



HEART OF OAK

Beautiful craftsmanship, natural materials and a distinctive palette bring style and substance to a light-filled contemporary manor house in Herefordshire

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Very few people can claim to have lived in the oldest and the newest house in their village, but Merry Albright has this rare distinction. Just 250 yards from each other as the crow flies, more than 600 years separate the 14th-century cottage where she was born and the spacious contemporary property that is now her home in Eardisland, in Herefordshire's Arrow Valley.

Though on a very different scale, they share a key feature – both have an oak frame at their core. Merry inherited a passion for this kind of traditional structure from her father John Greene, who pioneered the revival of green-oak building in the 1970s. After university in Bristol and a brief stint working in London – which “confirmed city life wasn’t for me” – she returned to the countryside, settling down with husband Ben, who also grew up in the area.

They both work alongside her father at Border Oak, the company he founded, and enjoyed the perk of living nearby in a handsome cottage that they helped design. But after the arrival of their second child, Gabriel, now ten (the couple also have a daughter, Minerva, 14), they realised they needed more space – and so, in 2010, Merry began to look for a bigger plot suitable for a new project.

It would take four years of diligent research, but her persistence paid off when a local farmer agreed to sell them a six-acre field on the edge of Eardisland, surrounded by meadows and orchards. “It was worth holding out for,” she says. Gaining permission to build on it took a further two years, so it was a huge relief when their design for “a contemporary barn-style house” met with planning approval.

Arranged in a horseshoe shape, with a central courtyard, Meadowmead’s configuration is pleasingly reminiscent of old barns clustered around a farmyard. Thoughtful referencing of vernacular architecture and use of local materials – oak cladding →



FROM ABOVE LEFT Inspired by those in National Trust properties, the pantry has a period feel; Meadowmead’s exterior features a mix of brickwork and oak cladding; the utility room’s units, walls and ceiling are in Flaxen Grey by Edward Bulmer, while the pigmented concrete sink is by Warrington & Rose



The solid oak frame is complemented by off-white walls and limestone tiles

Vintage industrial-style lamps from Baileys, positioned over the large wooden dining table, contrast with the line of four tiny copper pendants above the kitchen island

Walls in a dark smoky green and a natural grey wool carpet give a retro 70s feel to the playroom. A white Eero Saarinen Tulip table has been teamed with old school chairs, while vintage galvanized metal bins make unusual holders for the children's Lego. The vintage 1940s American circus print of an elephant was found on Etsy



Quirky character is supplied by vintage accessories

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and lime-mortar brickwork – has forged a visual link with the village, while its expanses of glass fill the property with light. The result is a stylish modern interpretation of a manor house.

In the vast open-plan kitchen, with its run of floor-to-ceiling windows facing the courtyard, the magnificent solid oak frame of the building is complemented by off-white walls, reflective pale composite worksurfaces and limestone floor tiles. Passionate about craftsmanship, Merry sought out quality fixtures and fittings from artisans and British companies to suit the handmade integrity of the house. She is particularly delighted by a collaboration with the talented young joiner Louis Ferneyhough of Fernio Furniture near Monmouth, who designed and crafted all the cabinetry in the kitchen, pantry and utility room – down to the drawer dividers and doorknobs. Following Merry's brief to "keep it plain", the pale-painted kitchen units have an elegant Georgian simplicity that is echoed by a central island topped with Herefordian oak.

A graphite electric Everhot range cooker provides a strong focal point, while quirky character is supplied by vintage accessories, such as the weathered metal wall clock that adds wonderful texture but keeps rather irregular time. Two striking industrial lampshades from Baileys bring a touch of utility chic to the dining area, where they hang above a chunky wooden country table and chairs – secondhand finds that were sandblasted to give them

FROM ABOVE LEFT An alcove in the snug has been turned into a study area. The posters are by Tilley Printing in Ledbury and feature quotes on Border Oak properties by design presenters

such as Kevin McCloud; Ben and Merry in her office. Pale walls and a seagrass rug create a calm feel; a vintage basin from English Salvage stands out against inky walls in the cloakroom

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raw rustic appeal. The beautifully simple shapes and colours of her handmade Brickett Davda tableware give Merry pleasure on a daily basis: "I like the way each piece is slightly different and the fact they aren't quite perfect."

"We didn't want the formality that often goes with a house of this size – it just isn't our style," she explains. "Although it's large, we've tried to create a more relaxed feel." The sitting room – in the middle section that links the two 'wings' – is furnished invitingly in earthy shades. Sofas upholstered in mole velvet and grey linen pick up on the subtle natural hues in a custom-made rug of soft plaited jute, while the opulent two-tone peacock blue velvet upholstery of an armchair from a local auction adds a flash of colour. Despite its high, vaulted ceiling, this room is always warm, thanks to a woodburning stove and underfloor heating. This features in every room and, together with excellent insulation, keeps the building energy efficient. Sustainability is important to Merry and Ben: the grey wool carpeting upstairs is made from natural undyed fleece backed with hessian, and most of their paint is eco-friendly – sourced from expert Edward Bulmer, who is based in the next village. His warm off-white – Whiting – provides a calm backdrop in many rooms, while deeper hues, such as Flaxen Grey, bring a period feel to the pantry and utility room.

Colour has been used cleverly throughout, with pale shades enhancing the sense of space in certain rooms, and atmospheric

"We didn't want the formality that can go with a house this size"

darker palettes being employed to make other areas feel more intimate. In the large high-ceilinged main bedroom, furnishings inspired by the rich tones of a dark-green hand-dyed velvet headboard make a real statement and anchor the scheme. Similarly, in its pale en-suite bathroom, a blackened steel washstand, made by a local blacksmith to Merry's design, provides a striking focal point, with its characterful countertop of pippy oak holding an array of vintage mirrors. Merry loves the foxed glass of older examples and keeps a lookout for them in antiques shops, where she has picked up many wonderful pieces for the house.

In the two years they have been at Meadowmead, the family have enjoyed expanding into the space and finding new ways to navigate it. "Minnie is a fan of roller skates and Gabriel prefers a scooter," Merry laughs. The studio in the wing across the courtyard has become useful for parties, sneaky football practice, cinema nights and Merry's creative workshops. "This is a special house in a wonderful spot," she enthuses. "I can't imagine ever wanting to leave."

i For information on *Border Oak*, visit borderoak.com. For details of craft workshops at Meadowmead, see meadowmeadlocations.com.

ABOVE LEFT An arched window salvaged from a Victorian Methodist chapel contrasts with the Oratory paint shade by Mylands on the landing walls and ceiling LEFT In the bathroom, an industrial-style frame makes an unusual feature in the guest room. White bed linen supports a pippy oak countertop

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A dark, dramatic look anchors the scheme in the main bedroom. The rich tones of a hand-dyed green headboard are echoed by an old painted tack box, used as a bedside table, and a 1970s Heal's green leather chair found on ebay