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# Space

Ellesmera Mill, Devon | Q&A with La Fabrico, Exeter | Shopping for space



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The hot tub at Ellesmera Mill  
See page 114  
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# Grand redesign

A family holiday home for 16 years, **Ellesmera Mill** has been refurbished to an exceptional standard by Siobhan Hayles. *Fiona McGowan* meets the client-designer duo behind the transformation.

Tucked away in a valley in South Devon are a series of centuries-old mill buildings, their stony flint walls abutting a single-track lane on one side and an urgent little river on the other. One of these buildings has recently been refurbished and added to the array of holiday homes on the books of top-end Unique Home Stays. That the accommodation is luxurious is a given, but there is something properly – well – unique about this property. Ellesmera Mill has been Tanya Bird's family holiday home for 16 years. Bought when her three boys were still small – they are now pretty much grown: aged 17, 19 and 22 – Tanya thought it was high time to give some TLC back to the place that had given them so much fun and pleasure. With a high-powered job in finance, though, she couldn't dedicate the full-time attention to the restoration. Pondering her options, she realised that listing her home-from-home as a holiday rental could justify the cost on the house, while still keeping the place as the family bolt-hole.

Unique Home Stays' interior designer Siobhan Hayles leapt at the chance to work on the house. With a background in the luxury holiday business – and having renovated and rented a few of her own properties – Siobhan has some pretty clear ideas of what needs doing to bring a place up to a gold standard. Meeting Tanya, she quickly realised that this owner did not want to just tart it up to rent it out. Tanya is passionate about Ellesmera Mill;

she wanted to keep it primarily as her country home, with the rental business as a useful second option.

This immediately presented a more exciting picture for Siobhan – an owner who wanted to get involved in the decision-making, working alongside the interior designer, rather than dictating her desires. Right from the beginning, when Siobhan first presented mood boards for each room, client and designer became a close pair: asking advice of each other and shopping for fabrics, antiques and furnishings together. Tanya quickly developed a love of hunting out quirky pieces to furnish and decorate Ellesmera Mill. "It's addictive," she confesses, "foraging around and seeing what you find. It doesn't even matter if you don't find anything – it's just the fun of looking."

The result is that almost every element of Ellesmera Mill has a story. As you step out of bed onto a Moroccan rug laced with giant black zig-zags, you might never guess its provenance. Towards the end of the nine-month project ("like gestating a baby," jokes Siobhan), Tanya and Siobhan were under time pressure to get everything finished before Unique Home Stays listed the property. With her demanding job, Tanya could only free up one weekend. On Friday morning, she and Siobhan were sleuthing around in the famous Ardingly collectors' fair, having left home at 5.30am – bundled up against the cold and rummaging through boxes with torches as the vendors were still unpacking. The next morning, Tanya was on a flight to Morocco, determined to find just the right rugs for the bedrooms. After trawling the souk, she found a rug that was perfect, but it was way too big – and she wanted two of them to go either side of the bed. The accommodating rug seller offered to cut the rug in two.

With the time of her flight home fast approaching, Tanya returned to the rug seller – the rug wasn't ready yet. Undaunted, he put Tanya on the back of his motorbike and roared through the souk to find the man who was frantically knotting the ends of the rugs. As soon as they were finished, Tanya and the rugs were piled on the back of the bike and raced back through Marrakesh in time to catch her flight. "It was really Indiana Jones-y," laughs Tanya, clearly relishing the adventure.

Ellesmera Mill has many attractive qualities – partly its location, less than a mile from the cliff-edged Blackpool Sands beach, and tucked away in a long river valley.

"I fell in love with it the moment I saw it," says Tanya, remembering her first visit in 2002. "I hadn't even got to the garden and I thought – this is the one. It was an instantaneous heart decision." The previous owners had restored the house some years before, preserving its cottagey charm. The walls remain lumpy and erratic, and the upstairs rooms maintain their cosy proportions. After years of use – with the boys bringing half the beach back up to the house, and a flood some years ago, it was ready for an upgrade.

Siobhan's technique with clients is to take them to the furnishings emporium at London's Chelsea Harbour.



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“  
Every element of  
Ellesmera Mill  
has a story.”



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Before and after: Ellesmera Mill's lean-to shed was transformed into a cosy den...



PHOTO © SIOBHAN HAYLES



PHOTO © UNIQUE HOME STAYS

...and the old elm door reborn as a coffee table, enjoying pride of place in the sitting room



PHOTO © UNIQUE HOME STAYS



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house. The incentive was to provide some elements that would appeal to her sons – “Their whole way of being is chopping wood and making fires,” she says. The addition of a cinema room – painted in a dark green, somewhere between bluebottle and olive – was also created with the boys in mind. Perhaps Siobhan’s *pièce de résistance* in terms of vision is the indoor-outdoor room in what was once a lean-to at the end of the house. One wall of the room is open to the elements; it’s furnished with sofas and chairs that they couldn’t re-upholster or weren’t right for the house. Rusty old circular saws and an ancient ladder were hung on the walls, and a wood-burner and rugs were added. “In England, sometimes in the height of summer, you can’t get outside, if it’s raining,” she says, “so you can have the fire on, a glass of wine. You can hear the rain, you can see the rain, because there’s no false wall.”

Siobhan has now moved on to a new project with her dream team of builders and craftsmen, leaving behind a holiday rental that feels like home. And Tanya can enjoy the fruits of their labour – while continuing to feed her passion for seeking out quirky furnishings and fittings for her magical second home. **M**

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Tanya was immediately inspired, choosing statement fabrics immediately, and they became the cornerstones of many of the rooms. She and Siobhan decided to use some of the fabrics for giant headboards. Which was not without its problems.

Working with the same team over the years has its benefits, says Siobhan. The builder’s experience working on high-end renovations in Devon properties enables her to find smart solutions. In this case, the builder mocked up the headboards and worked out if they could be jimmied up the narrow stairways into the rooms. Siobhan’s team enabled her to project-manage the work to the nth degree – something that Tanya really appreciated: “She was always about solutions, not problems – because when you’re busy, the last thing you want is someone ringing up and saying: we’ve hit a snag. She would get in touch saying, we did hit a problem, but this is the solution.”

There are some glorious quirks to the house that Siobhan oversaw – from the ancient door that now has pride of place as a coffee table in the living room to the old, piebald cement mixer now serving as a planter for an olive tree. With a yen for conservation and preservation, Tanya was determined to re-use existing furniture where possible, re-upholstering her own chairs and adding a dilapidated antique Passemard Coste chair, upholstered in green velvet as a feature in the master bedroom.

While the property already boasted a sauna, Tanya decided to add a wood-burning hot tub on the decking that Siobhan had created on the sloping lawn outside the

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