

Come up and see my wallpaper

'*The king of rags and rollers*' - you may mock his foppish hair, flounces and frills, but Laurence Llewelyn Bowen's licences generate £10m. Not bad for 'that bloke off changing rooms'

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The day I met Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen, interior designer and TV make-over show supremo, he had spent the morning sitting on a horse dressed as Dick Turpin. It was in the name of charity of course but, as he freely admits, he was hardly going to turn down an invitation to wear a pair of leather boots. Because Laurence is nothing if not flamboyant. It's hardly a surprise to discover that his first non-televised interior design project in a decade is the transformation of an old, purpose-built music hall into a super-luxe bar. Or, rather, the four bars of the Inc Bar.

There's the double height Pit Bar with its extraordinary coloured glass chandeliers. There's Larry's Bar, crazy mix of green tartan walls and swirling striped carpet (all designed by Llewelyn Bowen himself). There's the VIP balcony with its green lacquered walls and more of that carpet, and the Divan, an intimate room decorated with Llewelyn-Bowen's own pornographic wallpaper. Much has been made of this wallpaper, but, while it does indeed leave little to the imagination, the fact that the vignettes have been drawn in classic Toile de Jouy patterns means it is more decorative than shocking.

The Inc Bar is as far as you can get from the vast white-and-chrome spaces that have characterised urban bar design in recent years. It has carpets, curtains, full-on pattern and vibrant colour (mostly green, the one colour the client didn't want). And it is going down an absolute storm. In early January, it did 100 covers - good going for a new bar in probably the quietest month of the year. "People want exuberant, sophisticated decorating," Llewelyn Bowen says, "We've gone through ten years of complete restraint and many places are now so pared back that when people come into a space like this it's exiting, new, different."

And also incredibly fashionable - a fact Laurence must find surprising since he has spent most of his career in the hinterlands of style. After graduating in 1986 from the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts with an honours degree in Fine Art, he worked as a marketing manager at the Harefield Group of Companies which specialised in making industrial rubber floors. This was followed by a stint at Interior Design Company, Peter Leonard Associates, and then in 1989, he set up his own design consultancy. Business was good - it was the tail end of the excessive 80s and there was still a taste for grand design both in Britain and abroad. Commissions ranged from multi-million pound theatre refurbishments (including the Criterion) to hotel interiors in Thailand.

Fame came in 1996 when he was asked to appear on a new home makeover show, *Changing Rooms*. This was a curious decision. Minimalism was in, stylish homeowners were chucking out their chintz and painting their walls white, yet here was this long-haired dandy, dressed in a floral suit, pushing neo-Queen Anne as a look to aspire to. "I built my career on rather a negative footing," Llewelyn-Bowen says. "I was always that bloke on the telly who painted everything purple. Everything I did appeared so outside any notion of good taste".

So how come, instead of fading quietly away, he became a major TV celebrity and a phenomenally successful designer? The Llewelyn-Bowen licences, which now include wallpaper for Graham and Brown, cutlery for Arthur Price, bathroom furniture for RAK and a lighting collection for John Lewis have been ringing up retail sales of £10m since 2001.

Part of the explanation is that the over-the-top clothes and outlandish designs made for great entertainment. But 14 series later, 12m people aren't switching on *Changing Rooms* just to laugh at his suits and no company shifts £10m worth of product each year unless it has something the public wants. Pattern may not have been fashionable during the minimalist years, but Laurence knew people still wanted it in their homes. "To a large extent," he says, "minimalism was like a top-shelf porn idea - people wanted to look at it but they couldn't do it in their own environment. It was fashionable within the M25, but the further around the country you went people didn't give a stuff. In the acres and acres of minimalist grass paper you'd get this rather over-the-top damask and everyone would go 'ooh, actually I quite like that'." And now the taste-makers like it too.

Now that his look is *in*, he has decided to get back to what he likes best: proper designing. There's still quite a lot of television - he now presents *Changing Rooms* - but he reopened the interior design practice, which had been dormant since 1998, in order to do the fabulous Inc Bar and has no intention of stopping. Among the jobs currently on his books are a couple of residential properties and something he describes (in an uncharacteristic lapse into design speak) as an "under the Jubbah fusion" for an Arab Emirate. He is also rethinking the product range, dropping some of the lower-end, ancillary products and concentrating on bigger, more architectural things such as bathroom suites, fireplaces and even houses themselves. The smaller stuff did great business for everyone (the wallpaper is still B&Q's best-selling designer wallpaper), but it's time for rationalisation.

"Some of the things have gone," he explains, "because we came to the end of the licence and, while they did good business, I didn't feel we were moving forward with them as a concept. Jackie (his wife) and I have run the business together since the beginning and we went off on a bit of a scattergun at one time. We were just making it up as we went along. I did three years in marketing departments but knew nothing about the science of running a business. I had to force myself into a business-like state of mind."

In the studio, however, he is very much in charge. He has a team, but fundamentally the Llewelyn-Bowen look is his vision and he designs everything himself: "There's a real danger when the business impetus starts going that you diversify but I won't do anything I don't like and that makes sure we only do the kind of design we're really good at." Which, in a green tartan nutshell, is the reason for his continued success.