

Sit in comfort

Put a sofa in your kitchen and you'll live there. Naomi's sofa is from Ikea. 'I wanted one that the kids could live on and I could replace as soon as it got too shabby,' she says.



Meet the Neighbours

Naomi and David Neighbour have sympathetically modernised two warren-like period cottages in Derbyshire, turning them into an open-plan home

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Potted history



Posey Row and Elm Cottage were built as farmworkers' dwellings, c1840, together with a pig barn that's now

the annex. They're built from the local Derbyshire stone with pitch-tiled roofs, and had been sympathetically extended, possibly during the 1950s. When David and Naomi (above) bought the houses in 1998, two elderly ladies had lived there as neighbours for decades, creating a pretty cottage garden, and having an annex built at one end. Two asbestos garages at the front of the house, built in 1960, had to be safely removed during work converting the two cottages into one.

Set back from a leafy, rollercoaster lane, high above the Derbyshire village of Whatstandwell, Posey Row Cottage is nothing short of idyllic. Gazing out across the rolling fields, it's hard to believe you're only 10 minutes' from the local shops in Wirksworth. This is legitimate Range Rover country, where you can hear birdsong in the mornings and watch the neighbouring cows poke their heads through a gap in the hedge to eat scraps off your compost heap. 'It's an open buffet!' laughs owner Naomi Neighbour, who doesn't mind one bit.

'We've been here six years now, and it's still not finished,' she admits. 'Bizarrely, when we first saw the cottages, we'd actually come to look at another house just up the road. Posey Row and Elm Cottage were already under offer, but the sale fell through, and when we came to look inside, we just knew straight away. It was a bit "olde worlde", with lead pipes and Economy 7 heaters etc, but the cottages had all the rooms we wanted, and their layout meant they'd be ideal to join together and open up the downstairs.' The couple put in an offer and bought both cottages in October 1998.

Moving north to Derbyshire was a bold step, prompted by Naomi's husband,

David, landing a new IT job there. The couple had been living in Oxford for 11 years, and had never renovated a house on this scale before. Naomi says: 'I was expecting Joshua at the time, and had two-year-old Jasmin toddling about. I don't know how we managed – I was climbing up ladders and rummaging around salvage yards for tiles and stone slabs while I was heavily pregnant. You just get on with it, I suppose.'

David and Naomi rented a house 10 miles away while work progressed on the conversion. With Naomi – who works as a jewellery distributor – acting as project manager, she was visiting the cottage at least twice a day for six or seven months. 'We couldn't have lived on site,' she explains. 'It would have been impossible.

Walls had to be removed, ceilings taken down, plaster stripped off, a damp-proof course laid and central heating installed, plus new plumbing and wiring throughout. One of the really messy jobs was sandblasting all the beams, doors and

Top left The smart cottage as it is today.

Below This collection of crockery has been built up by Naomi over the years, accumulated during various holidays abroad. The dresser was bought from an antiques shop in Wallingford.





Left In the hearth, there's a Niederbronn stove, picked up in a salvage yard. The pew bench and table are both from a Wallingford antiques shop, and the table cloth was a wedding present. The antique clock was bought by Naomi's mum at Burlington Arcade in London.

Above This quirky collection of kitchenware is beautifully displayed in an old dresser in the kitchen.

fireplaces, which had been painted black by previous owners. The difference it made was amazing.'

The logistics of converting two cottages into one required hiring an architect, but the Neighbours already knew how they wanted the rooms to work. 'Downstairs, we wanted a large open-plan living area, with a massive kitchen that had its own sitting area,' Naomi says. 'We've found having a sofa in the kitchen means that when friends pop round for a glass of wine, we invariably sit there. It also means you can chat to the kids or to guests while you're cooking. We definitely didn't want a formal dining room that was closed off from everything else. Ours is an "open-door" house – access all areas.'

Yet the modern, open-plan lifestyle was completely at odds with the warren of tiny rooms that originally confronted the couple. Walls would have to be removed, and doorways knocked through to connect the rooms. Support joists would

have to be installed discreetly into the load-bearing walls, using the skills of a local plasterer to hide the angular girder edges. One set of stairs had to be removed and the other, more central flight, needed to be custom-made so that it led to bedrooms on both sides of the newly merged cottages.

'We really wanted to keep the original rickety old staircase because all the treads were at different heights,' remembers Naomi. 'It had loads of character, but there was no way we could redirect the upper flight so that it would split both left and right, towards each of the bedrooms.'

Originally, the two cottages had 11 external doors, so part of the conversion involved finding local Derbyshire stone – an evocative grey-pinky-green colour – to brick up four of them. Naomi had a creative idea for the disused doorways, inserting a window in each recess and building a wood-panelled window seat underneath. 'We copied an original

window seat in the sitting room, and had hardwood windows handmade to match. All along we've tried to make our alterations as sympathetic as possible, making it look as though the new bits have been there forever,' she says.

Although the cottage layout required much re-working, Naomi was keen to keep as many of the original features as possible – opening up massive Derbyshire stone fireplaces in the sitting room, dining area and bedrooms, and restoring the ancient oak beams hidden under modern ceiling panels. By keeping the walls white throughout (apart from the deep blue bathroom) she prefers to let the features speak for themselves. 'I like it to look lived-in. Real. It's not a show home with precise colour zones where everything matches. Having said that, Jasmin now wants a purple bedroom and Joshua's got a silver wall in his room with luminous skull lights...'

Gathering the furnishings has taken the couple all their 17 years together, ▷



The carpenter knew I didn't want a modern pine kitchen, so he came round with a trailer-load of salvaged paneled doors instead.

The perfect fit

The pan rack was made to fit by a local blacksmith, and the tiles are from Country Tiles in Hoague. 'I wanted an Aga in the kitchen, but the space simply wasn't big enough,' explains Naomi. None of the house walls are straight, so many of the fitted furnishings have been made bespoke.

renovating timeline

Oct 1998 Bought house.



Jan 1999 Started work hacking off plaster and ceilings.



February 1999 Timbers replaced in roof and some retiling.

March 1999 Damp-proof course and structural alterations to walls.

April 1999 Bricked up four of 11 external doorways and had new stairs built.

May 1999 Sandblasted beams, doors and fireplaces.



June 1999 Dismantled asbestos garages.

July 1999 New plumbing and central heating installed.

Aug 1999 Wiring, replastering and painting.

Sept 1999 Moved in.

Winter 2003 Garden landscaped.



'All along we've tried to make our alterations as sympathetic as possible, making it look as though new bits have been there forever'

Hidden treasures

Naomi re-upholstered the Sheffield junk-shop sofa herself. The beams were hidden under modern ceiling panels and the stone fireplace was hidden behind plasterboard and needed a new fire canopy, made by Rob Land at Ark Engineering. The painting hanging above the fireplace is by her grandfather.



and as a result, their home is an eclectic mix of pieces collected over time, each with a story to tell: salvage-yard treasures, junk-shop finds, gifts from parents and friends, wedding presents and holiday souvenirs. A salvaged wood-burning stove here; a beautiful vase from a London pal there. Naomi even took on the challenge of learning the art of upholstery to transform a junk-shop sofa, bought on a visit to Sheffield. 'Its springs used to stick up through the seat,' she says. 'I had to strip it down to the frame, replace the springs and padding, then cover it in new fabric. It took me three months and a lot of hard work.'

A local joiner – the same carpenter who fitted the window seats and realigned the rickety stairs – helped the couple find their cast-iron bath. 'It was in a country house and belonged to a client he was working for, who wanted to get

Above An eclectic mix of sitting-room furniture gives the room a real personality, and Naomi's choice of fabrics in rich reds mixed with creams, set against pale walls, has just the right balance of comfort and luxury.

rid of it. David and I had been looking for ages for a bath that was big enough for each of us to lie down in (he's 6ft something and I'm 5ft 8in) and this was perfect. We had to get it re-enamelled properly – not just spray-painted, as that just chips off – and as it only had three feet, we had to have another one made by a local blacksmith.'

There's an interesting tale behind the kitchen too: 'It was made by Pre-Eminence Kitchens in Matlock,' Naomi explains. 'The carpenter knew I didn't want a modern pine kitchen, so he came round with a trailer-load of salvaged panelled doors instead. The

Right 'The painting above the bed is by my grandfather, who loved the New Forest,' explains Naomi. The old front door to Elm cottage was saved from being scrapped and was spruced up – it now serves as a wardrobe door in Naomi and David's bedroom.

Bottom Most of Posey Row Cottage's interior is painted white, so rooms flow into one another with continuity, and let the period features speak for themselves. The bathroom, however, is a striking blue. The old cast-iron bath was brought from a country house, requiring re-onamelling and a new foot, but it's so large you can completely lie down in it!

unit carcasses are new, as are the large, crackle-glass knobs, but the doors are recycled – that's why you can find keyholes in odd places.'

Finding a butler sink for the kitchen was no problem; the couple had been carting one around with them for years, taking it from one house to the next, knowing they'd have the chance to use it in their dream kitchen one day. 'An Aga would really make this room,' Naomi adds ruefully, 'but it just wouldn't fit the space. And a Rayburn simply wouldn't have been big enough for cooking on. So we ended up with an electric range cooker.'

As you might expect of an 1840s cottage, none of the walls are straight,



and all those eaves and wonky floorboards are a nightmare for free-standing wardrobes (should you manage to wrestle one up the stairwell!). So, the couple's joiner made wardrobes to fit, recycling the redundant front door from Elm Tree Cottage as a wardrobe door in the master bedroom.

'We've had lots of things made to measure in this house,' says Naomi. 'The pan rack on the wall in the kitchen for instance. We'd been looking for one for ages but nothing in the shops would fit. So we had one made to our own design by a blacksmith, which cost about £180.'

After all this hard work and attention to detail, when you visit Posey Row you'd never guess that once upon a time it was a pair of poky farmworkers' cottages. With its white painted

walls and hard-wearing terracotta floor linking the entire downstairs living area, the cottage layout flows with a continuity that looks perfectly authentic. The original features and time-worn treasures help emphasise that this is a period property, while the large, flowing living spaces and amenities, such as central heating, help make this a modern home that's ideal for a young family. The Neighbours have truly made the best of both worlds.

■ To contact Naomi at Jewellery Rainbow Nation, call 01629 820060.



Words of wisdom

Naomi shares her renovating tips:

'If you want to make a house with lots of small dark rooms seem brighter and more open, try knocking down a few walls! You must consult a chartered surveyor first (RICS, 0870 333 1800) to see if you need a special joint installed to support the floor above. For continuity between rooms, use matching flooring and choose harmonising neutral wall colours.'