

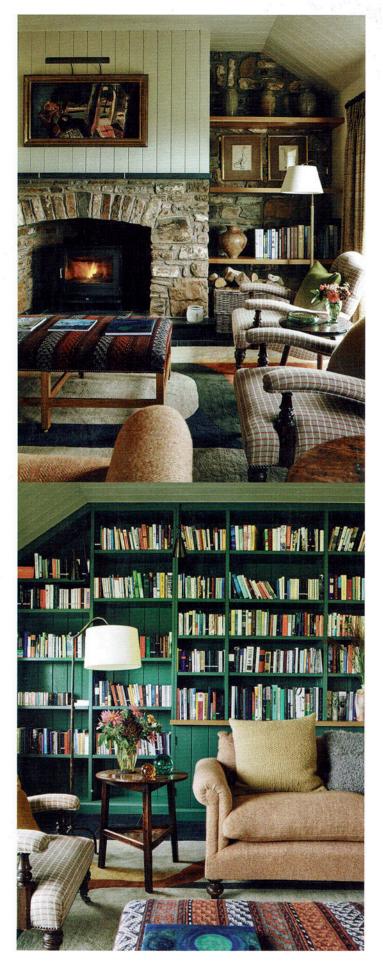
MASTER OF INVENTION

Tasked with decorating a nineteenth-century stone cottage in Pembrokeshire, John McCall made use of an unusually creative method to conceive its understated and eclectic look

TEXT DAVID NICHOLLS | PHOTOGRAPHS MICHAEL SINCLAIR









t is often said, not least in the pages of this magazine, that the best interiors are those that have evolved over time, giving them a 'layered' look. Rarely, however, is it suggested how one might fast forward this layering process, perhaps because to do so can easily look contrived. The designer John McCall has a trick up his sleeve to make it work, though, and he used it when he was asked to decorate a small and imperfectly formed stone cottage perched high above the wild Pembrokeshire coastline.

'I like to come up with a back story for a new project,' explains John, who imagined a history for the house, which was built as a farm dwelling in the nineteenth century. 'I came up with the idea of a slightly bohemian family who moved here from St Ives after the war. They were of modest means, having some family furniture – Edwardian and Victorian – with Cornish and Welsh pictures on the walls.'

Before John could fabricate the history of the modest two-storey house, there was much to do with the fabric of the building itself. Out went all the stripped pine, as well as a chimneypiece that was too large for the sitting room. In came Welsh slate and oak for the floors, and tongue and groove for some of the walls. A 'sad little extension' could not be removed – a condition of working in the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park – but it has been remodelled extensively and now sits more happily within the same footprint.

While the history of the house was invented, John had a far more tangible relationship with its new owners – an international publisher and his partner, a poet and garden designer – having already transformed their manor house





in Gloucestershire. 'We found John through the website of the British Institute of Interior Design,' says the publisher. 'We looked at every designer's portfolio and each came up with a shortlist of one – John. His work is sympathetic to the architecture of the buildings he has worked on, but not slavishly so.' When it came to decorating their house in Wales, John already had a good sense of the owners' tastes and lifestyle, as well as their interest in modern British art.

The finished result is a handsome, incredibly comfortable house to which the owners escape as often as possible. Along with the kitchen-dining space and sitting room, the ground floor has two spare rooms and a welcoming entrance hall with a vintage Kazak rug and a wood-burning stove. Upstairs, three small rooms have been opened up to create a combined main bedroom and bathroom. 'It took a bit of persuading to have a bath in the bedroom,' John admits.

The couple were so pleased with the cottage that they asked John to decorate their house in west London. 'I've become part of the furniture,' he says \square

 $John\ McCall:\ mccall design.co.uk$

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