mere five minute walk from Liverpool Street Station will take you back nearly 250 years. Few would doubt that Dennis Severs, with his bohemian-eccentric tastes has achieved his idealised English home. Go and visit: immerse yourself in the Georgian atmosphere of England as this American envisioned it.

References & Notes

(Dennis Severs: 1948-1999)

Website: www.dennissevershouse.co.uk

Photos courtesy: Dennis Severs' House

Severs, Dennis. *18 Folgate Street: The Tale of a House in Spitalfields*. Vintage & Chatto & Windus 2001

(1) page 4

(2) page 34

(3) THE PLOT on Dennis Severs website-

www.dennissevershouse.co.uk/the-plot/

Further information: Spitalfields Historic Building Trust, formed in 1977. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spitalfields_Historic_Buildings_Trust

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