

Labour of love

A patient approach and an ability to turn his hand to traditional skills has enabled a sculptor and his family to restore a Cornish farmhouse with sensitivity and style

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THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE Distinctive early works by William in canvas, twigs and twine sit perfectly with the earthy, textured look of the old longhouse. The ceilings of all the rooms upstairs were removed, exposing the ancient beams and increasing the sense of space



BELOW, FROM TOP Sophie feeds their donkeys; the courtyard cobbled by William; Sacha and Robin play in the sitting room. RIGHT AND OPPOSITE William's handiwork includes the draining board and clay floor tiles as well as striking stone sculptures



“I can only take on one really major project in my lifetime,” declared William Peers on seeing Moreton Mill for the first time, excited yet a little daunted by the thought that this might be it. Just on the Cornish side of the River Tamar, the 400-year-old longhouse was in a very run-down state but it also had several dilapidated barns and outbuildings with potential studio space for William, who is a sculptor, plus 14 acres of land. If his wife Sophie thought he was being a little melodramatic at the time, ten years on she appreciates the significance of his words.

The couple were renting nearby – William knew the area as he had spent several summers working there and it appealed to Sophie as it reminded her of Ireland, where she grew up. “Cornwall feels more Celtic than other parts of England,” she explains.

Fitting in work around William’s shows and the arrival of three children, as well as Sophie’s job as deputy editor of the ecology magazine *Resurgence*, they have gradually rebuilt the house themselves, with William learning traditional skills where needed. Though the farmhouse’s interior had not been touched for 50 years, the original cob


greatly increased the size of the rooms but also revealed huge holes in the cob behind. Luckily, the damage wasn’t structural – the ancient walls were two-foot thick in some places – but they did need to be repaired.

So William taught himself to work with cob, in the process discovering old doorways and fireplaces that had been walled over: but the most fascinating items were hidden in the cob itself. It had been the custom, in more superstitious times when these ancient houses were being built, to place personal items in the corners of rooms, in the belief that they would distract any mischievous spirits entering the house. William found a tiny leather child’s shoe, old coins, a comb made of bone and round stones like marbles during the restoration. Sophie hopes one day to display their ‘cob ephemera’: in the meantime, they’ve continued the tradition by replacing anything removed from the cob with old personal items of their own.

Used to working with his hands in wood, stone and other natural materials, William is immensely practical and likes a challenge. So when they needed terracotta tiles for the kitchen floor, he decided to make them – a lengthy process that involved digging and

*“We wanted to let the character
of the house come out and lived
here for a long while before doing
any work so we would know
what felt right for it.”*





THIS PAGE The beautiful wide floorboards upstairs were created from the broad trunks of Shropshire oak trees – a wonderful wedding gift from William’s parents. The couple planed them, planked them up and dried them in one of their old barns for two years, before bringing them into the house to acclimatise for a month and finally laying them. Although he’s done virtually all the work on the house himself, William has had some valuable assistance from his father, an engineer, who designed and made the oak staircase and window frames.



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
Colourful ethnic textiles brighten the main bedroom; William in his studio; a salvaged sink with slate splashback and Hornton stone wall sculpture by William; Miskin the cat on a bench of reclaimed wood



much about the materials and it becomes an interesting project in itself,” Sophie says.

William also learnt how to cobble, and even to thatch when the round cob house he built for their donkeys needed a roof – the only drawback being that its residents found it made a delicious snack. He is an equally accomplished roofer, scouring the area for suitable second-hand ‘rag’ slates. Endlessly sourcing items for the house, he has been delighted with the treasures yielded by local reclamation yards. All the vintage loos and basins at Moreton Mill came from the dump nearby, with none costing more than £10, and their splendid Victorian roll-top bath was spotted in a friend’s farmyard filled with baler twine.

William has a keen eye for salvageable bits and pieces, stashing ‘found objects’ and materials in their old barns – and because he has the skills and the tools, he eventually always finds a way to use them in the house, transforming odd blocks of slate into rough-hewn splashbacks for sinks, for example.

Sophie has similar acquisitive tendencies. “I have a luggage addiction,” she admits, but she justifies her collection of vintage trunks and old leather suitcases picked up

fond of those covered in evocative labels from long-forgotten journeys around the globe: “They have had wonderful lives – they’ve got soul,” she enthuses. “I like things that have a history to them, that tell a story.”

This was a large part of the appeal of Moreton Mill and why she and William felt they didn’t wish to impose a particular style on the house. Sophie loves the way it has developed organically over the years with William doing the structural work while she has focused on the interior. A mix of quirky, salvaged-wood furniture, junk-shop finds and old kilims has created an earthy, rustic look that works well with William’s abstract textural stone pieces, which hang from walls or rest on broad windowsills throughout the house, giving it a very grounded feel. And the traditional pale limewashed cob walls provide the perfect backdrop. “We like the idea of using natural materials and living very simply with few things,” she explains.

This philosophy certainly seems in tune with Moreton Mill, which has proved itself worthy of their thoughtful treatment in its gradual metamorphosis from a neglected wreck to a warm, welcoming home. 🐈