

The Northern Echo

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The lifestyle magazine
for the North-East

FEBRUARY 2006

INTERIORS

**Designer Ben turns
to bathrooms**

ON THE ROAD

Motorhome mania

FOOD

Biltong, anyone?

LIFESTYLE

**50 sisters
for little Eve**



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DL1 1NF
(01325)
381313

ADVERTISING

Gail Hunter
(01325) 505 239
gail.hunter@nne.co.uk
Chris Kay
(0191) 374 0298
chris.kay@nne.co.uk

EDITORIAL

Jenny Needham
(01325) 505082
jenny.needham@nne.co.uk

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sharon griffiths

“There are some things that are best done in private, and proposing is one of them

LOVE is in the air... romance is all around... and it's going to cost a lot of money just to pop the question. It's one of the great ironies of our time that as fewer people get married in the first place and as more people than ever get divorced, weddings have become even more elaborate. Maybe we think that the more we spend on them, the more likely they are to last.

First it was the cost of weddings that suddenly soared. I think the average cost now is somewhere around £20,000 – which includes all the extras which have become so essential in recent years, from string quartets, jazz bands, cameras on every table to enough flowers for a festival in a small cathedral.

Honeymoons, of course, last longer, go further and are very different from the days when a lucky couple had the morning off work and the really lucky couple had a weekend in Scarborough.

Once wedding and honeymoon costs had escalated, it was the turn of the stag night.

Do you remember when stag nights were just a gang of lads down the pub – with maybe the odd naked groom tied to a lamppost – and hen nights were nothing more than a group of girls in someone's sitting room with a bottle or two of sweet wine?

How times have changed.

The last time my nephew organised a stag night it consisted of three nights at an Irish country hotel, a day at the races, a day go-karting and enough food and drink to feed the five thousand. The bride, meanwhile, had been taken off to Budapest by her friends.

You'd think by now saturation point might have been reached in the wedding business.

But no. Before any of these wedding plans can get under way, first of all we have to have the proposal. “And how can that cost money?” you ask. Easily.

Once upon a time it was quite simple. Diamond ring. Down on one knee. And all that was required was a simple yes or no, given in private.

But did you even get a proper proposal? Chances are you didn't. A quick straw poll among colleagues shows that proper, traditional, romantic proposals are few and far between – and only when men know the answer already.

These days, the most a typically tongue-tied chap can manage is starting a sentence by “When we are married...” and leaving the poor girl to work it out from there. Subtle, maybe. But romantic? Hardly.

But all that could change – for now proposals are big business.

Singer Seal, for instance, built an igloo on a remote Canadian mountain to propose to Heidi Klum. Tom Cruise took Katie Holmes to the top of the Eiffel Tower to give her an enormous diamond.

Other people have proposed on live TV... on the big screens at football stadiums... with banners and bands at airport arrival lounges.

Nothing quiet or private about that lot.

In America – where else? – you can book a special proposal weekend. These often include placing the engagement ring in the bottom of a swimming pool, so the would-be groom can dive in, and bring the ring from the deep to present to his girlfriend.

Just as long as it doesn't get swept into the drain by the filters...

Or you can book a special cruise, “Engagement under the Stars”. This includes such delights as a personalised video proposal, prepared in secret by the ship's “videographer”, champagne, romantic dinner for two, and – something you would never have thought of – a complimentary pottery class at which the couple will design a commemorative engagement plate souvenir.

Sounds wonderful, doesn't it? As long as the lady says yes...

Because that's the trouble with these over-the-top romantic proposals. What happens when the lady says no?

If you've organised the brass band, the banner across the arrivals lounge and the TV cameras in on the act, then you're going to look, and feel, a bit of a prat, if she turns you down.

And what if you're on one of those Engagement Under the Stars cruises and there's no engagement?

It's a long way home when she's said no. You can drink the champagne yourself, of course, but if you turn up for one of those complimentary pottery sessions, she'll more likely smash the commemorative plate over your head. Tricky.

All in all, however romantic the impetus, however grand the gesture, there are some things that are best done in private – and proposing is one of them.

Once she's said yes, than that's the time to share it with the world. But until then keep it to yourself.

Less embarrassing, less likely to go wrong, much more romantic – and also an awful lot cheaper.

BEDDY BUYS

MAMAS & PAPA'S is reflecting this year's trend for comfort and the adult trend for vintage with a new nursery interiors range called Nostalgia.

“Just as we're starting to see a move away from minimalism in adult interiors, in the nursery and children's rooms embellishment and attention to detail are becoming more important,” says commercial manager Sonia Kelly.

Nostalgia features an eclectic mix of luxury fabrics combined with intricate detailing and



hand-finished embroidery to create a beautiful collection reminiscent of bygone days. Items in the range include blankets, bedding, cushions, tie-backs, wall plaque, wallpaper border and lantern. Prices start at £11 for the wallpaper

border to £95 for the Moses basket.

Details of all the collections can be found in the catalogue, online at www.mamasandpapas.com or over the phone on 0870 830 7700. To find your nearest store call 0870 830

NE window shopping

MOROCCAN SPICE

SPICE up the rooms in your home with these new Moroccan-inspired timber mouldings from Richard Burbidge. Available exclusively at B&Q, the new Marrakesh collection takes its inspiration from the crafts and culture of this vibrant, colourful city. Stained in a deep rich brown with an exotic embossed pattern, the range includes dado and ornamental rails, skirting and architrave. There's also a matching decorative screen, which can be



used to make wardrobe or cupboard doors or to conceal unattractive radiators. The mouldings can be quickly and easily fixed to doors, walls and furniture using a suitable wood adhesive. Prices start from £3.65 for the decorative rails and £22.62 for the decorative screen.

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BATHROOM COLLECTION: international clothes designer Ben de Lisi, centre, has branched out into the home market

He's best known for dressing some of the world's most stunning women, but designer Ben de Lisi likes his bathrooms to look beautiful too

Ben's bathrooms

SEXY and modern clothes for sexy and modern women are what fashion designer Ben de Lisi is renowned for the world over. Since he crossed the Atlantic from his home city of New York more than two decades ago to pursue his dream of becoming a fashion designer, Ben de Lisi has never looked back. His fabulous creations are worn by some of the world's most beautiful women – Kate Winslet, Angelica Huston and Liz Hurley number amongst his clients, all created from his base in Belgravia.

Now Ben, who moved to Britain in 1982, is directing his unique sense of fashion and style towards the bathroom through a partnership with Yorkshire-based Abacus Direct, which provides bathrooms to some of the country's leading showrooms.

On the face of it, it's an unusual move, but one which to Ben, and his Yorkshire-born business partner Debbie Lovejoy, is completely natural.

Since 2001, Ben has been working on pres-

tigious developments in the North of England, designing and giving apartments a stylish touch. This has now led to the creation of his own bathroom range which is both elegant and stunning, reflecting the qualities which have made his clothes such a talking point around the catwalks of the world.

"Everything I design happens naturally and through working on interior designs for the apartments I realised that bathrooms were a key feature of their appeal. You start and end your day there – why should it not be somewhere to spoil yourself? Somewhere which is enviable and aspirational?", says Ben, who launched his bathroom collection at Abacus Harrogate headquarters. "The bathrooms are pure in line and rich in detail, hard working and never over-stated. That is what I am known for. A good designer can turn his hand to anything. You see the world through designer's eyes; you know what is going to be successful, whether it is a chair, a bath or an evening gown."

So would languishing in a Ben de Lisi

bathroom give you the same fabulous feeling as wearing one of his dresses?

"I don't know as I don't wear my dresses," he laughs. "But if I did, I would like to think my bathrooms would make me feel the same – fabulous!"

● **The trend in 2006 is for more bathrooms in a house. Not so long ago an upmarket five bedroomed home would have a house bathroom with only one bedroom with an ensuite. Today, the trend is for each bedroom to have its own bathroom or ensuite. For others a wonderful spa environment with whirlpool baths, steam room and Zen-like furniture is a must. Gone are the days of coloured suites and gaudy gold fittings, today's bathroom is about understated style with an earthy, natural look, about using natural materials such as marble, stone and slate, about luxury, about relaxation and pampering.**



TOP TIPS FOR CREATING THE PERFECT BATHROOM

- 1** Consider the space – who is the room for? Is it to be a haven for adults or a functional children's area for scrubbing off football mud? Is it just to grab a quick shower in the morning before dashing to work? What mood do you wish to create?
- 2** Think about traffic – how much use will the bathroom get? Is it an ensuite which will be used every day, or house bathroom?
- 3** Decide your priorities and the function of the room – separate bath and shower? Would you benefit from double basins? How much storage do you require?
- 4** Look at the location of windows, doors and existing soil pipes. Try to take these into consideration whilst planning but don't necessarily dismiss moving some of these to assist in getting the correct design for your needs. When approaching your bathroom designer make a plan of the room showing accurate dimensions and the

current location of doors and windows (including sill heights).

- 5** Think practical – what about storage space? Where will you put towels and toiletries and cleaning products. No point having a beautiful minimalist area if you have no storage space to allow it to stay that way.
- 6** Hygiene – how easy is the bathroom going to be to keep clean? Consider European style concealed cisterns in sanitaryware fixing frames which enclose all the pipe work thus avoiding the dreaded painted copper pipes and doing away with potential dirt traps. They also allow toilets and basins to be hung directly off the walls to stop the need for traditional pedestals – again another germ hotspot.
- 7** Environmental issues – concealed cisterns have the ability to use dual flush mechanisms reducing the amount of water required to flush toilets.

8 Consider the room's heating – towel rails or radiators or underfloor heating?

- 9** What kind of water heating system do you currently have – high or low water pressure? The range you choose must be compatible with your system. Would you benefit from updating your current system?
- 10** Think about the lighting – will you need strong or subdued lights or a mix of both? Will you need to use mirrors to shave or apply make up?
- 11** Finally, what do you anticipate the lifespan of the bathroom to be? Be careful not to choose items which may date very quickly. The key to this is to choose contemporary stylish pieces which can then be accessorised with accent colours and finishes. Items such as wall and floor finishings, towels, taps with coloured handles can all provide accent colour and can be interchangeable to provide a fresh new look.




Commercial director of The Bathroom Studio and Bespoke Kitchen Company and the daughter of its founder, Michelle Shanks knows more than most about taps and work tops. She talks to SARAH FOSTER about the family business

APPROACHING The Bathroom Studio and Bespoke Kitchen Company, I'm distinctly overwhelmed. It's a plain unit on an industrial estate, the sort of place you wouldn't look twice at. Yet stepping inside, I quickly change my mind. The Tardis-like showroom is full of stunning kitchens and bathrooms, stylishly laid out on two floors. I can see why it attracts the likes of Newcastle United footballers.

For the past five years, Michelle Shanks and her husband Graham have run the outlet, on the Airport Industrial Estate, near Newcastle Airport. Yet the company itself dates back 30 years. "My dad bought the business from a man who was retiring," says Michelle. "He started off in manufacturing then progressed into the retail side. My brother used to work in the business so it's been very family oriented from the start. He set up the Newcastle showroom, then he was head-hunted and went off to be sales director at Jacuzzi UK."

Michelle's father, Jim Mongan, used his experience in the trade to link up with some of the top manufacturers, partnerships which have stood the test of time. "We've been very fortunate with my dad being in the business so long and having the contacts," says Michelle. "We can literally pick and choose the products that we have. We go into partnership with companies because the products they offer are the best quality, and all our staff have the knowledge and training to sell them with confidence."

On the bathroom side, suppliers include Jacuzzi and the American brand Kohler, the current world leader in bathroom products. It's an honour that few can boast of to stock such makes, but having twice been named UK Bathroom Retailer of The Year, the firm has a solid reputation.

Taking me round the showroom, Michelle points out the current displays – she explains that these change often to reflect

We've been very fortunate with my dad being in the business so long and having the contacts. We can literally pick and choose the products that we have

Michelle Shanks

Expertise on tap



GOING WITH THE FLOW: Michelle Shanks, above, and some of the products her company stocks

trends. The ground floor is taken up by bathrooms while upstairs are kitchens. Among the bathrooms there is cream and chrome, with clean lines and lots of wood but despite the many variations, the actual suites are all white. "I don't think we'll ever move away from white bathroom products," says Michelle.

While most want a suite that won't date, there are plenty of smart features to make it stand out. A curly radiator would not pass unnoticed and a bath that fills from the ceiling (I'm still not sure how it works) would be a real talking point. Yet for some, simplicity is the key.

"We've got some real iconic products but we try to have a good balance with very saleable products that will last you for 15 to 20 years," says Michelle.

Far from just being functional, bathrooms can now

be home spas, complete with aromatherapy baths and mood lighting. Michelle says wet wall panels – which replace the tiles behind your shower and are easy to clean – are very popular. The company has them in every colour to match your decor, and as well as selling them, it will also install them – along with the entire suite. "We provide exceptionally high quality products and we also install," says Michelle. "We offer the North-East region a complete service, including design."

The kitchen side of the business also involves manufacturing, and is fairly new. "We've only done kitchens for three years and the reason we decided to go into it was because a lot of our clients would ask us, 'do you know anybody who does the same quality of kitchens?'" says Michelle. "We bought a manufacturing company in Sunderland and people can literally have anything they want. In the future, we are looking to do not only bespoke but also mid-range quality kitchens."

Michelle says the current trend in kitchens is for farmhouse-style units with granite

work tops and Belfast sinks. While following the fashions is her job, she clearly enjoys sourcing new stock, and speaks enthusiastically about her latest find. "Ben de Lisi is just launching a new bathroom range and he's got some fantastic products," she says. "We should be able to get that brand exclusively within the region."

With her husband Graham (who's sales director), Michelle hopes to take the business to new heights. It already has another outlet – at Gilesgate, in Durham – but there are plans to relocate. "The Durham showroom is, at present, three cottages, and it's not suited to the bathroom industry, which is very contemporary," Michelle explains.

In the meantime, Michelle plans to keep providing quality – something she says is a real pleasure. "It's not so much a job – we're all passionate about it and we all love the industry," she says.

● **The Bathroom Studio and Bespoke Kitchen Company, Unit 4D, Airport Industrial Estate, Kingston Park, Newcastle, 0191-521 8934 and 103-105 Gilesgate, Durham, 0191-386 8868.**

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NE interiors



Home for the Hills

CAROLINE TURNER visits a not-so traditional farmhouse and discovers a stylish family home

A CONVERTED farmhouse was the starting point. Then a barn conversion, then a garage conversion, then a new garage that looks as old as the original house... Now all the elements have come together to form a beautiful, traditional home that suits its landscape and is pleasing to the eye.

Jenny Hill, husband Nick and their family moved to Leys Farm, near Thirsk, in North Yorkshire almost four years ago, finding the space and the possibilities they were looking for in this former working farm. "The house wasn't in bad shape but there are always things you want to alter."

It is now a light and spacious blend of old and new. The kitchen features cream units and granite worktops. Fired Earth terracotta on the floor and hand-made glazed tiles, also Fired Earth, in shades of pink and lavender – an unusual choice for a kitchen that works to beautiful effect here – on the walls bring warmth to the scheme. A cream Range-master range cooker is a practical substitute for the ubiquitous Aga and colourful, spotty Emma Bridgewater china fill the glass-fronted cupboards with bucolic charm.

The Hills have replaced windows throughout with wooden quarter panes, painted antique white. "Some of the work that had been done to the house in the 1980s, with the original conversion, was looking tired and dated," says Jenny.

A regime of replacing the old and tatty with new, high quality fittings that will stand the test of time is still in progress.

The interior of the original barn conversion once featured faux-rustic plasterwork on the walls and small windows. While its generous space and soaring height accommodates a staircase and galleried landing, the dark painted walls and carpeted floor make for a cosy, almost gentleman's club feel. The revamped room has a wooden floor, French doors leading onto the garden and more light from a new, high window on the gallery.

Jenny is her own interior designer, choosing paints from Fired Earth and Farrow and Ball and fabrics from Laura Ashley. The main sources of furniture and accessories for her decorative schemes are the four branches of her Gift World shops (details below), which sell a varied range of furniture and home accessories. The ever changing stock reflects the fast-paced change in tastes in the interiors market. "It's nice to be able to bring something home and then just change it when I'm bored of it," she laughs.

All the little finishing touches are here – wooden bowls, crocodile photograph frames (very fashionable for this summer's safari trend) and those gorgeous little balls in different sizes that you group casually



WORK IN PROGRESS: Jenny and Nick, proud owners of Leys Farm, top

► Continued on page 8



It's nice to be able to bring something home and then just change it when I'm bored

CALM AND UNCLUTTERED: the dining room, left, and Jenny on the gallery overlooking the sitting room



Pictures: RICHARD DOUGHTY

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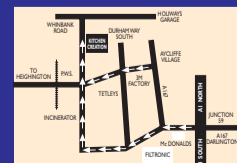


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NE interiors



ROOM WITH A VIEW: there is a stunning outlook over open fields from the Amdega conservatory

Home for the Hills

► Continued from page 6

together on a shelf or in a dish and which look so effortlessly elegant. Leather sofas and the wooden dining table and chairs are also from the Hills stock.

A timeless, yet contemporary theme runs throughout the house. Original artwork by Jenny's favourite artist, Libby Lord, graces the walls, a very modern touch in an otherwise traditional interior. Libby uses bright colours and snippets of newspaper, glitter and other tiny scraps to decorate her vibrant art.

Upstairs, the house is a warren of bedrooms and bathrooms. Colours are muted yet light and sunny. A beautiful daisy yellow bedroom is for guests, and the children's rooms are colourful and cheerful. The galleried landing across the barn conversion leads to more bedrooms, another bathroom and then every big boy's dream – and not so big, as a baby-sized drum kit sits in the corner – a room with a snooker table, leading to a gym, built in the roof space of what was once a garage.

The Hills transformed the old garage into a large and bright playroom for the children, leading to an office with restful sage-coloured painted Gustavian-style furniture. Adjoining

this is a spacious Amdega hardwood conservatory.

Outside, the garden is laid mainly to lawn. But behind the kitchen Jenny has created a picket-fenced, old fashioned cottage garden, leading to a secret garden enclosed by a high hedge. Within is a pergola, smothered in climbers, a perfect spot for a cold glass of wine on a summer's evening.

The overall effect of the exterior is charming, with the newer conversions blending seamlessly with the original farmhouse. "We're not sure of an exact date for the farm, but it's probably in the early 1800s," says Jenny. "Historically, the whole area around here carried the same name as the farm."

Now the Hills have reached full circle with their redecorating, Jenny feels it's maybe time to start again at the beginning, and, with a new baby on the way, now is the time to make plans. "I wouldn't mind moving bedrooms, making a dressing room and an ensuite," she muses.

You can tell this is one woman who never stands still.

● Gift World shops can be found at: Northallerton (01609) 772231; Lightwater Valley Emporium (01765) 635321, Knaresborough (01423) 865999, and Castleford (01977) 518999





FAMILY HOME:
 colour rules in the children's bedrooms, while bigger 'boys' can entertain themselves in the snooker room

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NE gardening

WHAT TO DO THIS WEEK

Take root cuttings from *Primula denticulata*, *Phlox paniculata*, oriental poppies and other plants.

Protect cauliflower curds from cold and frost by bending the large outer leaves over them.

Germinate seeds such as begonias and pelargoniums on windowsill indoors or in the greenhouse.

Cut down newly planted canes of raspberries, blackberries and hybrids to within 25-30cm (10-12in) of the ground.

Make a polythene tent to prevent rain falling on wall-trained peaches and to reduce attack by peach leaf curl.

Buy in well rotted farmyard manure or mushroom compost to mulch borders and dig into soil.

Bring potted bulbs into the home to flower.

Improve drainage on heavy soils by mixing in generous amounts of gravel or sharp grit.

Prepare celery trenches, digging in plenty of compost.

Take cuttings from conifers.

Plant lilies in patio pots, keeping them in the greenhouse to develop.

Give a dressing of potash to red and white currants, strawberries and gooseberries.



3 WAYS TO... Succeed with beans

1. Make sure pot-grown plants are hardened off before planting, as they cannot stand frost.
2. Grow them with sweet peas, which will give the beans more chance of pollinating.
3. If you are growing dwarf varieties, put a straw mulch at the base of the plants and surrounding area to keep the pods clean



ON HIGH: Pamela Bell's home, right, at the top of the cliff in pretty Runswick Bay, below, on the North Yorkshire coast



Bay watching

TRIPS to Runswick Bay are always a special treat. The drive there alone provides a sensory banquet of beautiful scenery, and never more so than in late summer when it simply fills your head with the fragrance of honey and a blinding blaze of purple heather.

The gentle amble down the twisting pathway towards the beach provides tantalising glimpses of whitewashed buildings, cliff faces and golden sands between the breaks in the canopy of blackthorn, brambles and travellers joy.

Winding your way between the angular buildings, which cling to the rocks at every level, you have to marvel at the use of space. Small gardens are squeezed into the slopes and patios built on roof tops. Wet-suited teenagers dash out of the rented holiday homes, clutching surfboards, kites and cricket bats. Their younger siblings gingerly totter down the stairs behind them carrying their bright buckets and spades.

This is a beach for 'doing'; for playing on the sand, swimming in the sea, exercising the dog, hunting for fossils, walking and exploring. It hasn't yet been hit by large commercial enterprises. There is a refreshment shop, and a pub.

Gardening correspondent BRIGID PRESS finds a gem of a garden beside the seaside at Runswick Bay

Owner: Pamela Bell
Location: Runswick Bay
Age of garden: ten years, but five in its current state
Time in garden: too much to mention
Favourite tools: secateurs (there's always something to snip at)
Favourite flowers: lilies, especially the Star Gazer

After a few hours down at the bottom of the split-level village, it is time to climb back up again, which takes twice as long as going down. The view is always a good excuse to stop and cling on to the hand rail though. Once at the top there is a choice of watering holes. Until recently, I had always either plonked myself on the terraces of the

Cliffmount, or walked just that bit further up the road to the Runswick Bay public house and nestled into a comfy window seat in the bar. Last weekend, however, I found a more relaxed and much more worthy stopping place.

Just before the Cliffmount Hotel (as you are going down into the bay), on the left hand side of the road, is an ordinary looking house. There is always a bowl of clean water at the foot of the gate to quench the thirsts of passing dogs. There is usually a small table full of home propagated plants for sale, and there is a small sign that advertises cream teas, in the garden.

If the arched wooden gate is open, then Pamela Bell will be serving her cream teas. The fruit scones are all freshly baked, and the fruit filled strawberry jam that sits on top of lusciously naughty, mountain of cream, is not just home made, it is home grown. The tea is served in china tea pots, and accompanying cups (none of that leaky silverware here) on a miscellaneous array of tables and chairs dotted around her garden.

As I sat and waited for my fare, a woman approached the proprietor with two empty jars and traded them for two full ones. They contained lemon curd. The woman asked if there was any damson jam, but Pamela, gazing over towards a tall clump of trees, had to tell her that the damsons weren't quite ready yet, and perhaps she had better return in a fortnight or so.

Every table in the garden is surrounded





‘ Pamela started selling cream teas after her husband passed away. She has a special corner of the garden dedicated to his remembrance

TIRELESS: whether she's working in the garden or raising funds for good causes, Pamela Bell is a bundle of energy

Pictures: RICHARD DOUGHTY



by flowers and foliage. Deep burgundy dahlia pompons poke out from behind pale pink penstemons. Lavatera cups compete with rose petals for attention, and steely blue heads of eryngium float above the ground held up high on their long tall stems.

There is no soil. Every inch of ground is filled with plants. Geraniums, mints, foxgloves and primroses. Everywhere you look there is something growing.

The whole garden is alive, and not just with plants and people. Blue tits flit amongst the cotoneasters, robins sing from exposed branches and the collared doves prance on top of the summer house roof. While I was there a man reported that he had been watching a woodpecker. Squirrels visit the nut feeders on a regular basis, but Pamela welcomes them, as they entertain her customers. Four hedgehogs are resident to the garden, which might explain the lack of slugs and snails.

Pamela started selling cream teas after her husband passed away, five years ago. She has a special corner of the garden dedicated to his remembrance. He was a big chrysanthemum and dahlia grower, so Pamela has filled one border with a million and one different varieties of dahlia, in all shades of colours, all shapes and all sizes. She doesn't seem to have much luck with the chrysanthemums, so concentrates on the dahlias. On the other side of the border is a willow, a weeping willow. This represents the sorrow of her husband's passing, in contrast to the gaiety of the dahlias which celebrate his life. An anchor reminds us that he

spent much of his life in the Merchant Navy.

Pamela's favourite flowers, though, are lilies. As you enter the seating area you are lifted by the intoxicating fragrance oozing out from a series of half-barrels planted up with tall stemmed lilies. Pamela stands by her favourite, the Star Gazer, as she tells me of how she watches people surreptitiously pinching off cuttings, and collecting seed heads. She isn't offended by the underhand methods of getting plants, but laughs quietly to herself, and would gladly offer anyone the chance to do so, if only they would ask.

No garden is complete without a water feature, and this one has a small wishing well. Pamela encourages children to throw in a coin (she will even give them a coin if they don't have one) and make a wish, on the condition that they also promise to behave for their mums.

All the money that Pamela makes in the garden is ploughed back into the village (the new hand rails down to the bay, and the bus shelter are evidence of this), or donated to the lifeboat institute or the North Air Ambulance, for whom she raised £750 last year. All her hard work hasn't gone unnoticed, as earlier this year she received an invitation to Buckingham Palace.

To Pamela Bell, though, nothing is too much trouble. She is not one of life's moaners, but a 'doer'. Where other people might see a problem, she sees a challenge, and with the help of her garden, Pamela vows to rise to any challenge put before her and her village.

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EXTENDED FAMILY: right – Martin and Judith with Eve, Guy, Max and some of the girls from Longfield House. Above: the Pepper children have fun with their ‘big sisters’



When baby Eve Pepper was born four months ago she was greeted by a loving family of mum, dad, two brothers – and 50 big sisters. SARAH FRENCH visits Longfield House, where teenagers, tots and parents all live in harmony

50 sisters for baby Eve

ANYONE meeting the Peppers for the first time could be forgiven for thinking they’re a conventional family. Dad Martin is a teacher and mum Judith stays at home to look after four-year-old Max, Guy, who’s two, and new baby Eve.

They live in a four-bedroom house, a four-wheel drive car stands in the drive and the washing machine is in constant use.

Their home, however, has a rather large extension and lodge for the rest of their ‘family’ – 50 girls aged 11-18.

As well as having responsibility for their own children, Martin and Judith are ‘parents’ to girls who board in Longfield House at Barnard Castle School in County Durham.

Despite the potential for demands to go to parties, broken hearts over boys, requests for help with homework and fights over make-up and clothes, life at Longfield House runs very smoothly. These teenagers actually get on with their ‘parents’.

“The Peppers are friends and parents when we need them to be; they’re really understanding and make fair decisions,” says 17-year-old Ashleigh Nixon, who goes to boarding school because her father is posted with the Army in Germany.

Chelsey Matthews, 15, agrees: “They’re really easy to talk to and when we come in to register we can have a laugh with them.”

Katy Harrison, 13, says: “My dad’s a group captain in the RAF and when my parents were in different places last year, I really missed them. I was able to talk to the Peppers and they helped me a lot.”

The majority of girls board because their parents are in the forces or work in the Middle East. Some come from Hong Kong while other girls are relatively local.

Martin says: “It’s important to remember that in many cases the girls’ parents are away and you never know when they will be affected by that. Some of their dads are in Iraq, for instance. They can’t always speak to their parents if they’re missing them so we and their friends are the closest they have to family sometimes.

“Judith and I didn’t go to boarding school and never really appreciated the benefits of it before. The girls spend 32 weeks of the year with us, which is more time than they have at home. School provides stability and, hopefully, has a positive influence on them.”

Judith adds: “Some of the girls also have younger brothers and sisters and they miss them as well. They’ve been great with our boys and now they’re ec-



static that we have a little girl too. Our children help break down any barriers."

This is the Peppers' third year as house parents, which has coincided with a rise nationally in the popularity of boarding schools. They met at a charity ball in London when Martin, a former Harlequins rugby player, was a youth development officer for the Rugby Football Union.

On deciding that they wanted to return to their native North seven years ago, Judith, who comes from East Boldon, near Sunderland, continued her career in recruitment in Leeds while York-educated Martin was appointed as rugby coach at Barnard Castle School. Now Director of Sport, it's under his tutelage that the school is turning out players like England international Mathew Tait and others who have represented their country at U18s.

Longfield House, which stands between the Preparatory and Senior Schools, overlooks extensive rugby and hockey fields, making work pretty easy to get to. For some it might be too close for comfort, but not Martin.

"We think there are more benefits than there are negatives," he says. "It's a fantastic, safe environment in which to bring up our children. Our house is great and there aren't many families where the husband can walk out the garden gate in the morning and be at work, then come home for lunch and keep popping in during the day."

They concede, however, that with three small children and their responsibilities as house parents it would be difficult if Judith worked full time outside the school. So she is employed by the school too. It's a team effort.

"If any of the girls have academic problems, they tend to go to Martin, whereas they're usually happier coming to me if it's a personal issue," she explains.

Judith's relationship with the girls changes as they get older. "The younger ones tend to see me more as a mother figure, whereas I'm more of a friend to the

older girls, although you've always got to keep that professional distance and not let the lines get fuzzy."

The girls' day begins with breakfast which is served in main dining hall from 7.30am, followed by morning registration at 8.40am. After chapel they go straight into lessons, then lunch, followed by three more lessons in the afternoon.

When classes finish at 3.45pm there are 70 different activities to choose from, or it's back to the house before tea at 5.45pm. The girls have free time until 7.30pm when they must be back in the house ready for homework. Years 7, 8 and 9 girls go to bed at 9.30pm, it's 10.30pm for Years 10 and 11 and the sixth formers can stay up until 11pm, "with a bit of negotiation", says

Martin. The house is locked and alarmed at night.

As well as Judith being available during the day, the Peppers are on duty daily from 4pm-7.30pm and cover Wednesday prep. They are also responsible for the girls at weekends. Saturday morning lessons are followed by plenty of opportunities to represent the school at sport.

"On Saturday evenings we'll bring in pizzas and ice cream and there's always a film shown on the school's big screen," explains Martin.

Sundays are for relaxation. The girls are allowed to go into Barnard Castle and to friends' houses, with permission from the school and their hosts.

Then there are lots of trips out, from ice skating, swimming and bowling to shopping and the cinema. And if the girls want to organise a game of rounders or hockey, they're in the right place with 50 acres of pitches outside their door.

Sunday also provides some time for Pepper family life. "We might go out for Sunday lunch," explains Martin. "I take Max swimming and the boys love to go off to tea with the girls whenever they can, which gives us some time to spend with each other and Eve.

"It works very well for us. We're in a family environment, a young environment and that's great for us and our children."

And finding willing babysitters is never a problem.

It's important to remember that in many cases the girls' parents are away and you never know when they will be affected by that. Some of the dads are in Iraq, for instance

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me and my wardrobe

Liz Ramshaw, 36, from Norton, runs Naughty Nights In A Box, a firm supplying couples with all they need for an evening of fun, food and passion, a great idea for Valentine's Day and anniversaries. "There's often no room for romance when you're so busy and so tired, so we wanted to create something to put a bit of sparkle back into people's lives," says the mother-of-three. "We wanted something where you could have a fun night in and it would be affordable too." The Couple's Special includes a bottle of French wine, Italian black and white linguine pasta with Italian sugos tomato sauce, edible undies, an erotic DVD, chocolates and other extras for £69.69 including postage and packing. Here, Liz models the looks that light her fire



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: blouse, top and trousers, all Hobbs; top and skirt, both Topshop, with black boots from Nine West; silk shirt from Whistles, Jigsaw top and shoes from Monsoon



Describe your look.
PROBABLY more like a classic look than a really trendy look. I run an advertising agency and visit a lot of clients so I've got to look smart for work. I tend to have skirts, suits and boots – that kind of look. I'll buy from Topshop if I see something I like but I also like to buy things that are a little bit different, so maybe I might go to somewhere like East or buy online from Boden. On weekends, I'm always in jeans but I usually wear them with a pair of boots and a nice trim jacket.

Favourite item of clothing?
AT the moment it's probably my green skirt. It's just above knee length and it's got flicky little pleats at the bottom. I love the way it looks when I walk. I wear it with either a green or a black top, green fishnets and my big black boots.

What's been your worst buy?
PROBABLY the most recent was a little brown skirt I bought from a boutique in Norton. I wore it recently and my husband said, "You can't wear that!" I didn't realise it was a wrap-over skirt and the spill goes right up. My worst habit is buying stuff without trying it on and then finding it doesn't fit.

Most expensive buy?
A DKNY black leather jacket. I paid probably about £400 for it but I loved



BOX OF TRICKS: if you can't have a night out, have a great night in. It has really intricate work on it and is really pretty, but I don't get to wear it that often because it's so nice!

Which celebrity do you most admire?
I ALWAYS think Kylie Minogue looks fantastic. I think she's just one of the most beautiful women – she's got a fantastic bone structure. I'm not as small as her but I'm probably not much bigger, so I suppose I am influenced by what she wears.
■ Naughty Nights In A Box: (08456) 730010 or www.naughtynightsinabox.co.uk

I tend to have skirts, suits and boots – that kind of look

NE out on the town

NE Magazine's style experts, Judie McCourt and Allison McKay, take to the social honeypots of the region in search of style and individuality



McCourt & McKay

COLLINGWOOD Street, Newcastle, is fast becoming the centre of bar sophistication and cocktails in Newcastle. The Apartment and nearby Living Room are proof that us Geordies can do it in style. Now, a £1.3m refurbishment has brought a new addition called Perdu to the street and "contemporary", "Parisian" and "chic" were the three words that sprung to mind as we walked in. Fluid designed Perdu and they have managed to incorporate style, comfort and sense of uniqueness all under one big airy roof.

An ample menu is served daily between 12 and 7pm but work is about to start on the upstairs restaurant where celebrity chef Gary Rhodes has been appointed head chef. The cocktails are cleverly mixed with crushed fresh fruit and served by courteous waitresses.

Although it was a quiet Monday night, the crowd was a good mix and the mood was light and friendly. Claypath, a resident acoustic and piano duo, appear every Wednesday and Craig the house DJ is accompanied by a saxophonist on a weekend. Oh, and one thing we nearly forgot to mention... the ladies' toilets are fab - ample cubicles, gilt mirrors, chaise-longues and GHD straighteners!

JANE BOLAM & RYAN HIPKISS

BOTH 34, Jane and Ryan have been in Perdu on a number of occasions since it opened six weeks ago, preferring it to other bars for service and style. Jane is a beauty advisor for Benefit Cosmetics and Ryan is a cosmetics account manager and they had called in on their way home from work at Fenwicks for a little wind-down glass of champagne.

Jane wore trousers from O'Neil, a top from Topshop and boots from Hobbs. She likes to shop in Coast as it always has good wearable clothes that are not too trendy. Her favourite girly goodie shops are Eden and The Italian House in Jesmond and says her one must-have beauty product is Pocket Pal by Benefit, with a cheek stain on one end and a lip stain on the other, perfect for giving a healthy flush.

Ryan wore a YSL suit and a Savoy Tailors Guild shirt, both from Moss Brothers in Newcastle, with a gold tie from Next. He likes to shop in French Connection and Tucci but his suits are always from Moss Brothers because he says they deliver good style and service. Ryan had a great haircut which he credited to Hooker and Young. As for beauty tips, Ryan is a recent convert to eyebrow waxing and facials. There are not many



JANE & RYAN

clinics that do men's facials but Ryan strongly recommends Julie Carter Beauty from Jesmond.

A favourite album of Ryan's is Adapt or Die by Everything But The Girl and Jane just loves old Eighties soul funk.

JOANNE MULDOWN & NICOLA ANTONUIK

JOANNE is a 20-year-old student and Nicola has recently moved here from a small town down South. Joanne also works in Perdu and loves it so much she was there with her friend on a social visit. She wore combat trousers from Topshop and a vest top from Warehouse. As a hardworking student, Joanne enjoys shopping on the high street.

Nicola works in nearby Revolution and although she was nervous of moving to Newcastle at first, she now says she loves it here and has quickly made friends. Nicola also loves the high street for affordable fashion, her favourites being Warehouse and Tucci. The girls both straighten their hair but always protect it first with Aussi spray conditioner.

In spite of their work schedules, they try hard not to eat rubbish at silly times because this can result in bad digestion and diet problems.

■ Perdu 20 Collingwood Street Newcastle.

● TV and radio presenter Judie McCourt and celebrity hair and make-up artist Allison McKay, run AM Creative Productions, which specialises in creative and social event management and PR

amcreativeproductions.com



PHILIP DIXON



NICOLA DOWNES

NICOLA DOWNES

PRETTY 19-year-old Nicola Downes is a student who also works part-time in Bar 55. She was at Perdu celebrating with a friend and cocktails after finishing her exams. Nicola's gold shoes were from Office, her skirt from Warehouse and she was wearing a French Connection top. We liked the way Nicola has accessorised her outfit with a selection of beads from Topshop and market stalls. Nicola is tall and slim, therefore she finds Zara often has a good choice for clothing and shoes. Nicola prefers to use good quality facial products like Lancome, YSL and Urban Decay and her favourite music is anything by JayZ and hip hop.

PHILIP DIXON

PHILIP is 23 and works in the IT department for South Tyneside council. Philip is a regular at Perdu. His favourite shopping days are spent browsing through vintage shops in Newcastle, Manchester and Leeds for clothes that are unique. He wore a leather vintage jacket from Period Clothing in Newcastle with Diesel Jeans and Vans shoes. Philip, who takes care of his skin with Nivea for men, has put thought into his style, adapting it to the indie scene which he follows. After years of having short, blonde hair he has now grown it longer and dyed it black. His favourite bands are Arcade Fire, Arctic Monkeys, Futureheads and Kings of Leon.



JOANNE & NICOLA

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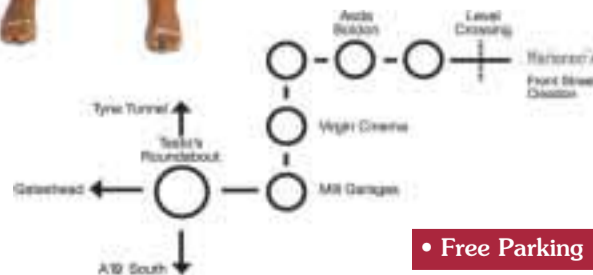
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NE food



BEEFING IT UP: directors Gary Quinn and Thomo Leteane
Pictures: RICHARD DOUGHTY



IN Cape Town, chewing on a chunk of dried beef from a biltong shop – as common as our own chippies – is as normal as snacking on a bag of crisps. But unless you know an African ex-pat who has told you of its delights, or sampled it for yourself while on holiday, the chances are biltong has passed you by.

But like many other ‘foreign’ foods that have been around for years in their own country, biltong has finally made it over here.

So now that it’s a trendy ethnic snack food, do stockists like Harvey Nichols and Waitrose import it from South Africa? Do they heck – they buy it in North Yorkshire.

Rather than walking straight off a South African plain, the beef comes from Skipton auction mart; instead of being preserved under a scorching sun like in the old days, it’s dried in metal cabinets in an industrial unit at Melmerby, near Ripon.

And according to Africans over here, it’s as authentic as can be.

It helps that the woman behind it, Thomo Leteane, comes from Botswana and has enjoyed biltong all her life.

“It’s one of those things that you associate so much with home that you miss it when it’s not available. It’s all about nostalgia and your sense of identity,” she says.

It wasn’t just homesickness that prompted Thomo, 32, to start making biltong. Clearly with a good business brain, she’d been mulling it over for several years but her early attempts were amateur to say the least – a light bulb and a fan to dry the meat hung up in a spare room wardrobe.

She first came to the UK in 1994 to read food technology at Reading University. During her year out in industry, she worked at Unilever in Kent where she met her fiancé Gary Quinn, a food engineer from Harrogate.

On returning home to Gabarone in Botswana, Thomo worked at a food research institution.

“My job was to train and help people setting up small food-related businesses on the food technology side. Biltong was one of the projects so I wasn’t totally unfamiliar with it as a business,” she explains.

With the idea of launching her own company now occupying her mind, she came back to Britain to do her masters at Nottingham, which included producing a business plan for a real venture. “The more mar-

Biltong, anyone?

Next time you’re feeling peckish, why not try a strip of dried beef? Once you’ve sampled it, you’ll love it, biltong businesswoman Thomo Leteane tells SARAH FRENCH

ket research I did into biltong, the more it looked like a viable proposition,” she says.

By now Gary was back home in North Yorkshire, and they found the ideal business premises at Melmerby. With a bank loan in place, they spent the next eight months setting up their business, Bare Earth.

The Atkins Diet was at the height of its popularity and women everywhere were looking for foods that were high in protein but low in carbohydrates and fat.

People were also travelling further and experimenting with foreign food, while shops

began stocking more foods from overseas and the snack market was booming.

The timing was perfect, but biltong was still new to many. They did the rounds of food festivals and trade and consumer shows.

“We’ve had to educate people by giving them a chance to taste it,” says Thomo. “Once they’ve sampled it, they love it. It’s helped take the mystery out of it.”

Bare Earth uses prime cuts of silverside beef, chosen for its leanness.

Historically biltong, which means ‘strip of buttock’, was made from game meat by tribesmen for whom sun-drying was the only way of preserving the first fast food.

It’s cut into half-kilo strips then rubbed with a mix of coarse salt, black pepper, coriander and brown sugar for the original biltong, or with garlic flakes or dried chilli added for Bare Earth’s two flavoured vari-

eties. It’s then dipped in cider vinegar which acts as a preservative and left to cure overnight. A hot vinegar dip the next day sterilises the meat which is then hung on butcher’s hooks in the cabinets and dried at 30C for four days.

The half-kilo piece of beef reduces to a third of its original weight and to just 68 calories. As well as a packet snack of shavings or strip, it can also be added as an ingredient to salads, savoury flans and muffins, pasta bake, bread and as a pizza topping.

It seems to appeal to all ages, from young men, for whom gnawing on a hunk of beef is the ultimate macho snack, to children, from calorie conscious women to older men who remember biltong from their days fighting in Rhodesia. “Its popularity has taken us by surprise,” says Thomo. “It’s taken off a lot more easily than we expected.”

But the ultimate taste test is by her family back home in Botswana. The good news is they all approve of her recipe.

Her sister Masego, who is over for a visit, says: “Biltong is a totally different concept in southern Africa. The market there is huge but it’s already full, so it’s nice to see Thomo carving out a new niche and promoting African food here.”

Thomo adds: “I still eat a lot of biltong, it’s moreish and I love it. When we do trade shows I munch it all day and get accused of eating the profits. I can’t see myself ever not eating it.”

■ Bare Earth biltong is available at Lewis and Cooper in Northallerton and other delis as well as by mail order at www.bare-earth.co.uk or telephone (01765) 641562.



BARBARA CONWAY: can’t get enough of the stuff

Why I’m bonkers about biltong...

WHENEVER anyone goes to Africa, Barbara Conway asks them to bring her back some biltong. Barbara, who is clinical team leader for coronary heart disease services with Darlington Primary Care Trust, was born in Zambia where her father worked in copper mines, then moved to Zimbabwe. She came to England when she was six.

“I was teething on biltong, which is an African tradition as there weren’t any rusks or sweets. All my children, who were born here, were teething on it. They still love it so there’s always a big fight whenever anyone brings us any biltong back.

“It’s very lean and full of protein but it is quite salty. It’s good for sating your appetite and gives you energy but it’s a bit like Marmite – you either love it or hate it.

“I thought Thomo’s biltong was very nice, chunky and the herbs were very good. It tasted really authentic and triggered many memories of my time in Africa. I only manage to get some about three times a year so I’m delighted it’s now available here.”

Foster care: making a real difference

FOSTERING is looking after children and young people in your own home who are not able to stay with their own families. There is a national shortage of around 10,000 foster carers and there are children and young people in all parts of the North-East who need safe, caring homes for anything from a few days to a few years.

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At SWIIS, they ask for at least one adult carer to be available full time. You need a spare bedroom and – because of the level of attention fostered children may need – no other children in your home under 12 years of age. In line with guidelines for working with children, applicants need to be willing to undergo the necessary health, criminal record and other background checks.

To find out more about becoming a foster carer with SWIIS, see the advert on this page and contact them today.

SOME QUOTES FROM FOSTER CARERS

'My advice to anyone considering foster caring would be simply to go for it – I was so nervous at first, but as soon as I started I knew it was the right thing. I'd say give it a go – you really have nothing to lose.'

'Foster caring has been harder than we expected but more worthwhile than anything we could imagine.'

'Seeing the difference in the children has been so rewarding.'



'The whole experience of fostering has been very positive'

SARAH FOSTER talks to two couples who have found fostering rewarding

Sally and John, from County Durham, have been fostering through SWIIS Foster Care for more than a year. They are currently looking after two sisters

SALLY SAYS: "I worked previously in a factory and had to leave through illness, so I was looking for something else I could do and I'd always thought about fostering. I saw it as a different career."

"I made contact with SWIIS and they did an initial home visit and asked questions, then the next stage was to be invited onto a course."

John continues: "We were assessed by an independent social worker and we put together a plan based on our lifestyle, the sort of people we are and how we would cope with different situations. That went to a panel to decide if we were going to be accepted. The whole process took about six months."

"Our first child was Michael, who was 14. It was difficult to start with because we were just learning to cope with a child in our home. He was very difficult to care for. He stayed with us for ten months, then went into residential care."

"Now we've got two girls aged 12 and 13. They came in December and it's working out brilliantly. They have contact with their mam and they're going to have contact with their dad. They're also going to mainstream school."

"The whole experience of fostering has been very positive. We would recommend it to anyone."



FOSTERING: sacrifices are worth the rewards

Anne and David, from Teesdale, have been foster parents to Mark for three years. They also take in other children for respite care

ANNE SAYS: "I've been interested in fostering from a young age. It's something I've chosen to do after I've done everything else I've wanted to do. We've had 11 children – a lot of them for short-term respite – and they've all been very different."

"We've had Mark for three years now, and he's a darling. He came to us at 14-and-a-half and he'd had 34 placements before us. We went to the residential home to pick him up and we just asked him what he wanted. We said, 'You've got 100 per cent trust with us now. This is your home. We just ask for certain things in return'."

David continues: "Mark is now at college. He's finished school and taken his exams and works in a garage four days a week. Basically, he's a happy-go-lucky 17-year-old."

"You definitely get out what you put into this job, but it's not to be taken lightly. Sometimes you feel like there's nowhere else to go, but SWIIS give you 24/7 support. The sacrifices are worth the rewards 150 per cent."

■ *The names in these two stories have been changed.*



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gadget man



ARCHOS AV500: first on the market... and still one of the best

Film and TV footage on the go

Catch up on your TV backlog on the journey to work with one of these top Multimedia Players

■ Don't miss Burton's Bytes - game reviews in The Northern Echo every Friday

HOW often have you recorded a show on TV only for it to sit on your machine unwatched for weeks? Have you ever wanted to catch up on last night's news on the way into work, or perhaps catch up on the gossip in the Square or the Street but simply haven't the time to cram it all into your evening?

Well, there is an entertainment device to hand to solve your woes. They are called Multimedia Players and can connect into your TV in much the same way as a VCR, but these have a distinct advantage. Crisp colour screens and stereo sound, and, of course, headphone sockets let you watch footage while you're sitting on the train, much to the envy of your fellow commuters. In addition, they double up as digital music players.

Prices have started to make these devices much more accessible and 2006 should see them hit the mainstream. Here's our top six:

SERIOUS STUFF

Creative Zen Vision £356.00 from www.amazon.co.uk

The software inside this box of tricks is Microsoft powered and means that it will also synchronise seamlessly with your home PC operating system. It was just about the easiest device to use on test. The display is crisp and clear and the only real downside is its relative size versus the others.



POCKET PLEASER

Goodmans GPDR1 £129.99 from www.argos.co.uk

This highly portable device wins plenty of admirers due to its dimensions, making it a must-pack item for your travels. This is an SD (secure digital) storage player, so you'll need plenty of those pesky little memory cards to hand if you're a fan of epic movies.



TOUCHY, FEELY

iRiver U10 £144.95 from www.expansys.com

For getting noticed, this is the player of choice as it does away with most of the buttons, giving it a cleaner design, and uses just four clickers to control all of the functions. Its hard drive memory is pretty low but this is made up for with a healthy battery life.

EASTERN PROMISE

Samsung PMC -YH99 £369.99 from www.amazon.co.uk

A very smart player here from the Koreans with superb picture delivery through the 3.5 inch screen and a battery life of seven hours, which is well above the average. Samsung are set to launch a few new players over the course of 2006, so keep your eyes peeled. Reliability is good too.

LESS CABLE STRESS

Archos AV500 from £349.99 see www.empiredirect.co.uk

This French company was one of the first into the market and their flagship model proves the point. A sizeable memory, extra large display, and when you're ready to record, there's no messing with multiple cables. Just place it in the supplied docking station which deals with the spaghetti.



NE beauty



FEET FIRST: one of Victoria's clients tries out the ionic detox

Ironing out the energy gap

TREATMENT: Ionic Detox

WHERE: The Nail Studio, Hall Farm, Carlton, near Stockton. Contact Victoria Baker on 01740 630951 or 07710 193422.

I WOKE up the day after the Ionic Detox treatment with more energy than I'd had in months. I spent the whole day ironing, well, at least five hours. The ironing pile had previously threatened to lift the ceiling, such was its height. At the bottom of it was one of those stiff, dried-out shirts I'd put off ironing for about six months. This time, instead of shoving it back to the bottom of the pile, I actually ironed it (although it did need half a bottle of water sprayed across it). Next, I went into the kitchen and made a banana cake and after that I cleaned the oven. I didn't run out of energy until about 8pm.

Could it all have been down to one 30-minute treatment with my feet in a bowl of warm, salty water at Victoria Baker's business, The Nail Studio?

Victoria, who also does the Ultra Dermi range of treatments, airbrush tanning and nails (as the title of the business probably gives away), has qualifications in clinical and sports nutrition. As a three-day eventer and former model, she knows the importance of looking good on the outside and the inside.

The Nail Studio is run at Hall Farm, Carlton, where husband Paul is an arable farmer. Victoria has recently included the Ionic Detox treatment in her repertoire.

The system works by putting your feet in warm water and accompanying salts – simple table salt because it “draws better” – which when subjected to an electrical current provides a source of essential ions. These ions can be taken into the skin and absorbed by the body's cells to rebalance them.

“There are more pores in the soles of the feet

than anywhere else in the body,” says Victoria. “Through the ultra sonic waves, it draws the toxins out of the body.”

It's hardly surprising that our bodies today are full of toxins, from household chemicals, alcohol, pollution, and smoking. This treatment is designed to stimulate the cells to rid the body of toxins. The benefits include better sleep, more energy, fewer joint aches and pains, and it has even been known to help conditions such as psoriasis or asthma. Victoria says it can also help with weight loss, headaches, sinus problems, and poor digestion.

It is recommended to have a course of five to seven treatments over two to three weeks with follow-up treatments every one to three months.

By the end of my treatment, the water has turned slightly off-colour but other people have reported it turning a dirty yellow colour – Victoria included. The detox has helped Victoria with an old shoulder injury, reducing the pain, and helps her to sleep better. “When I do it on myself, it turns all orange with floaty

bits on top,” she laughs. “You obviously have quite a clean lifestyle.”

After the water Victoria massages my feet using tea tree oil products.

“It helps to close the pores and rebalances. It also has anti-fungal properties,” she says.

I wasn't expecting one treatment to make a difference, but there was definitely a boost in energy the following morning which lasted a day or two. It gave me the momentum to tackle the ironing mountain – a case of any old ion.

I'm sure, given another abundance of energy, there would be better uses for it.

■ One Ionic Detox treatment costs £20. Victoria can give a full pedicure afterwards for an additional £18. If people book five detox treatments they receive a sixth free.

Lindsay Jennings

There are more pores in the soles of the feet than anywhere else in the body

Bad hair day: a girl's worst nightmare

BAD hair day or a facial blemish? – according to a new survey, there is no contest. Limp or unruly hair that you can't do a thing with is more likely to spoil a girl's day than any other beauty glitch.

When asked to choose their money-no-object beauty treatment, seven out of ten women surveyed didn't hesitate in opting for a daily wash and blow-dry by a professional hair stylist.

In the survey conducted by BeautyBay.com, one hundred women aged 25-45 were questioned about their beauty shopping habits.

Not surprisingly, the younger age group chose mascara as their favourite “can't live without product” and the upper age went for skin care such as moisturisers. An equal number across the whole age range picked professional hair straighteners.

Asked to name the top three beauty icons, more than 50 per cent of those questioned listed YSL Touche Eclat, St Tropez self-tan and hair straighteners.

Lancôme Juicy Tubes came in at fourth place.

Yves St Laurent Touche Eclat, a makeup brightener stick that is said to revive the skin's own natural glow, also appeared in the number one spot on the “can't live without” list. And old favourites such as Palmers Cocoa Butter, Nivea Face Cream and Olay Day Cream all ranked on the Top 20 Beauty List.

Top of the “don't consider the cost” category is Creme de la Mer. At around £85 for a 30ml pot, the most costly moisturiser remains a wish for most of us.

The survey revealed that an average of one hour a month is spent shopping for cosmetics and hair products. The largest number spent £25-plus but almost 40 per cent admitted to being beauty and perfume shopaholics and spending more than £50 a month.

One in ten chose a manicure and pedicure as their favourite treat while a tiny two per cent selected the daily facial.

■ For more information visit www.beautybay.com

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NE motoring



KINGS OF THE ROAD: Alan and Petra Sturdy relax in their new motor home with daughter Chris

Everything, and the kitchen sink

Spring is in the air and motor home owners are planning their trips away. IAN LAMMING talks to one family who have a passion for the open road

HOME is not only where the heart is but also your family and possessions as well. So if you are the sort of person who also likes to see a bit of the world, there is going to be conflict in your life.

A couple of weeks away from your house can leave you feeling a bit displaced, homesick even, and yearning to be home, which is a shame given that holidays can also be so rewarding.

But as the Sturdy family has come to realise, it doesn't have to be that way. They can have the best of both worlds, all dressed up in one very posh package.

Now living in the wilds of Scotland, on the Black Isle somewhere beyond Inverness, Middlesbrough-born Alan Sturdy has been back in the region recently to collect his new pride and joy from Cleveland Motor Homes, at Durham Tees Valley Airport.

"We looked around Scotland and motor homes are ten to 15 per cent more expensive than in the North-East," says the retired engineer. And when the price tag is up around the £50,000 mark that's something not to be sneezed at. "We also like the service we get and it gives us the opportunity to see family who still live around Middlesbrough."

Mr Sturdy collected the keys of a brand new Swift Kon-tiki Vogue – his third motor home in two years – a 24ft leviathan which even has a dashboard-mounted monitor connected to a camera on the rear so he can see what is behind when he is reversing.

The powerful 2.8 litre diesel engine allows the motor home to cruise long distances in complete comfort between fill-ups and when Mr Sturdy has had enough, he can park up virtually anywhere as the unit is self-contained with its own power, drinking and foul water supplies.

Six-berths, it also features a fixed double bed, a second over the driver's compartment which drops down on gas struts and another which emerges from the luxurious seat cushions. Add in house-standard kitchen appliances including gas cooker, fridge and microwave, central heating, a television, DVD

player and video, and it is easy to see how it starts to feel like a home from home. The shower and electric flushing toilet are mere cursory details of course.

After transferring all their worldly-travelled goods from the old motor home they have part exchanged they are ready for the off, making their way casually north back to their house.

Mrs Sturdy says: "And if you want to make a cup of tea you can, if you want to stay up watching TV into the early hours you can. It's the ultimate in freedom and privacy."

Mr Sturdy adds: "It's a little piece of home that we take with us including all our own possessions. It's your own mini world that you take around the world. It's just so convenient and we don't have to live in other people's mess.

"I feel motor homes are a bit safer than caravans as on our travels we do come across some of those that have overturned. You have such freedom too. The other night it was a bit windy where we were so I upped sticks at 2am and drove to somewhere a bit more sheltered. I suppose I could even drive in my pyjamas, though I haven't done as yet. You can park up virtually anywhere. So if we find ourselves at the top of the Great Glen, for instance, we are self-contained and can stay there for the night.

"It seems even easier going to the Continent and we are off to Holland and Germany in the spring and Portugal in the summer. I love travelling but I would never want to live anywhere other than Scotland. With the motor home we will never have to."

■ www.clevelandmotorhomes.co.uk



NE connections



AT THE HEART: the Radisson is a haven after a hard day's shopping; right, one of the arcades



● The Radisson Hotel, 1 The Light, The Headrow, Leeds, has rooms starting from £75. Visit www.radissonas.com

● Room, The Bourse Courtyard, Boar Lane, Leeds. For reservations call 0113 242 6161 or visit www.roomrestaurants.com

● Prices for Harewood House vary. Telephone 0113 218 1010 for details.

● Entry to Gatecrasher is £10 members and £12 non-members. Visit www.gatecrasher.com/Leeds.

Bright lights big city

LIZ LAMB and friend sample the delights of a weekend in Leeds, recently crowned the best place to live in Britain

THE list of accolades attributed to the city of Leeds over the past few years makes for impressive reading. It has been voted the UK's best city for entertainment, food and business, as well as visitor city of the year, best UK university destination and best place to live in Britain.

The metropolitan district, which boasts a population of 715,000, has been totally transformed into a thriving city with a vibrant economy. In the last 20 years, more jobs have been created in Leeds than in any other UK city outside London.

But nice as it is for those who work there, what has it got to offer the weekend visitor?

One of the jewels in its crown is Harewood House, a stately home belonging to the Queen's cousin, the Earl of Harewood. You can easily spend a whole day here as there is so much to do.

We visited the home's stately rooms which house a variety of art collections, including several pieces depicting Durham Cathedral and Barnard Castle in Teesdale, before going 'below stairs' to find out how the maids and butlers of yesteryear used to run the estate.

One of the best features of the home is its stunning setting. Visitors can enjoy garden walks, a boat trip across the lake, and even feed penguins in the impressive bird garden.

Unfortunately, we had to settle for watching the ostriches and pink flamingos because the penguins were on holiday in Bridlington while their home underwent a revamp.

After a day of culture, we decided to hit the shops and put our credit cards to good use. Dubbed the Knightsbridge of the North by the Lonely Planet Guide to Britain, Leeds has a great mix of high street stores and independent shops.

There are more than five miles of shopping within the city centre across 1,000 shops and Harvey Nichols recognised the city's potential when it opened its first store outside London here.

It's great to do some window shopping in the store but it's a little hard on the pocket, so we headed off to the Corn Exchange, where you can eat, shop and drink, as well as pick up a bargain on the stalls selling the wares of budding fashion students.

With a strong focus on fashion, and a student population of 100,000, it is hardly surprising that Leeds has also picked up a reputation as the clubbing capital of the UK.

Discotheque at Gatecrasher is one of the

city's newest nights which aims to attract the most stylish of clubbers to complement its £3m state-of-the-art decor. Held on a Saturday, in New Briggate, you have to get there early to beat the queue. We found the music a little too 'hard' in the main room and spent most of the night on the dancefloor downstairs, where the DJs spin soulful grooves and vocal house music.

“*In the last 20 years, more jobs have been created in Leeds than in any other UK city outside London***”**

Another venue for an enjoyable night out, aside from the numerous city centre bars, is The Faversham in Headingley, the student mecca of Leeds. Cheap entry and cheap drinks make it a popular destination for students but locals often go along too to sample its weekly live music events.

After a heavy night's clubbing we were glad to get back to our hotel, The Radisson, for a good night's sleep. Set in the heart of the centre, it is the perfect location for a weekend visit. Only a five minute walk away from the shops and bars, and housed in The Light, an entertainment complex boasting a cinema and gym, you don't have to venture too far for fun.

The only negative thing about staying in the centre was the parking. I paid £30 to park my car for the weekend, which included a £6 discount as I was a hotel guest.

One of the highlights of our visit to Leeds was a meal at Room, run by Middlesbrough friends John Pallagi and Simon Wright.

The award-winning restaurant, which prides itself on its retro menu, has a great atmosphere and even has its own DJ, providing the perfect musical backdrop while you tuck into a hearty meal of fish and chips, tikka masala, or steak and kidney pudding. Prices are reasonable with starters priced around £5 and mains at £15.

If you visit Room, you just have to go downstairs to the BedRoom bar, a seductive cocktail lounge draped in purple velvet and lit by candlelight. I can personally recommend the raspberry champagne cocktails.

Room makes its mark because of its impeccable service – our waiter knew the menu and wine list inside out – relaxing surroundings, and unpretentious staff and clientele.

After a weekend in Leeds, and despite being exhausted from our extensive schedule, we didn't want to come home. It's safe to say, we loved it.

Those accolades the city has been collecting are well deserved.

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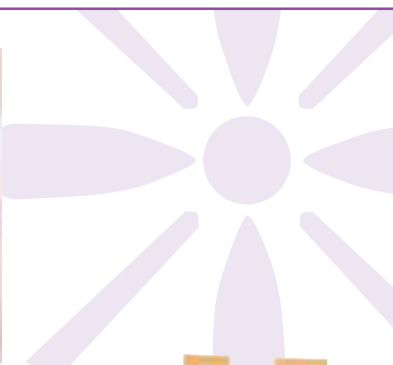
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