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TREASURE TROVES

Four inspiring homes filled with covetable finds



WILLIAM SITWELL

The food writer, editor and great-nephew of Edith Sitwell on the cookery books that inspire him

I have a much-loved stack of cookery books from the early 1800s. A friend at Sotheby's tipped me off about an auction of Stanley J Seeger's effects. He had a huge collection of cookery books right up to Delia and Nigella. I bought this lot of 18 for a few thousand pounds. I was worried at first I'd wasted the cash but how wrong I was.

Reading them shows that nothing in the food world has really changed. Just as now, every book claims to be the one that works. A manual from 1817 called *The Cook's Oracle* by Dr William Kitchiner says that all cookery books published until his would help a cook 'no more than reading Robinson Crusoe would enable a sailor to steer safely from England to India.'

The old books contain some unusual recipes – turtle neck soup isn't something you often see on a menu these days – as

well as more commonplace dishes. Cassell's *Dictionary of Cookery* bangs on about using up your leftovers, while a book by Friedrich Accum contains endless essays about frying.

I keep the books in my study on a shelf that I made. They sit next to a copy of Mrs Beeton's *Book of Household Management* that I found in the home of a dead relative. I didn't know her but the executors of her estate invited me to her home to see if I wanted anything. There, in her old sticky kitchen, was Mrs Beeton. I had to have it.

A house is not a home until it has books in it. We have a library where I keep the 130-odd volumes by my grandfather, Sir Sacheverell Sitwell, and my great-aunt Edith's poetry books, which I hauled out of the family attic. Putting my book next to theirs gave me great pleasure, although I still have a way to go to match their output!



The library is painted our own shade of red. My friend Jasper Galloway runs the paint company König Colours and created a dark red for me which you can now buy. It's called 'Sitwell Red'.

There is a secret door into my study. It leads out of the library. When we first moved in I went to a local bookshop and bought 250 or so old tomes, took the dust jackets off and stuck them on to the door to make a kind of trompe l'œil.

I tend to give a home to pieces rather than buy things. That said, I do have a lovely Victorian estate desk I found at Holloway's auctioneers in Banbury. I sit at it while I flick through my books to get inspiration.

The paperback edition of William Sitwell's A History of Food in 100 Recipes will be published on 12th March