

# IN SAFE HANDS



'I WANTED TO OPEN UP THE ROOMS AND LIGHTEN THE ENTIRE AREA'



LEFT The kitchen design is by Plain English. RIGHT Thomson Carpenter

*A young interior designer's first commission involved juggling Anglo-French harmony in a house dating back to the fifteenth century*

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Nestled in rolling Sussex landscape, this lovely farmhouse, parts of which date back to the fifteenth century, has a simple, classic kitchen with two statement ovens – a red Lacanche range cooker and a black Aga. An English gentleman and his French wife own the property and, if you had already jumped to the conclusion that the Lacanche was a wisely influence, you would be wrong. In fact, it is the other way round – she insisted on the Aga. As Thomson Carpenter, who designed the interior explains: 'They are a couple who both love to cook and have very set ideas as to what they want to cook on – so we had to keep them both happy.'

The kitchen is a study of restful tranquillity – a gentle palette of soft greys and off-white, complete with a haphazard pile of sleeping dogs in the corner. The kitchen is Spitalfields by Plain English, designed in

collaboration with Annela Schranz from the company's Marylebone showroom. Thomson took his clients to see it and they readily agreed it was perfect for the farmhouse.

'I always try to take my clients to showrooms as it makes decisions much easier. For example, they fell in love with the copper sinks and were able to fully appreciate a quartz stone worktop – I am a huge fan, as it marks less than granite or marble, which are porous, and you can be very precise with the colour.' Thomson's philosophy is that seeing furniture in situ is so much easier than trying to explain and ask clients to visualise from a brochure or a computer screen. Also, products such as copper sinks can change dramatically in appearance depending on how you look after them. They can be left to age naturally or, with the right cleaning products, stay shiny. Seeing everything in a working kitchen showroom helps a client to properly understand what they are purchasing.

This relaxed, open space belies how the kitchen once looked. When Thomson first visited, it was half the size and the furniture, heavy and masculine. 'I wanted to open up the rooms and lighten the whole area,' he explains. 'There was an inner hall, a larder, kitchen and a utility room all in this small space, so we took down the walls, added a steel supporting beam and the utility room is now in one of the outside barns. I also moved the wine cellar as it was too big to house in here – my clients love entertaining. The glass garden room by Marston & Langer was not in the initial plans but I know what an excellent addition they are to a house. My parents have one and I thought it would work really well here as an informal dining area. It is wonderful at night with lots of candles.' Thomson added a dining table, inspired by a Pugin design, by Augustus Brandt, with chairs in a heavy sackcloth linen to suit the rustic feel of the room.





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE  
LEFT A ceramic farmhouse sink and shutters by New England Shutter Company. The bespoke larder. Copper sinks with Perrin & Rowe taps in the main kitchen area



One of the few issues Thomson had with his client concerned painting the old wooden beams. 'They were very dark and, while the husband did not want them sanded as it is such a messy job, he was against painting them white as he thought it would look odd. I managed to persuade him to paint them and it makes a huge difference to the airiness of the space.'

The clients – a couple in their sixties – have a large family including grandchildren so Thomson made sure there were plenty of places to sit and chat or to read. The units underneath the window seat also act as useful toy storage. The Aga is integrated into the island unit – the flue is under the floor – and, as its situation did not lend itself to having an extractor above, any frying is done on the Lacanche, which has one hidden in the hood.

Thomson toyed with the idea of using big, statement American fridges but in the end opted for an integrated style using Miele appliances. 'Anneka and I felt, in this project, it needed a more traditional look and while exposed fridges can look wonderful, they can look dated after a while.' On the practical side, there are also two dishwashers so crockery and glassware can go straight from one to the table and back again in perfect rotation. It's a system that when it works, particularly at busy times like Christmas, you never have to put anything away.



The Lacanche cooker with tiles by Fired Earth as a splashback. BELOW Seating area with cushions by OKA and Chelsea Textiles; lights by Robert Kime



## THOMSON'S STYLE FOR THIS HOUSE COULD BE DESCRIBED AS 'PARED DOWN TRADITIONALISM'

A bespoke larder, which includes ventilation and a marble slab, is perfect storage for keeping fruit, vegetables and cheese. 'What I love about Plain English is the practical side to its designs – the pull-out bins have a drawer above them for liners and bags, and all the pan drawers are lined with rubber so the saucepans don't clang into each other,' Thomson explains. The Georgian brass knobs chosen for the cabinetry were hand-made in Norfolk and Thomson has also used them in other areas of the house. 'Going to visit the factory where they were made was like stepping back in time,' he enthuses. There are a number of different metals used in the interior, from the brass hardware to the chrome Aga hoods and copper sinks but, because it is all in traditional style, each adds interest without being overpowering.

It is a surprise to hear that this redecoration project was one of Thomson's first commissions. Like many of the UK's top interior decorators, he has no formal training but learnt his trade working alongside Thomas Hamel in Australia. 'I was in Sydney for four years and learnt an enormous amount from Thomas, but also from reading magazines such as *House & Garden*. Then I decided it was time to come home and this project came through a friend who had seen my work in Australia.' Initially the clients just wanted the drawing room 'refreshed' but once that was done, the rest of the house looked tired in comparison, so Thomson was asked to do a full makeover.







FROM TOP The Marston & Langer conservatory is decorated with lights by Jamb, an Augustus Brandt table and chairs in rough linen and hurricane lamps by Michael Reeves; the seating area has cushions in fabrics by Soane. The exterior of the farmhouse

Thomson's style for this project could be described as 'pared down traditionalism' – classic and unfussy. 'I wanted to achieve a family kitchen that was both classic and dateless.' He acknowledges the cost of the work is not inconsiderable but says: 'With companies like Plain English and Marston & Langer, everything is bespoke and the cost is understandable when you appreciate the quality of the workmanship involved.'

'The clients have been very easy to work for as they are keen to be involved and open to suggestion. They both came with me to visit the Plain English showroom and also to see Marston & Langer, plus we had a day at Harrods choosing cutlery and tableware. The other bits and pieces I picked up in Petworth, which is brilliant for unusual *objets*, such as the antique batons and the French major's sign, which hangs above the Lacanche oven.'

'This has been a very special project for me,' says Thomson. 'I came from working on harbourside houses in Sydney and townhouses in Melbourne to a fifteenth-century farmhouse in 700 acres. It's been fun but also a learning curve.' Let's hope he's here to stay. □

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