



# CORNISH living

STORY: ELEANOR WILDE PICTURES: STEVE TAYLOR

Victoria Stael von Holstein left London to build a stunning oak-framed country home on 15 acres of land in rural Cornwall.

**“M**y grandparents lived on the north Cornish coast in the 1950s, and by pure coincidence I’ve ended up in the same area,” says Victoria Stael von Holstein. “I’d renovated a house in London and was looking around for another project. Finding this large plot of land in such a beautiful setting was enough to persuade me to permanently relocate to the country.”

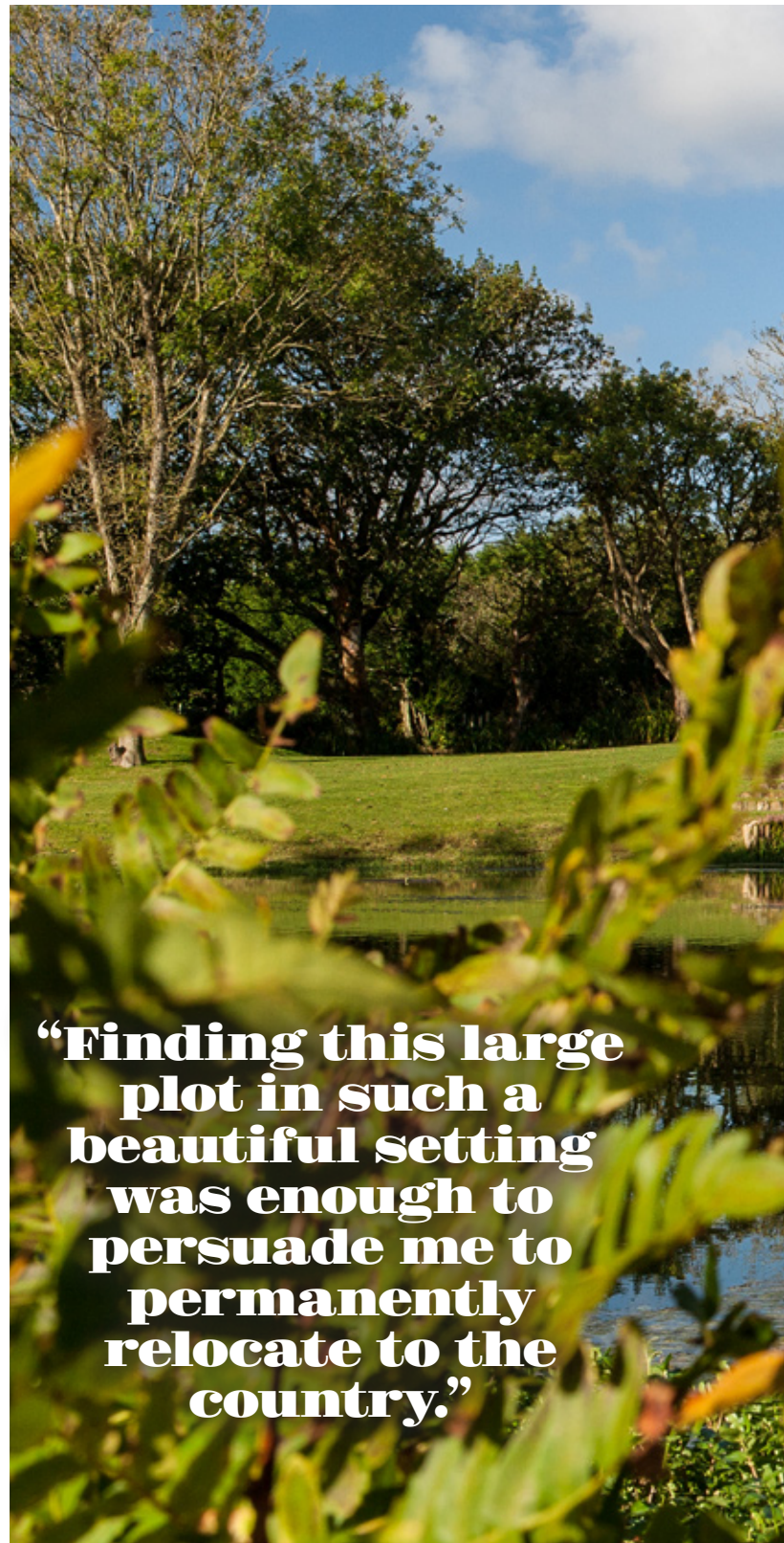
The plot in question – a 15-acre parcel of overgrown land, accessed down a long track – was being sold with an existing dilapidated stone farmhouse, outbuildings and a large pond which was hidden beneath undergrowth. “I thought ‘oh wow – that really is a project!’” Victoria laughs.

“At first I’d planned to renovate the house, which had been badly extended in the 1970s. I’ve always loved oak-framed buildings and contacted Roderick James Architects about designing a replacement extension because I’d often admired pictures of their work in magazines. They were the first and only architects I talked to after buying the property in 2007.”

It became apparent that the farmhouse was beyond economic repair, however, and Victoria needed to make a difficult decision. She spoke to her project architect about the possibility of knocking down the farmhouse and starting again – building a new, energy-efficient home with a more practical layout which would take full advantage of the country views.

## Wonder setting

The imposing oak-framed dwelling stands on a large rural plot on the outskirts of Wadebridge in Cornwall and replaces an existing farmhouse. A new carport has been built to match the cedar-clad house and a stone barn was converted into stables. The garden was designed at the same time as the house, with new terraces and planting. Victoria purchased granite gate posts from a local farmer and reused stone from the original farmhouse in the grounds. A large overgrown pond was reshaped and cleared.



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**New build**





**“Try to design rooms with favourite pieces of furniture in mind. I already had things like the dining room table and some big artwork that I wanted to bring with me.”**



### Dining divide

A deep double-sided peninsula unit divides the kitchen and dining spaces, providing storage for both rooms and incorporating a wine cooler.

“My biggest concern was that the house should feel cosy,” Victoria explains. “I love the light and views which come with having lots of glass, but I also like a home to feel warm and inviting. Peter designed a glazed barn-style sitting room, which is single-storey and juts out to the rear overlooking the pond, but he also gave us a separate snug which is ideal for watching TV.”

The layout is a modern take on the traditional farmhouse: a walk-in pantry has been included in the kitchen and there’s a spacious utility/boot room, accessed directly from the back door, which is ideal for muddy boots and wet dogs. “We use this entrance all the time,” says Victoria, who enjoys an outdoor lifestyle. “I’ve lived in big houses where you don’t use half the rooms, so it was important to make good use of all the space.”

Victoria and her partner, Darren, each have two grown-up children, and in addition to three guest bedrooms and the principal suite upstairs Victoria was keen to include a ground floor bedroom suitable for her elderly father. This also doubles as Darren’s study and provides a flexible multi-purpose space.

Externally, the oak-framed building combines the best of traditional features with more contemporary touches, such

as the triangular windows in the upper mezzanine level. Doors and windows have been painted a soft shade of grey and two timber balconies serve bedrooms on the first floor.

“Obtaining planning permission for the new house was actually quite easy, but we also needed to commission a survey for bats,” says Victoria. “Hundreds of pipistrelles were nesting under tile hanging on the old farmhouse, and there was also a long-eared brown bat in residence. A roosting space was created above the utility room for the long-eared bat, and we made slits in the cedar cladding for the pipistrelles as the new house has no loft.

The fact that the bats were using the stone farmhouse as a summer nursery also had a major impact on the build itself. The old building could only be demolished in October, once the bats had left, and the new build then needed to be completed before they returned in the spring.

“We gained planning permission in February 2009 but couldn’t actually start until the October, so we missed a really good summer – although that time did prove useful as I was able to make most of the decisions about fixtures and fittings in those early weeks,” says Victoria. Building during the cold winter months was far from ideal, and the time limit added further pressure. “We had to finish for the end of



**Hand-built kitchen**

The simple hand-built kitchen was made by London designer John Halifax and painted in Farrow & Ball's oval room blue. Cream Arenastone natural quartz worktops catch the light.



March, ready for the bats to come back, and the interiors took a further four months to complete," explains Victoria.

With Darren working in London for the fire service during the week and only returning to Cornwall at weekends, it was Victoria who took on the project management of the build. "I drove down from London and would spend time living with Darren's mother in Wadebridge, which meant that I was able to be on site most of the time," she recalls. "I loved every minute of it and watching the oak frame going up was fascinating."

New foundations and a slab were completed by a local building firm, and the oak frame was constructed and erected by specialist company Carpenter Oak in just four-and-a-half days on the same hilltop site as the original farmhouse. Structural Insulated Panels (SIPs) were chosen to clad the frame and have been finished externally with render and cedar boarding, laid both vertically and horizontally.



### Cosy focal point

A double-sided Stuv fireplace in the TV snug opens into the dining room to form a highly visible focal point.



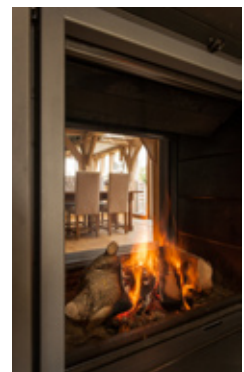
“This was the first oak-framed house that our contractor had built, and the company was absolutely brilliant,” says Victoria. “Everyone communicated and worked well together, so there were very few problems and the whole process ran extremely smoothly.”

Once the slate roof was completed solar panels could be mounted on the south-facing slope to provide hot water for the house. The underfloor heating system is connected to an air source heat pump, but gadgets were purposefully kept to a minimum. “We don’t have a high-tech lighting system because I light rooms with lamps,” explains Victoria.

“I decided to go for simple painted doors, skirtings and architrave internally so that the oak would stand out even more,” she continues. “The oak frame was sandblasted, which removed any water marks, but we’ve left it completely natural. Someone commented that it feels as though the house is hugging you because of the frame, which I thought was a really good way of describing just how comfortable and warm it is.”

One late addition to the design was the mezzanine level above the master bedroom, which was originally going to be used for storage, but as the house was being built this was instead converted into a stylish dressing room, lit by triangular windows and accessed via a staircase in the main bedroom. “It’s a fantastic space with masses of storage and lovely views,” says Victoria.

Landscaping the overgrown site was a major task and an ongoing project, which was carried out at the



### Room with a view

A vaulted single-storey sitting room overlooks the pond and features a contemporary fireplace with a hearth built from slate reclaimed from the original farmhouse.

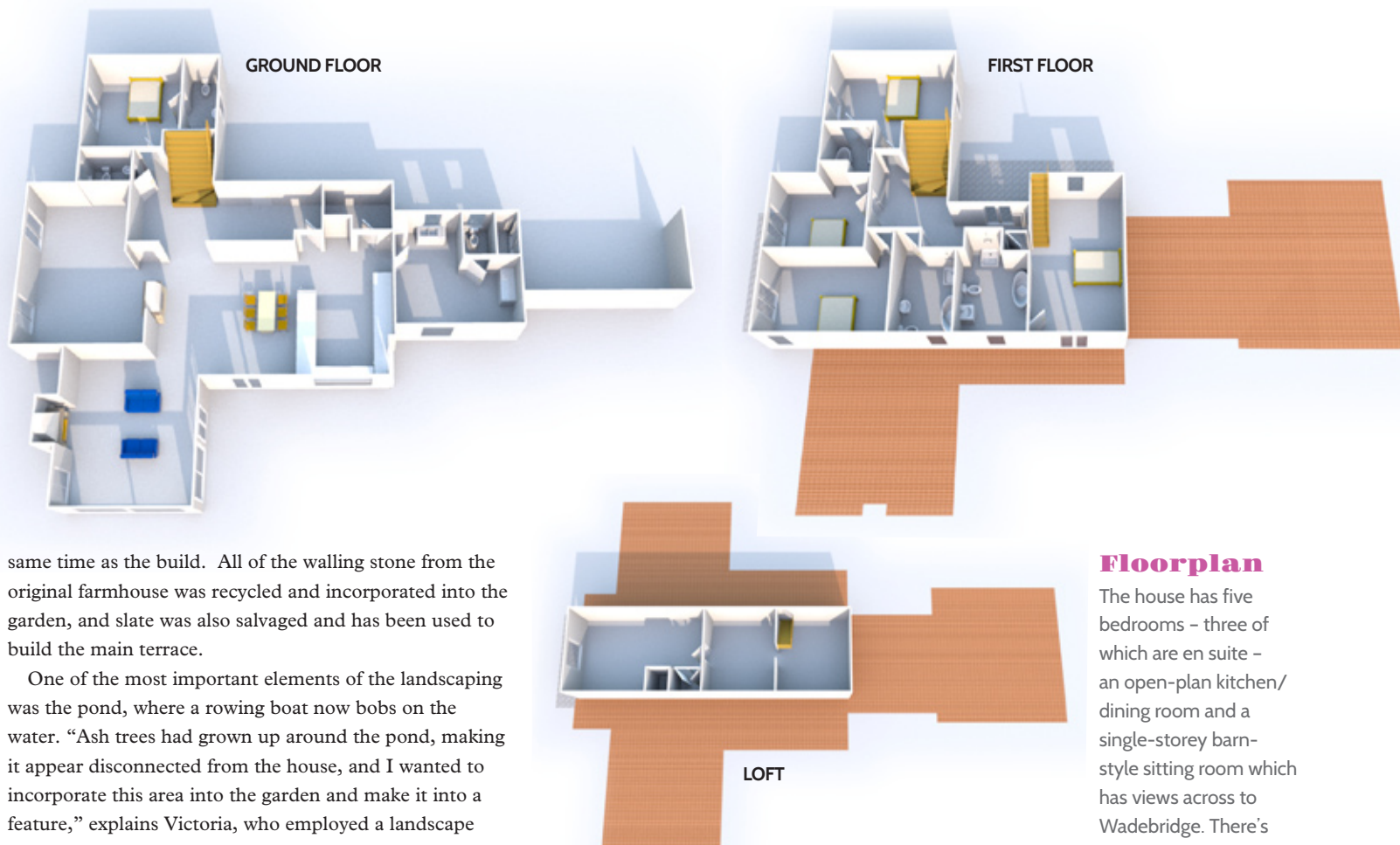


**Luxury bedroom**

Glass doors in the vaulted main bedroom open onto a private timber balcony. A separate staircase leads up to the mezzanine dressing room (far right). Bathroom sanitaryware including a large contemporary slipper bath by Victoria and Albert for the principal en suite, was purchased from The Big Bath Company,



## New build



same time as the build. All of the walling stone from the original farmhouse was recycled and incorporated into the garden, and slate was also salvaged and has been used to build the main terrace.

One of the most important elements of the landscaping was the pond, where a rowing boat now bobs on the water. “Ash trees had grown up around the pond, making it appear disconnected from the house, and I wanted to incorporate this area into the garden and make it into a feature,” explains Victoria, who employed a landscape designer to reshape the pond and the central island in addition to the other work.

Now the new oak-framed house stands in a beautiful setting, surrounded by open countryside. The couple have also built a four-bay carport on an existing concrete slab to match the house and converted an old stone barn into stables where Victoria keeps her horses.

“This is the first time I’ve ever been able to have horses on my own land,” she says. “Basically we’ve bought into a whole new lifestyle which is very different from living in London. Now I spend my spare time riding and gardening – there’s always something to do and we love having so much space. I’m definitely a country girl at heart.”

### Floorplan

The house has five bedrooms – three of which are en suite – an open-plan kitchen/dining room and a single-storey barn-style sitting room which has views across to Wadebridge. There’s a separate snug with a double-sided Stuv fireplace to the dining room, and a ground-floor bedroom which doubles as an office/retreat for Darren.

### Contacts

#### PROJECT

**Architect** Peter Brodbelt, Roderick James Architects LLP: 01803 868000, [www.roderickjamesarchitects.com](http://www.roderickjamesarchitects.com)

**Building contractor** Gynn Construction: 01208 73662, [www.gynnconstruction.co.uk](http://www.gynnconstruction.co.uk)

**Landscaping** Duncan Rice Landscape Designs: 01837 840531

#### STRUCTURE

**Oak frame** Carpenter Oak: 01803 732900, [www.carpenteroak.co.uk](http://www.carpenteroak.co.uk)

**SIPs panels** Sips Industries Ltd: 01383 823995, [www.sipsindustries.com](http://www.sipsindustries.com)

**Timber doors and windows** Rationel Windows and Doors UK: 01869 248181, [www.rationel.co.uk](http://www.rationel.co.uk)

**Fixed glazing** Camel Glass: [www.camelglass.co.uk](http://www.camelglass.co.uk)

**Garage construction** DCB Construction: 01208 880160

#### FIXTURES AND FITTINGS

**Kitchen, utility room, dressing room** John Halifax: 020 8735 0707

**Kitchen cabinet paint** Farrow & Ball: [www.farrow-ball.com](http://www.farrow-ball.com)

**Sanitaryware** The Big Bath Company: [www.bigbathcompany.com](http://www.bigbathcompany.com)

**Slipper bath** Victoria and Albert: [www.vandabaths.com](http://www.vandabaths.com)

**Curtains and soft furnishings** Chadworth Interior Designs Ltd: 01372 843888

**Solar panels and air source heat pump** Sungift Solar: 01392 213912

**Rustic slate flooring** Mandarin Stone: [www.mandarinstone.com](http://www.mandarinstone.com)

**Double-sided fireplace** Stuv: [www.jetmaster.co.uk](http://www.jetmaster.co.uk)

**Bathroom tiles** Stonegres: [www.stonegres.co.uk](http://www.stonegres.co.uk)



### Home truths

**What was the high point of the project?**

Watching the beautiful oak frame going up so quickly was probably the high point.

**...and the low point?**

There weren't really any low points, although driving up and down between London and Cornwall could be quite tedious.

**Is there anything you would change?**

We'd probably make the loggia slightly larger to better shelter the back door, because we use this entrance so much, and would perhaps add a glass side panel to shield us from driving rain.