

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR Period staircase

Years of heavy use and neglect can leave a staircase looking shabby. By ripping up a dated carpet and stripping off the layers of white gloss, you can reveal a staircase's original detail and elegance, says Joanna Marsden.

Staircases are all about first impressions, good or bad. An imposing, immaculately maintained staircase gives a house an immediate sense of period style and grace, setting the tone for the rest of the house. On the other hand, nothing symbolises an unloved and neglected home like a yellowed staircase covered in dark, floral carpet and caked in dust.

the history

Decorative staircases have been features of grand houses for centuries, but it was only in the nineteenth century that they started to be used in ordinary houses. By the Victorian era, even the most modest homes had a staircase with a relatively ornate balustrade. Staircases became symbols of affluence and good taste, and householders would use architectural pattern books to select fashionable styles.

The most expensive elements were always visible from the front door so that visitors could be suitably impressed. Large newel posts were placed at the base of the stairs, sometimes made of hardwood to match the handrail. In larger halls, the stairs would start with an elegant swirl or "monkey's tail".

Where there was more than one flight, staircases got plainer and steeper as they went up, reflecting the fact that upper floors were for children and servants.

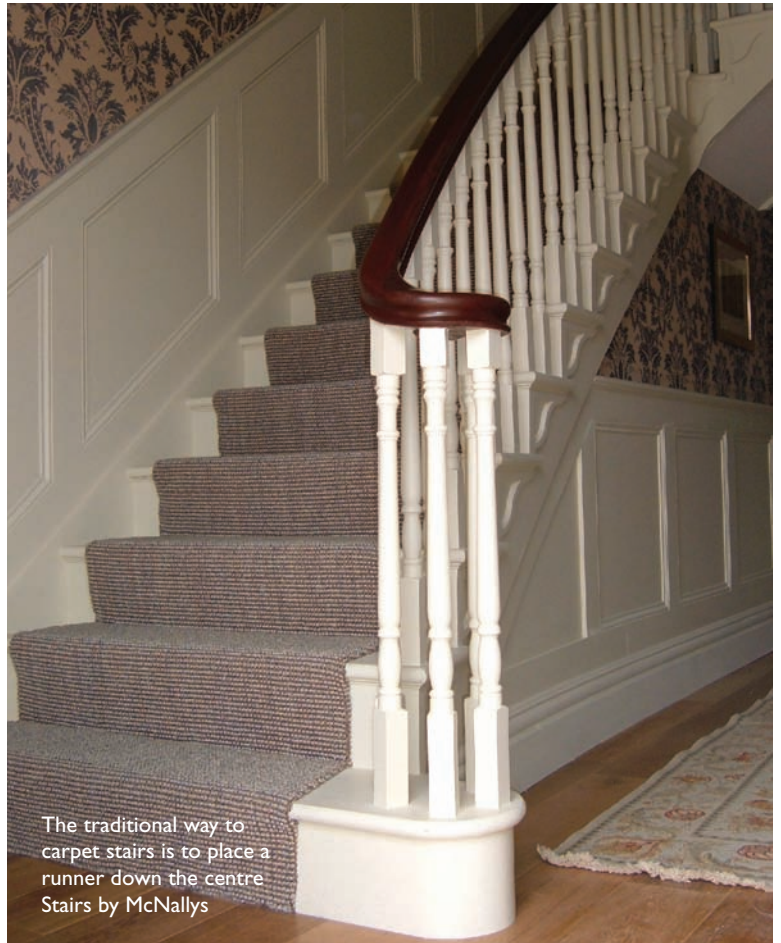
style

In most Victorian and Edwardian terraced houses, staircases were made of pine balusters and a mahogany handrail, although you occasionally find cast iron or hardwood balusters. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, unpainted oak staircases with simple arts and crafts design motifs became fashionable.

The influence of modernism in the early twentieth century led to staircase designs becoming less decorative with simple, angular balusters. Twentieth century staircases tend to have gentle gradients, more turns and more landing space. Householders expected comfort and practicality once they no longer had servants to do their housework!

carpeting


The traditional way to carpet stairs was to place a runner down the centre, held in place by stair rods or clips. When the wear on the carpet began to show, the



The traditional way to carpet stairs is to place a runner down the centre
Stairs by McNallys

runner would be moved up or down, giving the carpet another few years of life. In recent years, runners have come back into fashion. According to Glen O'Callaghan, of Glen O'Callaghan carpets, "Velvet runners are very popular with period home owners as they give a sense of opulence and don't date. Other popular choices include sisal runners trimmed in linen, suede or leather and stripy carpets."

Many people are unsure how to integrate a runner with timber floors in the halls. "There are two options," says Glen, "You can start the runner at the base of your stairs and finish it at the top of the final riser, just under the nosing of the landing step, leaving the return half-landing uncarpeted. On a typical straight flight of 12 steps with three further steps on



An imposing immaculately maintained staircase gives a house an immediate sense of period style and grace

the return, this will cost upwards of €600 to supply and fit. Alternatively, you can continue the runner on the half-landing by getting a carpet custom-shaped. This is a more expensive option but can give a great sense of flow to the stairs and landing area.”

A runner can be set off with stair rods and clips that reflect the period of the house. You can source anything from pretty Victorian brass rods to angular Art

Deco designs made of chrome or nickel. Reproductions are available from specialist ironmongers like Knobs and Knockers and from carpet suppliers for about €35 a pair. Originals can be sourced from salvage yards or Ebay.

RESTORING YOUR STAIRCASE... COMMON PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

structural instability

Before restoring the aesthetic features, ensure your staircase is structurally sound. Structural instability can result from various circumstances, including structural movements in the walls of the house, damp, woodworm or excessive loading. If in doubt, get a structural engineer to assess the staircase.

creaking stairs

Creaking stairs are usually caused by a loose joint between a tread and a riser, a problem you can correct yourself. First take back the carpet, then use screws to fix the tread back into the riser. If you have access to the underneath of the stairs, this type of repair can be done more discreetly and you can check if any of the support blocks that reinforce the staircase have come loose.

damaged or missing parts

If you have a cracked or missing baluster, how do you find a replacement? According to Bernie McNally of specialist joiners, McNally's Joinery, it's not as hard as you might think. "If you remove one baluster, it can be profiled and reproduced. We are also happy to work from photographs." McNally's charge approximately €20 (depending on profile) for a replacement baluster and can reproduce newel posts for €100 - €300.

STAIR TALK...

Balusters or spindles – the individual posts that support the handrail.

Balustrade – the whole side of the staircase, made up of a row of balusters, a newel post and handrail.

Handrail or banister – long, smooth support rail at top of balusters.

Newel post – the large post at the base of the staircase, anchoring the balustrade to the floor; and also on the landing where the stairs change direction.

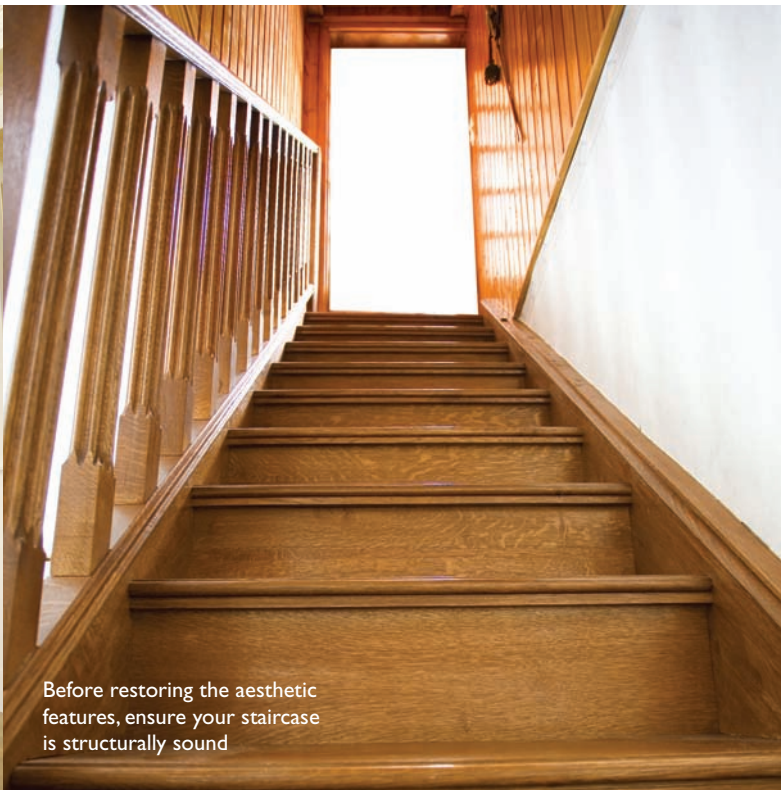
Treads – the horizontal part of the stair that you step on.

Risers – the vertical front section between two treads.

Nosing – the moulded front edge of the tread which overlaps the riser.

Brackets – decorative bracket-shaped mouldings on the open side of the treads.

Glue blocks – triangular support wedges glued underneath the joints of the treads and risers and only accessible from beneath the staircase.



Before restoring the aesthetic features, ensure your staircase is structurally sound

Many Georgian and Victorian staircases have decorative brackets on the hall side of the treads and risers; these too can be copied by McNally's for approximately €30 each.

wobbly balustrades

Your staircase may be showing signs of having been swung off and slid down by generations of children. Wobbly balustrades result from loose joints, so the first step is to closely inspect the staircase, identifying the problem areas. The services of a carpenter are recommended, but if you want a quick fix, you can try re-gluing loose joints and diagonally screwing through the end of loose balusters into the tread or handrail.

shabby paintwork

For many people, the shabby state of their staircase is simply due to decades of heavy gloss paint. If you are intending to re-paint the balusters, give them a light sanding and carefully build up the layers of new paint. If you want to reveal the wood, it comes down to Nitromors and hand sanding. Be warned: many DIYers despair and end up calling in the professionals! "We often get calls from home owners who have been sanding for weeks and barely made a mark," says Ken Bishop of EV Kidd. "This is a tough job even for the professionals in our French polishing division. Sanding the balusters and handrail of a typical staircase takes us about a week and will cost a couple of thousand euros."

treads and risers

EV Kidd's flooring division will sand the treads and risers of a staircase to remove paint and staining for approximately €600.


tatty handrails

A worn and stained hardwood handrail can be given new life relatively easily. Ken Bishop advises stripping it back with Nitromors, cleaning it with steel wool, applying a coloured stain, if desired, then a few coats of French polish. For a more hardwearing finish, you can add a couple of coats of clear polyurethane varnish before applying the French polish.

damp under stairs

When restoring your staircase, don't overlook the area under the stairs. Install vents to let this typically damp and spider-filled area breathe, preventing further damage to the staircase timbers.

the last resort... replacement!

If your staircase is genuinely beyond repair, it's worth investing in a quality reproduction. According to Bernie McNally, "The cost of replacement will depend on various factors, including how ornate the mouldings are and the type of wood. An approximate price for the supply and fit of a good quality, Victorian-style, straight flight of stairs would be €10,000," says Bernie. 

USEFUL CONTACTS

- > EV Kidd Ltd, Unit 31-32, Finglas Business Park, Tolka Valley Road, Finglas, Dublin 11. Tel: 01 811 0722
- > Glen O'Callaghan Carpets Ltd, 131B Slaney Rd, Dublin Industrial Estate, Glasnevin, Co Dublin. Tel: 01 8601849
- > Joseph McNally Joinery, Walshestown, Lusk, Co Dublin. Tel: 01 843 3022. Email: info@mcnallyjoinery.ie
- > Knobs and Knockers, 19 Nassau St, Dublin, Co Dublin. Tel: 01 6710288