

# ANCIENT and MODERN

An imaginative use of natural materials has brought a beautiful balance of traditional country charm and contemporary style to a recently built oak-framed cottage in the heart of Herefordshire

STYLING BY HESTER PAGE.  
WORDS BY CAROLINE ATKINS.  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SIMON BEVAN

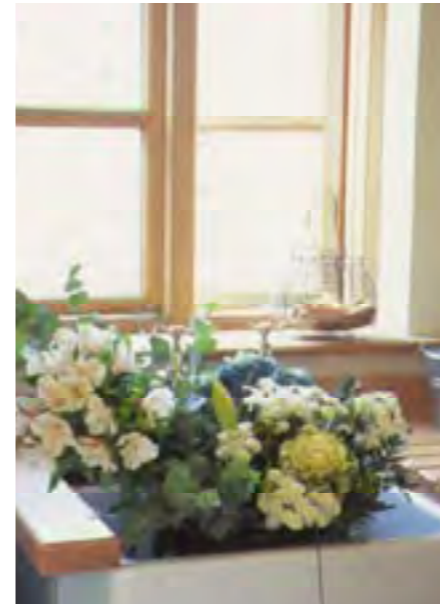


THIS PAGE Delicate details such as a Venetian mirror which was a 21st birthday present from Merry's parents and gypsophila displayed in Georgian porcelain pots offset the sturdy beams and solid green oak table in the kitchen. Made from the offcuts of the wood used to build the house, the table features the same pegged joints, which become stronger as the oak dries and shrinks. Plain plywood chairs from John Lewis were painted a warm blue from the Dulux heritage colours to match some of the cabinets. The walls and cupboard in the utility room are in Chalk from Paint Library. Merry likes this range as it is very low in solvents and has a high natural pigment content

MERRY ALBRIGHT is looking forward to the day when no one notices her house is there. Not that it stands out at the moment – in fact, its handmade bricks and mellow rendered walls are more discreet than the medieval black-and-white timbering that is typical of her Herefordshire village. But this three-bedroom cottage, with its moss-dappled roof and gently silvering oak porch, has become a local landmark simply because it is still less than two years old.

Merry and her husband Ben moved to Pembridge in the summer of 2002, having spent a year living in a glorified shed at the bottom of her parents' garden in nearby Eardisland because they couldn't find anywhere affordable to buy. The irony is that building a new house has given them the chance to connect with far older building traditions than buying a 19th-century two-up, two-down would have done. Planning restrictions forced them to think more imaginatively about the architecture and layout: they modelled the porch on the lych gate of the church where they married and created a gallery landing beneath the vaulted hall roof.

The cottage was designed by Merry's father John Greene, the architect behind traditional oak-framed construction specialists Border Oak, and became a family project, with cousins and friends doing the building and carpentry. In keeping with Border Oak's philosophy, energy-efficient methods were used to ensure that the house will have as little impact on the environment as possible: the Structurally



**“Our priority was for the cottage to be designed using natural materials, to be comfortable to live in and to have as little impact on the environment as possible”**

Insulated Panel system used for the walls provides a level of insulation more than two times that required by building regulations so little heating is needed. Most of the materials are sourced locally and all are either natural – the oak frame, copper guttering and cement-free render; reclaimed – the clay roof tiles; or recyclable – the bricks were fixed with traditional lime mortar so they can be dismantled and reused.

“Building your own house means you don't feel guilty about having exactly what you want,” Merry says. “Things like handmade oak doors, oak window frames, under-floor heating and blacksmith-made fittings, which you couldn't justify splashing out on if you just wanted to change what was already there.”

It was also a chance for Ben to use the craftsmen whose work he comes across as development officer for the local council, and for Merry to indulge her own design skills. One of the bedrooms is piled with vintage fabrics that she turns into cushions, bags and lavender sachets to sell in local shops, as well as the mood boards and colour samples from her job creating the interiors for Border Oak homes.

“Our priority was for the cottage to be easy to



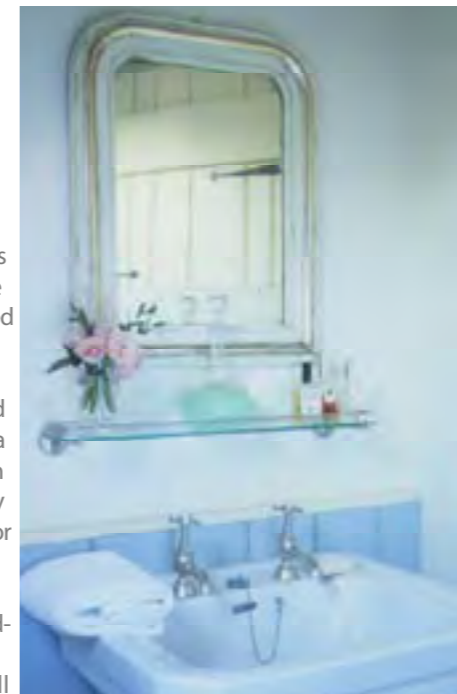
TOP LEFT Merry's favourite feature, the porch, is flanked by standard bay trees in oxidised copper pots from Roger Oates. The natural copper guttering requires little maintenance and will gradually weather to the same shade.

TOP RIGHT The reclaimed limestone fire surround was made to their own design, based on one they found in a book on old fireplaces.

ABOVE LEFT AND RIGHT Antique Irish scullery shelves from Zani Lady in Ludlow hold a practical mix of plain china and old storage tins. LEFT A double Belfast sink below the window was the starting point for the design of the kitchen

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The deep Belfast sink in the utility room is ideal for arranging flowers fresh from the garden; all the curtains and cushions in the house were made by Merry who compensated for using an expensive silk fern print from Liberty by backing it with boiled wool cut from an old coat; a plain Shaker box makes a perfect foil for a pretty mirror with a pierced-silver frame and dainty evening bags; the bathroom mirror was a junk shop find, which Merry painted and burnished (Baileys Home & Garden stocks similar old-fashioned sinks); fine porcelain is displayed on a broad windowsill

**They installed the few pieces of furniture they had and waited to see how it fitted – the result is a timeless mix of traditional country style with modern understatement**



live in and made with natural materials that we would never tire of – a home we could add to and that would evolve slowly,” Merry says. True to these “organic” principles, they installed the few pieces of furniture they had and waited to see how it fitted.

The result is a timeless mix of traditional country style with modern understatement. Black limestone floors in the hall and kitchen – “a little like slate, but smoother,” Merry says – include some seconds for a used effect. The freestanding kitchen cabinets, from the Leicester company DeVol, are painted in natural cream and warm blues; the chairs are a quirky mix of sleek Arne Jacobsen-style curves (from John Lewis) and rush-seated ash (made in a local workshop); and the handmade green oak table was a wedding present from the carpenters who built the house. A length of green checked linen from Ian Mankin provides a simple tablecloth and the window blind is stitched from an antique monogrammed sheet.

Across the hall, the sitting room offsets warm oak beams and traditional arched braces (also inspired by the lych gate) with halogen cable lighting and an almost-monochrome colour scheme of cream and silver. The inglenook fireplace with a wood-burning stove is framed by an old French limestone surround, and the chunky wall clock (bought for its inscription of the manufacturer “Meredith” – Merry's full name) came from a station house near Hay-on-Wye. And beneath a huge French mirror sits a low table made by Ben from oak offcuts. The simplicity continues

upstairs, with chalk-white walls, homemade cushions and antique bedspreads, and natural coir matting on the floors. Small dormer windows set into the sloping roofs overlook the cottage garden below, which is maturing at speed. Planted with old varieties of Herefordshire fruit trees, with meadow grass and wild flowers around one side, it has a lavender path running across the lawn from the back door, and pink and white roses already scrambling up the walls.

It's all ageing beautifully. Natural cracks appear now and then in the internal timbers, the oak porch is weathering gracefully, and the window frames are treated with organic oil that protects them from the rain but lets them fade in the sun – no colour stabilisers to fix them in the 21st century. Soon any house detectives who come in search of this perfectly planned cottage will have difficulty tracking it down at all. d

For more information on Border Oak call 01568 708752. A basic frame (without roof, internal walls, rendering or windows) starts at £29,000; a watertight shell (includes roof, internal walls, rendering and windows but excludes kitchen and bathroom fittings, plumbing and lighting) at £59,000.