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Divine inspiration

A holiday in the Scottish Borders proved to be a life-changing event for one couple after they fell in love with their stunning accommodation.

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Ken and Janine Wilson enjoyed their stay in a Scottish holiday home so much that two years later they bought the property. The couple purchased Cairns House in the village of Stichill in the Borders last summer, but the first time the Wilsons visited was on holiday three years ago.

Based in Essex, they were looking to holiday in Scotland but in a property that was a little bit different and Cairns House, a converted church, ticked all the boxes.

'When I walked in I just thought, wow! This is such a lovely place,' Ken recalls. 'And, when we stayed here, in my mind it all started to fall into place. I'd always wanted to retire early but I didn't know how it could happen. However, suddenly, owning and running a holiday property seemed like something we could do. Of course there were some questions to be answered, such as a) would the owners want to sell? b) would Janine go for it? and c) would it be something we could make work?'

'When I walked in, I just thought, wow! This is such a lovely place'

Left and below left: The upper level of the church is the heart of the property, with a vast open-plan living area. Below: Unusually for a church, Cairns House came with a good-sized garden area.





'We've got to know the locals, so we're settling in quite well'



Fortunately, the answer to all three questions was yes. 'Ken was the driving force,' Janine admits, 'but I suppose I've always wanted to retire and maybe run a bed & breakfast or a holiday cottage.'

'We already owned a number of rental properties, so the market wasn't completely unknown to us. However, the downside is that our family is down south. We were going back and forth for so long before we properly moved in, although we've got to know lots of people in the village so we're settling in quite nicely.'

Constructed over two levels, the former church has had a very contemporary makeover. On the ground floor there are now five double bedrooms (one with ensuite), two family bathrooms and a cloakroom, while on the first floor there is a vast, open-plan living space which incorporates the kitchen, dining, living and family areas. Centred around the stunning, oversized staircase and opaque-tiled floor, the various areas exist in their own right but, when required, come together to work equally well.

Attached to the main church is the vestry, which is currently where Ken and Janine are living. This can be entered through a door at the side of the property or through the main church, through the master bedroom.

'This was one of the first changes we made,' says Ken. 'Initially, it was a single door that separated the vestry from the main church but we were paranoid that if we had guests staying

Above left: The beautiful wood and glass staircase cuts through the centre of the property. Above: An old photograph of the church as it would have been. Left: Janine has injected some personality and colour with the tasteful use of soft furnishings.



they would hear us or the dog and we didn't want to live like that, so we've made it into a double set of doors and it makes it feel a lot more private. However, because that door is there, it's very easy to incorporate that master bedroom if we have a lot of friends staying. Also, because of the way the heating works, we only heat that extra room.'

Today, the couple are looking at putting more of their personalities into the building. 'We've started with the garden and the upstairs balcony as that's a bit bland. It was very low maintenance because the previous owners lived in London, but now we're here all the time we can make it more interesting,' says Janine. 'We're very fortunate as churches don't usually come with much land, but we've got a decent sized garden with enough space for us and for guests to have their own area for barbecues.'

Internally, the changes are more tentative. 'I did think about doing each bedroom in a different theme but for now, I'm just concentrating on adding colour,' Janine explains. 'This has actually been more difficult than I thought as there's nowhere to hang curtains, which are obviously a big source of colour. The design of

Top end and above right: The master bedroom with ensuite can be accessed via the vestry. Right: Janine has added colour to the bedrooms using wallpaper on a feature wall.



'Downstairs the windows are high, which flood the bedrooms with light'



the windows is such that upstairs the windows are low so you can see the surrounding countryside and downstairs the windows are high, which floods the rooms with light but also provides privacy. It's very clever, but no good for curtains, so I'm experimenting with some wallpaper and feature walls at the moment.'

Ken's next project is the front door. 'I'd like to make the original church door the main entrance as at the moment it's the side entrance that's used and the front is far grander. It would also mean that when you come in the first thing you see is the staircase, which is rather impressive.'

The changes will be gradual as Ken and Janine are still renting out the main church for holiday lets. However, this may not be the case forever, as Janine explains: 'I've always wanted a huge house and I'm trying to convince Ken that at some point, we could maybe swap over. We could rent out the vestry and live in the church. I'm still working on that idea.'

Left: Original detail reflects on the building's past. Above: Ken and Janine have created outdoor spaces for themselves and guests.

FIELDFACTS

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