

The test of time



STORIES

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FOR AUTUMN



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Home is such an emotionally charged word. Think about it, even just for a few seconds, and dozens of connotations will come flooding to the forefront of your mind. Ones linked to both childhood and adulthood, and scenes that your memory has stored safely so you won't ever forget them.

The heart & the home

Why all the talk about home? Because, when we're on the cusp of colder months, when evening and afternoon start to merge, when squirrels start squirrelling away nuts so they needn't leave the safety of their dreys, that's when the comfort, warmth and security of our homes shines its brightest...



Home means belonging. A sense of welcome, familiarity and security. Home is all yours, even when it's shared with others.

Our associations with its single syllable are shaped by life's twists and turns, events and experiences, memories and magic. For many of us though, the word home brings with it, more than anything, a strong sense of comfort. Home makes us think of family. Thoughts of when you were little, living under your parents' roof – your first home – where you'd be kept warm, cared for, bathed and fed, and tucked up tight at night. Thoughts of your first 'adult' home when you'd flown the family nest to feather your own. Your instinct to fill it with items of meaning and recognition, to put your own stamp on it, to claim it as your own is strong. It's an expression of our own selves. Essayist Pico Iyer in his Ted Talk *Where is home?* stated how home is more to do with a piece of your soul rather than a patch of soil. A notion picked up and backed by psychologists the world over and a point discussed at The Royal Academy's panel talk *The Psychology of Home* a few years back. Self-exploration in the home is how we take it from being a house to a home. Home has such a grasping connection with identity and territory too. It's how we discover more about what we like and don't like, but in an environment that's safe and private. Home can be your little secret. Then, when we open our homes to others, they adapt again to become

a habitat for many rather than a den for one. The family home comes full circle as you fill it with friends, a partner, little ones or four-legged companions. The sense of family is restored, and the feeling of security is sharpened as you see it as a safe shelter for all who live within its walls. Home is your safe place.

Your happy place.

When you spend time at somebody else's house, you might say things such as 'it's like a second home' or 'it feels like home'. You might even be told to 'make yourself at home'. Sayings like these simply reinforce the happy, comforting thoughts that are part and parcel of the word home. Home is about being completely at ease in your surroundings and company, about being comfortable rather than conforming, about restoring and recuperating. 'Home sweet home' and 'it's so good to be home' meanwhile, reiterate the deep-stirring emotion of returning to your own, where all those feelings are multiplied in their intensity.

In autumn and winter months, we spend more and more time in our home's warm embrace. The harshness of cold winters, darker days and rainy spells make us



Previous page: Wardley dining chair, painted in Smoke £270, oak £300 / Sheldrake dining table £1,330 / Henley 5ft sideboard £1,525 / Olney tableware, from £8 / Chichester kitchen, painted in Fog

cling to and appreciate the warmth and safe harbour of our homes in a bigger way than we do in spring and summer. Picture coming home from a day at work, the sky is covered in the darkest blanket, there are puddles everywhere, your fingertips are pink. Key in the lock, front door open, and now imagine the fireside roaring, the curtains drawn and the lamps on, supper bubbling away on the stove, a wagging tail to greet you and your go-to armchair ready and waiting, a chunky-knit throw just an arm's reach away, telling you it's here when you need it. Cue a contented sigh.

Our homes are an extension of ourselves. Take the home comforts away and sure, home would feel less 'homely', but it would still be yours, it would still be part of you. It's the concept of having a space of your own, your own little kingdom, your ability to open yourself to or shut yourself away from the world as you please, that gives you the real sense of comfort and security. For us though, home is in fact a combination of soil, soul and sanctuary. Be it animals or humans, our instinct is to nest, and to make our nests as comfortable and as comforting as we see fit.

And, as autumn dawns, our homes are ready to be at their absolute cosiest. Layers, textures, lighting and all...

Arthur large footstool, Saint James Aged Tan £960 / Sefton throw, Rust £175 / Milo stool, Saint James Aged Tan £360 / Lottie grand sofa, Harry Storm £2,240 / Blenheim small console table £350 / Caledonia Scottish Hills print by Daisy Sims-Hilditch £115



It's the concept of having a space of your own, your own little kingdom, your ability to open yourself to or shut yourself away from the world as you please, that gives you the real sense of comfort and security.



Layering: a fashion editor's view

Fine knits, long scarves, cardigans under coats. Upholstery, throws, rugs overlapping rugs. Fashion editor Frankie Graddon looks at the link between how we dress for the season and how we dress our homes...

When it comes to styling tricks, layering has got to be one of the all-time favourites. Now that autumn's fast approaching, it's the word on everybody's lips – the season when layering becomes more of a need. Pick up any glossy from now until December and you're sure to be told how the art of piling on one's clothes is the key to a successful outfit. Layering is chic – plus it'll keep you warm too.

But, of course, layering isn't just about sticking one thing over another. The joy of layering is in the mixture of colours, prints and textures. It's the light and shade. The high and low. Think swooshy, floral midi dress (yes, even in autumn) over a fine-knit roll neck, under a fuzzy teddy bear coat – one of my go-to autumnal looks and one that looks great at any age. This season (with fashion's love for

all things 70s) will see us mix burgundies and rusts with browns and metallics, and velvets with cords and silks, offering warmth, depth and glorious richness.

Considering the above, it follows that the principles of layering can be applied to your home. Who doesn't want cosy, cocooning surroundings? Plus, as is the way with an outfit, layering can also offer quick and easy seasonal updates to a room. A colour pop here, a splash of print there. Little touches to transform a space, building on what you already have. And that palette of texture and tone from the autumn/winter catwalks sounds mighty nice for our interiors too.

As you move from room to room, you can layer in different ways, much as you layer your outfit

Hanley candlestick £30 / Neve tea light holder £14



(Top left) Dominic armchair, Isla Grouse £900 / Turnberry side table £275 / Hanover cordless lamp £185 / Caledonia Pitlochry, Scotland print by Daisy Sims-Hilditch £125 (Top right) Matilda armchair, Isla Otter £790 / Carter rectangular side table £365 / Fitzroy medium table lamp, Black £130 / Lucile 15" shade, Silver Grey silk £43 (Bottom) Balmoral eight-seater table £3,170 / Arundel three-seater bench £640 / Mowbray dining chair, Ewan Dove £350

according to occasion. Sitting rooms – comfortable, functional and continually in use – are like coats and jackets of the interior world. This space is all about warmth and ease and is where layering really comes into its own. Think shearlings, heritage checks, corduroy (if you're into trends or texture – or both) and tweeds (tactile yet robust – after all, this is a room for living in). The sofa is your centrepiece and so a great place to start. Layer up cushions in a complementing colour palette but varying in size, shape (mix differently-sized squares and the odd rectangle) and prints – try stripes, checks and florals. Scattering in a couple of neutral cushions will anchor the whole look (think of these as your white shirt or trusty blue jeans).

If the sitting room is your outerwear, the dining room is occasionwear; glitzy, sociable and with a sense of ceremony. The table is your main event here, and can be dressed up to the nines with linens, candlesticks, serving dishes, greenery – I could go on. If you're feeling bold, go completely matchy-matchy so your whole

room has one colour theme. Otherwise, mix tonal shades like dusky purple and soft grey, which you can use on linens as your base. Layer further with a mix of matte and gloss crockery and ornaments – I like to mix glass and metallics, or glass and stone. Two textures are plenty for me. Remember, layering isn't all about fabrics.

Bedrooms are undoubtedly the loungewear of the interiors wardrobe. For me, it's about layer upon layer of soft textures to burrow under. Layering needn't be overcomplicated. It can be as simple as throwing on a cardigan. The same goes for your interior – just because rugs and throws seem like obvious additions, doesn't mean they aren't worthy. Go for texture here – nubby wools, fuzzy sheepskin, a spot of fringe, or even a touch of tassel. If you're someone who doesn't like the look of a throw or two at the end of the bed though, roll them up and store them in a wicker basket nearby – that still counts.

Layering lighting is an effective way to transform an atmosphere too – in every room. Table lamps

offer a soft, diffused glow whilst a floor lamp next to the sofa creates a cosy pool of light (which is also great for reading). Twinkling candle light creates cosiness and adds to an inviting ambiance. Like you'd dial-up an outfit for the evening with a switch of a flat shoe for heels, lighting can be dimmed or brightened depending on if it's teatime with the kids or supper with friends. A pendant light over the dinner table creates intimacy which can be brightened with a few ceiling spot lights. Scattered tea lights on the table are little jewels of light and make glassware especially sparkling.

And, just as you'd never leave the house without an accessory (or ten, in my case), you can layer decorative pieces on mantels, shelving, window ledges – or any surface that's on the bare side. In the same way that playing with proportions in an outfit (e.g. slim-cut top, wide-leg trousers) gives balance, playing with proportions in a room is also a useful styling tool. Mix in tall church candles with your low-level tea lights, or give height to your table with long-stemmed greenery in a tall

vase. Proportions are all part of your room's – and your outfit's – layers too.

Don't forget your final layer: scent. In the same way that a spritz of your signature perfume finishes your outfit, scented candles, room diffusers and sprays provide an invisible but no less important layer in your home wardrobe. And there you have it – style and substance.

The outfit-to-room comparisons go on, but the point is, we adapt the way we dress when the seasons shift. And I like to don my seasonal switchover hat for my home too. N.B, it's a woolly one.

FRANKIE GRADDON
@frankiegraddon

Huxley reed diffuser, Landscape £45 / Huxley scented candle, Landscape £37 (both available in store and online from November) / Blyton candle, Rust £4



OUR CRAFT INITIATIVE

THE SHORTLIST

Craftsmanship is at the heart of everything we do, so makers are very special to us. It's why we launched the Neptune Craft Initiative earlier in the summer.

It was an open invitation to all makers, from weavers to bookbinders, across the country, to get in touch and tell us about the wonderful objects they create. Why? So that we could find a connection with a pool of craftspeople, to support them with advice and guidance that would help them turn a passion into a growing business.

Since its launch, we've had an overwhelming response to our invitation. It's been brilliant, and choosing our favourites has been far from easy. Right now, we're at the shortlist stage, and are very happy to introduce you to three of the fabulous artists we've discovered along the way.



Kara Leigh Ford

Ceramicist

A painter converted to a potter and inspired by a lifelong love of the sea.

“When I was young, school didn't suit me unless I was drawing or making something. I went on to art college and then university to study fine art where I specialised in painting.

I started pottery at evening classes as I wanted to start making things I could feel, keep, give and treasure. I fell in love with clay instantly but was fearful of giving up my office job. Then I got down to the final 20 applicants for BBC Two's 'Great Pottery Throw Down' and thought, go for it.

I'm drawn to making pots that remind me of lazy summer days

growing up in Devon, surrounded by the textures and colours of its ocean and my favourite beaches. My training as a painter means I work backwards. I think about the colours and textures first before the form a pot will take.

Three words I use to describe my collection are natural, calm and uncluttered. I mainly make tableware and kitchenware, but I also create larger art pieces. I make everything on the potter's wheel in stoneware clay, hand-glazed and high-fired up to 1,200 degrees centigrade.

When people touch my work, I want them to feel transported to their favourite stretch of coastline. Also, I'd like to think my work offers a more mindful eating and drinking experience. Drinking from a handmade mug is very

different to drinking from a mass-manufactured one; the love, the care – a handmade object born of earth, water and fire.

I'm super-excited about the future. I've just built a larger studio in my garden, I'll be able to host pottery workshops, and I have so many plans for my product line, yet there's still nothing more satisfying than sitting at my wheel for an afternoon just playing with clay.”

karaleighfordceramics.com
Instagram @karaleighceramics



Photo: Richard Tymon



Jason Stocks-Young

Leather worker

Drawn to a new creative direction by a lucky meeting with an ex-saddler.

“Six years ago, I had a career change, inspired by a move from London to the foothills of the Pennines. I wanted to use my creativity in a more tangible way and started exploring how I could make something through furniture restoration and re-upholstery. After a serendipitous meeting with an ex-saddler in Derbyshire, I was hooked on leather! I knew it was the route I wanted to go down.

I was lucky to find a passion and a craft that could evolve into a business. I find an immense satisfaction and calmness in making that was never present in my

previous career (digital marketing). I’ve also found myself part of an industry that’s gathering momentum, and there seems to be a renewed appetite in traditional craft.

My inspiration can come from anywhere, at any time. My surroundings and visual stimuli are really important to me. My workshop is in an old cotton mill in Saddleworth – functional industry always inspires me, and it’s filled with an eclectic mix of antiques and artefacts. My daily commute is over Saddleworth Moor so nature is a constant inspiration.

I like to keep my designs simple and let the quality of the make and materials be the hero – a functional, clean aesthetic, using high quality leather and fixings.

When people touch my work, I’d like them to feel and appreciate

true quality and craftsmanship as an antidote to mass production and poor quality. My products will only get better with age and I hope people take them on their journey and allow them to develop their own character.

I’d like to do my part to ensure the continuation of traditional skills applied to the modern world, plus a more considered approach to consumption. I believe this can be done through creating an appreciation of hand-made goods and sharing my passion through teaching.”

Instagram @jsyleatherworks



Imogen Di Sapia

Weaver

When a deep love of textiles and storytelling come together.

“I’ve worked exclusively in textiles since I went to art college at sixteen. I started as an apprentice costumier with the Royal Shakespeare Company, then freelanced as a couture sample and pattern cutter for London fashion houses. Lately, I’ve reconnected with making and exploring raw materials again, and weaving has become my chosen textile medium.

I’m inspired primarily by the materials I work with. I love discovering the texture, lustre, shade and depth that comes from blending raw natural fibres, including rare breed and ethical wool, linen, nettle, wild silk, and

new fibres such as soy and seaweed silk. Storytelling and folklore are also important to me. I like to really get into the landscape of a story by imagining it being retold in our contemporary world.

My debut interior textiles collection for 2018 is called ‘The Selkie’, based on the traditional Celtic folk tale. How can I distil the textural aesthetic? Well, soft mauve-grey wet stone, gull feathers, seaweed, moonlight, wild seal-singing, driftwood, nude scallop shells, matte powdered chalk cliff...

I hope people feel the love of craft and get a genuine sense of the handmade in my work; from the subtly shaded fibres in the hand-spun yarns, to the weight and textures of the final piece.

I’m growing the business side of my work slowly, and launching my

new online shop this September. My work is also exhibited, and that means occupying a space that includes both art and craft; between product and installation. Weaving has given me such creative satisfaction, and making large, textured blankets that people can enjoy in their homes is a really fulfilling path for me as a maker. I’m a studio maker at heart, so I intend to keep working on my limited edition collections and exploring my relationship with weaving more deeply.”

brightmoonweaving.com
Instagram @imogen.di.sapia



THE NEXT STEPS

Our Craft Initiative isn't a one-time-only thing. It's not a competition, but more of an ongoing pledge to do our bit to support British makers. That means we'll constantly be looking and listening out for hidden talent.

If that's you, and you'd like to get in touch to tell us a bit more about you and your craft, then we'd love to hear from you.

Head to neptune.com/craft for more details.



Interior design journalist Jo Leever considers the thinking process behind finding the right dining table for you and your family.

Dinner table conversations

Years ago, I saw a mesmerising film clip. Shot from above, it was sped-up footage of a young couple getting their newborn baby ready to go out. Back and forth they flit, dashing in and out of shot, doing 101 other things but always returning to the compelling centrifugal force that was their baby. That film came back to me when I started thinking about dining tables. If you're thinking, "Nope, she's lost the plot..." just stay with me on this one.

Definitely less needy than a baby, your dining table still exerts a similar pull. It's a hub that draws you and your family around it. If you were filmed from above for a day, chances are you'd also be captured dashing to and fro, laying plates, clearing them, grabbing a coffee, helping with homework and, finally, relaxing around it.

Your table is a centrepiece in the truest sense. It gets used countless times a day, a week and a year. It's where suppers are hosted and life admin is tackled. Which is why it has to be practical as well as good looking. Here's how to choose the one that's right for you.



Shape

Rectangular is the norm, echoing the shape of most rooms, but there's something very appealing about a round table. King Arthur made a point of its egalitarian shape, and it does feel instantly inclusive when everyone faces each other. Circular tables also do away with what mid-century designer Eero Saarinen famously called the confusing 'slum' of table legs. A central, slender plinth solved the issue for his iconic Tulip table – and works equally well on Neptune's wood versions, Henley, Chichester, Sheldrake and Balmoral.

Style

Your table is an investment, so it needs to go beyond the bland with a character that suits your own innate style. If it makes you think, "It'll do," it really won't. If you're thinking, "I love it – those tapered legs are gorgeous and it'll work with our chairs," you've found it.

Chairs

Ah, yes, chairs. They really shouldn't be an afterthought because they also influence whether a table works. That's not to say you're restricted to a style identical to your existing chairs – far from it – but some correlation is a very good thing. Look at tones, materials or shapes that overlap. A table in a grey-toned oak would work with chairs in grey-toned upholstery. Or a simple trestle table looks right at home with spindle-backed chairs because it echoes the simple, smoothed angles.

And if you're choosing new dining chairs, sit on them...then sit some more. Because a good chair is designed with behinds and backs in mind. And a bad one will have you shifting, stretching and fidgeting within minutes.

Is there really a logical link between a baby and a dining table? Probably not (except in my mind's slightly random filing system). Nevertheless, when the time comes, congratulations on your beautiful new arrival.



Material

Wood has an unbeatable warmth and grain (which Neptune recommends preserving with its IsoGuard® oil), but if you prefer a contemporary look, glass, marble or powder-coated steel will add a bit more edge. Which brings us to...

JO LEEVERS
@joleevers

Size

The perfect table is neither so small it looks lost, nor so vast that it dominates. You also need to allow space for chairs to be pulled back, so guests can get to their places without everyone shuffling in a bit. Modern tables are generally a standard height – leaving around 74cm from base to floor – but vintage pieces can vary. Antiques restorers often have to add extra inches to French farmhouse tables because today's diners are much taller than your average 19th-century farm worker.

If you can't decide between a size that works for day-to-day meals and a larger one for entertaining, an extendable style is your friend.



How to: Create cosiness in the kitchen

Exploring ways to introduce cosiness in the kitchen at the home of our co-founder, John Sims-Hilditch.



When it comes to kitchen design, it's all too easy to focus on layout, cabinetry combinations, appliance integration, work surface space, and so on. All things utility. Then, you might home in on handle choice, the colour of your cabinets and what light fixtures to pick. All things aesthetic. But what about the touches that you can apply to your kitchen that add atmosphere, that create a particular feeling? Kitchens are said to be the main living space of the whole home, so, with autumn fast approaching and winter on the horizon, let's discuss what we can do to make them a cosy contender for sitting rooms and snugs alike.

Texture

A need for every room. Texture isn't just about visual interest: in terms of cosiness, it's a way to bring in all sorts of warming touches. Exposed stone on walls and timber flooring will make a room feel snug (especially with underfloor heating!) because we associate both materials with keeping us safe and sheltered. Take it to the ceiling and consider cladding it in wooden panelling. Your kitchen will be as good as a cocoon.

Colour

Unsurprisingly, paint has a big role to play. In the kitchen, you've got both walls and cabinetry to play with. If you're unsure of what shade to choose, speak to an expert like one of our home specialists, because not all dark shades have a warm base and light shades don't have to be all about freshness.

Lighting

Two of our absolute musts in a kitchen are table lamps and dimmer switches. Table lamps, because they're associated with sitting rooms and bedrooms and so as soon as they're brought into the kitchen, they immediately make the room feel softer. Plus, they're perfect at providing a dim, soothing glow. Dimmers on all other light fixtures – from pendants to spotlights and wall lights – will give you complete flexibility to reduce light intensity and in turn, boost the cosy factor so it becomes less like task lighting and more about ambience.

Rugs and throws

If you're worried about the practicality of a rug in a kitchen, put one close to the entrance so you walk into and onto softness, but away from cooking areas. You

could go for a natural fibre like seagrass or sisal for more practicality. Or, if you have a kitchen table, place a rug underneath so the edges peep out and make their presence felt, and your feet are somewhere snug while you're sat down. Blankets or sheepskin rugs over the backs of dining chairs or on a dining bench are cosy on the eye, never mind when you sit down or lean back into them.

Furniture

Furniture isn't just a practical thing. It makes a statement about how you're going to use a room. Having a table in the kitchen invites people in. Picture a table with a pendant over it (dimly lit of course) with a centrepiece display (be it an inviting fruit bowl or bowl of scented pine cones) and those dining chairs grouped around (with your blankets or sheepskins

over the backs). It's an open invitation to get comfy and stay close to where a cup of tea and a bite to eat is sure to follow. The same applies for an armchair in a kitchen with a small side table next to it, a dresser or console table. Furniture like this is another way to make your kitchen feel like a living space and not simply a place to cook, ergo making it more welcoming and cosy.



ornaments, clusters of lit candles with matches to hand so it's clear they're not just for show, and artwork with scenes of people or food in them will all contribute to

is on the large side, and you have windows further away from the stove and hob, a pair of fully-lined curtains is such a homely addition and will keep the warmth in

beautifully. Just be sure to air your kitchen as often as you can and look into having your curtains cleaned more regularly to keep them fresh. Roman blinds are another option; it's a case of bringing fabric into the kitchen that can help it feel cosier.

Fireside

If you're having a kitchen redesign or an extension built, why not consider having a fireplace or log burner built into the room. Wherever there's a fireside, there's warmth, there's comfort, there's cosiness.

your kitchen's cossetting atmosphere. Consider what would make you enjoy spending time in a room and wish to stay there for longer. Remember, cosiness isn't all about being warm and snug (though that's a lot to do with it), it's about what people find comforting.

Shutters, if your window allows them, are a way to avoid having fabric if you're not so keen though. Go for solid panels over slatted if you can, because when they're shut tight, it's as good as feeling all tucked in.

Little touches

The presence of comforting things like cookbooks (perhaps one could even be left open to show use and love), teapots and mugs on shelving, and family photos, all adds to

Curtains and shutters

Window treatments in a kitchen are an overlooked way to bring in one last dose of cosy. If your room

Combine a few of these elements, or the whole lot, and your kitchen will quickly become the busiest spot in your whole home in the coming months...



“ Having a place for friends and family to perch as you cook is a subtle way to create cosiness, because it's a way to bring you all closer together. Same goes for having extra utensils so everyone can join in with cooking.



A PLACE FOR EVERYTHING

How to create the best of a boot room in a hallway or utility.

There's nothing more wonderful than a good long walk. But when we return, our homes immediately come under attack from muddy boots and wet coats. A boot room is the dream answer, acting as a bridge between the exterior and interior of the house. Wherever it's situated, it needs to blend functionality with style. It's not just a place to hide clutter. But with a little planning, a large porch or the end of the hallway can stand in as the ideal drop-off point, and it's remarkable how much can be fitted into a small area.

It might sound obvious, but start with a list of everything you want to store. The number and variety of items will surprise you, and a list will ensure you have adequate storage for all.

The best way to maximise the use of any space is to create your own bespoke furniture. You could employ a local carpenter, but if you take photographs, measurements and your list into one of Neptune's stores, their designers can create clever ways to use every last inch.

Think about how you want the area to look. Will you place most of your items behind doors (best in an entrance hall), or are you happy to have a more relaxed open-shelf approach with storage baskets? Open shelves are convenient but can easily become untidy, while kitchen-style cabinetry is a great storage solution. Freestanding furniture will also give you the look you're after, but taking furniture to the ceiling will deliver extra storage, and in a pale, subtle colour, won't be overwhelming. Make sure surfaces are hardwearing. If using painted wood the finish needs to be eggshell. Natural wood should have a protective finish, such as Neptune's IsoGuard®.

Seating's a given. A bench-style seat makes the best use of space; even better with a storage area built-in, particularly in a narrow hallway. The easiest option is to place storage baskets below, as with Neptune's new

Edinburgh storage bench. You can also box it in, filling the space with cupboards, or the seat can open to reveal a spot perfect for boots. If it's in your entrance hall, consider upholstering it or using a cushion in-keeping with the main areas of the home. Or, for maximum durability, outdoor fabrics will be easier to keep clean.

Never underestimate how many hooks you'll need. Some high for long coats and for the dog's lead to dangle, some low enough for children to reach. Placing the lower or higher ones at either end of the run creates a sense of symmetry.

Consider the walls and floor as they'll have to deal with everything from water to mud. Stone or textured porcelain tiles are ideal. Ensure stone is sealed or non-porous. Neptune's Tamworth floor tiles in a brick pattern will give you a hardwearing yet beautifully textured floor that's non-slip. Decorate walls with easy to clean paint that can be washed down or touched up to remove marks – an eggshell finish does the job nicely.

Finally, an outside tap close to your door or a Belfast sink in a covered area can wash the worst of the mud from boots... and dogs!

DEBORAH BARKER

Edinburgh 3ft coat rack £63 / Edinburgh 1200 boot room bench £460 / Somerton boot room basket £63

WAYS WITH WOOL

Natural, renewable, breathable, hypoallergenic, comfortable, cosy and cooling, wool is one of the most benefits-laden yarns in existence.

Writer Amelia Thorpe takes a closer look at fleece and fibre...



Think of the magnificent landscape of Scotland with its dramatic mountains and glens, rolling hills and sparkling lochs. It's scenery that instantly evokes the colours of bracken and heather, mists and moors to create a naturally beautiful palette, perfectly suited to an imaginative interior. Add some richer tones, inspired by the russet shades of Highland cattle or red deer, and the combination is warm and inviting.

Highland vistas can provide a deep grounding for a seasonal colour palette in our homes. Earthy tones blend well with natural materials, from solid timber to sustainable yarns like wool, which offers luxurious softness and cocooning comfort. Available in many different weaves and weights, wool also comes with a sense of heritage – it not only looks elegant, it's also been used for generations to produce fabrics that are long lasting, tactile and warm.

Wool can come from far and wide, but Scottish wool is particularly varied and versatile; the country's hills are home to sheep breeds such as the Cheviot, known for its crisp, white, lustrous wool used for tweed, knitwear and blankets. The mountains are where Blackface sheep are to be found, a breed that's said to date back to the 12th century when monks used their wool for clothing. Today, its bulky, coarser fleece is valued for carpets and, in some grades, is used in blends in tweeds and mattresses. There are other breeds whose naturally-coloured, soft and silky wool is popular with hand-spinners and knitters; and cross-breeds, such as the Scottish Greyface, which is known



for its grey speckled face and white wool that's generally used in carpets. But wherever it comes from, wool offers the same multitude of qualities.

Why wool?

As a natural material that's invitingly soft to the touch, warm and comfortable, wool is hard to beat. With its subtle sheen, luxurious tactility and durability, wool has long been appreciated – there's evidence to suggest that it's been spun and woven into cloth since before 10,000 BC.

Of course, sheep's wool comes from many countries in the world, with Australia and New Zealand particularly well known for providing much of the wool used in furnishings. But thanks to its unique characteristics,

British wool remains sought-after, with farmers here still producing some thirty million kilos each year.

Sustainable & long-lasting

Unlike synthetic materials, wool is a renewable fibre, since a sheep produces a new fleece every year. The processing of wool also creates minimal environmental impact, something that can't always be said of man-made materials.

Whether used for upholstery, carpets, curtains or bedding, wool also offers extraordinary resilience, something that ticks the environmental box too. It lasts and lasts, because its fibres are strong and resistant to wrinkling, sagging and tearing, able to be bend back on themselves some twenty thousand times without breaking. That's a robustness that carpet manufacturers – and homeowners – appreciate, and the reason why more than fifty percent of British wool goes into carpet production. Even with heavier footfall, the natural elasticity of the fibres means they bounce back to help maintain the best appearance for many years.

It's an ideal material for busy homes, because wool is naturally stain-resistant. The fibres are protected by

natural oils which make them less pervious to dirt, and easier to clean. For the same reason, wool is less likely to fade than some other fabrics, and thanks to its high water and nitrogen content, it's naturally flame-retardant. And finally, when it does reach the end of its life, wool is biodegradable.

Warm up, sound down

Just as wool protects sheep from cold winds and rain, so it acts as an excellent insulator in the home, retaining warmth and cutting down on energy costs. It's naturally breathable, absorbing and releasing moisture and heat, helping to keep you both warm in winter and cool in summer.


Although sometimes forgotten, it's a fact that wool can also help improve the acoustics in a home. Anyone familiar with the way that noise bounces around the hard surfaces of a room – especially troublesome in large open plan spaces – will appreciate the way that wool curtains, upholstery and rugs will absorb sound to create a more comfortable environment.

AMELIA THORPE
@ameliathorpe

Did you know?

Wool is what you'll find in lots of traditionally-made mattresses, like Neptune's Barrington mattress. It's a great temperature regulator, and when it's used in tandem with cotton, they'll keep you warm in winter and cool in summer, wicking away any moisture and being completely anti-bacterial too. But not just any fleece can be used in mattresses: they should be tested for their springiness and resilience because your mattress needs to be as comfy as possible and to last through night after night of deep sleeps. Wool's benefits don't end there either. If you use locally grown and raised sheep's wool, it reduces emissions. It's also completely sustainable and can be recycled when it's time to move on to a new mattress. Both of which are far kinder on the environment.

Charlie double headboard, Harris Tweed Bircher £1,740 / Sefton throw, Rust £175 / Rupert footstool, Harry Rust £425 / Elgin 170x240cm rug, Grey Oak £600 / Herdwick sheepskin rug £135



From headboard to below-the-bed rug,
bringing wool into the bedroom
is a promise of cosiness.

HARRIS TWEED

— What lies behind the weave —



This autumn, we welcome our first Harris Tweed to our fabric library. Not a lookalike Harris Tweed, not one inspired by Harris Tweed, but a through and through Harris Tweed – not something that you can claim lightly. A few months back, we visited the croft house of a Harris Tweed home-weaver to learn more and bring together all of the beautiful threads behind this parliament-protected cloth's story...

Those kaleidoscopic yarns, that often coarse and always weighty texture, that clear-as-day quality, and that emblematic orb logo – it can only be Harris Tweed. A fabric that's come to be used in a whole host of ways from blankets and cushion covers to washbags and laptop cases, it's fair to say it's a British textile icon with a global fanbase.

But that wasn't always so. It may have been a part of Scottish history for over a century, but 25 years ago, it was threatened by the collapse of the North American market (which it relied heavily on for trade) as well as the advent of a new double-width loom that meant other textile houses could produce more tweed at a quicker rate. Not only that, a leading fashion house adopted a remarkably similar orb trademark to Harris

Tweed which caused brand identity issues. With the help of a body called The Harris Tweed Association (HTA) however, Harris Tweed was granted legislative protection and became the only cloth in the world to have its own act of parliament – The Harris Tweed Act of 1993.

Provenance, authenticity and standards were all cared for under the new law, which enforced that for a cloth to be declared a bona fide Harris Tweed, it can only ever be made from pure virgin wool, hand-woven at the home of a registered Harris weaver, and made entirely in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland. The constraints were of course deliberate. Not only do they safeguard the charm and spirit of true Harris Tweed, but they prevent others from being able to forge

imitations. This unique Scottish textile was to be fiercely guarded and honoured, forever.

But where did those signature Harris Tweed traits originate? Why was it that they were part of the new jurisdiction? History suggests that, before it was branded, Harris Tweed was known as *Clò-Mòr* (big cloth in Gaelic) – a fabric that was made by hand, by islanders, from Scottish wool, in their own cottages throughout winter. The Countess of Dunmore, whose husband – the sixth Earl – had inherited the island from his father, is thought to have taken a liking to the cloth in the 1840s. So much so, she requested her clan's tartan was remade in Harris Tweed. It was received so well, that she began marketing it to her friends, on mainland Scotland

and across the Scottish isles. It was this that led to it becoming an established, coveted textile, though initially for reasons of inherent practicality than aesthetic appeal; Harris Tweed is more or less impervious to rain. Up to, during and well after the Great War, the main market was the landowning gentry.

The Harris Tweed Act also secured employment for the 500 or so islanders involved in its production – more than 100 of those being weavers. Every process – dyeing, blending, carding, spinning, warping, weaving, finishing, stamping and inspecting – happens in the Outer Hebrides. The result is now more than 4,000 patterns and possibilities, all made with the help of the three island mills and each weaver's own treadle-powered loom. Some use the new double-width loom, but most prefer the traditional single-width known as the Hattersley, including weaver Rebecca Hutton (more about her on page 65) who believes the older looms require more skill. "It's my loom – I know it, I love it. It connects me to my grandmother who wove on one, and it's long been part of island life," she said. Harris Tweed is a product of love, community spirit, and the traditional, artisanal ways that are passed down through the generations.



Dyed bundles of yarn, waiting to be woven into Harris Tweed.

Our very own Harris Tweed (in a muted colourway that we've called Bircher, because it reminded us of the flecks of colour in our morning muesli) will take pride of place in our new collection. These tweeds are steeped in cultural significance and are worthy of such fierce protection. The endless tapestry of colours the weavers use is all reflective of

Hebridean life. Deep and earthy peat and fuzzy moss, purple-grey heather-like ribbons, straw yellow machair tones, electric streaks inspired by aurora skies, and a rugged nature buried deep in each piece of cloth reminding you that Harris Tweed is made of tough, beautiful stuff.

To cushion, or not to cushion?

A his and hers perspective

Cushions on the bed – they really do divide opinion. While we try to avoid making sweeping generalisations, it does seem to be that, when you share your bed with somebody, one is in the vote remain camp and the other will fervently shout leave. Leave them off the bed, leave them downstairs on the sofa, or preferably, just leave them in the shop where you found them.

Writer Fiona McCarthy shares the debate in her household with her architect husband. Who's of the "just bin the whole lot" school of thought...



thrill in your heart (take me to Palm Springs. Now). There's more. Cushions are often a way to explore the use of a favourite fabric too expensive to use in larger amounts.

In my ideal cushion-filled dream world, against a plain white thousand-thread-count backdrop, I'd have half a dozen strewn across the bed, in an elegant jumble of mismatched prints, hand-woven techniques and intriguing trims. There would be a subtle thread of a favourite colour running through each of them, but not prohibitively so; a single chair in the corner (when not drowning under the weight of all my stuff), would be the perfect resting place for two or three more.

Although I can live without a throw, I can't live without cushions. Cushions are like the handbags and shoes of the interiors world. They're the finishing touch that always makes someone say 'wow'.

– Fiona

FIONA MCCARTHY
@thechicshopper

Why put cushions on the bed when there are already pillows there too? This is my first point. Cushions are just something that get in the way of making yourself feel comfortable. This is point two.

Pillows are designed for sleeping, for propping yourself up against when reading a book. Why would you need anything else? A cushion on the bed is over the top and a daily annoyance (point three. I'll stop counting at this point). We have way too many of them.

Cushions for decoration have no purpose – I don't mind them on the sofa, you can use them for resting your head while watching TV – but cushions on a bed will only end up on the floor when I'm asleep so there's really no reason for a cushion to be there at all.

Throws, on the other hand, can be useful. They can be used as a blanket – but again, here the same cushion principle applies: if it's going to get kicked off the end of the bed and onto the floor in the middle of the night because it's too hot, there's no need for one of those either.

If I'm forced to endure a cushion, which I am (constantly), it's



essential it isn't scratchy – I can't stand kilim or heavy linen fabrics which indent or exfoliate your face. Of course, half of ours fit this bill – she calls them 'textured' or 'characterful'. I call them annoying. Inevitably, I'll turn them around to use their cotton backs, but, before I know it, they'll be back as they were in a blink of an eye. Fiona 'innocently' sitting nearby.

Fiona makes the point, repeatedly, that with fabric being so expensive, it's cheaper to use as a cushion – much like a rug in place of a painting. But there's no point if it's so precious you're terrified to walk on it. The same is true with cushions. There's no point having a pile of expensively-made cushions,

(dodgy ladder, fear of heights) so I'm somewhat powerless to stop him. Instead, I quietly grimace.

Yet I persist.

They live on the sofa, but it's on our bed where I gaze at them adoringly. Now, my argument for cushions on the bed is quite simple: they make it look inviting and enticing. A cushion transports you somewhere else – blue and white stripes immediately imply the seaside (you can almost hear the seagulls cry outside the window); plush velvet feels palatial and decadent (dreams of Versailles swirling in my head); a bold print, whether two-tone or multi-coloured, puts a spring in your step and a

piled in an arrangement too impossible to recreate, afraid you'll mark them. And yet, no sooner do I get rid of two, than another two appear.

In truth, I'll never understand cushions on the bed. In another life, there would be someone to take them off for us and put them into a cupboard each night. Then, maybe I could tolerate them. But we don't live in a hotel and we don't have servants. Instead, we have me, the mug who takes the cushions off the bed. Every. Single. Night.

– Mike



Creating contrasts

How to mix and match upholstery

Anyone who's old enough to remember the tyranny of the matching three-piece suite will know that British upholstery has grown up – and moved on. Hop on to social media or flip through a magazine and scrutinise the top designer schemes, and you'll notice a catholic mosaic of styles, shapes and textures – leather against chintz, a carved French fauteuil offset by a curvy art deco sofa – animating even the smallest rooms. Modern upholstery doesn't have to kowtow to trends. Like nonagenarian Iris Apfel with her oversized specs and paintbox-coloured outfits, 21st-century upholstery celebrates individuality. So, if you're investing in a new sofa or riffling through swatches in search of fabric to rejuvenate a lacklustre headboard, seize the opportunity to express your inner decorating ideal: be it country house or urban, bohemian or modernist.

There are so many ways to inject spirit into an interior. It might be a reading nook screened by a rose-strewn curtain or the woody scent of a candle drifting across flagstoned floors. But few things bring a room to life more vividly than upholstery. Not simply functional, sofas, armchairs, ottomans or footstools have been the building blocks of any scheme since the 18th century. Like elements in a painting, they inject definition, colour and contrast, and bring texture to any room: picture a small sofa stretching out languorously at the

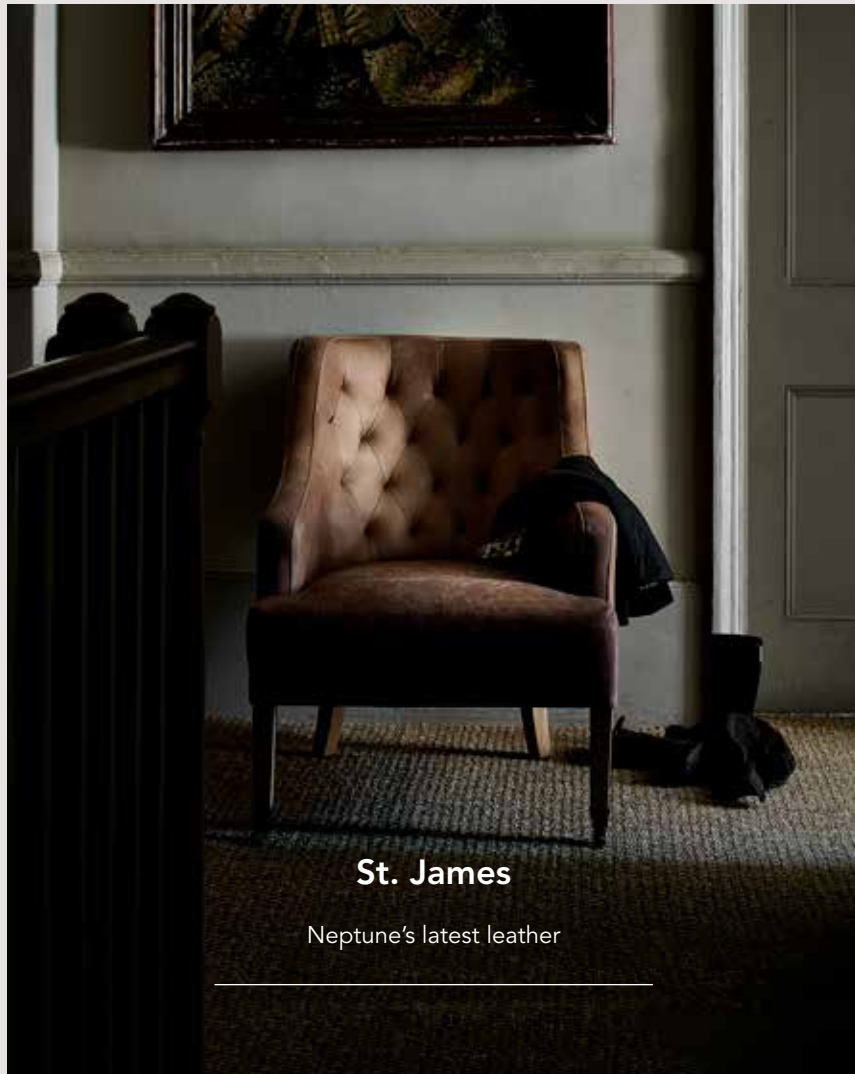
end of the bed; a simple chair in a lonely hallway spot, cloaked in opulent velvet, perhaps with a fun patterned cushion perched on top; or a perkily-buttoned ottoman in a dressing room. Upholstery also sets the tone of a space: loose linen covers breathe kick-back-relaxation; silks and velvets are for formal, toddler-free zones. Scale counts too: low, slouchy, modular seating suggests long hours in front of the TV. A shapely, armless slipper chair next to a blazing grate is the ideal perching place for a pre-supper aperitif. But the big question is – how to mix them all

together in the home in a way that's neither matchy-matchy, nor chromatically discordant?

Print, pattern and colour

Like cooking, decorating has its own grammar: a set of common-sense rules, ensuring that a concert of colours doesn't tip over into a cacophony. Do as the designers do and stick to a palette of three hues – it might be greens, blues and pinks – in modulating, tonal contrasts, to bring a balanced level of difference to your space. Once you've established your colour scheme, experiment with contrasting

Olivia loveseat, Harris Tweed Bircher £2,215 / Alex footstool, Saint James Aged Tan £480



St. James

Neptune's latest leather

As part of Neptune's autumn collection, they've released their St James leather – a completely classic tan leather that's just the right amount of aged. St James is a 'pull-up' leather. It's a term used when aniline (an organic compound) gets applied to the leather to soften its texture and help it to stay cool. Then even more oils and waxes get added to stretch the hide and encourage the lighter, natural tones to be 'pulled up' to the surface. That's what gives leather like Neptune's its colour variation. And because it's uncoated, it's designed to age and grow in character with time. Think of it like a good red wine that'll mature and just get better as the years go by. Pull-up leathers are much easier to work into an interior too, because they don't have that shiny leather finish that looks brand new. Mix St James with your other textiles and it'll look as though it's been part of your family's collection for years, blending in beautifully. It's got an heirloom-ness to it.



Grey meets yellow,
floral meets check,
velvet meets linen
(and wool) – there's more
than one way to mix and match.

prints, patterns and colours, as well as weights. There's nothing (apart from your confidence) that says you can't pair a peony-festooned sofa with a plain velvet armchair or place a leather tub chair next to an ikat-clad pouffe. Consider colour blocking too. A plain green sofa will sing against a pair of navy armchairs; or opt for a colourful, patterned ottoman flanked by plain sofas. For odd chairs, in bedrooms or on landings, a pretty print works wonders and can turn a dull corner into an inviting one, especially if you pair it with a plain cushion in a different fabric. Or do as the

Georgians did and opt for patterned loose covers which can be whisked off in autumn to reveal plain, fitted covers for winter entertaining.

All in the detail

Like a silk cuff on a black velvet dress, it's the small (but considered) details that bring individuality to upholstery and give it longevity. Contrast piping – on sofas or cushions – is a simple way to customise your coverings. A tip is to use a favourite rug or painting as your inspiration for piping. Pick a colour from the weave or paint and pair it with a contrasting plain

fabric on sofas or armchairs; it brings an instantly cohesive feel to your scheme (you can also use the contrast colour on the underside of kick pleats or on cushions for understated variation). Alternatively, opt for deep-set buttoning – on headboards, ottomans or sofas – in a contrasting plain. Or try elevating the humble stripe. A simple cotton ticking used vertically on the tops of seat cushions with contrasting horizontal stripes on the sides is unassertively individual. Ruffles, braiding and trimmings are also enjoying a renaissance: a deep fringe, in a tone that echoes the

(Opposite) Amelia armchair, St James Aged Tan £1,355 (Above) Long Island medium sofa, Emma Mustard £2,480 / Arthur footstool, Isla Finch £425 / William armchair, Angus Flint £745

colour of your main fabric, adds luxury without frou-frouness. Consider the view too. If a sofa or chair back is the first thing you see when you enter a room, an eye-drawing print or floral – or a fabric that subtly contrasts with the main body of the piece of furniture – brings painterly focus.

Shapely contrasts

It's not just about mix and match patterning. Judiciously juxtaposing styles and eras of furniture – a high-sided Knole against sleeker, slim-armed chairs for instance – is another way to give your space a timeless allure. Voluptuous circular love seats, once the haunt of cavorting Victorians, can be used to break up a larger room or highlight a corner – or placed at the end of a bed. A mix of frames brings variety, but again, basic rules come in to play. If your sofa has a valance then complement it with, say, a lighter chair with legs – too much upholstery can make a room feel ponderous. A modern, modular sofa looks best with a simple, armless chair. And if you have the space, two sofas look more inviting than one, larger piece against a wall. And don't let the

architecture dictate your furniture; a sleek streamlined sofa can look graceful set against 19th-century panelled walls or a canopy of oak beams in a medieval cottage.

After that, throw in the cushions. Opt for reversible fabrics; plain on one side, patterned on the other, for a simple makeover when you tire of one design. Or combine fabrics: two panels of plain material framing a panel of floral or geometric print adds definition; a single inset button looks jolly on a plain, square shape; layers of cushions in a matching print and contrast piping, scattered across plain seating, are inviting – and striking.

The right foundations

Even the most assured schemes fall flat if the upholstery isn't up to scratch (note – upholstery is the way a piece of furniture is constructed, not to be confused with fabric, which is the covering). Quality frames are made of solid wood, like beech or tulipwood, kiln-dried to stop it warping, which is glued, screwed and dowelled. Serpentine springs and elastic webbing prevent sagging. For the interior, cushions filled with 100

per cent down are cossetting, but if you're too lazy to constantly plump them up then opt for a mix of a foam core wrapped with feathers, which offers more support and needs less maintenance. Fixed-back sofas with loose cushions are even lower maintenance and suit smart and less informal spaces.

Everyone's seating needs are different. For some it's a deep squishy sofa; for others a pert, high-backed armchair. So, road test before you buy. Don't just perch on the edge of the seat, but throw off your shoes, curl up with a book – and you'll know if it's the right seat for you. And remember, here you can mix and match too to cultivate a marriage of opposites – both rangy sofa and gentlemanly wingback can get on splendidly.

SERENA FOKSCHANER
@serena_fokschaner

Shoreditch L-shape corner sofa, Elliot Soft Teal £4,190 / Rupert footstool, Isla Fox £345



Do as the designers do
and stick to a palette
of three hues.

Life in black and white

A landscape study of Highland whitehouses and blackhouses.



Dotted about the landscape in the Scottish Highlands are two very different types of country cottage: picture-perfect ‘whitehouses’ and their older forebears, known as ‘blackhouses’. Together, they tell a fascinating story about Scottish rural life and living in harmony with nature. What’s more, they have lots to teach us about sustainable housebuilding...

Pretty whitewashed cottages, or ‘whitehouses’, are a familiar sight in the Scottish Highlands and the Outer Hebrides, their shapes standing out clearly against the wild, remote landscape. So clean and fresh do they look that it would be easy to miss an older, more primitive style of dwelling that often sits close by. These stone-and-thatch buildings are known as ‘blackhouses’: not because they’re actually black, but because their relative darkness forms such a contrast with their paler neighbours. None of the

blackhouses are lived in anymore, and since they were built using only organic materials, they almost disappear into the landscape. But despite their humble appearance, they’re hugely important in the history of Scotland’s rural life.

The blackhouses are curious structures that wouldn’t look out of place in a Tolkien story. Built since ancient times by local crofters – no architects were involved here – they paid little mind to stylistic concerns and



were designed purely with the climate and terrain in mind. Seen from the air, blackhouses huddle together in clusters like cattle sheltering from the wind, distinguishable by their long, rounded shapes (which are not dissimilar to loaves of bread). Their thatched roofs are fashioned from oat straw, marram grass and heather, which is then covered in old fishing nets and secured with sturdy rocks to protect it from the fierce Atlantic winds. The roofs extend almost to the ground, adding an extra layer of insulation to the double drystone walls, which can be up to two metres thick and are sandwiched with a layer of peat. The houses have no windows, which would merely have let in the cold and made the walls less resilient against howling gales. Instead, there's just one tiny glazed opening high up in the wall to ventilate the sleeping area.

Until as recently as the 1970s, life in blackhouses like these was the norm for working people in Hebridean villages. Inside, the cottages were extremely basic, but not without a simple, functional beauty: unclad stone walls, an A-frame pitched roof (which may have been made from driftwood salvaged from shipwrecks or even whalebones, as fresh timber was a scarce resource on the islands) and a floor of rough paving or earth (the story goes that newly-built blackhouses would be filled with flocks of sheep to compact this down). There was just one open living area with a large central fireplace, which was kept permanently lit and fuelled with peat.

The fireplace dominated the daily routine in the blackhouse. It kept the inhabitants warm and was essential for cooking and social gatherings, but it also produced copious amounts of smoke, and there was

no chimney to prevent this swirling around the house (or any windows through which it might escape, for that matter). It must have been an oppressive and very sooty atmosphere, especially as the only lighting came from the fire itself and the odd oil lamp hanging from the ceiling. At night, the islanders could find refuge in their cosy wooden box beds, curtained off from the main room for privacy.

To modern minds, the blackhouse practice of living at close quarters with livestock might seem hard to imagine. Cattle, pigs, sheep, chickens and horses all dwelt under the same roof as humans in winter, when conditions were too harsh for them to survive outdoors. The byre, or animal shed, sat at one end of the house and was divided from the living quarters only by a partition. Since there was no plumbing, both animal and human waste accumulated, and it seems that the byre was only cleaned out once a year, in spring. At the same time, the thatched roof – by now covered in a thick layer of winter soot – was removed and replaced. The smoked straw was regarded as a good fertiliser, so it was added to the new-season crops with the manure; nothing from the blackhouse was wasted.

Despite this drastic annual spring clean, lack of cleanliness contributed to the phasing out of the blackhouse in favour of the more sophisticated whitehouse. In 1875, a public health act was passed with far-reaching implications for housing; its principle aim was to improve sanitation in urban slums, but it also condemned the conditions in the blackhouses.

Implementation of the new rules was patchy, however, and the Highland crofters fended off changes to their

lifestyle for several decades. Historian Dr Catriona Mackie, an expert on traditional housing in the area, has described their stubborn attachment to the blackhouses as “the clearest and most sustained example of resistance to housing reform” in 19th-century Britain.

Eventually, though, modern life made its presence felt. Islanders started to travel beyond the Scottish borders and become aware of different styles of home. Aspirations for change grew. The 1920s and 30s saw the arrival of government grants for those who wished to build new houses and live in a different way. The whitehouses – which had windows and conventional plaster walls that conformed to official standards, as well as proper bathrooms and kitchens – were the inevitable result of this. Even though some blackhouse owners did upgrade their interiors – with new chimneys, cookers and a little tongue-and-groove panelling – the last of their kind had moved on to pastures new by the 1970s.

None of this means that the blackhouses have lost their value. Built ad hoc from natural local materials, blending seamlessly with the surrounding landscape and in perfect harmony with the changing seasons, they're an intriguing point of reference for contemporary designers and builders, who are once again becoming interested in sustainable timber-framed architecture. At Landman Gardens and Bakery, a family farm in Ontario, Canada, a variation on a blackhouse was recently built to serve as a restaurant; it has a green roof where goats graze, and the same hobbit-house feel as its Scottish ancestors. And on the Isle of Skye, architects Rural Design have recently built Black

House, a corrugated-metal cottage whose low, angular shape shelters it from its exposed surroundings. It owes a lot to the past, while looking extremely modern (it even has floor-to-ceiling windows).

As for the original blackhouses, they've survived to tell new stories. Some have been restored and turned into living museums, while others have been converted into holiday homes with all mod cons. Visit one and you'll get a glimpse of what life used to be like for Scotland's crofters, up close and personal with nature in one of Britain's wildest landscapes.



AMY BRADFORD
@amybradford76



Where to see and stay...

GEARRANNAN

Gearrannan Blackhouse Village on the Isle of Lewis is a conservation area with a 'living museum' that shows what it was like to live in one of these stone-and-thatch cottages, with the Atlantic Ocean just outside the front door. It also has four converted blackhouses for holiday stays (complete with modern stoves, kitchens and bathrooms). While you're there, you can see Harris Tweed being woven and explore coastal walking trails. gearrannan.com

THE BLACKHOUSE, ARNOL

The tiny village of Arnol on the Isle of Lewis offers a unique opportunity to see an authentically preserved blackhouse alongside an older, ruined version and a newer 1920s whitehouse – a complete cycle of crofting life. The preserved house is exactly as it was

when the last inhabitants left in 1966 – only the livestock are missing. The fragrant peat fire is kept burning and the house has its original box beds. historicensevironment.scot

BORVEMOR BLACKHOUSE

Just 200 metres from the beach on the Isle of Harris, this is the first traditional blackhouse to be built in the Western Isles for over a century. It's an authentic stone, wood and thatch building in the classic rounded shape, but it also has all mod cons and is rented out for holidays (it sleeps two adults and one child). Completed in four months in 1993, it won an award for its drystone wall design. borvemorcottages.co.uk

SKYE WHITE HOUSE

Restored as a holiday let in 2012, this picturesque cottage with flower garden

is a typically pretty traditional whitehouse. It overlooks Knock Bay on the Isle of Skye and has a lovely contemporary interior, decorated in neutral colours and furnished with wood-burning stoves. skyewhitehouse.com

UNIQUE COTTAGES

This website is a great place to find Scottish whitehouses for holiday stays. Among the properties on offer are the tiny Boreray Cottage, which overlooks the silvery beach on North Uist; The Wee House on Loch Nevis, full of original features and accessible only by water; and Mary Ann's Cottage in Argyll, with woodland behind and the River Shiel in front. unique-cottages.co.uk

Talking to: Sam & Jamie

In our latest Neptune interview, you get to meet two of the characters from our customer care team. Cheeky Jamie Papworth, one of our team leaders, and Sam Ward-Smith, our assistant manager (and Jamie's boss...), tell us all about a 'typical' day manning the phones, looking after our people, and always doing the right thing.



You always wonder when you're talking to somebody and their boss if they're going to be 'well behaved' or not. If they might hold back a touch. Not here. As we walked to go sit in the garden room at Neptune HQ, Jamie began with the jokes before we'd even sat down. "Sam is a fairly unpleasant person to work with I'd say," was his opening comment. "These past seven months have been like a weight lifted." Sam is currently seven months into her maternity leave to have little baby Jack and will be back in September. The relationship between Sam and Jamie is, quite clearly, relaxed and full of fun and respect.

What's a typical day like in the customer care team? Or is there not such a thing?

Jamie: "There's definitely no such thing."

Sam: "Very true. Busy! That's one thing they all have in common that's for sure."

Other than the diversity of your everyday, what's the best thing about being in customer care for you?

Sam: "Of course, helping people and problem-solving is what made me want to work in customer services. That's a given. But what I love most about being in customer care at Neptune is the total trust and confidence people have in one another. I make my own decisions. 'Do the right thing' is what we instil across the whole company, and we give each other total trust that we'll each do what we feel is

right by the customer. That level of trust is massive for me."

Jamie: "I feel exactly the same.

Empowerment is really big at Neptune. I recently called up a certain phone company and they gave me the standard line of 'can you hold, I just need to check with my supervisor'. It's so frustrating to be at the receiving end of that. We don't do that and it's a much better experience."

Sam: "Doing the right thing isn't something we have a training guide on though. You need flexibility to tailor what we do for each person. There are guidelines of course, but a lot of it's about gut, empathy and just listening to what every customer says and then figuring out what they need."

Jamie: "They're more like grey lines. It's not like everyone's got a script to read. Nobody deserves to be treated with a robotic response. You listen, you understand, you build

a rapport – or try to – with every person and then personalise your interaction with them. It sounds simple, but it's so important to not just listen to what they're saying but to imagine how they're probably feeling."

So how on earth do you go about training the team to 'do the right thing'?

Sam: "It starts with finding the right people."

Jamie: "It's true. Sam and Gerry [who heads up customer care] only bring in people to the team who've got a good heart!"

They both laugh.

Sam: "We're laughing, but it's true. You've got to have your moral compass set right to be at Neptune. You've got to want to put yourself in other people's shoes. Doing the right thing isn't necessarily always a case of giving people exactly what they want though.

While looking after our customers and making them happy is the whole point of us being here, we encourage everybody to think about what's right and fair by the customer and by us. We'll bend over backwards to make people happy, but we care about being reasonable too."

Jamie: "You have to remember that the reason people come to us is because they're looking for a beautiful piece of furniture for their home. And that's what the end goal should always be. To make sure they've got everything they'd hoped for. That's the right thing."
Sam: "If you join Neptune with ten years' experience in customer care, I'll often say that you still need to come here and start afresh because we approach customer care very differently. Shadowing other people is one of the best ways to learn and appreciate our way of doing things."

Do you admire any other companies for how they look after their customers?

Sam: "I had a great experience with O2. My sister had her little one ten weeks early and was in hospital for weeks. It was so tough. She dropped her phone one day and it smashed. I called O2 for her to try to sort something out. The next day, a

brand-new phone arrived, free of charge, and they upped all her data, free of charge too, so that she could use her phone as much as she needed while she was away from home. That's what doing the right thing is for me."

If you had to pick the toughest element of your job, what would you say?

Jamie: "I find it hard that some people don't always appreciate the quirks of natural materials. The world's gotten used to fake stuff, and so when their table turns up with knots along the tabletop, they might call us and say it's faulty and marked. A lot of the time, once I've explained that's a characteristic of natural oak and it tells you we've not chemically processed it in any way and every table is a bit different, they go 'oh great!'. But not every time. I can't help it, I think it's a real shame."



Sam: "For me, it's managing people – my team, not customers!"

Jamie: "Oh cheers Sam."

Sam: "Don't get me wrong, I thrive on fixing problems and on being around people, and the team are fantastic. But, there are always things to sort, and that can be challenging."

And the best?

Jamie: "The support you get from the team. Including Sam [laughter]. There's proper team spirit and everyone's so helpful towards each other. We're really close-knit."

Sam: "I'm similar to Jamie. Before I had Jack, I really wasn't sure how I'd feel about work. He's my world, but I'm really looking forward to being back. I can't wait. Not many people get to say they don't ever get that feeling of dread about going to work in the morning."

We ended by asking if there are any 'standout' moments with any Neptune customers.

Sam: "Years ago, there was a lady whose home we delivered to, and we accidentally knocked some of the woodwork. She was lovely about it and totally understood that accidents happen, and we went back and forth a bit to make sure she was happy with how we were suggesting to right it for her. She needed to talk to me about it one evening because it was never very easy to speak in the day as she worked full-time, so I gave her my mobile. Now she texts me pictures whenever she gets something new from Neptune and sent me the kindest message before I went on maternity leave. How nice is that?"
Jamie: "I'm going to have to tell you about Mrs Teapot. Everyone on the team knows about her. Basically, she got a Neptune teapot and the spout had a bit of a chip. She called up and explained that she's going through chemo and that chip could mean loads of bacteria could settle in so she needs it swapping, which we obviously did. She was so grateful, even though it was our fault and we did only what we should have, that she named her teapot after me and emailed to tell me, signing off as Mrs Teapot. Now she just gets

in touch every now and then and always signs off in the same way. She's doing really well health-wise at the moment which is brill."

Sam: "You get a lot of frustration taken out on you in customer care, so when you have people like these, it really does feel good. We do a lot on the team to keep spirits high too, like 'Fun Fridays'. It sounds a bit corny, but we all dress up and bring in cake and it just lightens the mood. We all need that from time to time. We all care for each other on customer care too, as much as caring about our customers."

The last question was asked by Sam to us. "Will I need my picture taking for this?"

Jamie: "I feel like you'd be awful to take a picture of."

Sam: "Charming."

Jamie: "Not like that, just difficult and really particular."

Sam: "I just never think I look nice. And I don't like my mouth in pictures."

Jamie: "We can get you a little cover or something like Princess Jasmine from Aladdin. That could be our next Fun Friday. Or, I could dress up as me, and then as you. Or, we could be David Hasselhoff and Pamela Anderson and do a slow-mo run. Or, wait for it, I could lift you, like in Dirty

Dancing. You're skinnier than before you had Jack."

Sam: "You're doing well here Jamie."

Jamie: "No I mean that you look really nice. Not that you didn't before."

Sam: "I think you should lose that beard before we have the picture."

We said how we couldn't remember what Jamie looked like without it now.

Sam: "Better."

We left them squabbling.



Life

Books + Music + Food + Travel

Life's loveliest pleasures.

In the kitchen

Jay and Carol are the team from Kindness & Co – the cooks and creators of our latest seasonal recipes. Exclusively for Stories, they've come up with five vibrant and nourishing dishes for the perfect autumn picnic. Turn the pages and you'll find the first three, and if you've got room for more (including something sweet for a picnic pudding) head to our online journal for the remaining two.

THE THINKING BEHIND THE DISHES

by Carol Scott

At Kindness & Co, we're blessed to live in the heart of the Cotswolds with its rolling hills, grasslands and woods. Taking time to enjoy the simple pleasures in life and eating outdoors is one of our greatest joys, but we don't just limit these pastimes to the summer months. Crisp autumn days are perfect for a walk in the park or a stroll in the woods, with delicious seasonal produce readily available to make the perfect alfresco lunch. That's what lies behind these five recipes – food that's perfect for making by hand, ready to pack up to take along on an autumnal picnic. Now, a key to success for a hassle-free picnic is simplicity. This is why we like to use ingredients that are quick and easy to cook and that we normally have to hand in our kitchens.

Personally, I like to take a delicious heart-warming soup to feed the soul on autumn picnics, so we've included a quick and easy curried pumpkin soup. One of my all-time favourite snacks are butternut squash

'sausage rolls', which I batch bake and freeze so I always have one to hand for an impromptu meal. Wrap them up in brown paper and they're picnic-perfect.

Overall, there should be something for everyone. The dishes complement each other but are just as great by themselves. So, if you've never indulged in the delights of an autumn picnic, why not grab your favourite sweater, hat and scarf, enjoy the wholesomeness of the preparation and packing it all up, roll up a blanket, and step outside with friends and family.

If you're a Cheltenham local or are stopping by some time, you can always drop in for a mug of something warm and a bite to eat at Kindness & Co's own café. They work with local food producers to serve fresh, vibrant dishes for breakfast, brunch, lunch and everything in-between.

Kindness & Co, 38 Clarence Street, Cheltenham, GL50 3JS

SPICED PUMPKIN SOUP

Makes enough for four

Put aside: ten minutes for prep and 20 minutes for cooking



What you'll need

- 5ml cold-pressed olive oil
- ½ red onion, finely sliced
- 2 cloves of garlic, minced
- 3 sprigs of fresh thyme, just the leaves
- 800g pumpkin, peeled and roughly diced
- 800ml cold water
- A pinch of sea salt flakes
- A pinch of ground black pepper
- ½ tsp cumin powder
- ½ tsp mild curry powder

What to do

- 1 Start by heating a thick-based saucepan over a medium heat and add 5ml of cold-pressed olive oil.
- 2 Once the oil is hot, tip in the onion, garlic and thyme leaves, frying them on a gentle heat until the onion softens.
- 3 Next, add the pumpkin to the pan and stir until it's lightly coated with the onions, oil and thyme before pouring in all 800ml of the cold water.
- 4 Season with a pinch of salt and pepper and bring the pan to the boil, allowing it to simmer for 15 minutes.
- 5 The pumpkin should now be tender, so add the cumin and curry powder, and pour the mixture into a blender, blitzing it until smooth.
- 6 All that's left to do now is decant your soup into a thermos flask and pop it into your picnic basket.

You could always...

This soup will last for four days in the fridge or up to a month in the freezer. You can always make it in advance if you'd rather not cook on the day of your picnic, or, make extra and store it for mid-week lunches.



AUTUMN ROASTED BEETROOT SALAD

Makes enough for four

Put aside: ten minutes for prep and 12 minutes for cooking

What you'll need

– For the salad –

500g pre-cooked beetroot

5ml cold-pressed olive oil

½ lemon, juiced

150g garden peas, fresh or defrosted

1 pomegranate, de-seeded

¼ red onion, finely sliced

2 whole spring onions, finely sliced

10 fresh mint leaves, chopped

A pinch of sea salt flakes

A pinch of ground black pepper

– For the salsa verde –

½ banana shallot, finely diced

1 clove of garlic, finely chopped

20g fresh flat leaf parsley, finely chopped

20g fresh basil, finely chopped

20g fresh coriander, finely chopped

50ml cold-pressed olive oil

½ lemon, juiced

5ml soy sauce

A pinch of sea salt flakes

A pinch of ground black pepper

What to do

- 1 Pre-heat the oven to 200°C (180°C fan) or gas mark six.
- 2 Cut the beetroot into quarters and place them onto a roasting tray, drizzling them with the olive oil and lemon juice.
- 3 Roast for 12 minutes then remove them from the oven so they can cool.
- 4 While the beetroot is cooking, put the garden peas, pomegranate seeds, red onion, spring onions and mint into a small mixing bowl and season with salt and pepper. Put this to one side until later.
- 5 Now to make the salsa. Simply put all of the ingredients from the list on the left into a food processor and pulse for a few seconds. Leave the mixture for a few minutes or more to let the flavours infuse.
- 6 Once the beetroot is cool, add it to the mixing bowl containing the peas, pomegranate and herbs and mix well.
- 7 Then add it to your picnic Tupperware and drizzle with salsa verde.

You could always...

Prep the salad a few hours ahead of leaving, but if you do, just make sure you store the salad and the salsa separately. Pour it over just before you leave to keep your salad fresh and light.

BUTTERNUT SQUASH ‘SAUSAGE ROLLS’

Makes enough for eight

Put aside: 30 minutes for prep and 35 minutes for cooking

What you'll need

– For the filling –

500g fresh butternut squash, peeled, deseeded and diced

10ml cold-pressed olive oil

5g fresh thyme, finely chopped

1 red onion, finely chopped

1 clove of garlic, finely chopped

1 400g tin of butter beans, rinsed and drained

100g baby leaf spinach, finely chopped

10g fresh coriander, finely chopped

10g fresh basil, finely chopped

10ml soy sauce

A pinch of sea salt flakes

A pinch of ground black pepper

– For the pastry –

320g roll of puff pastry

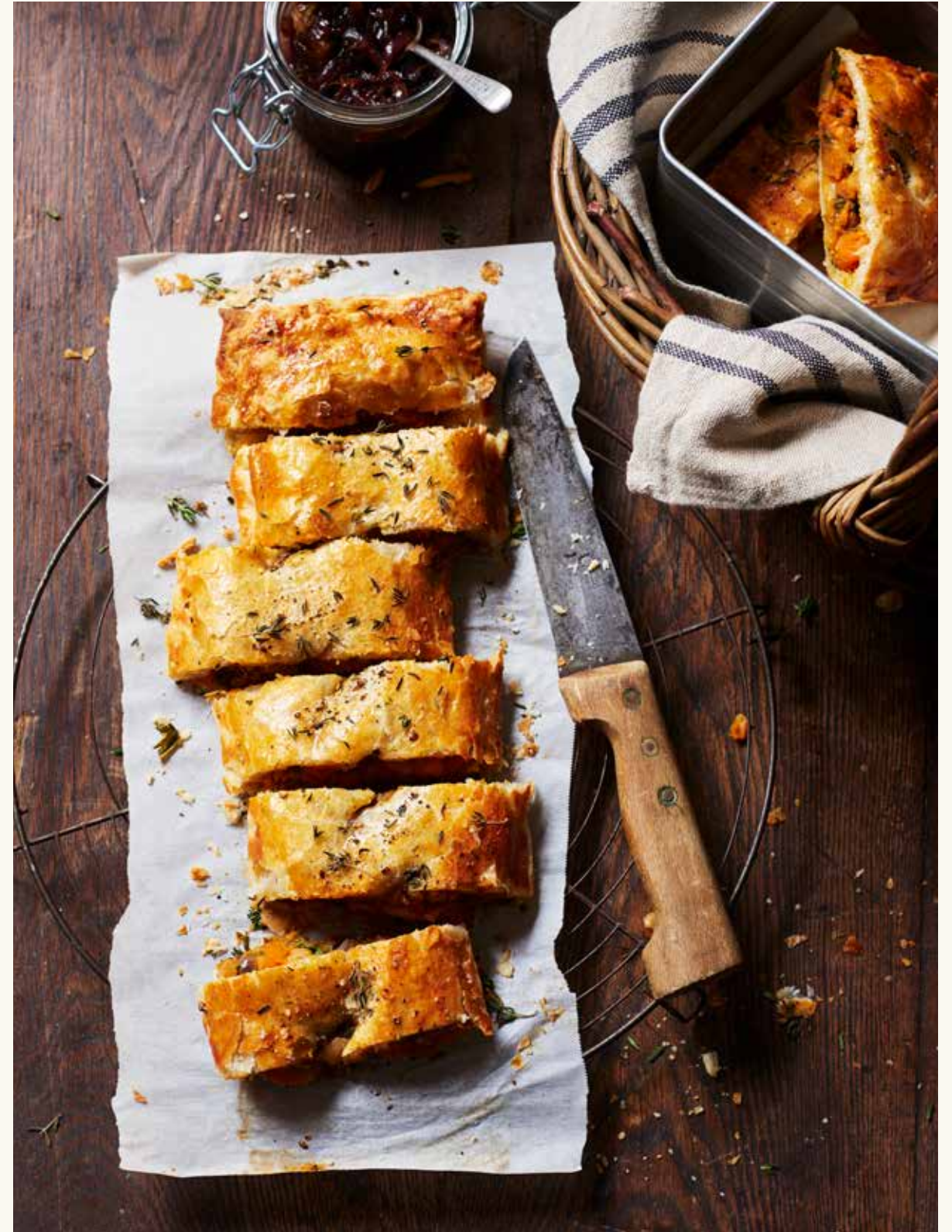
1 egg, beaten

What to do

- 1 Pre-heat the oven to 200°C (180°C fan) or gas mark six.
- 2 Put the diced butternut squash onto a baking tray and coat with half of the olive oil and all of the fresh thyme and roast for 20 minutes.
- 3 While the squash is roasting, warm a thick-based saucepan over a medium heat and add the remaining olive oil. Once the oil is hot, add the red onion and garlic and gently fry until the onion is golden and soft.
- 4 Put the cooked onion and garlic into a food processor along with the roasted butternut squash. Next, add in the butter beans, spinach, coriander, basil, soy sauce, salt and pepper, pulsing the mixture until they combine. Don't blitz for too long – you're looking for a chunky texture, not a paste.
- 5 Set the mixture aside and allow it to cool.
- 6 In the meantime, cut the pastry into two pieces. By getting the pastry in a roll, it'll already be on parchment paper. Keep it on the paper and measure out 10cm wide and 40cm long for the bottom piece. For the top, it should be 14cm wide by 40cm long. Use a knife to cut out your sections.
- 7 Once you've cut your pastry, spoon the cooled butternut squash mixture along the center of the bottom section of pastry.
- 8 Brush the parts of the pastry without any mixture with a little of the beaten egg and then pop the top section of pastry on top. Using your fingers, firmly press the edges of the pastry together to make sure the butternut squash mixture is tucked in tightly. Trim the edges with a sharp knife.
- 9 Gently brush the whole 'sausage roll' with the remaining beaten egg mix and score the top of it with a sharp knife – just three–four slits will do – so that the steam can escape when it's cooking.
- 10 Place the roll onto a baking tray lined with parchment paper and bake for 25 minutes. After the time's up, turn it over, remove the parchment paper and cook for a further ten minutes upside down. This will allow the bottom of the pastry to become crisp and ensure it's fully cooked.
- 11 Now you can remove it from the oven and let it sit and cool before cutting it into eight equal portions.

You could always...

To make these 'sausage rolls' in advance, simply follow steps one to eight and then either freeze or refrigerate the uncooked sausage roll. It'll last three days in the fridge or a month in the freezer. On the day of your picnic, just pop it on a baking tray and then follow steps nine to eleven.

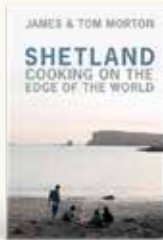


Book club

This volume's bookclub has been guest-edited by one of our favourite bookstores close to our newest store – Neptune Bath (which you can read more about on page 78). Now celebrating over a decade at the heart of Bath's literary scene, Topping & Company booksellers is one of Bath's cherished independents. They offer complimentary tea or fresh coffee while you browse more than 50,000 titles. And with rolling library ladders, oak floors, and hand-made wooden bookcases, it's the perfect place for any bibliophile to spend an hour or two. Read on to find out what their four picks are for autumn, all with a hint (or dollop!) of Scotland to them...



Sal, Mick Kitson – This slimline novel packs a powerful punch. Sal charts the adventures of two young half-sisters as they escape the trauma of their normal lives and retreat into the Scottish wilderness. As it's revealed who and what they're running from, it becomes clear how strong the sisters' bond is, and how desperately they need each other. It's a haunting yet heartwarming tale of the beauty and bounty of the Scottish landscape, and the sisterly love from which each protagonist draws her strength. This is a bold debut from former schoolteacher and journalist Mick Kitson, who wanted to write a book his pupils could genuinely relate to.



Shetland: Cooking on the Edge of the World, James & Tom Morton – Shetland is where Scotland meets Scandinavia and the North Sea hits the Atlantic Ocean. Isolated, unspoilt and rich in history and tradition, Shetland is a truly singular place. Ex Bake-Off cook and doctor, James Morton, and his father, broadcaster and journalist Tom Morton, explore life on an island with food, drink and community at its heart.



The Treasure of the Loch Ness Monster, written by Lari Don, illustrated by Nataša Illinčić – This new tale from renowned Scottish children's author and storyteller Lari Don sidesteps the modern Nessie to create a new Loch Ness Monster myth inspired by local folklore. Isabel and Kenneth need to save their family from going hungry, so when they remember the old local tale about treasure under Urquhart Castle, they set off across Loch Ness in a rowing boat. But the loch may be hiding its own secrets... A beautifully illustrated retelling of a great Scottish legend that'll captivate younger readers.

Scotland from the Sky, James Crawford – This lavishly illustrated book opens an extraordinary window into our past to tell the remarkable story of a nation from above – taking readers back in time to show how our great cities have dramatically altered with the ebb and flow of history, while whole communities have vanished in the name of progress. This is a fascinating – and little known – story of war, innovation, adventure, cities, landscapes and people. This is the story of Scotland, from the sky.



The soundtrack to the season

These three albums, for us, are made for those days when you're somewhere warm, looking out onto an autumnal landscape, be it from your car driving, with the heater on full, or catching a quick stolen moment in a window-side armchair, looking out onto the crisp, colourful world...



Ólafur Arnalds, Living Room Songs – The tinkling keys of piano combine here with the stirring sound of strings and soft, electronic beats. Perhaps it's something to do with his cold-climate Icelandic roots that makes us love his work all the more in autumn and winter. Who knows? But we always reach for it on road trips to equally as cold spots, where the scenery is dramatic, because parts of Living Room Songs are almost haunting and others enlightening. When the music reflects the same twists and turns of your journey, your views and the climate, everything seems to have more impact.



Isobel Campbell and Mark Lanegan, Ballad of the Broken Seas – For those who know Glaswegian folk-rock band Belle & Sebastian, you might recognise the melodic tones of former member Isobel Campbell, who was a cellist and vocalist for the group. The folksy notes are far from lost in this debut collaboration that's both beautiful and slightly melancholic. For us, it nods to both sides of autumn's character.



John Coltrane, My Favourite Things – This one's a real classic. This very small album of four songs by the American jazz saxophonist and composer was released in 1961. Despite being his seventh album, it's the first one where we hear him playing solo. Even if you haven't listened to My Favourite Things before, you're almost certain to recognise every track, because none are originals but in fact instrumental jazz versions of four pop songs, including the iconic 'My Favourite Things' from A Sound of Music – hence the album's name. Short it might seem, but there's actually over half an hour of atmospheric melodies that have a really cosy, calming quality that feels so well-suited to the time of year.

Isles & Islands

Three days in Scotland



On the outermost edge of the British Isles, curling around its north west corner, lie the islands of the Outer Hebrides. The Isles of Lewis and Harris are really as one, though they're islands of dramatic contrast. Lewis and North Harris appear dark and brooding. In their high mountains, golden eagles nest, and the sea always seems to be more tempestuous. South Harris looks like the perfect setting for a Mars lunar landing training programme with its scrambled terrain covered in boulders.

Here, art director, location scout and producer Philippa Gimlette, shares her memories of visiting Scotland's isles from childhood to today. She uses them to build a three-day itinerary for you to follow in her footsteps on her favourite two islands.

My grandfather loved to photograph the Scottish islands and their inhabitants. His photographs were often of the wild landscape, the big skies and of the tradition of weaving. I'd read about Harris's most famous weaver and reviver of traditional weaving skills, Donald John Mackay, MBE, and contacted him to see if I could visit one time. He invited me to rummage for tweed in his shed. I remember him saying, "If you look very closely, you'll see all the colours." Whilst I peered through a magnifying glass at a myriad of tiny flecks of pinks, greens and blues that were being woven into the tweed, his loom clacked and whirred as he vigorously pumped at the loom pedals.

The islanders are not only very proud of their weaving heritage, but of their lifestyle too. Sunday Sabbath is still strictly observed. On one dark, wintery Sunday night, I drove to a local church. Inside, the ladies, all wearing hats, sat on one side of the church and the men on the other. The Minister kindly welcomed his 'English visitor', and to visible relief from all, announced the service was to be held in Gaelic and English. There was no singing, only intoning, and everyone clearly knew it all by heart. After the service, we staggered out into the wind, shouting friendly and cheerful greetings to one another. It was fun to feel part of this very stoic and friendly community.

Life on Harris and Lewis, I learnt, is slower. That's part of their charm. And it does take time to visit them both so you'll need to plan your visit with thought, particularly if it involves a Sunday – something I also learnt along the way. For me, three days is a good amount of time to spend here. It gives you time to explore Harris and the northern end of the same island – Lewis. I combine it with time spent on the mainland. Thinking through the many years that I've spent there as a little girl, as a teenager, and throughout adulthood, dwelling on all of the memories, this is how I'd propose you take on this magical land...



The 16th century St Clement's church

DAY ONE

I suggest starting at the bottom of Harris to visit the 16th-century St Clement's church. It's one of the most elaborate surviving medieval churches in the Hebrides after the abbey on Iona. Another striking medieval church is the ruin at Northton. The long, curved Northton beach is always a bracing walk so do stop at The Temple

Café for delicious lunches and cakes. If Rebecca Hutton is at home, visit her weaving shed at Northton. With great enthusiasm and unbelievable strength, she built the shed in her garden and scavenged together all the parts for a loom from various unused looms all over the island. She'll happily weave lengths and colours for customers. Even if you're not somebody obsessed with weaving and textiles, it's difficult to not

find this a fascinating stop. A seafood dinner at The Anchorage at Leverburgh Pier, watching the setting sun and enjoying lobster and scallops, is a wonderful way to end the day.

DAY TWO

Drive from Harris to Lewis along the winding single-track road and visit Callanish, the second most important stone circle in the UK

after Stonehenge, and laid out in the shape of a Celtic cross. You can enjoy the magical privilege of walking between the stones. There are also several other megalithic sites near to Callanish, thought to be part of an ancient astrological observatory.

Further north along the west coast of Lewis, visit the Blackhouse museum at Arnol to experience what it was really like to live in a croft with all your animals and a smoky peat fire burning in the centre of the room all day. With no chimneys, you can feel very smoked out after a visit.

Lewis also has its share of beautiful beaches and one of the best is at Uig where the famous Lewis chessmen were uncovered in 1831. Dating from the 12th century, this very early chess set comprises a group of rather glum looking walrus-ivory figures and is thought to have originated in a Nordic country. They're now in the British Museum and the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. Harry Potter fans will be familiar with these slightly comical characters from the chess set in Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone.

Back on Harris, either light the log-burner and enjoy a delicious



Callanish stone circle

home-cooked dinner delivered by Croft 36 or go to Scarista House for a romantic supper followed by a walk along the long sandy beach at Scarista.

DAY THREE

If you can take a potentially rough sea crossing, I'd throw all caution to the wind for your last day and visit the very remote island of St Kilda. Whether or not the

boats go to the island is extremely weather dependant. St Kilda is a dark rock bursting out of the sea with the highest cliffs in the UK at 427m. It's now uninhabited, and the former islanders' battle for survival is a heart-breaking story, after they were forcibly evacuated in 1930 due to illness brought on by increased contact with the outside world and the upheaval after the First World War when so many of the men left to fight and



Luskentyre beach

subsequently emigrated.

St Kilda is now a UNESCO double world heritage site due to the island's historical and ecological significance, and is the single most important seabird breeding station in north west Europe. Take your binoculars to spot northern gannets, Atlantic puffins, northern fulmars and two early types of sheep, the Soay and the Boreray. If the seas are too rough, just enjoy walking on Luskentyre beach.

This has recently been voted one of the top five beaches in the world according to Trip Advisor. Its white sands and turquoise waters glow against the dark hills of the southern part of Harris and are sheltered by the remote island of Taransay. Do call Donald John Mackay's wife Maureen to see if you can visit his shed (01859 550261). He might not be in as he's often "oot having tea with the Queen" as I was once told by a

proud local. This is rumoured to be highly likely.

In the autumn, the flowering heather and the machair, the unique dune grassland of the islands, has disappeared and the dark landscape becomes increasingly dramatic in contrast to the white beaches. You could walk over the southern part of Harris, enjoying a home-made lunch at the Skoon Art Café. Tarbert, as the main town and ferry terminal on the island, is quite a lively place. The Harris Hotel is famous for its selection of over 100 varieties of malt whisky. And in 1912, at the height of his fame, J. M. Barrie stayed in the hotel and, as I was politely told, "he took the time" to etch his initials on the glass in the dining room window, which you can still see today. Whatever you do, go down to the sea, walk along the beach and enjoy the sunset, the dramatic scenery and slower pace of life.

PHILIPPA GIMLETTE

Behind the bottle

THE STORY OF HARRIS GIN



This is the story of the gin that's not just a gin.

It's a catalyst for economic change.

It's a tool of preservation to help sustain island life.

We've got somebody to introduce you to. Somebody and something for that matter. Simon Erlanger is the managing director of the Isle of Harris Distillers. Perhaps you've heard of him or seen the bottle that brought us to their distillery door earlier this year. Never had we been so blown away by a brand's story, values and mission. You don't have to be a gin drinker to appreciate this. But if you are, you'll love them all the more, and we'd hedge our bets that you won't ever want to drink any other gin again. This is the story of the gin that's not just a gin. It's a catalyst for economic change. It's a tool of preservation to help sustain island life. Over to Simon...

“When people ask me about Harris Gin, they generally say ‘so how did it all start?’ Everyone wants to know the story. I always enjoy seeing their faces when I say, quite honestly, it was nothing to do with me! The idea behind Isle of Harris Distillers Ltd [the full name for the people behind Harris Gin and The Hearach whisky which is due to be bottled in a few years' time] came from a gentleman called Anderson Bakewell. Now he's a really interesting chap. An Anglo-American musicologist, he was a true lover of culture and would travel the world cataloguing indigenous music in places like Yemen. On his travels as a young student, when he was about 20 or so, he discovered Harris. This is where the story begins really.

In the half-century that Anderson's been connected to Harris, the demographic has dramatically deteriorated. There are under two thousand people living here now. Young people really struggle to find a decent amount

of employment on the island. It's very sad. They're finding that they need to move away in search of a job, but they just don't want to leave, because Harris has this incredible sense of kinship. I've never known anywhere like it. They all look out for one another – that's the island mantra. There's no sense of fear. No policemen. No locking of doors. It's extraordinary and people don't want to leave that behind. On Harris, people are crofters by heritage – a form of farming where you eke out a living on pretty poor land by basically doing multiple things. You might rear a small amount of livestock or grow root vegetables. Whatever you need to do really. And the Harris community does it by helping each other out. That's just the way of life here.

Now Anderson could feel this as a young lad and wanted to find a way he could help. Not a short-term fix though. Anderson's nature was always to think



– ‘The Dottach’ gin still –

about a long future. He was a great outdoors man and enjoyed walking the Harris hills and that fuelled his idea too. I suppose this was the more romantic side of the story. He wanted to capture the spirit of this place, put it in a bottle and send it around the world. These two parallel thoughts led him to eventually ask, why don't we have a distillery here? Could there be a way to somehow create a fine single malt to put Harris on the map and use it as economic regeneration?

That was the spark. Anderson spent over two years talking to the local people to make sure they would be on board. The natives of Harris are conservative people and he had to know it would be sympathetically received. The feedback he got was very positive. I'm sure the fact he went about it so sensitively helped. Everyone knew Anderson, and could trust that if he was behind it, it'd be done well and carefully.

Time to fast forward a bit. By 2011, he'd found a piece of land. That's no easy task in itself. Most of the island is on Lewisian gneiss – The Hebrides are built on a long chain of gneiss that's a good three billion years old. It's about the oldest rock on the planet, symbolic of the steadfastness of this place. Here we are, out in the Atlantic Ocean – a land of basically peat bog or rock. It's very hard to find buildable land. Anderson now needed to get more hands on deck – more people from the industry. I joined as the potential managing director with my commercial background in single malt whisky. Then there was Ron, who used to be finance director for another whisky place. And Alison, who came from a whisky production background. We formed a little team and came up with a business plan with one major challenge – we would need a lot of cash. The funding gap was...big. It took two more years for us to find some sympathetic investors with a long-term view and to get enough government funding. Eventually, we found the £10 million we needed.

Fast-forward again to March 2014, and we'd started building. Then to October 2015 when we opened our doors and started trading.

But we couldn't open without a product, obviously. First and foremost, we're a whisky distillery, but, we're able to make gin at the same time as the principles of distilling are the same. That's why you only hear people talking about our Harris Gin really, because nobody's able to buy The Hearach [whisky] yet. When it came to making the gin, we consulted an ethnobotanist who spent a week on Harris, cycling around to look at the plants of the place to see which would make an excellent gin. She's a wild swimmer too so could take to water as well as land. That's how our sugar kelp ingredient came about. It was her suggestion. Now, we

have a diver called Lewis (from Lewis – we're one big island) who puts his wetsuit on, grabs his goggles and sickle and harvests it for us by hand. He only cuts the young fronds, so it grows back quickly. Sugar kelp's part of Harris' history and symbolised the island and our maritime nature. Flavour-wise, it's both savoury and sweet, but it sits at the back of the palate; it's very-much a juniper-forward gin. Mixed with our other eight botanicals, the overall taste is complex but gentle. Like the people of Harris. Our whisky won't be ready for another few years, but that too will have its own character, taking on parts of the climate, the water, the earth and the people of Harris, hence its name – The Hearach [the name given to a dweller of Harris].

That's the thing with Anderson's vision – it wasn't just a case of building a distillery based on Harris, but to build a distillery and create a product that was Harris to its core. After us founding three joined, we've only taken people on from the Isle of Harris. We've grown our own talent. That started with five Harris men and they're the proudest blokes on the planet because they learnt their trade, on their home turf, making something for the good of their community. We call ourselves a social distillery because we're about regeneration. Within five years, we'd hoped to create 25 jobs. At the moment, we've got 35 employees and have our first apprentice starting soon, all thanks to the extraordinary sales of the gin. We'd hoped for 40,000 visits to the distillery last year and ended up with 81,000. We had 400 come in just on Monday alone.

We'd never predicted, not in a million years, that Harris Gin would've gone down as well as it has. Anderson wanted to put Harris on the map in a way that would, more than anything, do long-term good



– Harvesting sugar kelp –

for the community. He wanted to do it though in a way that told the world what it means to be a Hearach. Harris is all about being considered. That's Anderson for you, that's Harris, and that's what the distillery is built on too. Even our bottle was designed with that same level of consideration. There was only one team that we wanted to enlist with the bottle's design – Stranger & Stranger. I went to London, ready to go down on bended knee, to see if they'd work with us. They heard our story, our purpose and values and loved what we were doing. They designed The Hearach bottle first, and then did the gin to complement it. At one point, we actually ran out of bottles and had to ration them. Our glass manufacturer in Yorkshire needed to refresh their furnace. It honestly hit the headlines – the great Isle of Harris gin drought! Some people were saying that we made it up to get some press attention but that's just not our style at all.



One of our values comes from our chairman's family motto – *esse quam videri*. It means 'to be, not to seem to be'. We just don't make stuff up. In fact, we have it etched into the glass at the bottom of every bottle as a way of saying to the world that it's an unchangeable part of who we are.

Isle of Harris Distillers might not have been my idea, but, being part of building something that had a good heart from the start is really special. Our values have driven every action, and the fact that we're now starting to see an uptake and make a meaningful difference to the island, as Anderson intended, just feels wow. What a job. It's testament that businesses and brands aren't

all about making a huge sum of cash. Some are mainly just about doing good. I've just bought a croft house. I've been commuting between Edinburgh and Harris. I fly to Harris on a Monday, pick up a motorbike, ride through the mountains, and fly back on a Wednesday night. It's the best commute in the world, but I want to spend more time here. In the thick of it. There really is no place like it. ”



About the bottle

Ivan Bell, managing director of Stranger & Stranger – the design studio behind the Isle of Harris Distillers bottles.

“Two members of the team and I went to Harris a few years back to take in the sandy white beaches and azure blue seas. The locals made us feel so welcome and we enjoyed the warm hospitality that you only really get in such a small and tight community. The people of Harris were softly spoken, understated and gentle but with sharp humour. The people and the place were what inspired the bottle design. We needed to build in the beautiful, rugged scenery but also the subtlety of the people and the colours of the landscape. That's why we used a harmonious interweaving palette of natural tones and rippled, blue-tinted glass to resemble the crashing of waves. The paper we use is made using local sugar kelp too because it nods to the gin's ingredients and craft making. The labels vary a bit from bottle to bottle because they're hand-made, each one flecked with slithers of copper because of the copper gin stills. We felt that reflected the love and care the distillery take in their own small-batch production. Overall, the bottle is meant to represent all of the key values of the Isle of Harris Distillers brand and to have that washed-up-on-the-shore quality – that's why you'll find the coordinates of Harris on every cork and that's what the flattened sections amongst the bottle's ridges are all about. As though it's been worn slightly by sea salt and the rough and tumble of the Atlantic current. We were asked to come up with a design that 'bottled Harris' which I hope is what they feel we did.”



Experiencing Harris Gin

Getting your hands on a bottle of Harris Gin is far from ordinary either. They're the only brand in the spirits industry not to sell through retailers or distributors; you're invited to come straight to them instead. Why? Because it means they can guard the whole Harris experience you'll have, from making that phone call to the distillery or checking out online (whichever you prefer) to receiving the hand-written note they include in every parcel. It also adds to the element of secrecy and mystery – not just anybody can buy a bottle of Harris. Only those in the know...

Visit harrisdistillery.com to book a visit to the distillery or to buy a bottle of your own.

News & views

Seasonal updates and happenings
in the world of Neptune.



PRODUCT FOCUS: BALMORAL EXTENDING TABLE

Family meals, gatherings with extended family, homework, deadlines, folding the laundry – most of life happens around the dining table. A hard-working dining table is a must for such an unrelenting onslaught of daily life, and if you get it right, it's a purchase that'll last you a lifetime.

The new Balmoral extending dining table ticks all the boxes. Extending tables are clever, original, and inventive, but only when they're not a pain to use.

You'll be glad to know that the Balmoral couldn't be more user-friendly; for example, the leaves come in a separate bag so they can be stored away rather than add unwanted bulk to the table when not extended. Lengthening the table is easy; simply pull out the oak rails beneath the tabletop – which will stay put thanks to the spring-loaded latch – and then just slot the leaves into the gap, and you're ready.

Its uncomplicated design means Balmoral looks just as good paired with a bench and mix of chairs as it does with a set of more formal dining chairs. There's no need to tiptoe around this table

either. Made from dependable hard-wearing oak, it can cope with a few everyday knocks and scrapes. Best of all is knowing its substantial proportions can easily cope when you've got more than a handful of people wanting to sit down – anywhere from six to ten in fact, and that's with plenty of elbow-room still to spare.

Balmoral extending dining table, £3,520
Available online and in store

SEASONAL SCENTS

Landscape is the newest addition to the Huxley range of scented candles and diffusers. It's a sophisticated scent inspired by autumn woodland walks; from blustery hillsides to the stillness of a pine forest, to the post-walk sanctuary of the fireside. Impressions of pine needles, fir balsam, cedarwood, moss and amber are infused with notes of nutmeg and tonka bean along with a touch of orange flower to lighten things up. This fresh, warm, woody scent tends to work well in any room and can be combined with other scents, such as Seascape, to create a well-rounded, natural fragrance.

Both the candle and diffuser come in a matte brown frosted-glass holder, thoughtfully designed to still be enjoyed long after the fragrance has finished.

Huxley Landscape candle, £37
Huxley Landscape diffuser, £45
Available online and in store



SHADES OF: AUTUMN

If you're looking to use paint to update a colour scheme in your home, you might want to consider brown – you'll be surprised how well it works. Start by selecting a warm shade, such as Chestnut, and cool shade like Walnut, which will work together harmoniously. Rich and vivid Chestnut would be a good choice for a feature wall while Walnut, with its cooler tones, will provide balance elsewhere in a room – try it on furniture for a contemporary take on wooden antique pieces. On paper, they may seem a little daring, but once applied in the home they're a combination that's all about cosiness.



YOUR DAILY STYLE FIX

If you're seeking inspiration to update your home or just a little interior escapism, take a look through our Instagram feed [@neptunehomeofficial](https://www.instagram.com/neptunehomeofficial). It's here that you'll discover more about our products, catch the first glimpses of our new seasonal collections and find the very latest news on our events and stores.

LOUISE GORROD
[@louise_gorrod](https://www.instagram.com/louise_gorrod)

REAL NEPTUNE HOMES: IN MY KITCHEN

We recently received an email from a lady called Anne Holmes. She gets in touch with us every now and then to tell us what she thought of the most recent volume, where she's been on holiday recently, and generally what she's been getting up to. She's become a bit of a pen pal. Out of the blue, she wrote an article for us about memories of her family's kitchens. It was such a nice surprise. She told us 'it's very unprofessional' but she hoped we'd enjoy it anyway. But what we read gave us such a sense of warmth, cosiness and nostalgia that we didn't change a single word.

My grandmother's kitchen was a hive of activity and laughter in 1953. Hanging in the air when I entered her home was an unmistakable aroma of good things – cooking smells of course, mixed with a hint of cigar smoke that lingered from my grandfather's nightly indulgence.

She was a serious Scot, my Gran, who taught us right from wrong, with a 'mercy goodness' here, and a 'mercy me' there, as she bustled, cooked, chatted and washed, while pushing away four little children from her busy areas with a swish of her hips and a chuckle. The gas-heated washing machine, on wheels, was pulled out when needed. There it stood, sturdily, in the centre of the room, making a terrible din, surrounded by three dressers, all made from different coloured woods. Two had curtains

behind their glass doors hiding precious pots and utensils, while the third displayed fine china. From the chipped pot sink in the corner, we could look out on to the back yard of the small terraced house in the west end of Newcastle. Standing there on a chair, because we couldn't reach the sink, Gran taught us, one by one, how to wash our hands – thoroughly, backs, fronts and nails, making patterns with frothy carbolic soap. She'd then give us bread to knead or pastry to roll on the scrubbed kitchen table.

Her four-ring gas cooker on legs stood opposite the sink. From that oven came some of the best meals I've ever tasted, or smelt, evoking wonderful memories even as I write this, of shoulder of slow-cooked lamb with a caper sauce, or coffee and walnut cake, all prepared with pride, love, smiles and the help of her hand-written recipe book, which I treasure to this day.

We were staying with Gran, four children under six years old, while

our mother was having her first 'fitted kitchen' installed. It was a flow of red and cream cupboards and drawers, all in a line, very modern. Meanwhile, my father was painting the kitchen wall opposite the units navy blue, much to mother's surprise. It became a background to the Disney characters he painted on the wall the following day. When Gran reluctantly returned us and saw the wall, she feigned shock, while we bounced up and down with excitement. Such a fantastic, child-friendly kitchen was wonderful. We lived in that room. All our friends were welcome and we sang, danced, played – we even ate in there.

Kitchens have always fascinated me. I've copied many ideas over the years and watched closely as they evolved into wonderful working and living spaces.

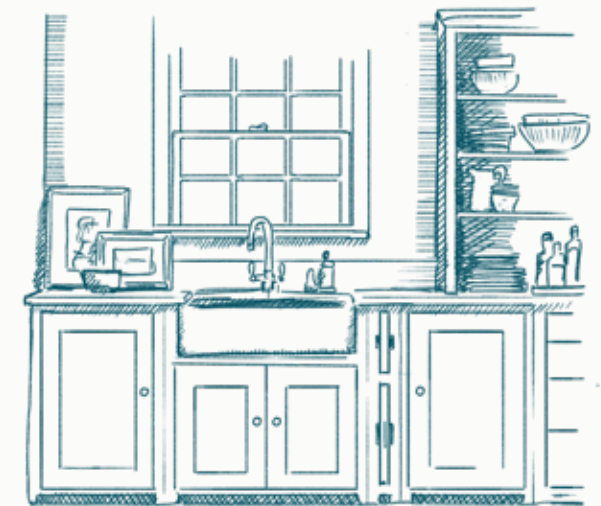
Seven homes and ten kitchens later, what will my grandchildren remember of their hours spent in our Neptune painted kitchen? Sensory memories are hard to define. They linger on the edge of consciousness until an associated waft appears and quickly fades, while we try desperately to grab it.

Now, where's that recipe for Gran's coffee cake?

#REALNEPTUNEHOMES

Your stories – real Neptune homes

Photoshoots are super. They give us all sorts of ideas and fill us with inspiration for what to do in our homes. But seeing our designs – be it furniture, kitchens, lighting or even walls painted in Neptune colours – in your homes is one of the best ways for the world to see our collections in-situ. Sitting on the fence between a Chichester and Suffolk kitchen? Um-ing and ah-ing over Salt versus Snow paint? Wondering whether our Olivia sofa will work in a barn conversion? Questions like these are the sort of things our Real Neptune Homes articles help to put to bed.



FROM YOUR PERSPECTIVE: NEPTUNE BATH

In July this year, our new store in the heart of Bath opened its doors, making it our 31st store in the UK and Europe. Instead of telling you all about it ourselves though, we asked Bath blogger and local resident Katie Weston and her partner, Rob to do the honours...

We've been waiting for the Neptune store to arrive in Bath and it was perfect timing, after recently completing on a house that has the Neptune Limehouse kitchen fitted. This store is a showstopper: located in a converted old tram shed, it exudes style and contemporary living, inside and out.

As soon as you enter you instantly feel relaxed, walking into a calm oasis away from the busy hustle and bustle of the city – but still only a short walk from the main high street. It really is like you're walking into someone's home. Who would've thought that visiting a furniture shop would make you feel this relaxed?

The store flows really well, walking from kitchens to living rooms to bedrooms, of all different styles. The area I'm a particular fan of is the homeware accessories section, with its collections of beautiful jars, vases, photo frames, kitchenware and more. So far, on both of our visits, we've left with at least one small accessory. That's why I think it's a great place for everyone; whether you have a Neptune kitchen or not, you can add small touches of Neptune throughout your home.

The store displays various kitchens, including our own Limehouse kitchen, which was great to see all set up, helping us come up with new ideas for our home. We were inspired from room to room, making our interior thinking hats explode with excitement.

I think the only problem we had was that we wanted every single thing in the shop. If only we could live in a house with four different kitchens!

On both visits we enjoyed sitting outside the front of the store on their terrace, trying out their various outdoor seating arrangements. It was lovely that the staff were so welcoming that, even after we'd bought something, they invited us to stay, have a cup of tea and enjoy the sunshine.

We can't wait to keep popping in, seeing the friendly staff and continuing our interior design journey with Neptune.

Keep on reading

This is an excerpt from Katie's article that she wrote on Neptune Bath for her own food, wellbeing and lifestyle blog. To read the full review, just head to katiwoosite.com.



Garrick wall light £75 / Hanley candlestick £30

A final thought

Joanna Wood on: using wall lights



In our newest column, you'll hear from some of Britain's leading interior designers on some of the trickier elements of home decoration and renovation. This autumn, Joanna Wood – who's recognised as being one of the most revered figures in international interior design – talks wall lights. Why to use them, how to use them, and where.

Wall lighting is such an underrated source of illumination. It works in every single room in the home, though it's not reserved for ambient lighting alone – for a wall light is capable of providing performance or task-style beams also.

I might use a wall light in complicated corners – in a kitchen, an awkward spot can be transformed into the place where you read recipes. I like one at the end of a long and narrow corridor. It provides something pleasing to walk towards. But I also absolutely use wall-mounted picture lights for illuminating art, particularly oils. Your goal is to reflect the artwork not the light itself, which is what happens if you place a wall light above a glass-framed work – here I'd position a wall light either side of the art, especially if you're trying to highlight prints or watercolours.

Regarding bulbs and positioning, I'd advise not to use a bulb that's too low in voltage, and rather go slightly higher and opt for a rotary dimmer as this is what controls your ability to create mood. I particularly like those fixtures from Forbes & Lomax.

Wall lights provide a room with a medium level of light. As a general

rule, we wire at 1700mm. 1800mm at the most – here I'm referring to the distance from the floor to the centre of the wall light bracket. Most wall lights will perform well at this level as ceiling heights aren't usually more than three metres.

In bathrooms, I employ the help of wall lights wherever humanly possible. Spotlights simply won't light your face effectively. Instead, use wall lights in tandem over a vanity unit – one either side of a mirror. If it's a double sink cabinet, use a trio. Add a linen shade; you might even apply a pretty trim. Neptune's Brunswick wall light is perfect here.

Studies, libraries and sitting rooms are my favourite spaces of all for wall lighting. Perhaps either side of a chimney breast or an artwork and then to delineate a window. A pleated silk shade will elevate this look, whereas you may down-temper it with linen. Neptune's Hanover is my light of preference here. Though I like to use metal-shaded lights such as Brompton or Keats behind a sofa as reading lights.

When it comes to the bedroom, I always recommend to my clients to install a reading light such as Neptune's Rathbone into their headboard. This is so that you

may read something deep and impenetrable at 3am should you want to, without disturbing your companion. To this I add a decorative table lamp. I might well use a wall bracket in another part of the bedroom – such as Garrick, with its bronzed finish – so there's something pretty to light as soon as you enter.

I shall end by sharing a tip of mine in regard to lighting and mirrors. By hanging a wall light either side of the mirror, this light reflects and increases. To go one step further however, you can fit sheet mirror glass above a mantel for example, and then drill the wall brackets into the glass. This then gives the illusion that the light is coming out of the mirror and doubles the light output as it immediately bounces back. Choose something here like Keats with the glass shade option and then you have mirror, light and glass all working in illuminating harmony.

JOANNA WOOD



Keats small double-arm wall light, Nickel £98

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A warm welcome

Autumn is one of our favourite seasons, and this year, we're looking forward to it more than ever. After a long-stretching summer and continuous balmy evenings, the thought of wrapping up, putting the log burner on and having heartier suppers feels especially appealing. Autumn is the season for enjoying that hunker-down quality of our homes, but with enough warmth to still savour time in the great outdoors.

These thoughts are what led us to Scotland for our new collection's inspiration – a place that's a real celebration of the British landscape but equally of creating shelter and safe harbour. While Stories brings you all sorts of articles that we think you might find of interest, fundamentally, every volume embraces the spirit of the season. So, in our latest autumn edition, expect to find out more about life on Scotland's remote islands, to read about how to get your home at its cosiest, and find recipes to make and pack up for an autumn's day picnic.

We really hope you enjoy the latest volume, and that you come away armed with interiors ideas for your own home and with thoughts on new things to try, whether it's recipes or places to visit. As always, if you want to tell us what you thought or have any suggestions for the next volume, our Stories inbox is ready and waiting...

stories@neptune.com

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