



INTERIORS

CORNWALL'S NEW WAVE

Moving to the sea, designer Helen Blake thought she'd be out of the loop – but fashion, and Jamie Oliver, have come to her

REPORT VINNY LEE PHOTOGRAPHS RAY MAHON



From left: the Smoke chair and graphic poster above the gel fire in the sitting room; the view from the main bedroom window towards St Marys

INTERIORS



"Cornwall has become fashionable at last," says designer Helen Blake, who 15 years ago took a risk and started her graphics and interiors company Absolute Design, in Falmouth. "At the time London was the focus of everything to do with design, but I am passionate about Cornwall and wanted to live here. However, to feel work I had to start up on my own."

Her single-mindedness paid off: she now heads up a business with nine staff and an international reputation, and has just completed work on the interior of Fibbers Cornwall, the latest branch of Jamie Oliver's restaurant chain, which opened recently at Watergate Bay near Newquay.

Helen's passion for Cornwall and in particular Falmouth is not difficult to understand when you sit in the bay window of her hill-top terraced house overlooking the harbour and across to Flushing and its Marnes castle. It's difficult to focus on the room when there is so much going on outside: rural views coming in to dock and a shoal of yachts heading off to sea. "It was the view that sold the house to us," she says. "I saw a picture of it in a newspaper advertisement and rang my husband, who knew without seeing the house that it was where he wanted to live."

But inside the home Helen shares with her husband Paddy is also attention-grabbing. "It was like a chalet when we moved in; everywhere was clad in yellow pine."

Clockwise from above left: Helen Blake; the terraced house perched on the hillside above the harbour; the dining area of the main sitting room; the mosaic seats in the upper garden room



'I AM PASSIONATE ABOUT CORNWALL. TO LIVE HERE, I HAD TO START UP ON MY OWN'

Putting her design talents to work, the couple opened up the ground floor to make one open space with a living area to the front, dining section in the middle and a tiny kitchen at the back. A second door into the hallway was filled with a decorative glass panel which allows light to circulate through to the hall.

The scheme of the living area is black, white and red with two dramatic, hand-burnt stools by Maarten Baas for Moooi's Wanders' Moooi range. Most furniture from the collection was used in the Fibbers Cornwall scheme. "Black and white is my favourite palette. I think it goes back to my graphic design training," she says. The framed typographic poster no doubt owes its presence to the same source.

The dining area has high-backed cream leather chairs arranged around a glass-top table set against a deep plum-painted panel on the side wall. The kitchen is small, "one person size," says Helen, confessing that she doesn't cook at all and it is designed to be Paddy's zone.

The back door from the kitchen opens into a series of terraced decks and gardens that rise up the steep bank of the hill behind. In the upper





“room” of the garden there is a pair of mosaic-clad armchairs facing each other across a small table, an ideal place for a summer’s evening sundowners.

Back inside, and at the top of the first flight of stairs it seems as though you’ve gone outside again as the wall is covered with a panel of Cole & Son tree-pattern wallpaper. “The paper is like tramped-oil woodland and conceals the door to the shower room,” explains Helen. “Because the house isn’t straight and leans a bit it took three rolls of paper and a lot of patience to hang it so that the trees appear upright.”

Following the stairs to the upper landing you pass the guest bedroom, which in reality is an overflow wardrobe for Helen. Her current favourite shoes are arranged on spot-in glass shelves, and others perch on their boxes on the floor. “I buy a lot online through net-a-porter,” she says, adding that “although Cornwall has become fashionable, not all fashion is available in Cornwall.”

The main bedroom is to the front of the house and its elevated position gives it an even better view of the harbour. Helen says that when it came to choosing colours for this room she deliberately veered herself away from her favoured monochrome scheme. “I told Paddy I wanted to make it boodie-like and he said that was all right as long as it wasn’t pink”, so she named it the other male in her life for inspiration.

The colours are those of Bubble, her Siamese cat – soft fawn and beige with a dash of vivid turquoise, like his eyes. Behind the suede-covered bedhead the wall is decorated with Osborne & Little wallpaper.

But the finishing touches to her home of the

From left: picture frames in the main bedroom – the colour scheme of which was inspired by Bubble, the Siamese cat; the shower room with the tree-patterned door to the hall

‘THE HOUSE LEANS A BIT, SO IT TOOK A LOT OF PATIENCE TO HANG THIS WALLPAPER’

past six years were put on hold while Helen got on with her latest project. Having previously worked with the Watergate Bay Hotel, which owns the sea-edge, elongated beach hut in which Fifteen Cornwall is based, she was invited to put forward a speculative scheme. The scheme that beat off the competition focuses on chunky black chairs from Moooi, cloth-free bright white Corian top tables and light installations that hang rickety from the high pitched, barn-like roof. And although speculation is rife that the clientele will be mostly the Kensington-on-Sea holiday home owners, the waiting list for tables is already heavily subscribed.

Meanwhile, Helen heads back to her office in the centre of Falmouth, adding, “When the sun is up the chat around the office isn’t about the latest episode of *Emmerdale*, it’s about *Poemans*, *Gooly Foot*, *Fables* and *Hong Ten*, and the staff come in to work with salt in their wet hair”. It’s clear to see why the work-life balance in Cornwall has great appeal. ■

For information, visit www.stasilofdesign.co.uk and www.fifteen-cornwall.co.uk