

In the Groove

Built in the Sixties and nestled in a wooded dell, Valley Spring is a Modernist masterpiece with the majority of its original features intact



Gordon and Liz Bloor bought Valley Spring in 2011



With its Sixties Modernist aesthetic, Valley Spring is often mistaken for a modern brick new-build

South of the historic city of Bath sits Valley Spring, built in 1968. The Grade II-listed home is remarkable in two regards. First, for its secluded setting in a wooded Somersetcombe with a spring-fed pond. Second, for its heritage: it is one of only a smattering of Modernist houses designed by the nationally important architect Peter Womersley. With its flat-roofed pavilions, glass walls and imposing brick structure of dark-brown Westbrick Devonian masonry, rather than the local mellow Bath stone, Valley Spring is the antithesis of Georgian Bath, a bold expression of the Sixties.

Valley Spring was commissioned by Womersley's brother, John, who had bought the plot of land, formerly a plant nursery, in 1965. John Womersley was the managing director of Arkana, a contemporary furniture company, and wanted a stylish family home for his wife Vivien, their three children, and his elderly mother. Womersley had already designed two houses for his brother, one in West Yorkshire, another in Surrey, so collaborating again seemed natural.

Womersley is said to have been Le Corbusier's favourite

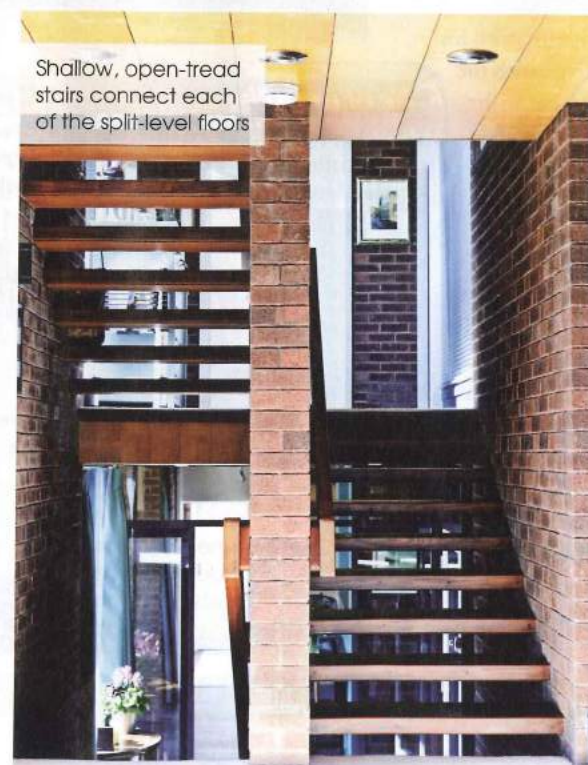
British Modernist architect and in Valley Spring he did not disappoint. The house is designed along core Modernist principles, such as creating a relationship between the building and its surrounding landscape. To this end the three flat-roofed pavilions (now four) are set into the side of the valley, facing south, ensuring superb views and maximum light. A roof deck and dining room terrace ensure quick access to the invigorating outdoors.

Rooms inside the three pavilions are arranged along a linear, free-flow plan executed on split-levels over a generous 813 square metres, connected by glass links and low flights of stairs. Womersley factored in a relatively modest four bedrooms, four bathrooms (extravagant at the time), a kitchen and dining room, a playroom for the children, plus a self-contained, single-storey annexe for elderly parents or children as they grew up. The seamless Modernist look is enhanced by bespoke fitted furniture and timber-clad ceilings in sycamore, yew, rosewood and cedar.

On the upper level of the principal two-storey pavilion is the outstanding room in the house – a 182 square-metre →



A glass corridor links the original house with Liz and Gordon's new guest pavilion



Shallow, open-tread stairs connect each of the split-level floors

A MODERN MAN



Peter Womersley

» Born in Yorkshire in 1923, Peter Womersley is widely regarded as one of Britain's most important twentieth-century architects. After serving in the Second World War, he studied at London's Architectural Association from 1946-51, and a travel scholarship enabled him to visit France, Germany, Italy, Belgium and Austria to study buildings old and new. He was admitted to the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in 1952.

» As a young architect he assisted with the design of a sheik's palace in Kuwait, and worked briefly on the Royal Festival Hall, but his first solo commission was a house for his brother, John, in the village of Farnley Tyas near Huddersfield. Farnley Hey (above) was built between 1954-5 and with its extensive glazing and part open-plan design, was deemed special enough to win a RIBA bronze medal in 1958.

» Womersley moved to the Scottish Borders where he built his own house and studio, The Rig, in Melrose in 1956, a single-storey Modernist house with views to the Eildon Hills. In the same year he worked on a house for the textile artist Bernat Klein in Galashiels, called High Sunderland.

» In 1961, Womersley won a competition to design Roxburgh County Offices, and his practice really took off. Commissions followed for the sports hall at the University of Hull (1964); Edinburgh College of Art sculpture building (1969), and Monklands Leisure Centre in Coatbridge, Lanarkshire (1977). The architect died in 1993.

living room with plate glass walls, which was large enough to seat all the family plus guests. This room was top of John's wish list, and was where he would listen to classical music through a built-in system. During an interview in the Seventies, Vivien Womersley described her feelings about the house: 'It works extremely well... the stairs are so gradual that I feel no fatigue and the many see-through points often save room-to-room journeys.'

So impressive was the design that it featured in June Park's book *Houses for Today* in 1971, and in the October 1972 issue of *Ideal Home* magazine, although it took until August 2011 for English Heritage to list it.

Fortunately, the property has had only two other owners since the Womersleys' day and is remarkably well preserved. The current owners are Liz and Gordon Bloor who moved from a Georgian house in Bath to take custodianship of Valley Spring in 2011.

The Bloors decided to live in the house for a year to give themselves a better understanding of Womersley's design before making any alterations. 'The first thing you notice is that there's an amazing feeling of light here, the house is very uplifting to live in. Before we bought it we didn't realise how special it was; our main priority had been to find a plot of a few acres a couple of miles out of Bath, which is rarer than hen's teeth,' recalls Liz, a chartered surveyor.

Under the wing of architect Richard Reid, who has expertise in buildings of this era, they embarked on a programme of refurbishment in 2013. Rooms have been repurposed – bedrooms exchanged for an office and a utility

'Valley Spring is a bold look... we love its strong, angular design'

room on the lower level, and a luxurious bathroom with his and hers dressing rooms on the upper level to go with the master bedroom. A new kitchen was installed, but with a nod to the Sixties provided by Formica worktops and cupboards with drop-down flaps; and the couple have removed a cloakroom, opening up the view from the kitchen into the dining room.

The house has also been rewired and the plumbing updated complete with a new wet central-heating system; eco-friendly solar panels were installed on the sunroof. The draughty and cold single glazing – some of it ugly uPVC replacements from an earlier decade – was replaced with double glazing set into fibreglass frames painted a recessive anthracite grey. Finally, the Bloors commissioned a fourth, single-storey pavilion to be used as guest quarters, an addition that fits well with the welcoming spirit of the Womersleys. Three years on from the improvements, Liz and Gordon are totally smitten. 'Valley Spring is a very bold look, some might say ugly, but we've become very fond of it. We love its strong, angular design,' concludes Liz. **GD**



The new fourth pavilion sits behind the original house



Wallpaper fixed to battens can be easily removed if desired

Next month

Charles Rennie Mackintosh's Hill House



The Bloors have added a modern master bathroom



Formica surfaces give the new kitchen a Sixties feel