



# THE *Victorian* TERRACE

The most familiar styles of English housing offer a wealth of history, architectural flair and decorative inspiration. In this new series, we celebrate the unique characteristics of period homes and how to decorate them

FEATURE EMMA J PAGE

**LEFT** The ubiquitous brick faced, often-painted Victorian terrace typically features a two-up, two-down arrangement, although many have been reconfigured and extended over the years.

From stuccoed townhouses to flat-fronted former workers' cottages, Victorian terraces are among the most ubiquitous of British housing stock. Nearly a quarter of today's population live in mid-to-late 19th-century homes, many of which were built during the boom of the Industrial Revolution across the country.

These terraces vary in size, scope and detailing from town to town and even street to street – a reflection of the speed at which they were constructed during a fast-changing economic landscape. As a rule of thumb, early examples tend to feature plainer, Georgian-inspired facades, with later builds becoming increasingly ornate.

Prized for their decorative features, including sash windows, slate roofs, ornate mouldings, encaustic flooring and tiled fireplaces, Victorian terraces are also configured in a way that can be challenging to modern living, which has since evolved to embrace open-plan, multi-functional spaces and enhanced eco-credentials. Despite this, a creative architectural and decorative approach can easily unlock the magic of these properties, making them timeless in their appeal.

## LAYOUT: *A balancing act*

Although it can be tempting to strip out a space when modernising, it is often more beneficial to play to its existing strengths. "Victorian homes have so much to offer," says architect Rodrigo Moreno Masey. "Though there will be times when significant remodelling is unavoidable, it's frequently in smaller, more surgical solutions that the biggest impact can be made."

Focus first on a gentle reappraisal of the building's layout, bearing in mind that integral elements such as cornicing, fireplaces, open stringer staircases, skirting details and architraves can all be preserved, even if they are removed, rejigged or repositioned elsewhere during renovation.

Many terraces feature a two-up, two-down configuration, with a back addition over two floors. Though proportions tend to be generous, hallways are nearly always narrow and middle living spaces often suffer from a lack of light. "These homes are largely limited to a width of four to six metres, so the footprint feels narrow and long," says Nick Horvath, architect at Momo & Co. "Look for opportunities where you can visually enjoy the full scope of the house. One option is to form a larger opening between the entrance hall and front living room. You could use a pair of glazed French doors and two additional fixed glass panels which the doors can fold back onto. It's a solution that draws in light and makes the space feel more generous."

Try thinking counter-intuitively, too: a middle sitting room can be enhanced just as it is. "Preserving a division between the more formal sitting room and the 'middle' room of a Victorian home will ensure each space has a clear definition," adds Zulufish's Caroline Milns. "Adding glass doors instead of traditional brick walls can introduce a sense of modernity and a softer definition. A skylight in the centre of the roofline will also allow much-needed natural light to pour through the core of the building, permeating every floor."

If a reconfiguration is being crafted to suit family life, bear in mind that the traditionally darker middle room can alternatively be a good place to house utilities, especially if the building is being extended. "Making room for 'back of house' zones, such as a cloakroom, pantry or boot room is essential for daily life, and these don't need much natural light," says Horvath.

Reorganising a Victorian terrace in this way enhances our connection to it from a contemporary perspective – and if its key characteristics are respected, all the better. "The layering of these details makes all the difference," says Horvath. "Buildings like these have a story to tell." ▶



**ABOVE** In this hallway, renovated by Momo & Co, traditional encaustic flooring sets the tone. Its graphic, monochrome pattern is echoed in the interior paintwork and edged stair runner.

**RIGHT** This middle room, designed by Sarah Peake, has been uplifted by contemporary Miro prints. A sideboard by Fiona McDonald provides a focal point in the absence of a chimney breast.



**LEFT** In this room designed by Alice Leigh, simple shuttered window treatments allow the architecture of the building to shine. A classic furniture arrangement makes the most of the room's proportions.



## SPACE: *Room to grow*

Preserving the existing footprint of a Victorian terrace or deciding to expand it is an important consideration, as is whether to echo the building's vernacular or opt for a contemporary addition. "The biggest challenges we see are width, light and storage," says Moreno Masey. "Most renovations include the brief to open up the space and connect the front door to the garden via an uninterrupted sight line."

For roomier living spaces, a side return is a classic solution. "It's cost-effective and creates valuable communal space for families where it's needed the most," Moreno Masey advises. "And garden rooms are often undervalued as an affordable and easy way to add living space. Many don't need planning and can be quite big, so there is an opportunity to do something striking."

When planning a rear extension, it is natural to stay within reasonable depths. A three-metre addition tends to look most proportional to the original building. "However, often we don't extend to the back at all as rear gardens are small," says architect Michael Schienke of Vorbild Architecture. "Instead, we might remove an existing old outhouse from the rear, channeling more light into the deepest part of the home, locating a redesigned kitchen-diner in the space created by the original side return."

Adding bedrooms in the roof can be a good step, too. It is worth remembering that all mid-terrace properties have the possibility for a full-width rear dormer. Successful conversions usually involve continuing the staircase up into the loft from the first floor and adding a bathroom or shower room where the ceiling is highest. Expect the remaining space to be as big as the rear first-floor bedroom plus about a third of the front bedroom, combined.

Even without adding an extension, it is possible to reorganise the interior of a house to provide cleaner circulation and improve function. "We achieve this in multiple ways, increasing the heights of internal doors, repositioning the staircase, opening up between rooms and providing a clear vista from front to back," says Chris Pring, senior architect at Hodgkinson Design. ▶



**OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE** In this bathroom scheme by Laura Stephens, a freestanding double basin and a marble chequerboard floor lend a classic feel. **OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW** loft conversion by Momo & Co features a shower room with a generous skylight. **ABOVE LEFT** Soft pink textured wallpaper adds a contemporary note to a bedroom by Zulufish.

**LEFT** A contemporary kitchen extension by Zulufish allows for space-saving banquette seating. **ABOVE** In this kitchen extension designed by Laura Stephens features boxed-in steelwork (top left) to suggest beam-like breaks in what would otherwise be a large, blank ceiling. Glazed tiles and a Shaker kitchen add character.





ABOVE Floor-to-ceiling painted joinery frames an elegant seating area while providing characterful display storage in this bedroom designed by Kitesgrove.

## RENOVATE: *Restore & Refresh*

Victorian terraces make excellent backdrops for contemporary as well as more traditional schemes. “The key is to preserve or restore architectural elements such as cornicing and architraves,” says interior designer Susie Atkinson. “The mix of old and new is interesting. I find that even if an extension is more contemporary, it can add unexpected depth overall, because it shows progression in building materials and ideas.”

Considered storage is a good way to introduce a note of cohesion. “To combat any sense of coldness when it comes to rear extensions, I often use traditional-style joinery, such as a v-grooved hand-painted kitchen, which might tie in seamlessly with tongue-and-groove bookcases elsewhere,” says Sarah Peake of Studio Peake. “I also include plenty of cosy textures and patterns to make the space feel warm and welcoming, and in some cases, to make up for any lack of original features.”

Effective storage can be built into dead corners to optimise space. “In a recent project, I designed a ‘dog-legged’ storage box which is narrower behind

the front door so that it can still open easily,” says interior designer Laura Stephens. “It features cubby holes for shoes and the wider end has a handy drawer for hats and gloves. A slim console shelf sits over the radiator, serving as a practical space to store keys but also allowing surface space for the warm glow of a table lamp.”

Robust materials that age well with time are beneficial. “Natural textures such as timber, marble and stone work beautifully,” says Kitesgrove’s Katie Lion. “Not only does this approach improve your environmental footprint, but materials like these breathe better, last longer and improve our well-being.” Try using contrasting textures, such as polished-concrete flooring juxtaposed with exposed brickwork, elegant wood panelling combined with fluted glass cabinetry, or graphic Crittall doors that chime with the rhythm of traditional timber parquet flooring. Remember that a simple, honest palette detailed well, will look beautiful for many years. ▶



### CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT

Tongue-and-groove joinery in this design by Studio Peake provides a textural contrast in this contemporary extension.

‘Dog-leg’ storage in this entrance hall by Laura Stephens leaves room for the front door to open fully and has cubby holes to accommodate shoes.

In this design by Studio Peake a combination of open and concealed kitchen storage adds depth.

A narrow bench and a simple metal coat rack provide practical hanging and sitting space in this scheme by Hám Interiors.







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**FAR LEFT** In this scheme by Louise Robinson, rich mid-green tones pick out the hues in the inset tiling of the original fireplace.

**LEFT** A contemporary inset fire is offset by grasscloth wallpaper in this scheme by Elmwood Design.

**ABOVE** Contemporary furniture and modern fireplace tile slips offer a fresh take in this scheme by Studio Peake.

**RIGHT** Louise Robinson teams a generous round mirror and mid-century-style pendant with more ornate antique pieces.



## DECORATE: *tales of the unexpected*

Often a showcase for travel, adventure and exotica, Victorian interiors were known for their clash of cultural influences – colour, pattern, fabric and texture were as popular then as they are now. It is a good reminder that buildings like these are a natural backdrop for a sense of playfulness and delight, which means a relaxed approach pays off. “For example, in my experience, the tones of original fireplace tiles and hallway flooring almost never ‘fit’ with the hues of an updated scheme, but sometimes that mismatch can be magical,” says interior designer Louise Robinson. “I value the authenticity and craftsmanship of rich tile colours such as dark green, blue, crimson and brown over box-fresh reproductions in neutral tones.”

There are also times when there is value in adding a playful contemporary contrast such as restoring a

damaged fire surround with monochrome chevron tiles, or bringing a stripped-out fireplace to life with a contemporary inset gas fire, complemented by textured grasscloth wallpaper and the graphic silhouette of a generous round mirror. Surprising design elements such as a splash of jewel-coloured fabric or a decorative wallpaper can create vibrant pause points.

“As the Victorian era was all about exploration, it seems fitting that we use an eclectic mix of antique, vintage and contemporary pieces when decorating these homes,” reflects Violet & George’s Nicky Mudie. “Celebrate the space, rather than fight it. The bones of the building should feel as if they have always been there, with new additions as contemporary as you want them to be. An approach that’s eclectic, thoughtful and comfortable will always allow this well-loved architecture to sing.” ■

