

Donna Ida Thornton, 49, the Australian-born denim designer known as the jean queen, always dreamed of a home in the British countryside. “At 13 I was buying art from [the collectibles company] Franklin Mint. I had an English country scene, with a thatched cottage for the wall of my bedroom. I was definitely manifesting.”

Whatever she was doing, it worked. Thornton now owns a Jacobean manor house, Langdon Court, in Wembury, south Devon, which she shares with her British husband, Robert Walton, 66, five chihuahuas (Emilio, Julio, Fernando, Eduardo and Gonzalo), a two-month-old shiba inu puppy called Momo, a squad of highly vocal guinea fowl, ten rescue geese and nine ducks. Soon there will be another chihuahua (Rodrigo), a trio of llamas, three hives of honeybees and a few fainting goats. Come again? “Haven’t you seen them online? They fall over in a faint if you startle them. But who would do that?”

Looking around the building site that is now the couple’s full-time home, it’s tempting to ask: who would take on a crumbling 16-bedroom listed building like this?

They bought Langdon Court in 2021, for just over £1.2 million. “The purchase price was the cheap bit,” Thornton says. “Because it had been repossessed by the bank, we had to buy it back from the bank, and in the meantime people had come along and stolen all the lead from the roof.”

She and Walton, who is president of the Restaurant Association and known to all as “Bobby Dazzler”, first viewed Langdon Court in February 2021. By the time they had the keys, in July, loss of the roof had resulted in water ingress and damage to the rooms, and garden statuary had disappeared from the grounds. Despite the depredations, the couple were still enchanted by the property. It’s not hard to fathom why. From the rhododendrons that line the driveway to the friendly square stone façade and the beautifully proportioned rooms arranged round the palm court at the centre of the house, Langdon Court is an absolute corker of a country estate.

Thornton says the decision to buy a historic country house was made during a visit to her good friend the interior designer Kelly Hoppen. “We went to stay with Kelly when she got her place in the Cotswolds. We were early so we were driving around and we saw this beautiful house that was actually a hotel. Dazzler has had hotels, and that’s when we had the idea: why don’t we look for a beautiful house like this, which is a hotel, so we can get ten or 15 bedrooms.”

“A ten-bedroom hotel would have all the facilities, the good kitchen, the en suites, all the bits and pieces, which a ten-bedroom house might not,” Walton adds.

And while they didn’t plan to run a traditional hotel, they decided they would enjoy sharing their home for special events. Living in Berkshire, between Pangbourne and Goring, they began their search during lockdown in 2021. “For me on a Friday night my favourite thing to do would be to get into bed and go on to Rightmove and do some property porn. I’d have all my favourite ones saved, the same as you do in your basket on Matches and Net-a-Porter, and Bobby Dazzler would be, like, ‘Everything is £10 million and £12 million. Why are you looking at them?’ And I’d say I don’t want to look at houses I can afford — where’s the fun in that?”

The pair met in 2006, when Thornton was 33, and married in 2009. “When Dazzler and I first met,” she says, “he



From jean queen to lady of the manor

After buying a dilapidated stately home in Devon for £1.2 million, denim designer Donna Ida is creating her dream country pile. By Katrina Burroughs

said to me why are you not married? I said because nobody ever asked me. Then we got married and he said: ‘Now I know why!’”

The perfectionism and persistence with which Thornton built her fashion brand (speciality: high-waisted jeans and flattering denim jumpsuits, adored by celebs from Hoppen to Jodie Kidd, Lisa Snowden and Amanda Holden), were precisely what the doctor ordered to resuscitate Langdon Court.

The process she refers to as “the rip out” began in February 2022, and from that moment the couple have enjoyed the company



Top: Donna Ida and her husband, Robert Walton. Above: Langdon Court, their home in Devon. Left: wearing her own-brand denim

of 25-30 workers on site daily. The house had been a hotel for two years before going into administration, and the previous occupants had “put up stud walls everywhere, and covered up the flagstones with lino. If there was a floor that was caving in, they just threw up another wall so they didn’t have to address it.” Once the rooms were cleared, the period property specialist BBK Builders arrived in July. Uni-Lec Electrical took on the electrics, Titan Mechanical the plumbing and the local joiner Devon Carpenters the woodwork. Hoppen introduced Thornton to the interior designer Geraldine Apponyi, and in October they began planning the decor.

The sheer amount of materials needed to refurbish the 22,000 sq ft building has been eye watering: 10,000 sq ft of carpet and 4,000 sq ft of marble, and 12 miles of cable to run the electrics. The top priority was to design a comfortable suite on the first floor for the couple and their dogs, as a sanctuary from the building work.

The private rooms, which they moved into in August, are a haven of calm. In the bedroom, the centrepiece is a Christobelle bed by Love Your Home, its curvy headboard upholstered in a Salvesen Graham floral fabric. A cosy jute herringbone carpet from Tim Page is underfoot. Furniture is vintage: the bedside tables are by Ashburton-based In a Nutshell, and a marble-topped chest of drawers found on the Instagram shop @homewithally. In the couple’s dressing room/bathroom a Millbrook tub from the Cast Iron Bath Co has been painted Mason Pink, a delicate blush by Edward Bulmer Natural Paints.

Next door, from a sketch made by Apponyi, BBK built what may be the world’s first “chihuahua stables”, featuring canine sleeping quarters, a kitchenette and five tongue-and-groove panelled stalls where the dogs can eat separately.

For the first five months they lived at Langdon, only the private suite was finished. The kitchen was next to take shape. This is Dazzler’s domain, and he shuttles happily between the garden and his supersized black and chrome Bertazzoni range, providing sustenance for allcomers while wearing Ralph Lauren and Simon Dowling tailoring.

The palette of materials here is a classic mix of marble, brass and stone, with painted wood cabinetry by Williams & Sons, set against a creamy off-white backdrop from Edward Bulmer’s colour card Portland. In the corner, the breakfast alcove is painted in vivid India Yellow, by Farrow & Ball.

The star of the entire project is undoubtedly the palm court: the central sunroom has a greenhouse-style glass roof and wall-to-wall vegetation. The walls are painted and tiled in green, and furniture is retro rattan, including a Peacock chair from Homesense, and several massive terracotta pots from Thornton’s favourite antique dealer, Matt Dixon of TallBoy Interiors.

The house is on schedule to be finished in June, and after that the gardens will be a life’s work.

If the interiors are Thornton’s passion, the grounds have bewitched Walton. He is planning an orchard, and will plant a pear tree for every event held here; he is sowing seasonal vegetables in eight Vegepods — sort of raised bed/polytunnel affairs. “If I’m feeling in any way under pressure, I go and walk round the garden,” he says. “I’m so excited about the blossom coming out. I talked to the Japanese blossom this morning, I said you are going to be so beautiful. Either I am going completely doolally or I am just in love.”

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