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Storm troopers

The police who lost everything while facing down Katrina

Plus Vivienne Westwood, English wine and the unusual apples of Ampleforth Abbey



The making of
an Australian western

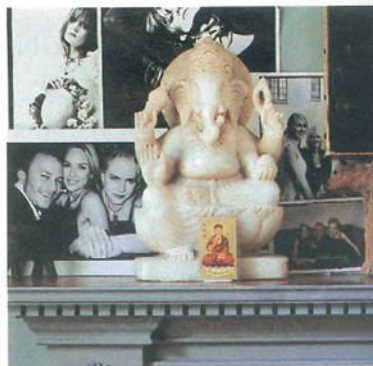
The good, the bad and the bloody





As you walk along the path to Miv Watts's Victorian cottage, the crunching sound beneath your feet takes your eyes down to a carpet of white shells. But then shells are probably easier to come by than gravel for the interior designer, as her partner is one of north Norfolk's most respected fishmongers. For many years Watts's Burnham Market interiors store, House Bait, has been above Mike Gurney's fish shop. Downstairs you collect your scallops, Norfolk crab and smoked mackerel pâté; upstairs you are tempted by the fruits of Watts's buying trips abroad, perhaps picking up napkins and prized plates to accompany the feast.

For the past decade the peripatetic Watts has more or less made Norfolk her base. House Bait



The stuff of life

The interior designer Miv Watts has filled her cosy Norfolk cottage with a rich mix of family treasures and mementos of foreign travel. By **Dominic Bradbury**. Photographs by **Mark Luscombe-Whyte**

Clockwise from left in the sitting-room the fire surround was an evening's work with scallop shells – a perk of the fish trade; the mirror is English, bought at auction, as were the Edwardian chairs and rattan cabinet; a figure of Ganesh from Jodhpur sits among family photographs on the mantelpiece



'I'm fed up with minimalist spaces – I wonder what has happened to the family in those houses'



Top the kitchen paint is Rosebank Pink from Francesca's Limewash; the cabinets were made out of a ship's safe. **Above** the sitting-room curtain fabric came from Delhi, the plates are Chinese

and its nearby sister, House Bait II, have become Burnham Market fixtures, while her work on the interiors of the Victoria at Holkham helped transform a dowdy pub into one of East Anglia's most desirable destination hotels and restaurants. The comfortable, reassuring mix of Indian fabrics and furniture with English club chairs and sofas, and a sophisticated contemporary eye is echoed within her own home in a quiet village some miles away.

'After we finished the Victoria many people came up to me and said they felt so comfortable there. That made me really happy,' Watts says, curled up on her living-room sofa. 'I don't worry so much about people noticing the interior details as about them feeling relaxed. If anything, I hope that's my gift – to take a room and make it into a place where somebody feels they can kick off their shoes, curl up and read a book. This house is intrinsically me and it is an eclectic look, which is what I tend to do. But at

the same time, I hope I don't put too much of myself into other people's rooms. I can't bear the idea of a "Miv Watts look".' She does, however, have decidedly passionate views about what a home – especially a family home – should be: a place full of colour, individuality and warmth rather than a minimal wasteland. Together with Francesca Wezel of Francesca's Limewash, she has been collaborating on new paint ranges, including colours inspired by the Norfolk landscape. She is also designing a range of furniture to be made in India, fusing exotic and contemporary elements, and there are a growing number of commissions for private houses and excited talk of a new hotel project.

'Really I'm working on bringing colour back into people's lives,' Watts says, 'and mixing in ideas that are European, oriental, exotic, spicy. I'm fed up with minimalist spaces and I wonder what has happened to the family in those kinds of houses. You can't bring up children like that.



'I never really match things or have one idea in my head. It tends to grow much more organically'



Top the bathroom door was brought back from Marrakech; the tiles, too, are Moroccan. Floor and bath panels are of locally reclaimed wood.

Above Miv Watts outside her Norfolk cottage

My children, Naomi and Ben, used to come home with bits of china they'd dug up to make a mosaic. But where can you stick that mosaic or a drawing of Mummy with big green ears in a house where there's nothing?'

Watts moved into her cottage two years ago, having given up a rented home on the Houghton Hall Estate near King's Lynn. It was a 1980s timewarp of Formica and apricot plastic bathroom fittings, yet the fabric was well preserved, so she kept structural work to a minimum, just stealing away one bedroom to create a new study and extending the bathroom. 'Mike now has a place in Australia where we stay in the winters and that has big open spaces, so I wanted to stay cosy and cottagey in Norfolk,' she explains.

She coated the walls in Francesca's Limewash colours ranging from soft blues for the double sitting-room to a simmering pink for the kitchen. Kitchen and bathroom were reinvented with bespoke cabinet work – including units made

from an old ship's safe – and brightened with a mix of Moroccan, Victorian and Portuguese tiles. The dining-room was warmed by Madras Orange walls and a new Rayburn, while the fire-place surround in the sitting-room was painted over and an inset fashioned with some of Mike Gurney's cast-off shells.

The furniture includes pieces designed by Watts herself – such as the sofa and her own bed – with others brought back from India and France, where Watts has a bolthole that she shares with a friend. Then there are the prizes of hunts around antique and flea markets from Newark to Clignancourt. 'I also buy a lot at auction,' Watts says. 'I never really match things or have one set idea in my head. It all tends to grow much more organically than that.'

Watts was first drawn to Norfolk on holidays in the 1970s. As a child with an Australian mother and an English father, she moved between her parents' homelands, although her



'I have a great deal of affection for Norfolk. It feels remote and there's a lot going on creatively'

Sources for the Miv Watts look

- Paints** Francesca's Limewash [020-7228 7694; francescaspaints.com]
- Antiques** Newark Antiques Fair [01636-702326; dmgantiquefairs.com]
- Indian furniture** David Edmonds, London W4 [020-8742 1920]
- Oriental ceramics** Keys Auction Rooms, Aylsham [gakey.co.uk; 01263-733195]
- Vintage upholstered furniture** Fakenham Antique Centre [01328-862941]
- Paintings and artwork** Corbett Gallery, near Holt [01263-587269]

In the spare room the fake-fur bedspread is Russian; a Victorian screen bought in Maidstone market stands in as a headboard; the bedside tables are 1950s Peter Jones

schooldays were mostly English. Her first job was as a display artist for a department store in Sevenoaks followed by a stint at Burberry. But after having Naomi and Ben at a young age, Watts began working in film and television as a set and costume designer, moving to Australia for a decade, where her children spent their teenage years. Naomi, the star of *The Ring*, *Mulholland Drive* and Peter Jackson's new remake of *King Kong*, gained her first acting experience on productions her mother was working on, including *Return to Eden*, and went to drama school in Sydney.

'I always wanted to sing, dance and act,' Watts says. 'But it just didn't happen. Now everything I wanted to do when I was younger, Naomi is doing, so that's OK. I look at both my children and see different sides of my creativity. Ben, who is a photographer living in New York, has the eye, and Naomi, who has just bought her first house in LA, has the drama. I'm so proud of

them both, and growing up in Australia has a lot to do with that. There you can be anything you want to be.' Returning to Europe as Naomi and Ben went their own ways, Watts lived in France and then in London but couldn't bear city life. She was finally drawn back to Norfolk, to Burnham Market and to Mike Gurney. The wanderlust is still there, though. There are regular trips to India, to France, and to Australia, as well as the new winter home at Byron Bay, christened Wombat Hollow.

'If it were a perfect world,' Watts says, 'I'd live half the year in France and half in Australia. But I do have a great deal of affection for Norfolk. It feels quite remote and spread out and there's a lot going on here creatively, a lot of interesting people, and I love all that. It's got the beaches, the wildness and a sense of openness that reminds me of Australia sometimes. It has an edge to it and that's exciting.'

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