



a labour of a LOVE

Coin a couple of phrases
– you can't make a silk
purse from a sow's ear
but on the other hand
one man's pleasure is
another man's poison
– and you would come
close to the story behind
Alison McKeith's very own
country retreat...



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earing in mind that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, on a grim day in March six years ago, even after a long drive down a rather muddy country track to almost the middle of nowhere, Alison was able to see something beautiful in what was to become her future home. Hidden somewhere beneath a plethora of plastic conservatories (one on each ground floor doorway!) and reproduction beams were the remnants of two 18th century mill workers' cottages, crying out for rescue and restoration. And relatively untouched at the bottom of the garden lay the old paper mill itself, the place of their employment, listed in *The Lost Mills: A History of Paper Making in County Durham as Ewhurst Mill*. Despite the state of the property, Alison knew that this was somewhere she wanted to live and so, offers made and accepted, the project began.

Alison's brother-in-law and architect Roger Copestake was brought in to give his professional opinion as to what should and could be done to renovate the property. At this stage the house consisted of two rooms downstairs plus the kitchen and three bedrooms upstairs. Everything was extremely dark due largely to the leylandi 'forest' which had been planted and allowed to take over almost to the doorstep. Roger's first suggestion was the one which has had the greatest impact on the entire building and that was to bring huge amounts of light into the very central area of the house using massive skylights and oversized windows. Letting light into the house was a great way to change the feel of it – the space seems modern and fresh but still retains the character and original features of the older building. Alison mentions a number of times how fortunate she and husband Kieran have been to have worked with a team who understood what they were trying to do with the property, and that both Roger and their builder, James Lillie, had a good mix of contemporary ideas and sympathetic views on re-using and recycling many of the materials from the existing property.

Seasoned restorers from two previous homes – a miner's cottage and an old granary, both Alison and Kieran also worked on the renovations, from labouring to painting and even handcrafting the 15 solid oak baton doors. It was, in fact, a much larger project than either of them had foreseen and for seven months they lived with their two children, Harriet and Finlay, in the tiny 'one-up



one-down' old mill house at the bottom of the garden. Although this meant they were always on site if the builders had any queries, the downside was that they didn't have a chance to get away from it all at the end of the day. Looking back Alison says she came to dread the number of decisions she would have to make each day. It was the first thing she thought about when she woke and she would go to bed at night with questions and lists racing around her head. Squared or rounded reveals? Wood or stone? Which wood? Which stone? And on and on and on. Would she do it all again? A resounding NO is the answer! But then she won't have to, as she can't see herself ever living anywhere else.

'Vast A-frames lead the eye up to the full height ceiling and combined with full-length windows lend an air of grandeur to this country home. The ensuite bathroom has wonderful views with no curtains to get in the way – there's nothing out there except the odd lamb and some snowdrops so no need to worry about privacy!'

The most triumphant day in the project came when they started to dig up the old floor to lay a damp proofing course. They removed the carpet and a layer of newspaper, presumably put there as insulation, then a layer of 1950s lino. More newspaper underneath led to solid concrete. As that was dug up the excitement started to mount for there, under nine inches of 'stuff', lay the original stone flag floor. All of the flags were carefully lifted, sandblasted clean and then replaced as the current floor. The beams were also sandblasted to remove numerous layers of paint, and when the walls under the staircase were dismantled the old handmade bricks were saved and now form the back and base of the fireplace in the drawing room.

The drawing room forms the ground floor of the 'new' bit of the house, although it's impossible to tell unless someone points out the old quoins at the end of the original house which have been deliberately left exposed in the otherwise white plastered walls. The room is, in fact, on the very spot where the 'forest' – 50 leylandi trees, each 30ft high – used to grow and the clever use of wide, glazed doors allows the light from the central area into this room. The extension has also given Alison much more space upstairs, particularly in the magnificent master bedroom. Vast A-frames lead the eye up to the full height ceiling and combined with full-length windows lend an air of grandeur to this country home. The ensuite bathroom has wonderful views with no curtains to get in the way – there's nothing out there except the odd lamb and some snowdrops so no need to worry about privacy! The house meanders upwards with bedrooms on halfway floors in a wonderfully higgledy piggledy fashion.



Alison describes herself as having eclectic tastes with a leaning towards handmade furniture which she often picks up from shops or craftsmen whilst on holiday, squeezing pieces in between the children on the back seat on the return journey. As co-founder of Country Retreats, with sister Fiona McKeith, a company which offers a collection of luxury holiday cottages in the north of England, Alison has the added advantage of being able to buy through trade suppliers. However, she also has a good eye for style and a bargain and will shop carefully in a variety of places from Fenwick to TK Maxx, often visiting more niche shops such as Dyvels in Corbridge and Rustique Interiors located just outside Edinburgh. It's not just about having the right pieces, designer or otherwise. They have to be properly situated to make them work well together in the room. Friends frequently ask her to look over their houses and she often sees ways of placing things more advantageously and creating better use of the space. This has stood her in good stead when it comes to organising the holiday cottages – 'things need to be both stylish and practical for our guests – they don't want to spend time having to think about the house when they're on holiday, they want to relax'.

Country Retreats seemed to blossom from the time when the ceiling fell in on the old paper mill building in Alison's garden. Originally a project set aside for a later date it pushed its way to the top of the list when a burst pipe leaked copiously over the Christmas holidays, forcing Alison to start work earlier than intended. The building was a bit of an eyesore on the inside – Artex walls, hideous carpets and beams painted in an unmentionable shade of brown were just some of the problems she had to deal with. Today it is a tranquil bijou holiday hideaway of pale creams and restful blues with a sun room from which guests can watch the deer as they mosey down the track. Walls were demolished upstairs to create one large bedroom with an ensuite bathroom and Kieran returned to his workshop to make the built-in cupboards and yet more doors! From the comments in the Visitors' Book, The Old Paper Mill has just the right effect and guests leave feeling at peace and thoroughly 'chilled'.

Future projects for the main house include the kitchen where Alison hopes to realise her dream of a dining table which can seat 12. Lots of simple Shaker style cabinetry in a deep slate blue, a new window and elm flooring are also on the list. The kitchen has a good lived-in feel which she will retain – no minimalism here. Everything she needs to cook with is easily at hand and the impression is not so much of clutter but of busyness. Beyond the kitchen lies a range of outbuildings, again largely built by herself and Kieran. Above the largest of these is the children's playroom/den, complete with TV projector and



floored with the maple of an old squash court given to them by a friend – still more recycling! Almost finished, this idyllic home nestled in the woodland of the Derwent Valley has been a labour of blood, sweat and tears, although the tears have ultimately been of joy.

The Old Paper Mill is available to rent via Country Retreats, 9 Causey Street, Gosforth, Newcastle NE3 4DJ tel: 0191 284 0134 www.countryretreatsuk.com