

Couples' retreat

If two's company, intimate and cosy High Lodge in Dumfries & Galloway has everything you need

Words **Nichola Hunter**
Photographs **Tracey Bloxham**

Ella McCreath met her husband Finn in 1997 and by 1999 she had swapped her media life in London for the Dumfries & Galloway countryside. "Finn was running the family dairy farm near Newton Stewart and we set about converting it to operate as an organic one," says Ella. "Once that was under way, we looked at what else we needed to do on the farm and decided to tackle the derelict properties that we had. There were two beautiful lodges on either side of the estate which hadn't been lived in for about 70 years. One of them had a tree growing through it so it was never going to be a quick fix."

"We didn't set out with a grand plan. High Lodge was our first property and we started renovating it when I was pregnant with our eldest child. Seventeen years on, we have four children and four properties on the estate that we use and we decided that High Lodge needed an upgrade."

While the latest facelift includes practical elements such as a new Aga, the initial refurbishment was more drastic. "It was originally a little gamekeeper's lodge," says Ella. "When we started the renovations, it had dirt floors, a felt roof and an outside toilet, which obviously we didn't keep. There were two main rooms downstairs, and although we didn't extend, we did move walls around to get everything in. We wanted to fit a bedroom into the eaves



The door of the rustic dining kitchen opens on to some beautiful scenery



became habitable again it has naturally evolved and the latest additions have been to the outdoor space. "We're always thinking: 'How we can add to people's stay? How can it be nicer?' We decided to maximise the outdoor area and we planted an orchard for picnics under the trees, and more recently we added the wicker furniture on the decking outside. It's almost like adding another room and the external pizza oven isn't just good for pizzas, it's great for lobster as well. However, if you don't want to cook yourself and you time it right, we have a pop-up restaurant with a guest chef in our 18th century stables courtyard every few months. Any profits go to a local charity.

"I am glad that when we started work on High Lodge we didn't extend it. It was a dilemma at the time but I think we would have ruined the character and that's what makes it so special."

High Lodge is available to let through CoolStays, www.coolstays.com and www.gallowayhouseestate.co.uk

but to do that we had to dig deeper into the ground floor so we could create some decent headroom."

The couple worked with local, independent builders to ensure they got exactly what they wanted. There was no electricity and no water and today the house is powered by a wind turbine, solar panels and a wood-burning stove. "To put a house on the grid in this type of location is incredibly expensive and quite complicated in the permission process. High Lodge has everything you need: you can plug in your laptop and the Aga is oil-fired, as it has to be, and it's on all the time to heat the house."

Ella's aim was to create an intimate, cosy retreat which is ideal for two people. "There are a lot of antiques, not necessarily amazing antiques, but characterful and quirky pieces that hopefully are different to what guests have in their own homes. I also like Abigail Ahern, Graham & Green and Rockett St George – although they're quite big brands you can buy one piece and it still looks like an original rather than a generic high street piece."

The kitchen cupboard was a lucky find in an antique shop. "The kitchen isn't huge and it's a skinny cupboard, so it fitted really well. All it needed was a lick of paint. I'm not a fitted kitchen person and that would have taken up too much space anyway. The dining chairs came from an antique shop in Castle Douglas and they're all church seats."

Adding to the kitchen's quirkiness is the lack of fixed worktops which have been replaced with island units on castors. "Again, it came down to the size of the kitchen and it does make the space more flexible. I quite often swap things between the cottages and our own home. Fortunately, now if I see something I

like I'm lucky enough to be able to buy and store it, rather than in the early days when I would realise I needed another chair and I would have to actively source one. I'm very much a forager and I'm constantly buying throws and cushions and lampshades."

With a degree in fine art, Ella admits she has strong opinions on what she likes. "Taste is subjective but I'm very strong on aesthetics and when it comes to colours and paint I'm on speed dial to Farrow & Ball. I know it's a real cliché but I'm quite a fan, their paint just cleans so well."

Ella is, however, partial to wallpaper designs too, especially those with special effects. "I think it was Rockett St George and Graham & Green that the ones in the bedroom [driftwood] and the living room [panelled] came from and they work really well."



It is quite a romantic spot and there have been a few proposals here



The couple chose not to have a TV, but with the stunning aspect it's easy to see why. "It is quite a romantic spot and there have been a few proposals here. The view is amazing looking across the field, then the sea and then the hills. You can't see another house, it's really quite incredible."

Over the years since the cottage



Clockwise from main: the kitchen with its Aga, free-standing cabinets and island worktops; wicker furniture on the decking; the outdoor pizza oven; the bedroom in the eaves; the cosy living room



FREE DESIGN SERVICE



BATHROOM PERFECTION

For incredible savings visit the Edinburgh Bathroom Company. You'll find great service, design & low prices on all products including big brands.

- Big Brands Including; Duravit, Hansgrohe, Utopia & Keuco • Tiles & Accessories
- Free Design Service • Free Parking

161 BONNINGTON ROAD, EH6 5BQ | OPEN 7 DAYS | TEL 0131 297 2895
www.edinburghbathroomcompany.com