

JEFF MORGAN'S house on Good Hill in North Kent was built in 1740 and is being restored.

the centuries

man's doorway to 1740

By ALISON WYRLEY BIRCH



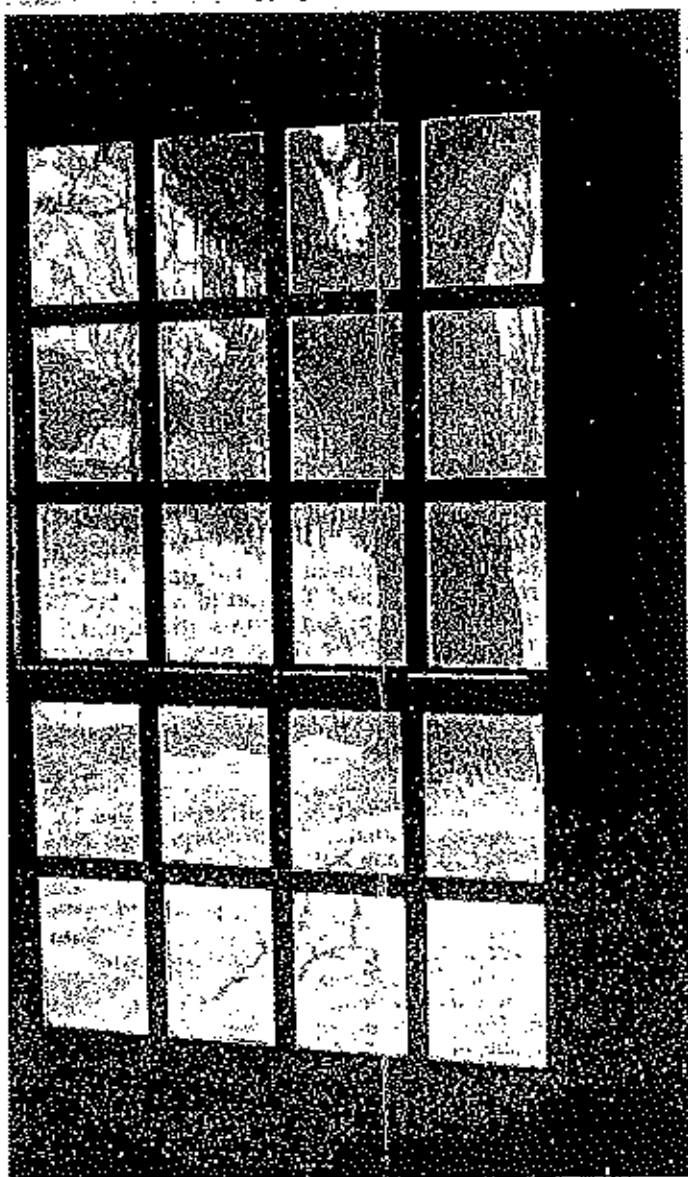
with light from an 18th Century lace-water-filled vessel amplifies the candle to book page.

"I BELIEVE that the domestic arts have always best reflected the times," Jeffrey Morgan said. "Living this way has a rhythm to it, and in this house you can feel the passing of souls."

Morgan, a young Kent man, has chosen to live at least part of his daily life alone in 18th Century style in an 18th Century house that he has restored. The main part of his house has no electricity and no central heating. He finds it easy to survive in this electronic age without TV, and to do his reading by a colonial lace maker's lamp sometimes illuminated by candles that he has made himself. He cooks over an open fire in a fireplace with a six-by-four-foot opening and he bakes in the neighboring beehive oven, using recipes from Revolutionary times. One is called great cake that is made with raisins, currents and apricots, among other ingredients.

It is a strange lifestyle for a young man born and reared in an era of self-indulgence, affluence and canned entertainment but Morgan finds nothing strange about it. "There's nothing better than French toast done on a wrought iron griddle over an open fire," he said. "It's a living experience." The house was comfortably warm from its flaming log fire even during one of the worst winters of the century. And in three years or more of reading nightly by candlelight Morgan has found no impairment of vision.

Immersed in colonial history and architecture for most of his life Morgan has collected antique furniture for some time. "We had a fine Queen Anne highboy and I used to play under it as a child," he said. "I think the aura of it rubbed off on me. After he grew up he worked for an antique dealer and found his work to be a constant source of inspiration for what he calls, "the glory of the past." He spent much of his free time from work as a photographer, looking at restorations. "I knocked on a lot of doors," he said. "I'd have a camera slung



over my shoulder and ask to see the house. Most people were flattered and were glad to show it."

While visiting a friend in Kent, Morgan decided one day to look at houses. An agent showed him several elegant, up-to-date ones that failed to move him. Then in North Kent on Good Hill he found a derelict old farmless shape in deplorable condition. His long involvement with architectural history gave him the insight to see its original 1740 outlines under the gross modernization of less perceptive owners. His excitement baffled the real estate agent. "The house had more than its share of misfortunes," Morgan said. "The exterior walls were covered with ugly simulated shingles and tarpaper and the whole house had to be jacked up eight inches out of the dirt." The interior was a shambles with crumbling plaster and torn and faded wallpaper and there were four tiny rooms hung on to the long grade of the original roof, completely spoiling the colonial lines. "I just removed the dormer," Morgan said. "One of my most glorious days was the one when I went to pick up some rafters in the morning and came back to see the roof line as it used to be." He had bought the house as it stood for \$24,000 including three and a half acres that top Good Hill and spread generously to the surrounding hills and the river.

Morgan did a lot of the work himself and the rest of it was done under his direction. His carpenter was Noel Fisher of Warren. "He was the hands of my eyes," Morgan said. Reconstruction began with tearing everything apart. The wallpaper and plaster came off the inside walls

and the tarpaper and shingles were ripped from the outside walls. "I had tons and tons of plaster on the floor," he said. "I saved every single scrap of everything we removed and laid it all out on the lawn. In the kitchen there were only five or six original boards so I put pieces together and figured out where they went."

As he pulled the place apart he uncovered buried treasure in the way of paneling and wide floor boards but the most exciting find was a corner cupboard hidden in the back of a nine-foot closet. "I went in there and there it was!" he said. "with its arch and keystone it was an incredibly elegant embellishment for a wilderness home."

Morgan has sunk thousands of dollars into his restoration but acknowledges that his expense would have been a lot more than the \$40,000 he estimates if he hadn't done or overseen the work himself. Although the Good Hill house is the first and only restoration he has done for himself he often serves as a consultant for others.

Although he likes his 18th Century life style he has made two concessions to the 20th Century. One is a small, up-to-date kitchen that was designed to blend in-offensively with the rest of the house. It has a door so that it can be cut off if its modernity spoils the general effect. The other is a small bathroom. "I cheated only in the kitchen and bath," he said. "There's electricly there and a radio for weather reports in winter, and I can't live without my stereo," he added. The lace-maker's lamp he reads by is a water-filled round glass bowl on a

glass pedestal. The water magnifies the light from a candle that burns nearby it. The candle, in its holder, is placed behind the bowl so that its light passing through water is refracted onto the reading matter. Even antique nomenclature is important to Morgan. It's a candle holder, not a candlestick, he said. "A candlestick is a little piece of wood used to hold candles over in the process of dipping. Understanding that makes Jack be nimble, Jack be quick, Jack jump over the candlestick, make much more sense."

Morgan's goal is to make the house as it was in the 18th Century. All the furniture is authentic 18th Century Litchfield County and there are no curtains at the windows—a fact that causes him some disconcerting moments. "People think the house is empty," he said, "and they come and peer in the windows." But there were no curtains used in the 18th Century and they would spoil the effect. "The windows of the original structure were removed at one point in the modernization" process and were replaced with huge, bland panes of unrippled glass. One of Jeff's first moves was to restore the old "12 over 6" small paned windows with astigmatic glass from West Virginia, that distorts properly as early American glass did.

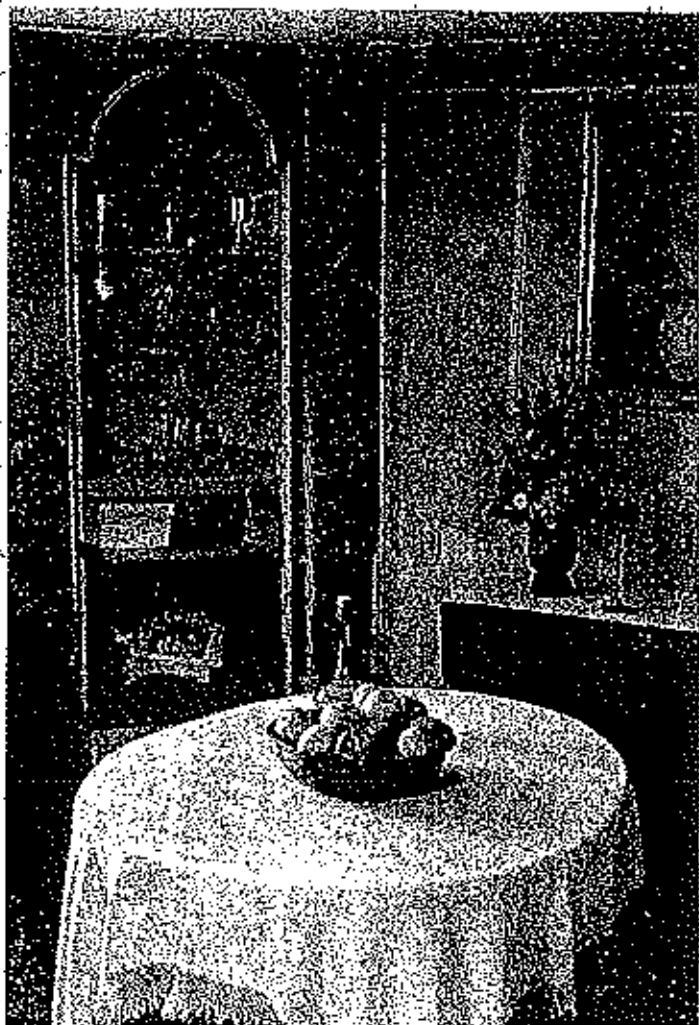
The whole effort has been carried on simply for personal satisfaction. "I like to live this way," said Morgan. "These houses are living works of art. It's another form of common escapism, I suppose. I come home and feel no time here. It doesn't seem to pass."

Morgan has great respect for his early American counterpart—the Colonial proprietor. The

Morgan, was probably one room on the ground floor and one above it, reached by a ladder and about 16x16 or 18 feet in size. The house now has seven rooms plus a lean-to and a garret. The additions to the simple original structure came at different periods. The renovated kitchen with the six by four foot fireplace was built about 1760. The vague deeds available show the house was owned by a family named Hall in the 19th Century.

The huge fireplace in the 18th Century kitchen is a restoration of the original and when its interior is saturated with the heat of a blazing fire the temperature in the entire house is quite comfortable. It was the custom in those days to build a central chimney with open fireplaces branching off of it in two, three or four rooms. This is so with Morgan's house. One extra fireplace is at a 90 degree angle to the one in the kitchen and faces into the parlor. Another branches off the central stack in an upstairs bedroom. "The chimney was what we call a flue," Morgan said. "The word stack is the term for the whole mass." Above Jeff's fireplace in the old kitchen are bunches of herbs hanging—rosemary, fanny and thyme—on a pole. They lend yet another authentic touch to the whole restoration.

The walls of all the rooms are paneled with wide boards, some of which are original. Morgan bought the house in 1972 and has worked on it for five years in his spare time when not working as a photographer at the Morgan Studio in Bantam. His past and present studies of colonial times made it possible for him always to envision the house as it was and should be again. "I could always see it," he said. "You sim-



CORNER CABINET in the living-dining room was found during restoration work when a closet was removed from the room.

home owner. "They applied a little art to everyday living," he said, displaying a wrought iron pot lifter shaped like a small black swan. "It's a piece of sculpture. See how delightfully it fits the hand!" Less artistic, however, is the 18th Century clothing he found bundled up in a heap in a closet. One piece is a man's shirt of linen tow -- the coarser fibers of flax. It would, Morgan says, have been worn with just stockings, shoes and a belt. Included in the bundle with the shirt was a flannel house cap and two pairs of ladies drawers. All 18th Century.

Because deeds in colonial times were very vague, Morgan knows less about the history of his house than he would like. He knows that it was built by Daniel Comstock and his wife, Mary, in 1740. Daniel was born in 1695 and lived to be 80. His wife died at 93. They are buried in a graveyard near the house. Somehow they had survived the smallpox epidemic in the 1770's that took a massive number of lives. Perhaps it was their long-gone shades that disturbed Morgan so much one night he had to leave the house temporarily. "It was the only time I was ever uncomfortable here," he said. "I suddenly got very cold. It seemed to be coming from the back staircase." No genuine, or visible, ghosts have materialized as yet, however.

The original house, speculated

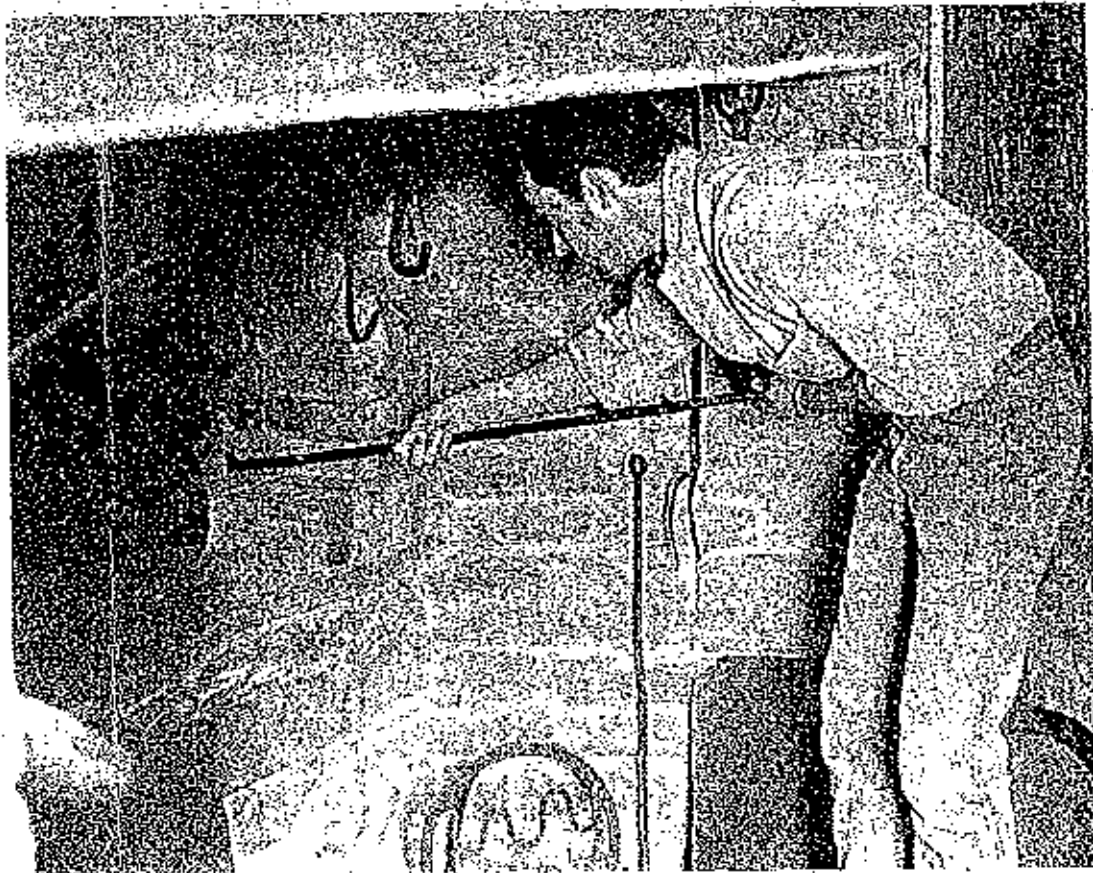
A BEEHIVE OVEN built into the fireplace is used by Morgan to bake his own bread.

ply go by the architectural evidence. I had no building experience -- just independent research."

There's a graciousness and warmth to Morgan's 18th Century

lifestyle that is contagious. The house exudes a sense of time and contented living. Even without curtains and rugs, the mellowness of the wood paneling and the wide floor boards, brightened by

the glow of the fire, seem to create an atmosphere of quiet welcome reminiscent of colonial homcoming from a long day's encounter with the elements of 18th Century survival.



Concessions to the 20th Century were made in kitchen and bath

CENTRAL HEATING is supplied by a fireplace with six-by-four-foot opening. A doorman shares Morgan's corner of the 18th Century.



IMPRESSIONISTIC views are afforded by the astigmatic glass in the "12 over 8".