



As you walk along the path to Miv Watts's Victorian cottage, the crunching sound beneath your feet takes your eyes down to a carpet of white shells. But then shells are probably easier to come by than gravel for the interior designer, as her partner is one of north Norfolk's most respected fishmongers. For many years Watts's Burnham Market interiors store, House Bait, has been above Mike Gurney's fish shop. Downstairs you collect your scallops, Norfolk crab and smoked mackerel pâté; upstairs you are tempted by the fruits of Watts's buying trips abroad, perhaps picking up napkins and prized plates to accompany the feast.

For the past decade the peripatetic Watts has more or less made Norfolk her base. House Bait



The stuff of life

The interior designer Miv Watts has filled her cosy Norfolk cottage with a rich mix of family treasures and mementos of foreign travel. By **Dominic Bradbury**. Photographs by **Mark Luscombe-Whyte**

Clockwise from left in the sitting-room the fire surround was an evening's work with scallop shells – a perk of the fish trade; the mirror is English, bought at auction, as were the Edwardian chairs and rattan cabinet; a figure of Ganesha from Jodhpur sits among family photographs on the mantelpiece



'I'm fed up with minimalist spaces – I wonder what has happened to the family in those houses'



Top the kitchen paint is Rosebank Pink from Francesca's Limewash; the cabinets were made out of a ship's safe. **Above** the sitting-room curtain fabric came from Delhi, the plates are Chinese

and its nearby sister, House Bait II, have become Burnham Market fixtures, while her work on the interiors of the Victoria at Holkham helped transform a dowdy pub into one of East Anglia's most desirable destination hotels and restaurants. The comfortable, reassuring mix of Indian fabrics and furniture with English club chairs and sofas, and a sophisticated contemporary eye is echoed within her own home in a quiet village some miles away.

'After we finished the Victoria many people came up to me and said they felt so comfortable there. That made me really happy,' Watts says, curled up on her living-room sofa. 'I don't worry so much about people noticing the interior details as about them feeling relaxed. If anything, I hope that's my gift – to take a room and make it into a place where somebody feels they can kick off their shoes, curl up and read a book. This house is intrinsically me and it is an eclectic look, which is what I tend to do. But at

the same time, I hope I don't put too much of myself into other people's rooms. I can't bear the idea of a "Miv Watts look".' She does, however, have decidedly passionate views about what a home – especially a family home – should be: a place full of colour, individuality and warmth rather than a minimal wasteland. Together with Francesca Wezel of Francesca's Limewash, she has been collaborating on new paint ranges, including colours inspired by the Norfolk landscape. She is also designing a range of furniture to be made in India, fusing exotic and contemporary elements, and there are a growing number of commissions for private houses and excited talk of a new hotel project.

'Really I'm working on bringing colour back into people's lives,' Watts says, 'and mixing in ideas that are European, oriental, exotic, spicy. I'm fed up with minimalist spaces and I wonder what has happened to the family in those kinds of houses. You can't bring up children like that.



'I never really match things or have one idea in my head. It tends to grow much more organically'



Top the bathroom door was brought back from Marrakech; the tiles, too, are Moroccan. Floor and bath panels are of locally reclaimed wood.

Above Miv Watts outside her Norfolk cottage

My children, Naomi and Ben, used to come home with bits of china they'd dug up to make a mosaic. But where can you stick that mosaic or a drawing of Mummy with big green ears in a house where there's nothing?

Watts moved into her cottage two years ago, having given up a rented home on the Houghton Hall Estate near King's Lynn. It was a 1980s timewarp of Formica and apricot plastic bathroom fittings, yet the fabric was well preserved, so she kept structural work to a minimum, just stealing away one bedroom to create a new study and extending the bathroom. 'Mike now has a place in Australia where we stay in the winters and that has big open spaces, so I wanted to stay cosy and cottagey in Norfolk,' she explains.

She coated the walls in Francesca's Limewash colours ranging from soft blues for the double sitting-room to a simmering pink for the kitchen. Kitchen and bathroom were reinvented with bespoke cabinet work – including units made

from an old ship's safe – and brightened with a mix of Moroccan, Victorian and Portuguese tiles. The dining-room was warmed by Madras Orange walls and a new Rayburn, while the fireplace surround in the sitting-room was painted over and an inset fashioned with some of Mike Gurney's cast-off shells.

The furniture includes pieces designed by Watts herself – such as the sofa and her own bed – with others brought back from India and France, where Watts has a bolthole that she shares with a friend. Then there are the prizes of hunts around antique and flea markets from Newark to Clignancourt. 'I also buy a lot at auction,' Watts says. 'I never really match things or have one set idea in my head. It all tends to grow much more organically than that.'

Watts was first drawn to Norfolk on holidays in the 1970s. As a child with an Australian mother and an English father, she moved between her parents' homelands, although her