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CHRISTMAS SPLENDOUR

JEWEL-LIKE INTERIORS IN LONDON, SOMERSET AND OXFORDSHIRE

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



John's clients, whose main house is in Gloucestershire, knew this part of the Welsh coastline from walking holidays they had spent in the area. They bought the house at first sight after driving up the bumpy little track that leads to it and discovering the extraordinary view. It sits on 14 acres of grassland, which are also home to three Welsh ponies, with occasional visits from a local farmer's sheep





It 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



SITTING ROOM (opposite top left and bottom left) The chimneypiece is made from stone reclaimed from a larger version that the previous owner had installed. *Cottage Interior, Evening* by Ivon Hitchens hangs above it. The Victorian reading chairs and Edwardian sofa were bought at the Decorative Art & Antiques Fair in Battersea. Opposite the chimneypiece, shelves painted a strong shade of green take up the entire wall. **DINING AREA** (opposite top right) The original stone wall was left visible in the new extension. The antique dining chairs are by Gillows of Lancaster and the fabric for the blinds is from Blithfield. **KITCHEN** (this page) John designed the units, which were made by Mark Stone's Welsh Kitchens. The worktops are made from hammered black granite



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 □

John McCall: mccalldesign.co.uk

'I CAME UP WITH THE IDEA OF A SLIGHTLY BOHEMIAN FAMILY WHO MOVED HERE FROM ST IVES AFTER THE WAR'



HALL (*opposite top left*) This was the kitchen of the original house, with an Aga where the wood-burning stove now stands. MAIN BEDROOM AND BATHROOM (*opposite bottom left and right*) Upstairs has a more traditional seaside style. Once three small rooms, it is now an open-plan main bedroom and bathroom, clad in tongue-and-groove panelling. The basin cupboard is by the Water Monopoly, and the headboard and curtains are made from Carolina Irving fabrics. The painting above the bed is by Gillian Ayres, who lived in Wales during the Eighties. SPARE ROOM (*this page*) The shutters are painted in 'Ball Green' by Farrow & Ball. On the bed is a vintage Welsh blanket

