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APRIL 2006

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A Bigger Splash is relocating into larger premises within Carl Johnson Landscape and Aquatics Centre on Gallowfields Trading Estate in Richmond in March 2006. The combination of both companies on the same site will benefit the client showing various displays and ideas in garden leisure



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## sharon griffiths

“She was reduced to bribing the heirs to the dukedom to clean the stately silver during Neighbours

**T**IME for the gawping season again. As spring – eventually – arrives, the stately homes are taking off the dust sheets, polishing up the silver, straightening the family portraits and getting the barriers ready to let us in so far and no further.

Gift shops have been stocked, postcards printed, industrial amounts of pot pourri delivered and all the dinky little gingham hats made for the jars of jam and honey.

Time for us to pay up and shuffle through admiring the paintings, furniture and the tapestries hanging carefully in dimly lit and shaded rooms. And, certainly, the country's stately homes hold a wealth of fine art and furniture that is well worth admiring.

But that's not why we go, is it? Be honest. The reasons we trail round stately homes are (a) to see how the other half lives and (b) to imagine living there ourselves. The paintings, candelabra, tapestries and furniture are merely the stage set for our fantasies.

Visitors might pause dutifully in front of the Gainsboroughs or the Turners, but what really makes them exclaim is the silver framed picture of the present duke in his adolescence, laughing on a shooting party with a chubby Prince Charles. Or with a youthful Mick Jagger when they did a concert in the park.

My mother – whose house was so frighteningly clean that you could have conducted surgical operations on any available surface – used to delight in rubbing a finger along furniture or woodwork in palaces and ducal houses. If she found a layer of dust, she was pleasantly shocked and it made her day. Threadbare rugs and curtains, however grand, would delight her too. “Well really...” she would say, fondly thinking of her own immaculate and very un-threadbare home.

My sympathies were with the stately home owners. I once interviewed the chatelaine of a huge and draughty castle, whose mother-in-law had had a household staff of 15. Her successor was reduced to making do with a housekeeper, a cleaner and bribing the heirs to the dukedom to clean the stately silver while watching Neighbours.

No wonder they always plan the route through the house so that the only way out is through the shop. Even dukes have to earn an honest penny these days to stop the stately roof leaking.

As well as a glimpse of their private lives (“Ooh look, they've got an electric fire just like gran's”), what we ultimately hope for is a glimpse of the great and good in person, if only

to prove they are just as human as the rest of us. Though why we should ever have thought differently is a mystery.

Children are always said to be disappointed when they meet the Queen because she doesn't get dressed up in robes, ermine and with a crown just to open a school or hospital. The aristocracy can be equally disappointing.

My mother once got very cross with my father on a visit to a Welsh castle. Instead of BEING inside admiring the furniture, my dad was outside in the kitchen garden, deep in conversation with a scruffy old gardener in threadbare jacket and grubby cardigan. They were getting on famously when my mother went to interrupt. It was only when the gardener invited us all in to the house for a drink, that we realised he was actually the lord of the castle himself. My mother regaled friends for years with tales of the holes in the aristocratic trousers.

Trouble is that looking round other people's houses isn't limited to stately homes and castles. Put your house up for sale and you are guaranteed a stream of visitors – most of whom will have not the slightest interest in buying your house.

**T**HEY'VE just come out of nosiness and curiosity, because they like looking at houses but don't like paying for the privilege. Any house will do. Even yours. They spend entire weekends with sheaves of estate agent's details, working their way from one des res to another.

You can tell which they are. They are the ones who drift through the house going “Oh lovely” in a vague sort of way and taking more notice of your furniture than the foundations.

The ones you really want are those who ask awkward questions, surreptitiously stick pencils into window sills to see if they're rotten and want to know about damp courses and boiler capacity. They're really serious about the house. Even if they don't like it, they've come with honest intentions.

As for the others... well, maybe we should copy the great and the good. Let people in through the front door, give them the guided tour but then only let them out through the back, where you could have one of the children manning a stall full of over-priced jams, chutneys, stripey rubbers and bars of chocolate with a picture of your house on the wrapper, and not let them out till they've bought something.

Well, if it's good enough for dukes and earls.

### TAKING STEPS

**R**UBBER Sole, masters of funky footwear, have taken a walk round the corner to a new base in Darlington. The outlet first opened on Blackwellgate nearly four years ago and has a loyal clientele, but found itself bursting at the seams and has moved to bigger premises in the town's Post House Wynd. “We had run out of places to put the stock,” says Joanne Rankin, who owns the shop with husband Lee. “There's also more passing trade here so we hope more people will be tempted in to see our range.”

The new season sees lots of chunky wooden wedges and pretty, girly leathers, says Joanne, who stocks Fly London, Art and the ubiquitous Converse All Stars, amongst other labels. They also sell accessories, including belts, bags and one-off jewellery.

● Rubber Sole, Post House Wynd, Darlington (01325) 461118



Girly: some of the spring range

### NE window shopping



THE Damson Tree on Barnard Castle's high street is now stocking some larger pieces of furniture amidst their array of beautiful and unusual gifts.

The distressed painted cream potboard dresser base with wooden top above costs £455, and there's a



number of smaller pieces. They also have a range of stunning leather and embroidered bags.

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## ME interiors



**STYLISH:** Magnet's new walnut kitchen. Units for a standard size kitchen cost £4,300

# Kitchen charisma

GABRIELLE FAGAN checks out what's cooking in the kitchen this spring

**T**HINK rich, dark and handsome – no, calm down, not George Clooney – it's the new trend for kitchens. Dark, grained wood, with curved units and a more luxurious look in general is going to be one of the fashionable choices for 2006.

Naomi Cleaver, design expert and TV presenter, believes that the popularity of the rather severe stainless steel, industrial-style kitchens is on the wane. "I actually embraced that stainless steel look for my own home," she says, "but now I think things have moved on and there's a return to units in natural wood, in dark, sumptuous colours."

This more glamorous, decorative look is also in tune with the desire to use kitchens for more than simply cooking. More often today they double as dining or family rooms, and are larger open-plan spaces where people want to linger in comfort.

Naomi banishes the outdated view of dark woods as overpowering. "When we think of dark wood it conjures visions of 'brown furniture' – that heavy, over-varnished stuff of yore. This new trend in dark timber, such as rich walnut, couldn't be further away from that. Now what's important is the beauty of the grain and crisp design."

Softer lines will also feature, with curves making a comeback, she forecasts. "Curves make a lot of practical sense, especially if there are kids running around, as well as being a refreshingly feminine trend, of which we will be seeing more," she says.

Award-winning kitchen designer Simon Bray agrees: "Stark modern angular designs do not lend themselves easily to creating the right environment for today's kitchens." He uses oak, burr oak and high gloss acrylics and curved contours. "The current trend in kitchen design is all about mixing materials and textures, and creating a practical modern room which is full of warmth. This is, in some degree, a result of the desire to entertain – not just cook – in the kitchen."

If dark woods aren't to your taste, the warmer traditional looks, such as Shaker and rustic oak, will still find favour. These can be enlivened by contemporary-style materials, such as glass splashbacks and granite worktops.

Those wanting to make a statement in a large, roomy kitchen might opt for the other top trend – glossy, lacquer-style cabinets. Red is for the brave, or key into classic neutrals with a high shine. "It's all about combining the classic with the quirky and the traditional with the modern," says Naomi.

### TOP TRENDS

#### MAGNET

**INSIDER TIP:** Naomi Cleaver, design consultant for Magnet kitchens, predicts the following looks will be big: "Composite stone for floors and worktops, glass for splashbacks, shelves, and wood or lacquered finishes for doors. Grey is an excellent choice for walls, especially teamed with dark wood units."

Her top appliance choices: Japanese-style teppanyaki grill, £2,275, and a built-in wine cooler cabinet.

#### B&Q

**INSIDER TIP:** Brian Dews, head of kitchen buying at B&Q, agrees that dark woods will find favour. "Worktops and doors in beech and darker oak will be popular," he says. "Colour-matching cabinets and doors gives a more luxurious look, especially in a wood finish, and these can be teamed with stone or granite style work surfaces. Our new Speedstone granite is a more affordable version."

"Don't neglect lighting – key for creating atmosphere. Under-pelmet lighting in cupboards, lights behind splashbacks and under-cupboard lighting will be fashionable."

#### ALTERNATIVE PLANS

**INSIDER TIP:** Laurence Pidgeon of Alternative Plans, which specialises in European de-



**CLOCKWISE FROM MAIN PICTURE**

- Simon Bray Kitchens start from £25,000. Kitchen shows the teppanyaki entertaining kitchen with seating for six around the bar;
- John Lewis Mezzo kitchen system in a choice of colours, including high gloss white. Base units start from £309;
- White Country kitchen units from B&Q www.diy.com 0845 850 0175;
- Walnut Shaker kitchen from B&Q. Base units from £66



*I actually embraced that stainless steel look in my own home but now I think things have moved on and there's a return to units in natural wood*

**Naomi Cleaver**

signer kitchens, says the trend is away from a variety of small units, all in one colour.

"We are seeing a demand for larger, floor-to-ceiling lacquered units running along one wall. They have real impact and are supremely practical as they conceal the workaday machinery of the kitchen, from the oven to the fridge. An island should be set in front of these cupboards, containing a preparation sink, hob and appliances. Look for worktops in granite, or a Corian worktop resembling a concrete texture, and finish in a variety of colours, including chocolate brown or cement grey."

quer style finishes are still a flourishing trend. "High gloss is still a top choice, followed by cream, grey and black but people are beginning to experiment with colour, particularly red. If you're not brave enough to choose a vibrant red or orange kitchen, opt instead for striking features such as coloured glass worktops and splashbacks."

**KITCHEN SOURCES**

- Alternative Plans: 020 7228 6460/www.alternative-plans.co.uk
- B&Q: 0845 850 0175/www.diy.com
- Simon Bray: 01234 376 990/www.gkdesign.co.uk
- John Lewis: 08456 049 049/www.johnlewis.com
- Magnet: 0845 123 6789/www.magnet.co.uk

**JOHN LEWIS**

**INSIDER TIP:** Matt Thomas, central kitchens buyer for John Lewis, says light-reflecting lac-

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**NE interiors**



SECRET: the Udalls' home is hidden away near the main street Pictures: RICHARD DOUGHTY

# Hitting the right note

Kath Udall loves nothing better than to browse the Internet looking for new ideas for her lovely family home. JO STEVENS pays a visit

**Q** UITE confident that I know exactly where I'll find the home of Phil and Kath Udall in Stokesley, I don't even bother to ask for precise directions. I park the car and mooch about on a gloomy damp afternoon until finally I give up and enquire at a local shop. Nobody has a clue. Yet, within a minute or two of leaving the shop, there it is. Tucked neatly away, but within a few yards of the main street.

The welcome from Kath and Phil into a cosy bay windowed sitting room with open fire, comfortable sofas and distinctive traditional furniture is warm and relaxed and over coffee and biscuits, we settle down for a chat.

The house, named Claremont, was built for an estate agent during the 1920s on agricultural land originally belonging to Stokesley's historic Red House on Bridge Road. This was rescued from dereliction and has been converted into apartments. Claremont itself has gone through various makeovers down the years, once even fancying itself as Italian, complete with fancy crazy paving and ornate balcony overhead. The present sitting room is built on the site of the farm manager's office.

Although Kath and Phil's home is not a listed building, a conservation order surrounds the house, including the outbuilding and a row of charming old cottages, two of which belong to them. Son Dan lives in one cottage while their elder son Chris lives in the family home.

"Kath's never happier than when she's looking at houses," says Phil. "I often find her on the computer viewing properties of all kinds. It's a wonder she doesn't make a career of it."

"I really believe that all houses can have their own special atmosphere and charm," says Kath. "You have to work at it and not just copy other people or the latest trends. I like houses that don't give up all their secrets



at first sight, houses where you have to explore and find out interesting things for yourself. I think a surprise element should be there. An instant home wouldn't work for me. I'm more into creating a home with a history. I feel the same about gardens."

Kath is a seeker out of furniture with character and has a particular interest in Victorian finds, which are interspersed with furniture and pictures handed down through both families.

We make our way to the music room, very much Phil's province. "I've been involved with music since I was 14, taking lessons and playing in bands. The bass is my main focus.

"You could say that indirectly music brought Kath and I together. She was working temporarily behind the bar at the



**I** like houses that don't give up all their secrets at first sight, houses where you have to explore

**HEART OF THE HOME:** Kath's brother helped design the kitchen. Below: Phil in his music room; the master bedroom; the relaxing sitting room and the bright bathroom

Yorkshire Dragoon near Yarm and I turned up with our band Iron Chicken and asked her out."

Nowadays Phil plays in the Colin Holt band. "We concentrate on raising funds for worthy causes dear to our hearts, including Great Ayton's Yatton House for physically and mentally disabled adults and children, and the excellent RVI in Newcastle."

When Kath and Phil moved into Claremont the hall floor was carpeted, concealing original tiles, now restored to their former glory. The hall sideboard is from Binns in London. The dining room reflects the couple's interest in mixing specially chosen items of furniture with family pieces. "We had my parents' table and chairs restored," says Phil, while other objects such as the Georgian plate rack are also prized as family treasures. Graduation pictures of both sons are displayed. "They each wore their dad's old tie," laughs Kath. Phil points out several evocative Frank Sutcliffe framed prints, which he collects.

Off the cleverly designed landing, the main en suite bedroom has a mixture of woods, and again there is evidence of affection for the past in the choice of pictures. The fourth bedroom is now Phil's dressing room while the bathroom with under-floor heating is spacious enough for lounging in the armchair.

The kitchen has been extended and revamped. "When we moved in the whole kitchen was brown - ceiling, units, walls, floors, all brown," says Kath. "Fortunately, my brother Vince, who owns Cleveland Kitchens, worked with us to design and build the perfect kitchen, making the most of all available light." "But I chose the wall tiles in the Inglenook," Phil is quick to point out.

Lasting impressions as I make my way back down the drive, now in darkness, are of a happy and welcoming home where family memories are treasured.

No doubt Kath is already back on the computer combing through Home Interiors...

**CONTACT**  
Vince Byrne: Cleveland Kitchens (01325) 369955



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## NE window shopping



### WET, WET, WET

SHOWER manufacturers Roman Limited, based at Newton Aycliffe, have launched a tanking starter kit to help customers complete the first step in installing a wetroom. The Wetrooms Tanking Kit Starter Box has simple step-by-step instructions and includes all the materials needed to complete the job of making a completely watertight base.

The box contains primer, sealing strip, a drain mat, and quick sealing membrane, and is enough to create a six-metre square, tanked area.

Says Roman's marketing director, David Osborne: "There have been a lot of fears over whether a bathroom can be watertight enough for a wetroom. We hope by offering this new starter pack it will show just how safe and fully waterproof a wetroom can be. It is a very simple guide that can easily be followed by experts, DIY enthusiasts and novices alike."

Roman also stocks the specialist waste system required for a wetroom – a trapped shower gully waste with chrome grill – and a large range of enclosures to complete the wetroom.

● Roman Limited, Whitworth Avenue, Aycliffe Industrial Estate, County Durham, DL5 6YN (01325) 311318 [www.roman-showers.com](http://www.roman-showers.com)

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### WARDROBE FANTASIES

WHILE you may not, Narnia-like, find a magical, snow-covered world at the back of your wardrobe, Tomlinsons Antiques – Europe's biggest antiques warehouse – has mountains of wardrobes in stock to fulfil your furniture fantasies.

Tomlinsons Antiques, based at Tockwith, between Wetherby and York, has more than 5,000 items in stock at any one time. From striking Victorian grandeur to decorative Arts and Crafts, there are wardrobes to suit every style and taste. All are in good condition or have been expertly restored.

One of the wardrobes said to have inspired CS Lewis when he penned *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, was an ornate double-door black oak wardrobe, handcrafted by Lewis's grandfather, a shipbuilder in Belfast.



Tomlinsons currently have a wrought oak wardrobe in stock, circa 1920-1940, priced at £995.

Among the Victorian wardrobes in stock at the moment is an imposing Victorian triple robe in mahogany priced at £3,750 from around 1880-1890.

For more information on antiques and to view the full range of furniture available at Tomlinsons visit [www.antique-furniture.co.uk](http://www.antique-furniture.co.uk). ABOVE: Edwardian walnut robe in walnut circa 1900-1910, £1,350 plus VAT

WHO said men aren't interested in what goes on in the kitchen? This LG SXS Titanium TV Side-by-Side refrigerator could change everything! It means there's no excuse for missing any of the action from this summer's World Cup, whether you're working in the kitchen or just grabbing another ice cold beer from the fridge. The integrated touch-screen 15inch remote controlled LCD display has TV, DVD, cable and radio connectivity. Available next month, from £2,499, at selected electrical retailers.



## NE interiors

Radiators are a must in most homes, but no-one can accuse them of being pretty. So after spending the bulk of his career in manufacturing, Ken Hill is now tapping into the trend for custom made covers. He talks to SARAH FOSTER



COVER-UP: Ken Hill with an example from his range

## A warm front

IT seems that nowadays, we're all obsessed with our homes. Be it carpets or curtains, wardrobes or windows, it's so important to get things right. So it's no surprise that when it comes to radiators, the same high standards apply. Let's face it, they can be pretty unattractive – and who wants something unsightly in an otherwise pristine room? It's this philosophy that underpins Ken Hill's business.

The 55-year-old, who lives at Rainton Gate, near Durham, trades as Radwell Covered (NE), specialising in radiator covers. It's a big departure from the early years of his career. "I started in 1969 on a staff apprenticeship, working for a company called Morganite Resistors in Jarrow," he says. "Then I had a couple of years as a senior design engineer at ITT Components in Great Yarmouth. I came back to the North-East to work for Morganite Resistors again, which had been taken over by Allen Bradley Electronics."

After several years in manufacturing, in 2002, Ken joined The Creative Christmas Company, a Langley Park-based firm making Christmas decorations. He got involved in his current trade when things went wrong. "They had to close down the manufacturing operation because there was a lot of competition from China," he says. "I found it very difficult to get another job in a senior position because of my age. The guy who owned The Creative Christmas Company, Tom Baker, recommended me to his brother Robert, who owns Radwell Covered Limited. I went to Buckinghamshire to look round the factory and see how they exhibit their product, how they go to people's homes and how the product is fitted. Then I was offered the franchise."

As the first franchisee, Ken hopes to build on the firm's success, supplying radiator covers to the North. He says he's thorough in what he does. "What I'm basically offering is a personal service."

he says. "I'll exhibit at a show, someone will show an interest and I'll take their name and telephone number and make an appointment at a time convenient to us both. I will then go to their home and measure the radiator, and the customer will choose whatever they want. Once they've decided, the cover is specially made to their size and specifications by the parent company. It takes four to six weeks from when I've taken the measurements."

While they must have a grille to let the heat out, covers come in different guises. According to Ken, they're always tailored to the customer's needs. "They're made from MDF and we do a spray painted finish as well as a veneered finish," he says. "We can do oak, mahogany, maple... whatever. We can even colour match to the person's room."

Both decorative and functional, covers are seen as items of furniture. If the customer requires, they can form a real feature. "We do a drawer unit, which is effectively a radiator cover with drawers above it," says Ken. "It's like a hall table, if you like. We also do bespoke furniture including bookcases, and we can even make a radiator cover into a bookcase."

With fans like House Doctor Ann Maurice, and Lawrence Llewelyn-Bowen, who displayed a Radwell Covered product on TV, Ken hopes covers are on the rise. For the moment, he's just enjoying his new trade. "I'm finding it totally different but it's very satisfying," he says. "I'm putting in a lot of hard work, but you only get out what you put in."

● Ken will stage displays at shows throughout the region, including Sunderland International Airshow, the North-East Motor Show and the Durham County Show, as well as at garden centres and shopping malls.  
● To book a consultation, contact him on 0191-584 3843 or 07947 113679.







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# Lighting the way

Lighting can make or break a room, but it often comes way down the list of priorities when we're doing up a room. The founders of a North Yorkshire-based lighting consultancy believe this should change.

**S**INCE the launch of The Lighthouse Company two years ago, Judy Staveley and Judith Graham have lit up lots of people's lives, producing home and, more recently, garden lighting ideas for clients in the North. Converted barns, dining and sitting rooms and kitchens have all received lighting make-overs from the dynamic duo.

As independent consultants, they offer professional and impartial design advice and source lighting products from across the world.

"People are now much more interested in lighting and are aware of what can be achieved. Lighting, more than any other factor, can immediately change the atmosphere of a room or a house – both internally and externally," says Judy.

"In the garden, lighting can also add another dimension, emphasising key features such as statues and trees and turning terraces and summerhouses into true outdoor living areas," adds Judith. "When the unpredictable British weather means we can't be outside as often as we would like, by lighting the garden we can dramatically improve the view from inside."

Judith used to work at Harlow Carr Gardens at Harrogate and Judy is a graduate of London's KLC, the UK's leading school of design, where her course included the technical aspects of lighting as well as general interior design and project management. Judith also used to run a successful curtain making business before doing a gardening course at Askham Bryan College.

## TOP TIPS FOR LIGHTING

- 1 Low-level marker lighting, activated from beside the bed, ensures that there is enough light to show the way to the bathroom during the night, without the likelihood of falling over any obstacle, or waking anyone up.
- 2 Uplighting for a picture can create a more dramatic effect than lighting it from above.
- 3 When lighting a mirror, remember to light the subject and not the mirror itself. The light source should not shine onto the mirror.
- 4 Subtle garden lighting can be magical. Use focus lighting on architectural features, such as sculptures, or special trees, which can create wonderful shadows and vistas.
- 5 Conservatories are best lit with up lighters and table lamps. If pendants and spotlights are used, they will show reflections in the glass at night.
- 6 Living room lighting should be versatile. Different layers of light, created with the use of lamps, specific focus lighting, wallwashers and downlighters, give interest, dramatic effect and change of mood.

■ The Lighthouse Company can be contacted on 01765 640803, email [info@thelighthousecompany.biz](mailto:info@thelighthousecompany.biz) or visit their website [www.thelighthousecompany.biz](http://www.thelighthousecompany.biz)



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**NE gardening**



**VERDANT:** lavender beds outside the castle; below, head gardener Paul Bramley

Hyacinth  
 heaven

Dating back 200 years, the gardens at Ripley Castle provide a fascinating link with the past, as SARAH FOSTER finds out

**E**NTERING the village of Ripley, off a roundabout between Ripon and Harrogate, you can't fail to be struck by its charm. Arranged around a village green, its light stone buildings evoke a scene from a story book. Progressing to the castle, the image endures, its regal turrets standing tall against the skyline.

Owned by the Ingilby family, who still live in the castle, the centuries-old village was apparently modelled on one in France. Once a grand private residence, the castle and grounds are now a tourist attraction, with hundreds of visitors flooding through the gates each year.

Although for many, an exploration of the family treasures or an event in the corporate suite more than justifies their presence, I'm here for a different reason: to discover the castle gardens. In this, I'm ably assisted by head gardener Paul Bramley.

Aided by two other full-time staff and, currently, a student, Paul's job is to tend the four-acre walled gardens and eight-acre woodland gardens. But as he explains, it doesn't end there. "We're also responsible for all the window boxes. Because there are so many weddings, everything has got to be on a white theme," he says. "We do more than 100 window boxes in the village as well, as most of the houses are owned by Sir Thomas (Ingilby). They get done twice a year."

Standing on the sweeping driveway in front of the castle's east wing, Paul describes how this has recently been re-modelled, reverting to the oval-shaped lawn that carriages once drove round. Opening out to the left is the vast deer park, designed by Capability Brown.

Moving closer, we catch sight of a herd of deer, conspicuous amid the wide green vista. The land is dotted with trees – some of which, Paul says, have been recently planted. "I think it was last year that we planted just short of 70 English native trees like oak, hornbeam, sycamore and beech," he says. "We do get one or two trees as wedding gifts."

Snaking round to the right, past the estate of-



**PAUL'S TOP THREE PLANTS**

English oak trees, dicentras, primula auriculas.

**Essential equipment**  
 good quality secateurs.



fice, we come to the magnificent walled gardens. Once the secluded spot where the lord and lady came to stroll, the area has changed little since those more affluent times. My first sight is of a huge rectangular lawn with elegant buildings at the far side and colourful borders skirting the perimeter. It's pretty breathtaking, both for its sheer scale and its sense of timelessness. Paul leads me to the first of the buildings – the old fire engine room – which still contains the ancient vehicle that once served the castle and village. He explains that now it's

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**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** all the hanging baskets and window boxes on the estate are white; a visitor enjoys the gardens; a dramatic display

used for art classes. To the right is the orangery – originally the home of such ‘exotic’ plants as pineapples and palms and which is now full of cacti. The hothouses beside it are bursting with tropical plants including delicate orchids, used for table decorations at weddings.

Climbing the wall beside the hothouses is a pale blue wisteria – with its many shoots, Paul says this is a nightmare to maintain – and further along, the boar’s head fountain, a reminder of the Ingilby family crest. If you visit during late spring, as I did, you will also see one of the gardens’ most prized assets – the national hyacinth collection.

One of only two sites in Britain chosen for the honour (the other is in Cambridge), Ripley receives a yearly batch of 40 unusual hyacinth species from the International Bulb Centre in Holland. These are planted in the beds to the south of the hothouses and, as Paul explains, act as an advert. Once spent, the bulbs are dried and replanted elsewhere.

Passing through a gap between some yew trees, we reach another fascinating part of the walled gardens – the kitchen garden. Herbs are grown here for their medicinal, culinary and aromatic qualities, and Paul says chefs from the castle and nearby Boar’s Head hotel are always coming to stock up. Vegetables include staples like leeks, onions and carrots as well as trendier varieties like fennel and rocket. Nothing goes to waste: what isn’t used by the hotel is sold at the castle shop.

With many rare and ancient breeds, Ripley is committed to plant conservation. Its Henry Doubleday Research Association beds ensure that by means of a seed bank, threatened varieties are preserved.

Leaving the neat order of the walled gardens, we enter the rambling woodland gardens, where I’m greeted by an awesome sight – the 400 year-old sweet chestnut tree. With a massive 27ft girth and covered in burrs, this has an aura of ancient wisdom. Like the rest of the gardens, it has stood the test of time and leaving them, I’m sure they’ll do so for years to come.

● There will be a country house plant sale at Ripley on Sunday, May 21, from 10am to 4pm. [www.ripleycastle.co.uk](http://www.ripleycastle.co.uk)



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**INVOLVING:** older gappers can get involved with all sorts of projects in a variety of countries. Above: getting to grips with a baby croc at Shamwari Game Reserve in South Africa. Right: the vibrant colours of India and walking with leopards in Africa

New research says that more people than ever are discovering a thirst for adventure in their 40s and upwards. MARIE CARTER finds out what they're up to



# The denture venturers

**S**IXTY-something Margaret Fleck realises there's a lot more to life than catching a free bus ride to bingo. In fact, she's decided to catch a ride to Brazil instead. One of a growing number of older adventure seekers, who are radically altering our perception of the typical gap year traveller, the South Shields mother of three and grandmother of six has just embarked on a three-month trip of a lifetime to a little known area of Brazil. "I'll be teaching English to the locals in a small village called Foz Do Iguacu," says Margaret, admitting that until recently she didn't think such a trip would be possible for people like her. "I thought it was something that students did, and although I was always envious of younger people who went on those sorts of holidays, I never imagined that there were groups out there supporting older people like me."

The trauma of being widowed a year ago left Margaret feeling that she needed to do something positive, to turn around what could have been a life-sapping event.

Surfing the Internet one day she stumbled upon the Travellers Worldwide site, which is one of a growing number of companies supporting career and mature

gappers. The company offers supported travel to a variety of far flung destinations from Borneo and Brazil to Ghana and Guatemala.

Whether you fancy teaching English to a group of Kenyan schoolchildren or helping to look after abandoned baby elephants at a Sri Lankan sanctuary, organisations like these are increasingly fulfilling long-cherished dreams. And as placements are flexible, lasting from just two weeks to a year, gappers can choose to swap their annual fortnight in Tenerife for a fulfilling experience or else commit to a potentially life-changing lengthy stay.

"The possibilities are endless," says Margaret. "There's now no barrier to travelling when you're left by yourself."

Not that she didn't challenge herself already, with shifts as a district nurse, amateur dramatics and her work as secretary of the local University of the Third Age. Now Margaret is also busy getting to grips with the Portuguese language.

"Anyone thinking about doing this should just go for it. There's bound to be a feeling of the unknown, but it's also very exciting and good to know that I'm giving something back," Margaret says.



**LIFE CHANGING:** Kathryn and Ian teaching in Sri Lanka; below, the Pinawala Elephant Orphanage, also in Sri Lanka



**USEFUL CONTACTS**

- Travellers Worldwide  
www.travellersworldwide.com – One of the leading providers of gap year travel opportunities, supporting many older gappers. Their website includes case studies of older gappers. Contact: Travellers Worldwide, 7 Mulberry Close, Ferring, West Sussex, BN12 5HY, Tel: 01903 502 595, info@travellersworldwide.com.
- Gapyear.com www.gapyear.com – Britain's biggest gap year website, with a section for over 25s, and case studies of older gappers. For career break information and advice, visit www.thecareerbreaksite.com.
- For more advice and information for older travellers, contact Gap Year For Grown Ups, 45 High Street, Tunbridge Wells, Kent, TN1 1XL, Tel: 01892 701 881, www.gapyearforgrownups.co.uk



She is far from alone. According to a recent report by market researchers Mintel, of the 520,000 Britons who take a gap year abroad each year, some 90,000 are taking career breaks and 200,000 are over 55. Only the remaining 230,000, less than half the total figure, are aged between 18 and 24 – the group that pioneered the idea of the gap year.

A spokesman for Mintel explains that as older gappers have already spent many years working, they generally have more disposable income to spend on travel, volunteering, courses or expeditions than pre- or post-university gappers. So called "denture venturers" also have more experience and can often get more out of a break than students, who may just choose to spend six months with a bad hangover lying on the beach.

For the younger "career gappers", dissatisfaction with lacklustre jobs is no longer borne like a modern servitude. "Many people are realising that not only do they not want to be a fully paid-up member of the rat race, they want total change. The best thing about it is that people know that they can make their dreams a reality. They can work hard and then take time off, and usually they have no regrets about it," explains Tom Griffiths, founder of Gapyear.com.

Companies are being forced to change their attitudes to employees who want to take time out. "Employers are stuck because they are faced with their most valuable workers suddenly heading off. But worldwide trav-

el develops you and your thinking, which is very important in today's global marketplace," Tom explains.

For one forty-plus couple, a career break to Sri Lanka five years ago looks like it could develop into a whole new way of life. Ian and Kathryn Merrick, in their mid forties and fifties respectively, spent three months teaching five to 18-year-olds near the remote National Park of Handugamuwa in the Matale district of Sri Lanka.

"The area was very rural and the villagers make their own entertainment so there was very little to do once it got dark. It's unwise to leave the house because of the danger from snakes and elephants," says Ian. "This sort of trip is ideal for people who are little bit older, but it would probably not suit gap year students looking for a party atmosphere. The voluntary teaching can be both frustrating and rewarding but free time not teaching can be spent doing anything from swimming, visiting the local town, cycling or just lazing in the sun with a book."

The Merricks made many friends in Sri Lanka, and kept in frequent contact with over the years. After the tsunami struck, they went over to help for three weeks in January 2005. "It was heartbreaking, a complete scene of devastation," Ian admits.

Now the Merricks run a walking centre near Derwentwater in the Lake District, but they would like to return to Sri Lanka, this time for good.

"As soon as we can, we plan to move out there and set up a school. Our experiences in Sri Lanka have not been a holiday, but seem to us more like a vocation."

Jennifer Perkes, co-founder of Travellers Worldwide says: "At a time when society tries to label people as no longer useful because of their age, our volunteers choose to go out there and prove exactly how useful they are. If you see the wonderful work they do, you couldn't help but agree that their volunteering contribution is nothing short of extraordinary."

"They take a lifetime's experience with them and make a significant difference to the quality of life of the underprivileged or abused and, in the case of animals, to the threatened or abandoned. How many of us can claim to be that useful – at any age?"

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## me and my wardrobe



Kathryn Pick, 26, is the buyer and supervisor for the ladieswear department at Triads on Linthorpe Road, Middlesbrough

**Describe your look**

Mixed. Some days I'm really casual in baggy jeans and a T-shirt and other days I'll wear a shirt and a skirt. I wear a bit of everything from tomboy to smart.

**What's your favourite item of clothing?**

My Y3 skinny jeans. They're a dark wash and the fit's really nice.

**What's the most you've ever spent on an item of clothing?**

I recently bought a Prada Sport zip-up hoodie. It was half price in the sale and it was still £120. It's quite fitted and you can either wear it casual or smart.

**What's been your worst buy?**

Probably some D&G pink suede shoes that I've only worn about twice. I think they were about £110.

**What are your favourite shops?**

Obviously Triad! I also like All Saints in Leeds. I haven't been there recently but I go down to Leeds and York. I like Sarah Coggles in York. My main shop is probably Topshop, where I go for basics.

**Which celebrity's style do you admire and why?**

Probably Kate Moss. She's just so individual. She always seems to wear the forthcoming trend and everyone seems to follow.



■ Triads, Linthorpe Road, Middlesbrough (01642) 249989.

**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:**  
Topshop black jeans, Oasis belt, top from Triads; the other two outfits are both from Triads

# 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

**N**UMBER Twenty 2 has served many a pint over the 11 years it has been based in Coniscliffe Road, Darlington. It is favoured for its guest ales, fine wine and the social conversations that are never interrupted by loud music, making it a popular place to catch up with friends. Proprietor Ralph Wilkinson places service high on his list of priorities, meaning staff are always well presented and courteous.

**ANDREA WHITEHOUSE**  
Andrea, 38, from Dubai, was at Number Twenty 2 revisiting friends. Whenever she is in the area, she likes to shop in Middlesbrough as she believes it has a good variety of shops and brands. Andrea's job as cabin crew ensures she gets plenty of exercise, but she also attributes her slim figure to a no carbohydrate rule



ANDREA WHITEHOUSE

after 6pm. She was wearing a top from Morgan with River Island trousers and Ravel boots. Her CD of the moment is Robbie Williams' latest.

**KEVAN SMITH**  
Kevan is self employed. He was at Number Twenty 2 drowning his sorrows in some real ale after watching Darlington FC getting thrashed at home. Kevan's Ted Baker suit was dark blue with a fine striped texture, his shirt was from Changes in Middlesbrough. Rather than quantity, Kevan shops for quality, meaning clothes and styles last longer so hours spent on shopping are reduced! Drinking lots of fluids is Kevan's tip for a healthy body... water, of course... and a good mosquito repellent if you are going somewhere hot.



JIM COOPER



SUZANNE ROBINSON

**ALAN GREY**  
Alan is a legal executive with an infectious personality. His suit was by Pierre Cardin from TK Maxx. His tip for looking good is to hang around with an old, overweight, ugly mate! Oh, and get some hair... Alan's favourite CD is Santana.

**SUZANNE ROBINSON**  
Suzanne, 38, is a self employed hairdresser. She prefers to shop in individual small shops that stock items that are different rather than large high street stores. Suzanne wore culottes with a sequinned jacket from River Island and her boots were bought in Holland. Lipstick is one beauty item Suzanne couldn't do without. Like Gill, Suzanne's music choice is governed by her daughter's taste, usually pop and party.

**JIM COOPER**  
21-year-old Jim is studying computing and networking. He also works at Republic on a weekend and is a fan of the brand. He also likes Fourth Chamber in Darlington's Post House Wynd for a good range of urban street wear. Jim's glasses were by Oakley, his jacket by Soul Cal, top by Criminal with Republic jeans and Swiss trainers, altogether giving a cool yet stylish look.  
● Number Twenty 2, 22 Coniscliffe Road, Darlington (01325) 354590

■ Judie McCourt is a lunchtime presenter for Century FM and Allison McKay is the Creative Director of NE Representation supplying models, photographers, hair, make-up, stylists, film extras and locations (01325) 488 385



KEVAN SMITH & ALAN GREY

**GILL CHAMBER**  
The 39-year-old office manager was wearing a skirt with embroidered detail from Cruise and black leather boots from Next. Her top was an old faithful. Gill enjoys shopping at the MetroCentre and loves Debenhams. Gill had a natural glow to her skin which she believes can be credited to not using sunbeds, protecting her skin in the sun, always removing make-up at night and investing in a good fake tan. Music depends on what her eight-year-old daughter is listening to.



GILL CHAMBER

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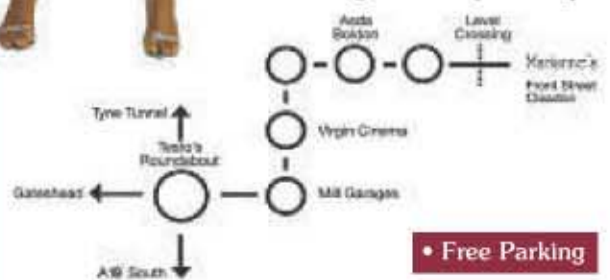
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A new bike centre, part of major changes at Hamsterley Forest, is set to boost business at the beauty spot. SARAH FOSTER talks to Martin Stout, the driving force behind the facility



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# On yer bike!

**F**OR many years, while undeniably attractive, Hamsterley Forest had little else aside from nature. You could have a picnic and a walk, explore the trails and rugged woodland, but there were precious few facilities. In the past year, however, all this has changed. A £225,000 investment has seen new bike routes and a competition course, and phase two of the development will bring yet more picturesque trails.

The main aim of the improvements, being introduced by the Forestry Commission, is to enhance the area's appeal, enticing families to come and visit. As the man responsible for bike hire, Martin Stout is key to this strategy.

"I'm hoping that it's not just going to be a local resource, although it definitely will be," he says. "I'm certain that we'll bring people from far and wide. I hope the local pubs and B&Bs will see an increase in turnover – I see it as having a spin-off for everyone."

Having just assumed his role, Martin is new to the forest's management, yet for many years, he's followed its progress. "I've always liked Hamsterley Forest and been interested in its development," he says. "I've been going to public meetings about it for probably about two years now to throw in the occasional idea."

A cyclist himself – although he says he's "nothing flash" – Martin is ideally suited to cycle hire. His retail background includes an eight year stint at Halfords, and he's fully trained as a cycling coach. It was through his latest job, running Specialist Cycles, based in Meadowfield, that he got involved in Hamsterley Forest.

"The cycle hire facility came up for tender at the back end of last year and I thought I'd have a go at it," says Martin.

"The gentleman who ran it previously was 60-plus and decided he wanted to retire, plus the forest itself had just gone through phase one of the development and they were looking for someone to come and be part of phase two. As a company, we wanted to look more towards

*I'm certain we'll bring people from far and wide. I see it as having a spin-off for everyone... it's all healthy outdoor fun*

Martin Stout

training and this was a great opportunity."

Martin set up Wood 'n' Wheels as an offshoot of the shop and while at present, he's still in a hut, he has plans for somewhere much grander. "We're going to be putting in a new, purpose-made cycle centre in four to six months," he says. "There'll be a cycle mechanic on site all the time, so if someone has a mechanical problem on a trail, they can come and have a sit down while he sorts it out. Once we've got that in place, we can do all sorts. We can get groups in to do training in cycle maintenance, we can take kids out for rides and get those more technically inclined into engineering. It's all healthy, outdoor fun."

Of course, the core business will still be cycle hire – and Martin aims to run it well. "We've got every size of bike it's possible to have," he says. "We've got two sizes of children's tow-alongs, and if you need a leader, we'll send one out. We're going to do escorted routes – and not just for groups."

With plans to take on further staff, and make the centre multi-purpose, with even access to the Internet, Martin has his work cut out. Yet from his perspective, it's worth the effort to put the forest on the map. "It's all happening at the moment – it's great," he says.





Since its name change last July, Hotel Bannatyne has seen custom soar. General manager John Price tells SARAH FOSTER the secrets of its success



Drinks prices are cheaper than in most of the town. We're doing a lot of stuff that bucks the trend in hotels and it's working

## What's in a name

**W**ITH its smart appearance and prime location, The New Grange Hotel, in Darlington's bustling centre, was always a popular haunt. As well as attracting overnight guests, it saw a steady stream of daytime visitors. Maxine's restaurant, a place renowned for its fine food, or even just popped in for a drink. So with such a successful brand, why change the hotel's name?

The new title, Hotel Bannatyne, came as part of a massive refurbishment programme, costing more than £1m. According to John Price, the general manager, it was a matter of bringing the business up to date – including the owner adding his surname. "It's his way of defining quality," he says. "It's the same for the health clubs. There's so much competition out there these days. Ten or 15 years ago, having a TV in your bedroom was a luxury. Now it's expected. As much as the service is really important, and that's what people remember, the quality of the product is essential."

As part of the changes, the old function suite has been replaced by 16 new bedrooms, bringing the total to 60. A new and improved function area, complete with air conditioning and disabled access, and which can seat 150, now stands at the other side of the hotel.

Along with structural work, the hotel has undergone a general facelift. Among the most striking new looks is the bar, now more modern in creams and browns. Although the original bedrooms all retain the original character of this Grade II listed building, John takes me into one of the new bedrooms and it, too, has a contemporary feel. Also in creams and browns, it's simple but stylish, with quality furniture throughout. The bathroom is pure white and sparkling clean.

According to John, the renovations have prompted a very positive reaction from guests.

"The occupancy level for bedrooms has remained the same – we're still retaining the same occupancy level, despite the extra rooms," he says. "We have a lot of regulars and in the past they were having to book up possibly a month in advance. Now we can accommodate the regulars at shorter notice and the new guests as well, which is a huge advantage to them and to us. It's been fantastic."

It's not just the accommodation side that has benefited. John says every part of the business

has seen an upturn in trade. "The restaurant has increased covers for lunch and dinner since July/August," he says. "It's been a massive success. Weddings have always been popular but even these are on the increase."

As well as hosting weddings, the new function suite is in demand as a conference space and John partly puts this down to the extra bedrooms. "We can cater for larger conferences now and people can stay overnight," he says.

Apart from comfortable surroundings, Hotel Bannatyne has another big selling point – competitive prices. With bed and breakfast for two costing only £70 on weekdays and £60 on weekends, it can claim to be among the cheapest in town. John says that unlike at many hotels, prices are deliberately kept low. "We do a two course lunch from Monday to Saturday for £4.95 and we also do an early bird three courses for £8.95 on weekday evenings."

"Hotels tend to overprice but we do these offers to get people through the door and then customers can experience our facilities. Drinks prices are cheaper than in most of the town. We're doing a lot that bucks the trend in hotels and it's working."

With the revamp complete and customers flocking in, John and his team can now focus on what they do best – providing good service. "I run all the weddings and I'll be at the door waiting to greet the happy couple with a glass of champagne, then I'll be with them until the moment they go to bed," says John. "It's that personal touch. To me, it's just as important as having a clean bedroom and a modern, air conditioned function room."

"My background is in service and Duncan Bannatyne and my managing director Nigel Armstrong have done their bit in terms of improving the product and demonstrating their vision, so the partnership is really successful."



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**THE GREAT** thing about hard-disk based music devices like the Apple iPod is their versatility. With a fully loaded Pod you can carry around your entire music collection in a jacket pocket, move data files or listen to a library of audio books on the move. And when you get home a Pod makes a great entertainer. Just hook it up to your hi-fi and it will play your tunes for days (or until the battery goes flat). A hard disk music machine makes the perfect party jukebox. Just switch on and forget about swapping CDs for the rest of the evening. But what do you do if you junked your hi-fi when you splashed out on Apple's finest? If you don't have a "proper" music system at home, fear not. The incredible popularity of the iPod and its smaller brother, the Nano, means there is a speaker solution available for every budget.

**BEST FOR AUDIOPHILES**  
**Cyruslink Linkdock**  
 The tiny Linkdock from top audio specialist Cyrus is almost as tiny as the Nano itself. As a result it's probably not at its best straining to make your music heard in a party environment. In a quiet room or on a bedside table, however, it is a sonic revelation. About the only real musical criticism is a lack of bass but all the smaller music solutions suffer the same problem - the speakers just aren't big enough to displace the kind of air needed for real rumble. For less than £100, though, the Linkdock tuned by Cyrus is an excellent investment.

**BEST LEFT TO THE WEALTHY**  
**Bose SoundDock**  
 America audio company Bose is well known for delivering premium priced products that do an excellent job but the SoundDock costs more than an iPod. It's a mains-only unit that also charges your devices as it plays. The sound is excellent - lots of depth and none of the tinny sound that blights cheaper solutions - but it's very pricey and not exactly portable. Cost: £250.

**BEST FOR HOLIDAYS**  
**Logitech mm50**  
 The great thing about the Logitech is its portability. It comes with a carry case and, unique among the sound solutions here, has its own rechargeable battery so you don't need access to a household electricity supply for power. According to Logitech, the cell should be good for around ten hours but this depends on your preferred volume setting. Keep it realistic and you should get a full day's play between recharges. Even better, when you plug in the mm50, the base also juices your iPod (provided it is docked at the time) so that's one less adaptor to pack in your suitcase. Price: £100.

**BEST FOR PARTIES**  
**Kensington sx2000**  
 This is a big unit more at home on a shelf than by your bedside. It also utilises some pretty nifty technology. The speaker panel is a superslim NXT type for big sounds that can fill a modest-sized room even during the general hub-bub of a party. It's a shame the panel can't be wall-mounted - how cool would that be? - and it really could do with a remote so you can flick between tracks from the other side of the room, but that's about it. Decent value for £100.

**BEST FORGOTTEN**  
**Portable speakers**  
 The popularity of the iPod has seen the return of the audio lovers' nightmare product: battery powered portable speakers. Usually selling for less than twenty quid, these plastic ear bashers simply can't do music justice. Most of them have a pathetic output, making them virtually useless in any kind of noisy environment outside the library. Because they are two separate speakers, you have to trail wires all over the place and they rarely look cool. If this is all your budget can stretch to, keep your cash in your wallet and save up for something better.  
 www.thisisthenortheast.co.uk/leisure/bytes

NE food

# Funny honey

With flavours like garlic and chilli, a new kind of honey is setting taste buds tingling. SARAH FOSTER reports

**W**E'VE barely met when Linda Reay starts feeding me honey. From a giant Tupperware box she brings out jars of the stuff, laying them out in front of me. With each new flavour, she dips in a spoon and dribbles some on my finger. The honey is sweet, but not as sickly as I expect (I'm not a honey fan, as I admit when Linda asks). It's surprisingly subtle, with the taste coming through as a pleasant hint.

I try the more conventional kinds – flavours like orange, lemon and ginger – before moving on to something a little more adventurous. When I admit to liking spicy things, I'm given a drop of honey with chilli. It's a strange concoction. Although it's sweet, it has a definite chilli kick and while I can't imagine it on toast, it's really quite pleasant. "It's quite good for those who don't have a sweet tooth," says Linda.

For the past seven years, she and her husband Tony have run KidHugs, a firm specialising in flavoured honey. They met while working in the cosmetics industry in Linda's native USA and resettled in the North-East, where Tony is from. The couple got into selling honey entirely by chance.

"My husband and I have a friend in America who is a bee keeper," says Linda. "As a thank you gift for something we had done for him he sent us a package of honeys. My husband and I didn't like honey so we gave it to the kids. They were very excited about it, which we were surprised about because kids don't like healthy things. We tasted it and discovered it was not what we had expected."

Inside the package were honey sticks (straws filled with coloured and flavoured honey), which had obvious child appeal. Yet their subtle taste meant Linda and Tony also liked them. "We actually did like honey – we just hadn't realised it," says Linda. "We learned how ignorant we were about it."

Sure this modern take on honey would catch on, Linda and Tony, who live in Darlington, began selling their friend's produce. Then September 11 came – and brought a halt to business. "All our stock got stuck on the docks and we had to come up with an alternative," says Linda. "We called our friend and he suggested we make the honey ourselves. Knowing nothing about it, we had to learn really fast."

Keen to find a new supplier, the couple approached local bee keepers and found several who were willing to come on board. "We only use small, independent bee keepers, mostly in the North-East," says Linda.

Then came the matter of sourcing flavours. "After some research, we found a flavouring company which made all natural flavours," she adds.

To begin with, Linda and Tony played it safe, selling mainly fruit flavoured honey. Then customers started asking for other things. "We started with your basic ginger, blackberry, lemon – stuff that you could imagine going with honey – then we started getting people asking,

"will you make this? will you make that?" says Linda. "People bugged us for two years to make garlic flavoured honey. Finally, I said I'd try some and it flew out. It's become our best seller."

I wonder what on earth you would do with this, but Linda explains. "It's a nice glaze for meats and stir-frys," she says. "You can even make garlic bread with it. All you're doing is replacing the spread, and you're not using any oils or cholesterol. Honey has a lot of nutritional benefits. We didn't set out in the business of trying to push the health benefits, but as we've gone along, we've discovered them."

Sold in pots of 100 or 200ml, the honey is meant to be used sparingly. While it can go on toast (except, perhaps, the garlic and chilli kinds), it's more for use in cooking. "Some flavours are nice just for the taste but they're not really designed for the breakfast table," says Linda. "They're designed as cooking sauces, for salads and dessert sauces. The market that we are after is the working mum who needs to be able to do things quickly and easily, and in a healthy way. Honey has no fat, no 'e' numbers and no cholesterol, and it's acceptable on lots of diets. Because it's a natural sugar, even diabetics can have it, as long as it's in moderation."

Such is demand that Linda and Tony now spend most weekends at fairs. During the week, they sell in offices and hospitals. "Whenever we are doing office buildings or hospitals, or a specific charity event, we give a percentage of our profits to charity," says Linda. Another nice touch is that each recyclable pot comes with a sweet pea seed – to be a future source of food for bees.

With fans like Ffion Hague, who bought some honey at Leyburn Show, and celebrity chefs, KidHugs can only go from strength to strength. For Linda and Tony, success could not be sweeter.

**KidHugs HunnyTubs are available by mail order at £4 for 100ml and £7 for 200ml, plus £1.75 postage and packing. For more information, ring (01325) 249913 or visit [www.kidhugs.com](http://www.kidhugs.com)**

**Linda and Tony will be at The Dales Festival of Food and Drink in Leyburn on April 29 and 30 and May 1.**

f

*People bugged us for two years to make garlic-flavoured honey. Finally, I said I'd try some and it flew out. It's become our best seller...*



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## NE motoring



**CHRYSLER 300C:** luxury without the luxury pricetag

# Colossus of roads

Big really is beautiful when it comes to the superb new Chrysler, says Motoring Correspondent IAN LAMMING

**B**IG impressive cars are few and far between on our roads today. Yes, people carriers are large and accommodating but they also look like minibuses. There are also the myriad off-roaders that are physically grand but in this case don't count either.

When it comes to luxurious saloons, impressive leviathans that force you to double-take, then you have to look hard and long. There are big BMWs, Jaguars and Mercedes, true, but their curvaceous lines hide their real girth.

Really, when it comes to physical presence, there are only Rolls-Royces and Bentleys that truly stand out from the crowd and how many of those do you see up North?

But thanks to Chrysler that is all going to change. In the new 300C Chrysler has a car that stops passers-by of all ages in their tracks.

It is simply huge with Bentley-esque lines and a grille the size of an American state. Its sheer presence on the road is as immense. Its proportions and the feel-good factor this creates behind the wheel are of equal scale.

It is the poor man's Roller. The big black bonnet stretches out towards the horizon – and then a bit. Its capacious interior gives space and comfort levels the Queen would be proud of. It is colossal.

In a world of swoopy lines it is pleasantly slab-sided and retro. The last person I gave a lift to joked: "Thank you Parker, you can take the rest of the night off."

"Yes m'lady," I found myself responding while tipping my imaginary chauffeur's cap.

Inside, the myth is perpetuated by a luxurious cabin of grey leather and walnut. Glorious white faced clocks stare back from the dash which is neat and understated in a thoroughly splendid way.

The steering wheel is large and chunky with a look and feel of yesteryear, though contemporary controls are subtly housed in its hub. The interior oozes sheer class, it is timeless, comfortable and appealing.

Every luxury imaginable is on hand: climate control, satellite navigation, a superb

sounding hi-fi, cruise control, electric sun-roof, electric windows, trip computer, electrically operated heated seats and xenon lights to name a few.

No price can be put on the voluminous space, which few cars can match at any price.

When it comes to the price, the bill for this taste of elegance and luxury is as shocking as the car itself. It has the feel of an £80K to £100K limo but weighs in at a feeble £25,750 – unbelievable, surely some mistake. Even the top of the range 5.7 litre V8 is only £32,995, a staggeringly low amount for a car this luxurious, this accomplished, this size.

It's the same story on the road. The 300C is pure delight to drive. Never mind the feel-good factor, this is a real driver's car. The 3.0 litre V6 turbo diesel engine is magnificent, churning out a silky smooth 218bhp and 376ftlbs of torque. That's enough to hurl it to the benchmark 60mph in just seven seconds.

On the motorway there is little more than a whisper from the unit as the 300C gobbles the miles with aplomb. On the minor roads the huge car accelerates, stops and handles with the best of them. The ride is long-travel so expect maximum comfort. But handling isn't sacrificed and through the bends it is nice and composed. For such a big car it is amazingly spirited to drive and the real bonus is at the pumps where you can expect to see the car return up to 34mpg.

The 300C scores highly in every department and I can't remember the last car I enjoyed driving and being in so much. There are few cars on the road today that look as impressive as this gargantuan Chrysler and, with its affordable price tag, none that are such amazing value for money.





**STYLISH:** Simonstone Hall has played host to Kate Winslet, Jeremy Clarkson and Judith Chalmers

# NE connections



It may be hidden away, but Simonstone Hall is full of country house charm. It's also good for star spotting, as Women's Editor SARAH FOSTER finds out

**O**N the upstairs landing of Simonstone Hall, a small hotel amid the fells of upper Wensleydale, Jason Woodger holds out a key. "This is the room brides and grooms tend to go for," he says, opening the door.

The room is vast, with a four-poster bed as its grand centrepiece, and stunning countryside views. "Imagine waking up to that on your first day of marriage," says Jason, the hotel manager. It's only later that I discover the famous names who did just this - A-list actress Kate Winslet and her first husband, Jim Threapleton.

Chatting to Jason in the hotel bar that I learn that it was here, in the unlikely setting of Simonstone Hall, that the star couple spent their honeymoon. According to staff, they were the model guests. "All they seemed to do was play backgammon," says a woman in the office, who remembers the whole affair.

Having recently arrived at Simonstone Hall, Jason missed the Threapletons' visit. Yet they're not the only stars to have graced its walls. "Jeremy Clarkson and Judith Chalmers have both stayed here," he says.

Jason's appointment, last October, coincided with a change of gear for the hotel. A former hunting lodge, it was once the private bolthole of landed gentry, and only opened its doors to guests in the 1980s. Although still very much a hunters' haunt, it's now reaching out to the leisure market, as well as trying to claim a share of the wedding trade.

According to Jason, the key concern is letting people know the place exists. "We'd like to make more people aware that we're here and how nice the hotel is," he says. "The fact that we only have two stars is really deceiving. We need to make people aware of exactly what we are, and the general consensus among a lot of the guests is that they don't believe the rating."

As Jason shows me round, this statement rings true. Although I'm no expert, the styl-

# Beautiful bolthole

ish decor and opulent feel speak of all-out luxury. A new addition is the Orangerie, a relaxed alternative to the main restaurant. With its simple furniture and wooden floor, it's chic yet cosy, and features like the glass-covered well retain a link with the hotel's past.

Moving through to the older part, there are wood-panelled dining rooms complete with animals' heads and the most striking room of all - a spacious lounge with light flooding in from the stone-framed window. The view of the fells, like that from many other aspects, is limitless.

While firmly traditional, the hotel decor isn't fussy or overdone. Its classic style is

thanks to former manager Jill Stott. "She left as general manager but she's still involved in the hotel," says Jason. "She goes round and chooses the soft furnishings, and she's designed and bought all the stuff for the new bathrooms in some of the rooms."

Such is its appeal that many staff - like Jill - have long-standing links with Simonstone Hall. Yet there's also a crop of new faces, recruited by Jason.

For Jason, age isn't a factor when it comes to choosing staff. "When I'm recruiting people, I'm not looking for a starchy person to stand in the corner," he says. "I want someone to interact with the guests. It's finding that happy medium between attentive-

ness and creating a warm and friendly atmosphere."

If guests' responses are the litmus test, it seems he's got it right. "We get a lot of feedback about the staff and how friendly they are without being overbearing," says Jason.

With more changes planned, including a restaurant extension, Simonstone Hall is moving with the times. To meet modern needs, some of the bathrooms have power showers, and there's a constant drive to keep the rooms looking fresh and clean. "Some rooms are being refurbished at the moment," says Jason. "We have quite a structured plan in place where we do deep cleaning in four rooms a week and then it's just general maintenance and redecorating when it's needed."

Yet for all its innovations, the hotel hasn't strayed from its country house roots and, famous or not, you're sure to be treated like the lord of the manor.

■ Simonstone Hall, Hawes, North Yorkshire (01969) 667255, [www.simonstonehall.co.uk](http://www.simonstonehall.co.uk).

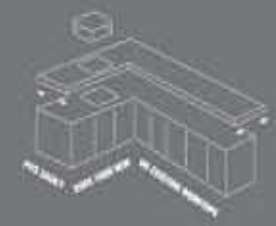
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*It's finding that happy medium between attentiveness and creating a warm and friendly atmosphere*

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**WINNING COMBINATION:** The Atlantic, above, and chef Darren with helper Sharon



**C**HEF of Darlington's Atlantic Bar & Grill Darren Parkhill wowed shoppers with his culinary expertise at a cook-off in the town's market place. As part of Foodiefest 2006, he competed with Phil Kirby, from the Hallgarth Hotel, in a Ready Steady Cook style competition. Despite a howling gale and just £10 to spend at the farmers' market – and with Northern Echo columnist

Sharon Griffiths as helper – Darren knocked up a winning combination from local produce, three courses including pan-seared venison with sweet potato rosti, sauteed shallots and broad bean cream. If you want to sample Darren's cooking, the Atlantic Bar & Grill is on Coniscliffe Road, Darlington. With fresh produce and a menu that changes weekly, there's always

plenty of choice. The Atlantic runs a happy hour from 12-2pm and 5-7pm, Monday to Saturday, when pizza and pasta are £4.95, and burgers cost £5.95. Steaks at the restaurant cost from £13.95, gammon steaks £12.95, chicken a la creme £9.95. Home-made desserts cost £3.75. ■ Atlantic Bar & Grill, 38 Coniscliffe, Darlington (01325) 382200

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