





# How the King's garden designers revamped their derelict cottage

Isabel and Julian Bannerman's family home in Somerset now includes a bright and quirky addition, with pinks, greens and yellows galore



Julian and Isabel Bannerman at the cottage in the grounds of their family home in Mudford, Somerset  
ADRIAN SHERRATT FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

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**W**hen the married design duo Isabel and Julian Bannerman decided to renovate a derelict, grade II listed cottage, a discreetly muted decor was never in the running. That would be far too dull for a couple renowned for their imaginative gift for the theatrical and full-on use of vibrant colour.

“We don’t do boring,” Isabel agrees.

“Or bland,” Julian adds.

So they treated the cottage project, in the grounds of the period family home at Mudford in Somerset, as just another of their colourful garden borders.





The cottage was built of stone and brick in the 1820s

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The result is a joyfully quirky kaleidoscope of bright green, blue, pink, red, orange and yellow. Only in the two bedrooms has Isabel given in to a muted ivory decor for the sake of a good night's sleep.



"I wanted calmer colours in there, you don't want a crazy bedroom."

The Bannermans, whose many projects include King Charles's Highgrove, the Duke of Norfolk's Arundel Castle and New York's Queen Elizabeth II garden in memory of the British victims of the 9/11 attack, have worked as a team since 1983. So any undertaking, whether work or domestic, tends to be a collaboration between them.

However, when it came to the cottage, Isabel held more sway.

"Julian said, 'You can do what you like'. He's very opinionated about stuff, and in the main house we chose all the colours together. With the cottage he let me experiment I suppose, though he really likes it," she says.



The cottage's sitting room. The Bannermans often use the colours in pictures as a starting point for their decor

When they moved to Mudford in April 2019, the part-Elizabethan main house and the cottage had been empty for ten years. Built of stone and brick in the 1820s, the cottage had at some time in the past been divided into a cider barn on one side and a farmworker's very basic living quarters on the other.

"The barn had been turned into a young farmer's social bar. It was very grim, it was derelict, dark and dank," Isabel says.

The living quarters had "barely a kitchen and a loo".



One of the two bedrooms

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The idea was to camp out in the main house while renovating the cottage, then to move into the cottage while the main house was being modernised. The cottage project took two years, which was longer than intended due to delays caused by the Covid lockdowns. It already had planning permission to be joined up to the main house. However, the Bannermans wanted to keep the two properties separate so they had to apply for listed building permission to turn the cottage into a two-storey home, with two bedrooms and two bathrooms. This involved knocking through the upstairs loft space to create a second bedroom and bathroom. Isabel also hived off part of the rear of the cottage to create a ground-floor work studio with a separate entrance.



“We had to do everything, there was no power, no plumbing, no heating, nothing,” she says.



The croquet lawn leading to the main house

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Her starting point was a kitchen with bold colours which she wanted to give a Fifties feel. This was to match the cottage’s existing Crittall windows which she liked, rather than the fact that Julian, 72, was born in that decade, Isabel, 61, says.

“I wanted to do a Mexican kitchen because I’d seen it in a magazine and I thought it would make it fun. I think actually, it was in Argentina, but everybody calls it Mexican because of the colours and because it’s not a hyper-fitted kitchen.”

The kitchen walls are painted in Boiled Egg and the kitchen units and the sitting room walls are Sreevidya’s Green, both by Francesca’s Paints, an “eco-friendly” manufacturer the Bannermans have worked with for about 30 years.





The kitchen has bold colours and a Fifties feel

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The green was inspired by two posters in the sitting room. One is a green and black Boomtown Rats poster to remind Isabel of when she was a devoted teenage fan of the pop group. The other is a green and pink poster for *The Warp*, a 24-hour play at Edinburgh Festival.

The Bannermans have a big art collection, including botanical prints by Isabel, with the more modern and funkier works hanging in the cottage. They often use the colours in pictures as a starting point for their decor.

“So we think, we have this group of pictures and what is the predominant colour in them,” Isabel says.

Pursuing the Fifties theme, Isabel sourced a red Formica table from Glastonbury Reclamation for the kitchen, and then tracked down recycled pink and orange Formica table tops which she fitted to trestle legs for the sitting room. Even when plans had to be changed at the last minute, Isabel had slotted the colours easily into place.

"I went for a turquoise woodburner but when it came it was cracked and they said that was the last one. So we went for the red, which is really nice because I've got lots of red lampshades."

In the upstairs bathroom, the bold pink walls are inspired by the *Warp* poster and a need for light.

"We didn't want to put roof lights in because it would have been annoying from the main house, it's the light coming out that I don't like. As the bathroom has no window I thought it needed to be bright and fun. And I do love pink."



The garden was designed and planted from scratch

She says the multi-hued decor works rather than clashes in a garish mess because of how she has learnt to put colours together as a garden designer.

"That's what flowers teach you. Dahlias are orange and yellow and pink all at once and you'd think that would be dangerous but it works terrifically."



Along with a bold decor, Isabel wanted an environmentally friendly cottage. For insulation they lined the walls with cork with beadboard on top. They double-glazed the Crittall windows, fitted solar panels, and installed air source underfloor heating and Glapor insulation (recycled foamed glass).

A blue Aga in the kitchen was “an extravagance”. “But we knew that we’d have to live in the cottage ourselves so we wanted it to be nice.”

Although expensive to run, the Aga worked with the insulation to keep the cottage warm.

“We never had to put the heating on the whole time we were there. It’s amazing what a difference it makes. Originally, there was horrible, dripping condensation,” she says.



The garden has blue salvia, pink and white dianthus, magnolia, perennials and roses



The beadboard, pine flooring, wooden doors and most of the furniture are recycled.

"I won't really buy new stuff," Isabel says. "I'm an upcycler apparently. I don't really know what that means, but I buy stuff from reclamation yards, eBay and junk shops."

The 19th-century mahogany bed in the guest bedroom was inherited from Isabel's mother. Other pieces are from their favourite salvage yards such as Castle Reclamation, Frome Reclamation and Glastonbury Reclamation.

The bold colours of the interior continue into the garden, which they designed and planted from scratch. It is, Isabel says, a typical cottage garden with blue salvias, pink and white dianthus, orange *Rudbeckia triloba* 'Prairie Glow', magnolia, blue *Geranium* 'Rozanne' and lots of roses.

The £100,000 project "cost too much," and more than anticipated, Isabel says. It ran smoothly under the guiding eye of Ridge & Furrow, designer-makers the Bannermans have known for years and whose husband and wife owners, Martin Gane and Elle Kemp, helped with the design and the sourcing. Gane also made the kitchen units.

The Bannermans now rent out the cottage for short stays.

Isabel admits that somewhere along the way the Fifties ethos got a bit lost. Guest feedback, however, suggests that what the decade has lost the cottage has gained. It resembles neither a typical home nor a holiday let, she says.

"It just feels like going somewhere else."