



Organic Matters

THIS KILKHAMPTON HOME AIMS TO BE SOFT AND EASY ON THE EYE →

Words by **Alice Westgate**, photographs by westcountryphotographers.com/James Ram



“like organic surfaces,” says William Peers. “Curved surfaces are soft and easy on the eye, but square shapes and sharp corners seem too harsh.”

He is talking about the interior of the house at Kilkhampton, near Bude, where he lives with his wife, Sophie Poklewski Koziell, and their three young children, Sacha, eight, Robin, six and Zoisa, three. But he could just as well be referring to the gentle lines of the sculptures that he creates in his workshop, because both the building and his sculptures involve the creation of things with natural beauty, fluid lines and real integrity.

It’s difficult to imagine how the house must have looked when William and Sophie moved here in 1999. Today it is a picture-postcard thatched longhouse, but back then it was a distinctly unattractive building in a terrible state of repair. “The whole place was in a very poor condition,” remembers William, “with rotting timbers and 400-year-old cob walls only just holding it all together.”

What’s more, this crumbling skeleton was hidden beneath layer upon layer of wallpaper, carpet and panelling, much of which was added in Victorian times when the trend was to box in beams, square off walls and generally neaten things up. It has taken 11 years of painstaking labour to remove all the ceilings and lathe and plaster cladding, exposing the ancient

beams and uncovering the cob. Along the way William had to learn the art of restoring these traditional walls as well as the skills to apply lime plaster and authentic lime-wash. “It was never going to be easy,” says Sophie, “but we just wanted the house to be able to breathe again.”

They added some windows to bring in more light (the old house was testament to the historic window tax) and installed sympathetic fixtures and fittings throughout, most of which are recycled or rescued so that everything is in keeping with the age and fine craftsmanship of the house.

“We wanted to avoid making the house into something it’s not,” says Sophie. “So we tried to stay faithful to its roots – I suppose we are 21st century traditionalists. It was good to let the place return to the 1600s, and then to let it lead us from there.”

The massive cast iron bath, which stands in the middle of the bathroom, was once filled with old bailer twine in a farmyard in Oxford, and one of the upstairs door lintels was a chunk of wood they found floating in the River Helford. The beautifully wide floorboards, meanwhile, were made from six huge trees that were a wedding present from William’s father. “They are the most wonderful things,” says William. “They

have given heart to the house.”

Occasionally, when they were short of a particular material, William would just make whatever was needed. This includes the intricately carved draining board in the kitchen which he fashioned out of a slab of Portland stone; its indented pattern of leaves and stems makes a perfect drainage channel. He even learned the art of pottery to make his own terracotta tiles for the floor, a task which he saw through from digging the clay to firing it.

It’s somehow quite natural that the family should live in this house quite simply, growing their own vegetables in a huge new greenhouse (rebuilt from an old cow-shed), sharing their garden and sometimes even their kitchen with two gentle and extremely sociable donkeys (a present from William to Sophie), and working from home.

In a converted barn Sophie, who until recently was co-editor of the ecology magazine *Resurgence*, is engaged on various writing and editing projects as well as overseeing the admin of William’s business. In another set of outbuildings, William designs and creates his sculptures from huge blocks of raw Portuguese marble which sit like giant meteorites in the yard.

William’s latest project was an ambitious one – to produce one sculpture

every day for 100 days. He started with a simple figure, but over the months developed it into abstraction and back again. Seeing all 100 finished pieces together is powerful stuff. “Surprisingly, the task wasn’t a burden,” claims William. “When I was 20, I walked from John O’Groats to Land’s End and that taught me to enjoy the journey as much as the destination. For this project, I spent 10 hours working on each piece, so that’s 1,000 hours of sculpture, 1,000 hours of thought.”

And did he get bored towards the end? “I can honestly say that number 100 is my favourite. Creative progress was definitely made, which was really heartening.”

Pieces of William’s work can be seen throughout the house, where they look perfectly at home sitting on slate windowsills with lime-washed walls as their backdrop. This adds to the sense that William and Sophie’s house has one foot in the present and one foot in the past, and it’s a delightful combination. Add to that the sight of a pair of friendly donkeys munching an apple at the kitchen door, and you might say that this really is rural bliss. ☺

www.williampeers.com.

The 100 Days series is on show from April 23 to May 18 at John Martin Gallery, London.

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