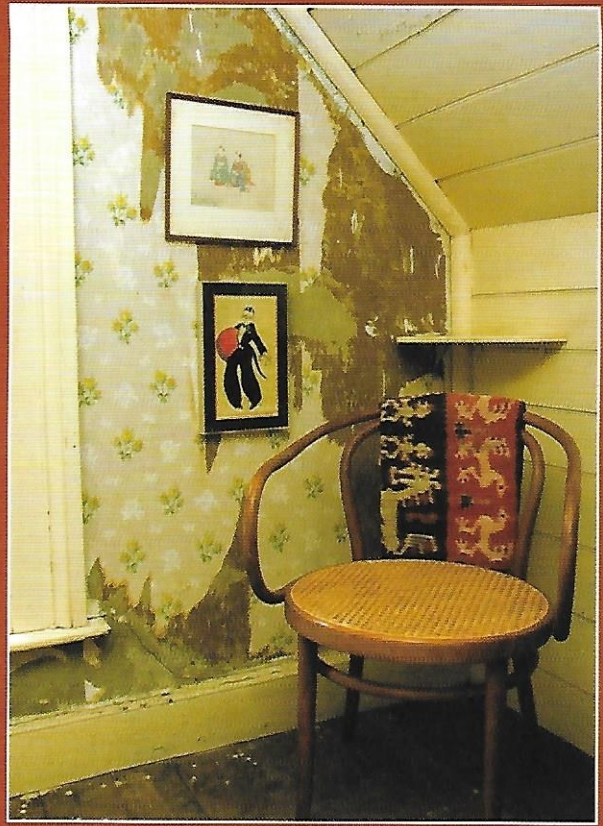




**Previous page:** George Freedman relaxing in his Harry Bertoia 'Bird Chair' – a 20th century design classic.

**Facing page:** The walls in the little attic bedroom have been left unfinished. Peeling Victorian wallpaper, with tiny purple violets and original timber boards give the room an authentic charm.





# LET IT BE

STORY KATE BROADHURST PHOTOGRAPHY NICKY GORDON

Godfather of Australian interior design, George Freedman has owned this cute country house in Milton for the past 34 years. Considering his reputation for creating sleek, contemporary interiors, it comes as a bit of a surprise to find that his own second home is refreshingly under done.

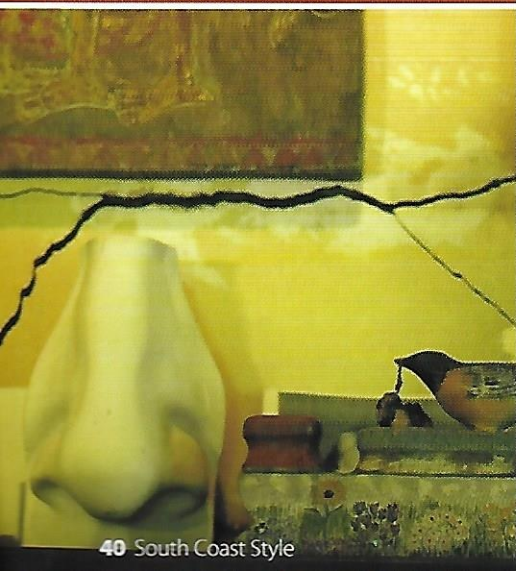




**Above:** The sitting-room wallpaper was peeled back to reveal the archaeological layers of paint. The resulting look, like the whole house, is one of faded grandeur.

**Below:** A plaster replica of Michelangelo's David's nose sits on the mantelpiece.

**Facing Page:** A Chinese embroidered opera set makes an exotic wall hanging in the dining room. An Isamu Noguchi paper lamp, another mid-century modern classic design.



Sitting pretty at the top of a small hill in the Milton Valley is one of those quintessential storybook Victorian cottages – the kind a child might create when asked to paint a house. Built from rough rubble stones that come from the paddocks it inhabits, enveloped in pink flowering oleander with a deep shady verandah, it has got so much character it almost seems to have a personality – even a presence.

“There is this benign quality about it; it’s a happy house – it’s happy, you’re happy,” says George Freedman who has owned the cottage since 1972. It’s always been kind of comfortable, so I would never say it was haunted, but it does have a kind of happy presence. The house has its own voice, it tells you what it wants.”

George Freedman is one of Australia’s most highly regarded interior designers with a reputation that stretches far beyond our shores. He is known for his passion for clean lines, classic aesthetics and a rigorous attention to detail and he has been responsible for designing some of Sydney’s high profile homes, restaurants and landmarks over the years like Kinsella’s and

Bilson’s, as well as designing the interiors of the Power House Museum and stage sets for the Sydney Dance Company. So, you would be forgiven for being a little surprised to find that the interiors of his own country pad have an almost intentional anti-design feel to them.

While the kitchen and the bathroom have been updated, this house feels like it’s just happened organically over time; a place where things have accumulated rather than being selected; where objects have gathered rather than being placed and where the space has been allowed to simply *be* rather than *be ‘done-up’*.

“The house said, ‘I’m happy! Leave me as I am!’” says George, “It’s a weekend house. I spend my life fussing about other spaces and I get a perverse pleasure in not fussing. There’s no need to strip the cedar down so it’s pristine, polish the floorboards, take the possum stain out of the ceiling – it’s really nice. You know, leaving it just as it is, it’s just dandy!”

George was born in Brooklyn in New York and after studying architecture for a few years, George headed to Europe in the 1960s to be a painter – starting in Ibiza (“well





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before it was chic"), Amsterdam and then London, where he started his career in interior design. Back in New York by 1969 George was sent to Australia by Knoll International to oversee their designs for the executive offices of the Bank of NSW in Sydney.

"A week after I arrived I met someone at a dinner party and fell madly in love...I went back to New York after the six weeks, but by March I rang my boss and said 'I'm going to quit and go and live in Australia with the person I love'. The project still had two years to run so they transferred me here on half salary and saved on the six first-class airfares!"

George Freedman joined Neville Marsh's company and after a few years they formed Freedman Marsh, which went on to become one of Sydney's most successful and innovative interiors and architectural companies. George Freedman and Neville Marsh were business partners and life partners for many years until Neville died nearly twelve years ago of cancer.

We are standing in his garden, shaded by an old oak tree, looking out at the layers of luscious green fields and hills that stretch off into the distance to the sea. We could be in the hills of Ireland or Up State New York and George is working out that it's 36 years to the very day since he fell in love with Neville and moved to Australia. I ask him whether he fell madly in love with Australia too.

"It took me a while to be comfortable with the Australian landscape," he says, "I remember being taken to 'the bush' and everyone saying, 'Here is the Australian bush! Isn't it wonderful! And I looked at it and I went – well, yes... but it's so spare! It just wasn't the kind of forest and voluptuous vegetation that I understood. The Milton Valley doesn't have that spare Aussie feel – it's dairy country. The coral

trees, when they're in full lushness of early summer. It's like a Poussin painting with a heavy, rich, green quality to it."

So how did he stumble across this impossibly cute farmhouse with its divine view? "My partner and I had a boathouse at Clareville on Sydney's northern beaches and it was charming but very confined, so we decided not to renew the lease and then on that very Saturday morning, as I was making lunch, he opened *The Australian* and he said, 'That's what we need!' And it was an historic house with acreage. So we came down and came into the garden and we immediately said to the guy, "Yes! We'll have it! And he said, "Don't you want to look inside the house? And we said – "Yeah, yeah sure! But we'll have it!"

'Danesbank' was built in 1865 by James Pool, the master mason who came to the area to build Ulladulla's stone wharf, and then stayed on to build several local houses.

Inside the rooms have enormously high ceilings and elegant proportions with even a touch of Dicken's Miss Havesham about them. It's not that things are disastrously shabby – but that they have been allowed to curl up at the edges slightly.

There is a strong sense of theatre in the dining room with the focus of the room oriented towards a side table which is covered in an almost votive collection of candlesticks and offerings. Everything in the house has a story, has come from a friend or has come to them in an interesting way. Three of the candles are Christmas presents from the manufacturer of the bathroom taps, (and on close inspection their previous life becomes obvious), the giant triangular candlestick was found in Berrima and is thought to have Masonic connections. The stuffed white angora rabbit in glass box is by Melbourne artist



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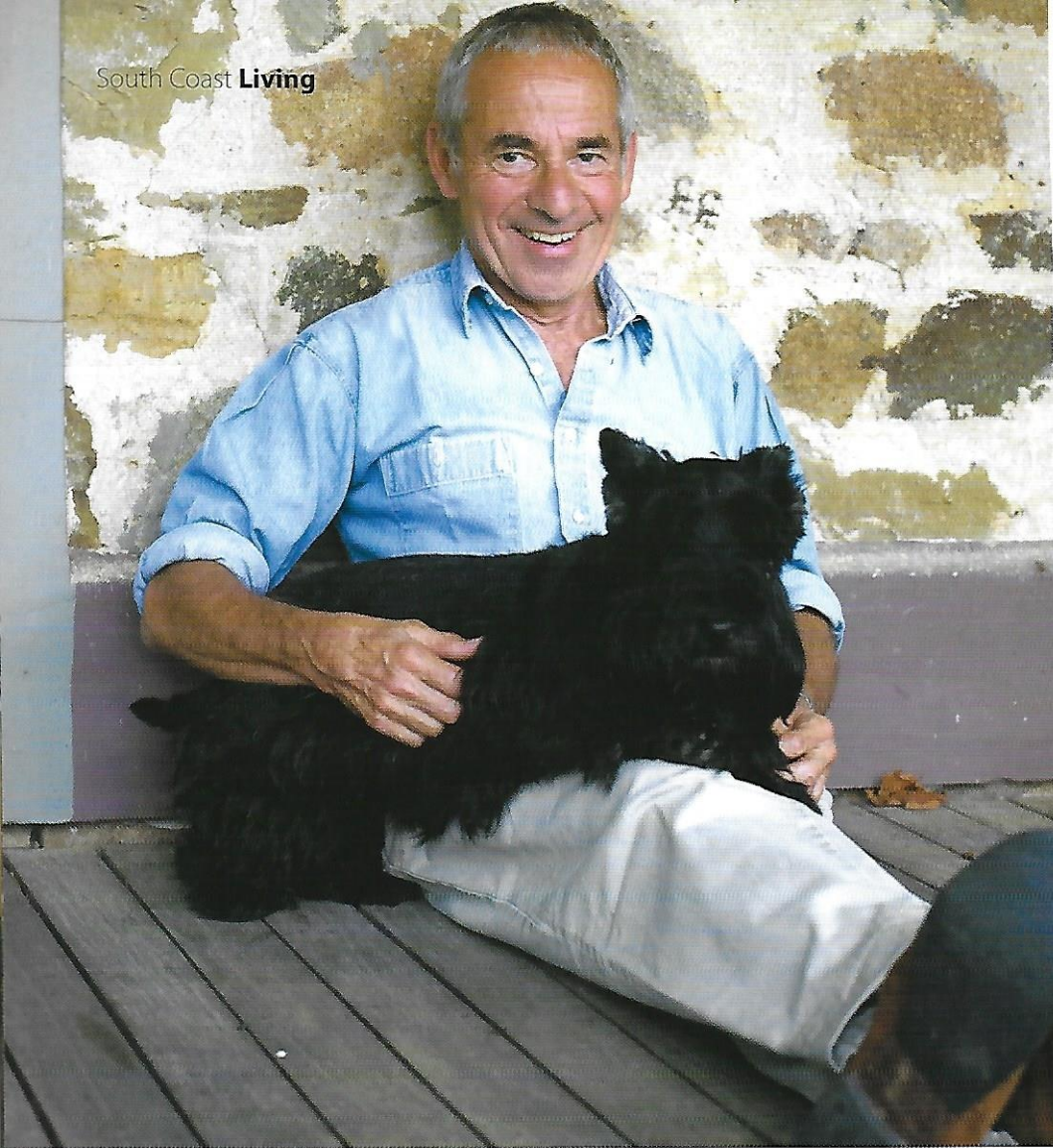


Danebank's romantic verandah is cloaked in pink Oleander and grapevines.



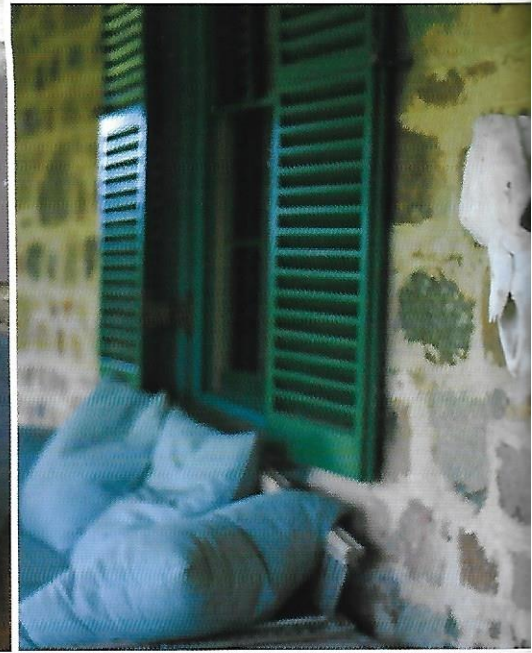






**Left:** George on his verandah with one of his much loved Scotty dogs, Duffy McFala.

**Below:** Cow skulls found on the property are hung as a cheeky homage to Georgia O'Keefe.



Kate Rhode, and the cheese grater with antlers is a Philippe Starck classic.

The dining room table was bought specifically for the room and was found in a church sale in Moruya – the two aboriginal drawings they bought at the same sale have since gone to the National Gallery in Canberra. On the wall is a spectacular Chinese silk embroidered wall hanging, which would once have been the backdrop for travelling Chinese operas. The walls of the whole house are covered in a huge collection of prints, drawings and watercolours by various artist friends including Cedric Flowers, Gail Rutherford, Margaret Olley and some by George himself – to whom he refers in the third person quite often, as though his artist days were lived by another person – “and those are by George Freedman!” he says grinning and pointing.

The sitting room is decidedly shabby and unashamedly a place to flop about and not fuss or worry about the decor. A group of black and white photos is again a collection of favourites – his first scottie dogs; close friends; a portrait of George and Neville in the early days; a portrait of his uncle

and aunt who mostly brought him up (“my mother wanted a career”) and a dashing picture of his father in police uniform riding three horses at once! Like the whole of this house, the slight air of reverence is regularly undermined by his mischievous sense of humour – amongst the gallery of family and friends is a semi naked photo-montage of the Queen – called “Lizzie at St Tropez” and at the centre of the group is a portrait of Alice B Toklas, George’s “patron saint because of her cookbooks”.

On the mantle piece, a wooden scottie dog carved by his father sits next to a life-sized plaster replica of Michelangelo’s David’s nose. Scotty dogs are central to George’s life. His two shiny black scottish terriers, who don’t leave his side, are the fifth and sixth scotties he has owned.

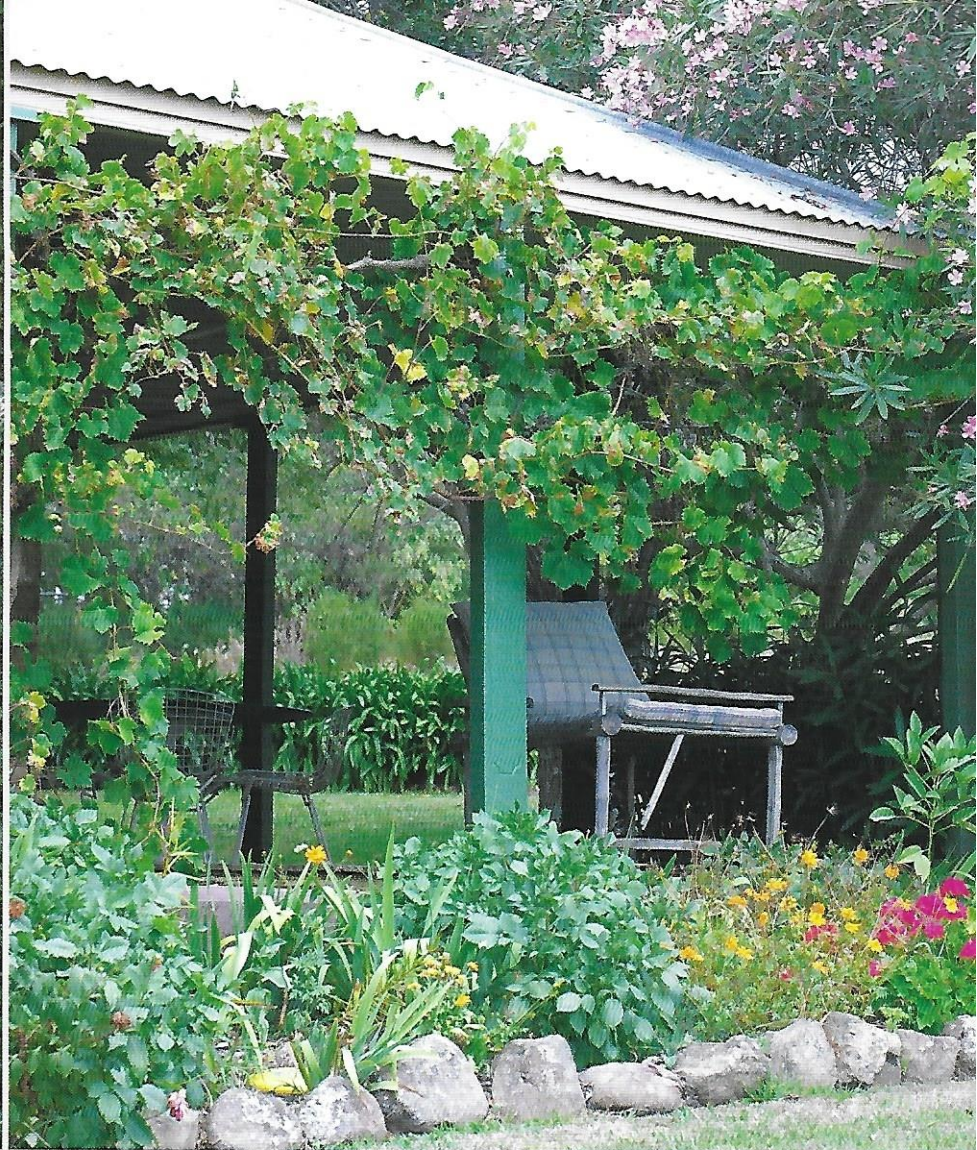
Slightly disturbing is the state of the plaster on the chimneybreast – which is cracked and slipping into that decidedly distressed look that you might find in an old house in Europe. (“Don’t worry it wont fall far” says George). In fact the whole interior has that luscious but elegantly-aging charm that you find in big old English and Italian mansions,

“THIS HOUSE IS A REAL HOME WITH A COMFORTABLE CHARM. FRIENDS COME DOWN AND WE ALL HAVE A LOVELY TIME – WE JUST SPEND THE WEEKEND FLOPPING ABOUT, BEING COMFORTABLE.”





PETER SIMONS







**Top left and bottom left:** George loves liberating the wallpaper from the wall to reveal the layers.

**Above:** Everything in the house has a story

**Below:** The walls in the hall are covered in paintings and pictures, including a Margaret Olley







where things are so often left to age naturally, and where upkeep and refurbishment has not been the priority. The old wallpaper has been left patchy and in some places is quite literally hanging off the walls.

“When we came here the hall and the sitting room had this wall paper – silvery, moiré, lightly metallic – you know that kind of bland ‘nice taste’ wall paper they put on in the fifties. Then there was a temperature change of some sort and panels started peeling off the walls and ceiling, so we took a panel off and then another panel off, and, as the evening progressed we stripped all the wall paper off these walls and in the end it was effortless! The wallpaper said, ‘it’s time to go’ and so it went!”

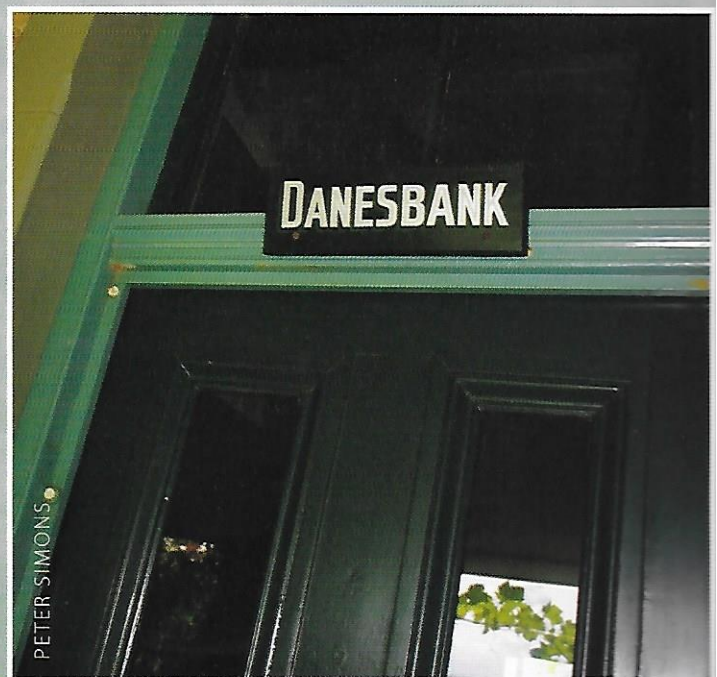
A collector of all things well designed, almost all of George’s furniture has a design pedigree and much of it is classic 20th century. He has a Marcel Breuer tubular chair, Noguchi lamps, and outside there is a collection of wire Harry Bertoia diamond lounge chairs made by Knoll International. I ask George about the mix – that some people might be surprised that he has furnished his old cottage with 20th century design classics and an eclectic mix of eras – from the rustic country meat safe to the Victorian dining table.

“These are beautiful objects. They are comfortable to live with and they make sense – there’s no intention of reproducing the interior of 1865, where you sit in stiff little chairs and horsehair stuffed sofas! This is the word of television and martinis – so let’s live that life! The important thing is to live in a place with things that you love and that they are comfortable. They have to be comfortable to be with physically but also comfortable visually. What is comfortable visually for me may be challenging to somebody else.”

Although this may seem “anti-design” – it’s actually very close to the core principles for many interior designers and architects: the important thing, they’ll tell you, is to listen to the spaces, let the rooms speak to you and tell you what works. The aim is to create an

environment that merges the demands of the space with the client’s personal priorities – somewhere they will feel simply at home, living and working.

“This house is a real home with a comfortable charm. Friends come down and we all have a lovely time – we just spend the weekend flopping about, being comfortable.”



PETER SIMONS

**Above:** George loves collections. Groupings of favourite things like candlesticks and photographs add character. The house was named *Danesbank* in 1865 when it was built.