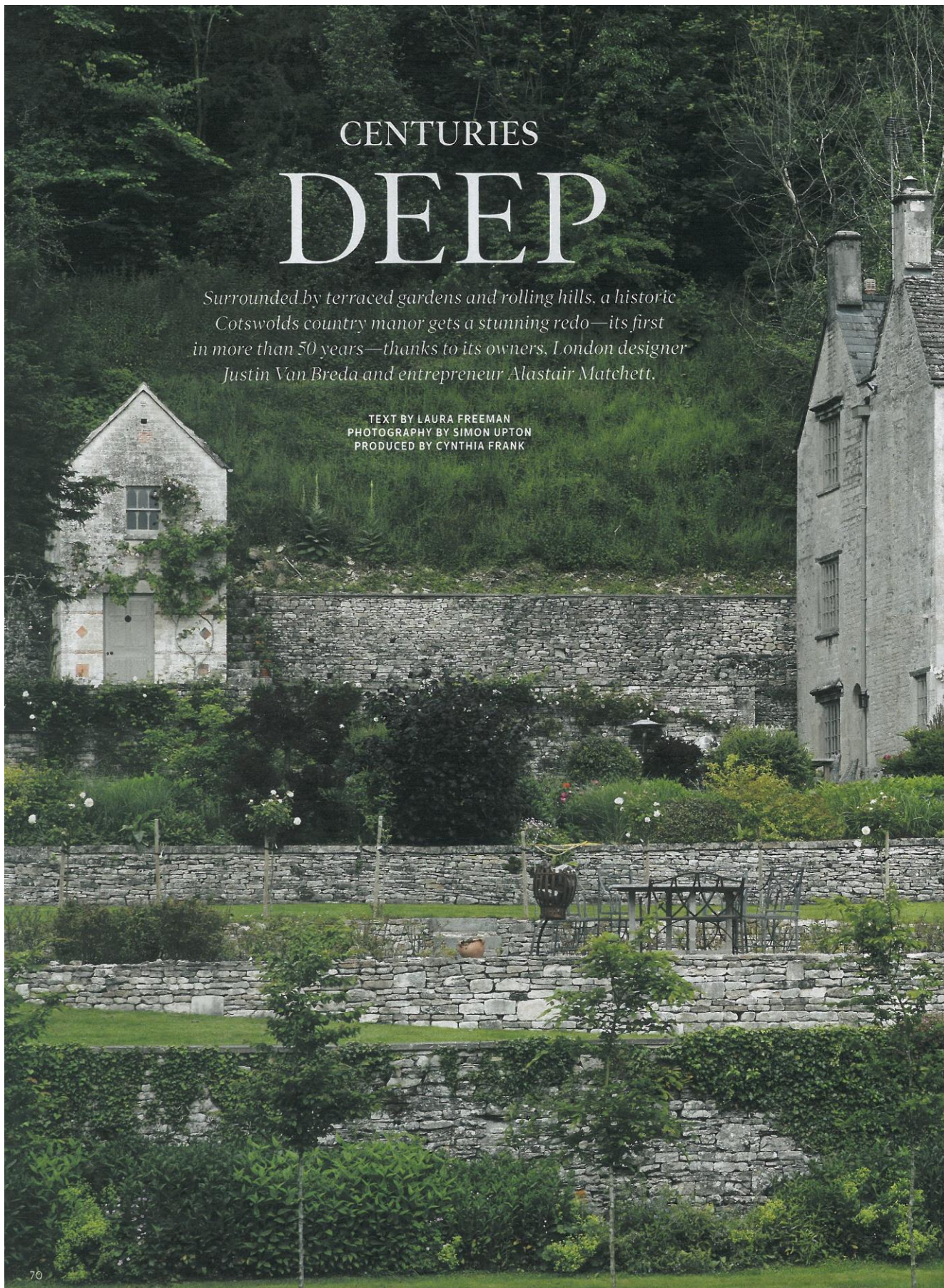


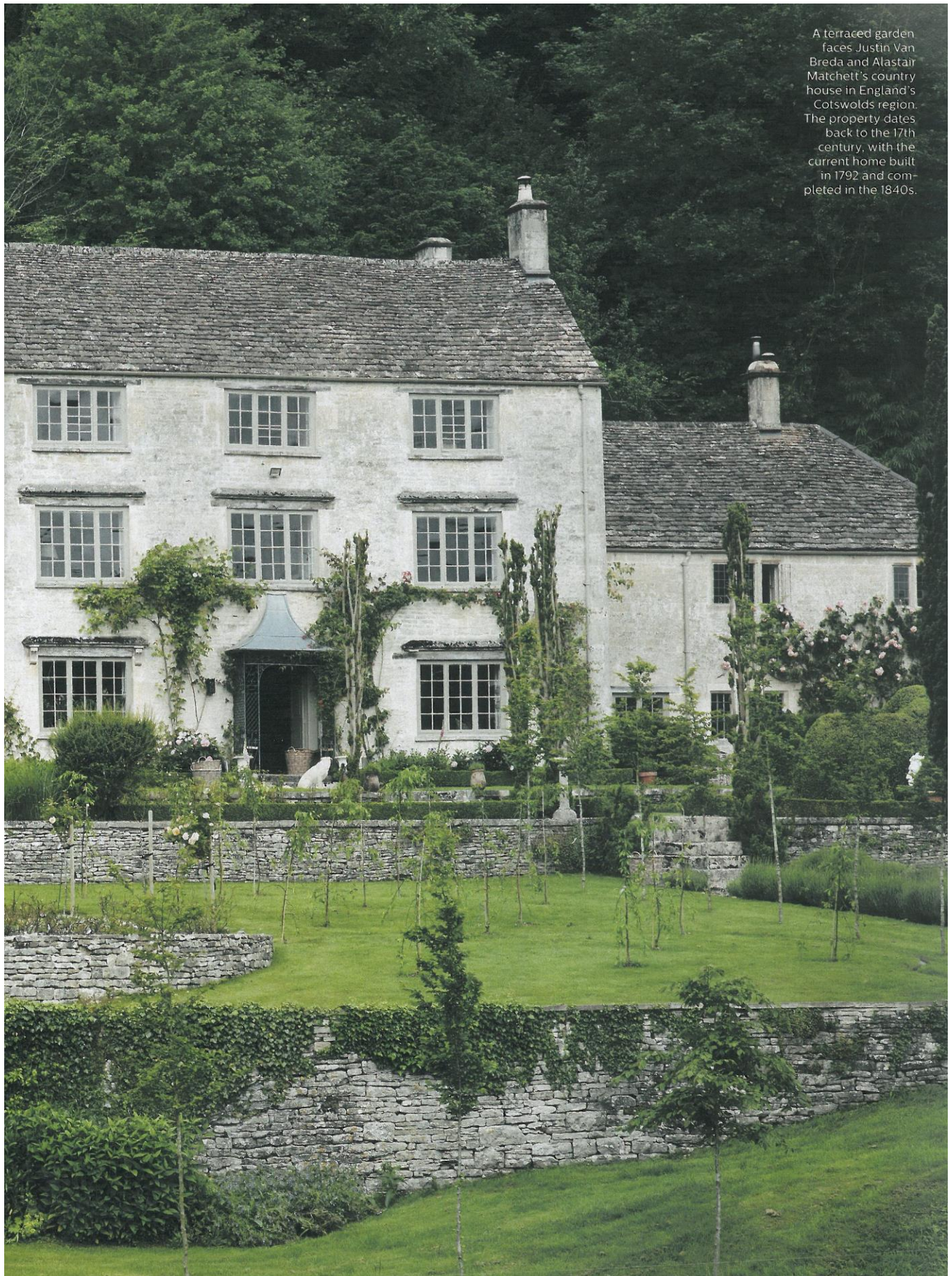
CENTURIES DEEP

Surrounded by terraced gardens and rolling hills, a historic Cotswolds country manor gets a stunning redo—its first in more than 50 years—thanks to its owners, London designer Justin Van Breda and entrepreneur Alastair Matchett.

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A terraced garden faces Justin Van Breda and Alastair Matchett's country house in England's Cotswolds region. The property dates back to the 17th century, with the current home built in 1792 and completed in the 1840s.



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IT IS A SPRING AFTERNOON of incomparable beauty when Justin Van Breda drives from the Kemble train station in Gloucestershire, a place of candy-striped ironwork, doves in the rafters, and daffodils in pots on the platform. Overnight, cornflowers have come up in the south Cotswolds lanes, blue as the sky. “They weren’t there yesterday,” says Van Breda. It has taken a couple of weeks of swooning sunshine to call the countryside to life. “England is like a greenhouse,” he says, winding through wooded lanes. “A little heat, and *whoomf!* Everything comes up.”

Van Breda, a South African-born, London-based interior designer with a refined yet eclectic eye, is irrepressibly good company. Passing through a neighboring village, he tells the story of the duchess in her dotage who sleeps with her tiara cut into the mattress for safe-keeping. He jokes that when he first came to England to work for Nicholas Haslam, the designer used to introduce him as “my giraffe.” (He is strikingly tall.) Today, Van Breda designs furniture with immaculate attention to finish and fabrics whose patterns take their cues from sources as diverse as botanical prints and Georgian architecture.

The first time Van Breda discovered these lanes—barely wide enough for a horse and cart, let alone two passing Land Rovers—it was quite a different day. It was late November, darkening already at teatime, darker and colder still when he arrived at Watercombe, the house his partner, Alastair Matchett, a financial analyst, had bought and wanted so much to show him. The next morning, “It was like stepping through the wardrobe into Narnia. Snow had fallen while we slept. The landscape was magical.” He fell in love with the house then.





ABOVE: The winter sitting room is known as the snug. The armchairs and their fabric were both designed by Van Breda, the late-Georgian table was purchased at auction, and the floor lamp is by Vaughan. The walls are in Dimity by Farrow & Ball, and the painting is by Robert Pohl. **OPPOSITE, TOP:** Van Breda with two of his Labrador retrievers. **FAR LEFT:** The dining room's mahogany table, chairs, and sideboard are from Van Breda's collection, the mirror is from Brownrigg, the candelabras are Victorian, and the rug is by Coral & Hive; the wallcovering is a digital print of a landscape by John Constable. **LEFT:** The sitting room's sofa and cocktail table are from Van Breda's furniture line, and the blue-and-white pillows are in fabrics by Bennison and Morris & Co.; the large mirror is from the 19th century.



The antique cherry table in the kitchen is French, and the china cupboard is original to the house. The flooring is English limestone and slate, and the walls are painted in Farrow & Ball's Slipper Satin.



ABOVE: The guest bath's tub and fittings are by C.P. Hart, the walls are in Tallow by Farrow & Ball, and the artwork is by Patricia van Diest. **BELOW:** The mudroom's flooring is English flint cobblestone, and the wicker hampers are from Fortnum & Mason.



It has become a place of sanctuary and celebration. "Alastair had his 40th birthday here," he says. "I had my 40th here. Our dogs were born here." Three yellow Labrador retrievers, Margot, Maudie, and Leila, meet the returning Van Breda with rapture before collapsing on the kitchen flagstones. It was a long winter—Van Breda and Matchett were snowed in three times—and the arrival of warmer temperatures has been greeted with collective ecstasy.

"We don't stand on ceremony," says Van Breda, pouring glasses filled with iced elderflower cordial. Lunch is smoked salmon, cream cheese, and strawberries on the terrace. "Even in the dining room, we wear jeans and T-shirts," he says. "We live here. We're not precious."

Watercombe is an English manor in miniature. The house takes its name from the Old English *watercoombe*—a valley with a stream or river running through it. The present house was built in the late 18th century by Thomas Baker, an amateur property developer and antiquarian who collected archaeological finds from Roman-era Britain. The terra-cotta tiles of the facade are from a Roman villa near Cirencester. A roundel, once set into the garden folly, is now in the British Museum. Meanwhile, the original deeds to the property—dated 1636, written on parchment, and sealed with red wax—are framed in the hall.

When Matchett first renovated, the roof came off and the floors came up. Georgian doorjambs and fanlights were carefully restored; subtle modern lighting was cut into original oak floorboards.

In the kitchen, formerly a muddle of tack rooms, coal stores, and sculleries, stands a magnificent cider press above a stone trough. The apples came from the orchard, which Van Breda is nursing back to life, though the press is no longer in use. "Everything leads out into the garden," says Van Breda, opening door after door. On a day like this, he reads in the drawing room. "It's a wonderful room in summer, with lovely, dappled, soft light." On his list: *Mrs. Astor Regrets*; *Rebel Prince: The Power, Passion and Defiance of Prince Charles*; and *Vanished Years*, the memoirs of actor Rupert Everett. "I jump between

them,” he says. “And I read a lot.” There are books in every room: Tate exhibition catalogs in the drawing room; piles of Beatrix Potters on a bedside table; biographies, saintly and scurrilous, in the upstairs study. In the snug—an informal sitting room—a copy of *Hello!* has been left on a footstool, Meghan Markle waving from the cover. This is the winter room. A stack of tartan blankets, rolled in a wicker basket, awaits the first cold snap. A quilt made from the strike-offs from Van Breda’s first fabric collection covers the sofa.

Nothing is set or static. “You might find something here today,” he observes, “and somewhere else tomorrow.” He mixes antiques inherited from both sets of grandparents, such as the upright chairs in a guest bedroom, which he describes as being upholstered in “very Victorian, very pink moiré taffeta,” with beakers of porcupine quills from Africa, screens and statues from China, mirrors bought for a *sous* in French markets, and elegant pieces from his own furniture atelier.

A plastic Labrador sits on the kitchen’s mantel. “I like my little bit of kitsch,” he admits with a smile. In the cloakroom, succulents grow in chipped coronation mugs, and Marseille soap sits in a royal wedding saucer. Van Breda spotted a round table in the sitting room on the pavement outside an antiques shop. “It was £150, and I just strapped it to the roof of my car and drove straight down here,” he says. “For me, it’s not about what an object is worth—it’s about the story.”

The dining room walls are a bosky panorama: a blown-up print of John Constable’s 1816 *Wivenhoe Park, Essex*, from the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. These days, Van Breda spends a considerable amount of his time in the United States overseeing his furniture and fabric collections, which are represented in showrooms in seven U.S. cities, including New York, Atlanta, Dallas, and Hollywood, Florida.

But Watercombe always calls him back. The summerhouse overlooks a lavender walk, an avenue of palisaded hornbeams, and the rose garden. (If only the deer wouldn’t eat the roses.) The apple trees are coming into blossom. It is the perfect English day. ■





In the sitting room, a pair of armchairs in an ivory chintz are by OKA, and the slipper chair covered in an Irish linen is by Van Breda. The Edwardian nursing chair by the fireplace has a cushion in an antique satin brocade, the pear-wood side table (left) is George I, and the George III mahogany console in front of the window belonged to Van Breda's father. The portrait over the original mantel is of Matchett's mother. For details, see Resources.