

The Northern Echo

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The lifestyle magazine
for the North-East

NOVEMBER 2005

What *not*
to wear
to the
Christmas
party

GIFT GUIDE

Gadgets
to go for

Little Britain
goodies

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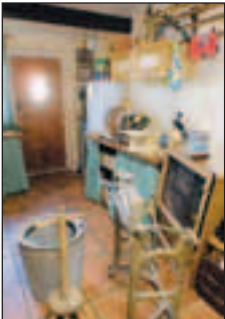


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sharon griffiths

Time for a clear out. Before you bring any more consumer goods into your crowded house

SPRING cleaning in spring is all very well, but don't you think it would be better done in November? True, when the first sunshine of the year tries to struggle through the windows, it has the nasty habit of showing up all the accumulated winter grime in all its dinginess, so that's a bit of an incentive to pull on the Marigolds and get out the Flash and the paint pot.

On the other hand, once you've spring cleaned, you're hardly in the house to admire its beauty, so let's not waste good weather on housework. In summer time, the house is generally somewhere you just pass through on the way to somewhere else, so really, it makes much more sense to do the cleaning in the autumn, when there are fewer outside attractions and you're there to appreciate the results of your effort.

Autumn is when you're in a lot, when you spend far more evenings looking at the grubby patches on the wall, the bald bits on the rug and watching an enormous spider scuttle back to its home among the pile of unsorted videos next to the TV.

It's when you realise that the chair you're spending so much time sitting on isn't all that comfy really and the table just isn't big enough for every one to eat in comfort, without getting someone else's elbow in their dinner.

If you're going to spend a lot of time at home, it makes sense to make it as clean and comfortable as possible.

And anyway, it's a time of year when we all need cheering up. If you've battled home in the dark and quite likely in rain and fog too, you need a boost when you get in, a bit of a welcome. You need a house that's warm and cheerful. When all is dark and gloomy outside, it cheering to open the door on something clean and sparkly – not just grubby patches and wonky chairs.

Then of course, it will soon be Christmas...

And you just know your mother-in-law with her X-ray vision will home in, like a super-powered Exocet, on the grubby bits you've happily ignored. Beat her at her own game. Do the cleaning. That will give her nothing to moan about and spoil her Christmas completely.

No, really, if you've got family and friends

coming round, you want the place to look its best. Come to that, you want there to be enough room for them to sit down. No wonder so many of us rush out at this time of year and order new chairs and carpets. The adverts are still saying, just, "delivery in time for Christmas," so don't hang around – otherwise Uncle George will have to sit on the Thomas the Tank Engine stool eating his turkey off a tray.

Then there's space... If you're the organised sort, you're already well into your Christmas shopping, smuggling in parcels, hiding them in the back of cupboards, on top of wardrobes, under the bed... But how can you do that if cupboards, wardrobes and under-bed space is already taken up by junk?

Time for a clear out. Before you bring any more consumer goods into your crowded house, get rid of some of those you already have. The bonus is that you will have lots more space. The house will seem bigger – even with all those extra people in it.

Since the boys came back from their various travels in the summer, there has been a heap of stuff on the landing. "It might come in useful," they said. I have managed to ignore it for weeks, but finally weakened and finally got round to excavating it last week and – guess what? – it was mainly almost empty sun cream bottles, half packs of playing cards, cracked headphones, E111 forms and lots of disposable razors.

I rescued the forms and the razors and dumped everything else. Suddenly, we have a much bigger landing...

Of course, according to all those books and magazine articles on how to manage your life, you should be out and about now, gathering the pine cones to hand-make your traditional garlands to drape around your hall. No? Oh well, it gives you more time to sort out that spider's web behind the TV.

Next month you and your family will probably spend the longest consecutive time at home than at any other time of the year so it makes sense to make it as comfortable as possible.

On the other hand, you could just put up lots of decorations to hide the dirt... pile up the rubbish behind the Christmas tree... spray the cobwebs silver – and put off spring cleaning until the spring.

BAGS OF STYLE

If you really want to treat someone this Christmas, this David Jones Collection faux leather bag from The Damson Tree in Barnard Castle is a stunner. It comes in black, green, cream and red, is 19ins long and 17ins high and costs £65. The shop has an excellent collection of bags, beads, lamps, Christmas lights and other gifts.

● The Damson Tree, Horsemarket, Barnard Castle. (01833) 690120.



NE window shopping

SEVEN of the UK population now own a small animal and hamsters are even included on the consumer Price Index – the only pet ever to have featured on the index. With this popularity comes an increasing demand for quirky accessories. From harnesses for rabbits (£5.69), to log cabins for hamsters (from £4.99), Pets at Home's new range of small animal products has something to cater for every small furry demand. Available from in selected stores across the UK. To locate your nearest store call 08003288255 or visit www.petsathome.com



STIRRING IT

THIS is one of the daftest gadgets we've seen, but that's absolutely no reason why you shouldn't buy it for someone for Christmas... someone, perhaps, who loves hot chocolate but hates to find all those delicious dregs wasted at the bottom of the mug. There's a little battery operated propeller at the bottom for those too idle to stir their own coffee. The site it comes from – www.gadgetter.com – has all sorts of entertaining gadgets. The self-stirring mug is £9.95 plus delivery.



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Clinical Negligence - - when things go wrong

WHEN you go into hospital or visit your GP most treatment is of a very high quality given by dedicated and skilled professionals. However, it is an unfortunate fact that a small percentage of patients may experience clinical negligence.



In that case the Judge decided that provided the medical professional has acted in accordance with the practice accepted as proper by a responsible body of medical people, skilled in that particular art, they have not been negligent. Put simply, if a reasonable doctor or nurse would have done the same thing, there is no negligence.

What this also means for the injured patient or bereaved relative is that in order to prove to a Judge that negligence has occurred you need another doctor, of the same speciality and at about the same level of seniority, to come to Court and explain why no reasonable body of doctors would have treated you or your relative in the way they were treated.

Not only must you prove that the treatment fell below the low standard, but you must also establish that what the doctor did wrong or failed to do has caused you an injury.

So now you know what clinical negligence is, where does it happen? It can happen anywhere is the regrettable answer.

Peter Henry explains: "In terms of different departments, the most mistakes apparently happen in surgery, followed by obstetrics and gynaecology, medicine, A & E, and then surprisingly, psychiatry. Nursing is actually one of the safest areas."

Funding considerations are particularly significant in clinical negligence litigation due to the high costs that can be associated with pursuing such a claim.

Peter Henry says: "Although, in the eyes of the government, the legal aid system is regarded as no longer being sustainable, it does still exist in the field of clinical negligence. The Government insists that public funding arrangements are strictly only to be provided by Solicitor practices like Archers Law that hold a current clinical negligence franchise issued by The Legal Services Commission.

"With the Government intention being to reduce the level of publicly funded legal aid

available they have introduced legalisation for alternative methods of funding such as No Win No Fee and insurance packages."

However, Clinical Negligence litigation against the NHS is due to change. In order to reduce costs and supposedly to improve the system the "Redress Scheme" - as it has been named - is being considered.

"This will involve the NHS considering claims to determine if they are valid and if so, the level of compensation to be paid," explains Peter Henry. "The details are very vague. People will still be able to obtain independent advice and in certain circumstances opt out of the scheme. What is not clear is who will fund this."

In short, when the "Redress Scheme" is introduced it will mean that any new claims for clinical negligence that have a potential value of less than £20,000 will be handled outside the legal system by the NHS. Clinical Negligence claims that exceed the £20,000 level from the outset will continue to be dealt with as they are now.

Archers Law 10-step guide to making a claim

1. Make a decision to pursue a claim
2. Collect as much information as possible
3. Obtain advice from a specialist solicitor
4. Consider making complaint or pursuing claim
5. Review response to complaint or records if pursuing them
6. If proceeding resolve how a claim will be funded
7. Obtain expert evidence to support allegations
8. Notify the hospital or doctor of the claim and obtain their response
9. If not resolved and still pursued issue court proceedings
10. If claim not resolved proceed to hearing where a judge decides, having heard all the evidence who, if anyone, is liable and if so assesses the compensation

Anyone who viewed the recent Panorama investigations into the standards of cleanliness and treatment of the elderly in two hospitals would have been appalled by the treatment some of those patients received. The Healthcare Commission, the Government funded body set up to review treatment in the NHS, recently criticised the standard of maternity services in many hospitals.

Peter Henry, a specialist Clinical Negligence Solicitor for Stockton-based Archers Law, says: "Most people are surprised to learn that the treatment demonstrated in the programme, and the criticisms raised in the report, may not actually amount to clinical negligence.

"Like most people at work, the vast majority of doctors, nurses and all other healthcare professionals are trying to do their best on a daily basis."

So when does the poor treatment, the criticism or the mistake amount to clinical negligence? The answer was provided by a Court decision as long ago as 1957.

ARCHERS LAW Clinical Negligence

Most medical treatment given by the NHS is of a very high quality, however, a small percentage of patients treated every year may experience clinical negligence.

If you have received incorrect or inadequate treatment call 01642 636500. We can help.





WHAT I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS

What do you want for Christmas? I'm going to put an ipod at the top of my wish list this year, a pink one, preferably.

If money were no object... I'd like a champagne-coloured SLK Mercedes with a personalised number plate. It's my dream car, which one day, by hook or by crook, I'm determined to own.

The best christmas present I ever got... was given to me two years ago by my husband – a very unusual piece of bespoke jewellery. It was a silver and amber with a 20 million-year-old tiny insect embedded within. Sadly it's disappeared into the Bermuda Triangle that exists within my home. Maybe I'll be getting a replacement this year.



Titillating: Liz Ramshaw, left, and one of the boxes of goodies she guarantees will spice things up a bit

Naughty, but nice

With three kids and a busy company to co-run, Liz Ramshaw barely had time for her husband – until she came up with a new business idea. Women's Editor LINDSAY JENNINGS reports

LIKE many couples with young children under the age of five, Liz Ramshaw and her husband Keith Palmer had little time for extra-curricular activities.

The pair focused all their energy on daughter Lucy, 18, and two young sons, Lewis, four, and Ethan, two, as well as running their own advertising agency. Dinner was often a rushed affair, eaten in front of the television once the younger kids had gone to bed – a scenario played out in thousand of homes up and down the country.

"We didn't seem to be doing anything exciting," says Liz, 36, of Norton, near Stockton. "We were in this kind of rut, working long hours with the agency, seeing to the kids before finally sitting down. Then Keith and I would do separate things night after night. One day I thought 'this is no good', we never go out. So we decided to try and have a good night in instead."

Her experience gave her an idea for a business venture. Why not get everything you want for a night of fun, food and passion delivered in a discreet red gift box straight to your door?

"There's often no room for romance when you're so busy and so tired, so we wanted to create something to put a bit of sparkle back into people's lives. We wanted something where you could have a fun night in and it would be affordable too," she says.

Liz, who calls her new venture Naughty Nights In A Box, set about creating her boxes using products sourced across Europe. Before she launched, she ran focus groups comprising couples and singles at a local restaurant asking people what they wanted to see for a naughty night in. One friend even said she thought the erotic DVD wasn't raunchy enough which opened up the option of people creating their own boxes.

"I asked them what they wanted and it re-

ally helped because what I might put in one is not necessarily what other people want to see," says Liz. "I just knew I wanted everything to be a bit more sophisticated, I didn't want anything tacky."

Many of the boxes come with a bottle of something special, a meal for two with nibbles, fun toys and erotic DVDs. A great deal of the food comes from a company called Dordogne Direct, with tantalising meals such as beef bourguignon.

The Couple's Special includes a bottle of French wine, Italian black and white linguine pasta with Italian sugos tomato sauce, edible undies, an erotic DVD, chocolates and other extras for £69.69 including postage and packing.

There's also a box for honeymooners, single men and women, and a girls' party box, which is ideal for hen nights. The Secret Affairs box is a luxury box including Dom Perignon champagne, dinner for two direct from the Dordogne, a Janet Reger single pearl thong as worn by Samantha in television's Sex in the City (well, not literally), massage oil, furry handcuffs, and a whole host of extras for £300.

So far, the hen night party boxes are proving really popular and the single men's boxes are a hit with people looking for unusual 40th birthday presents.

Liz is even considering creating an extra naughty nights box, such as one for swingers. Perhaps that could come with a bowl to collect the car keys?

"A lot of people have said they want a more raunchy box with things like handcuffs in," she laughs. "But we can source anything if somebody wants to create a special box. Basically staying in is the new going out – they can tailor make it for whatever they want."

● For more information log onto www.naughtynightsbox.co.uk, call the sales hotline on 08456 730010.

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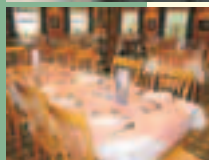
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6 of the best Little Britain gifts



THIS Autumn sees the arrival of the third series of the hugely popular cult TV show Little Britain and there are plenty of new characters to get to grips with. As with any successful broadcast, the shameful yet inevitable product licensing bandwagon has begun to roll, but any diehard fan will probably be delighted with one of these mildly tacky trophies at Christmas.

THE ONE AND ONLY ◀

Daffyd Doll, £19.95, from www.lastminute.com
FEATURING his trademark outfit, this is a scary replica of the village's only gay, and his collection of six statements will have you in stitches. The bizarre character, along with the rest of the talking doll range, takes 3xAA batteries to get him going.



TWO'S COMPANY ▶

Lou and Andy Dolls, £34.95, from www.boysstuff.co.uk

THE 12 inch dolls recite four of their famous phrases at the squeeze of a hand. Available in limited quantities, these dolls have caused quite a kerfuffle already by flying off the shelves, so if you're a fan, best grab them quick.



WEAR FOR A STARE ▲

T-shirts, £14.95 each, from www.headspun.co.uk
SPORTING one of these T-shirts you can't fail to be noticed. Licensed BBC merchandise and made to the highest quality, so you can parade your allegiance to the show with pride.

POCKET PEOPLE ▲

Phrases Keyring, £7.95, www.boysstuff.co.uk
CARRY all the top catchphrases in your pocket and get your Little Britain fix wherever you are with this hilarious keyring containing six of the best one-liners from the show. Give your friends a surprise reply to their questions by simply tapping one of the buttons to release an original recording from the TV stars.

TALKING TEENAGER ▼

Vicky Pollard Doll, £19.95, from www.boysstuff.co.uk
THE fastest talking teenager ever to grace the small screen is now immortalised into toy form. She has so much to say they've only managed to cram in three phrases, but they are the most memorable of her recent rants and ramblings.



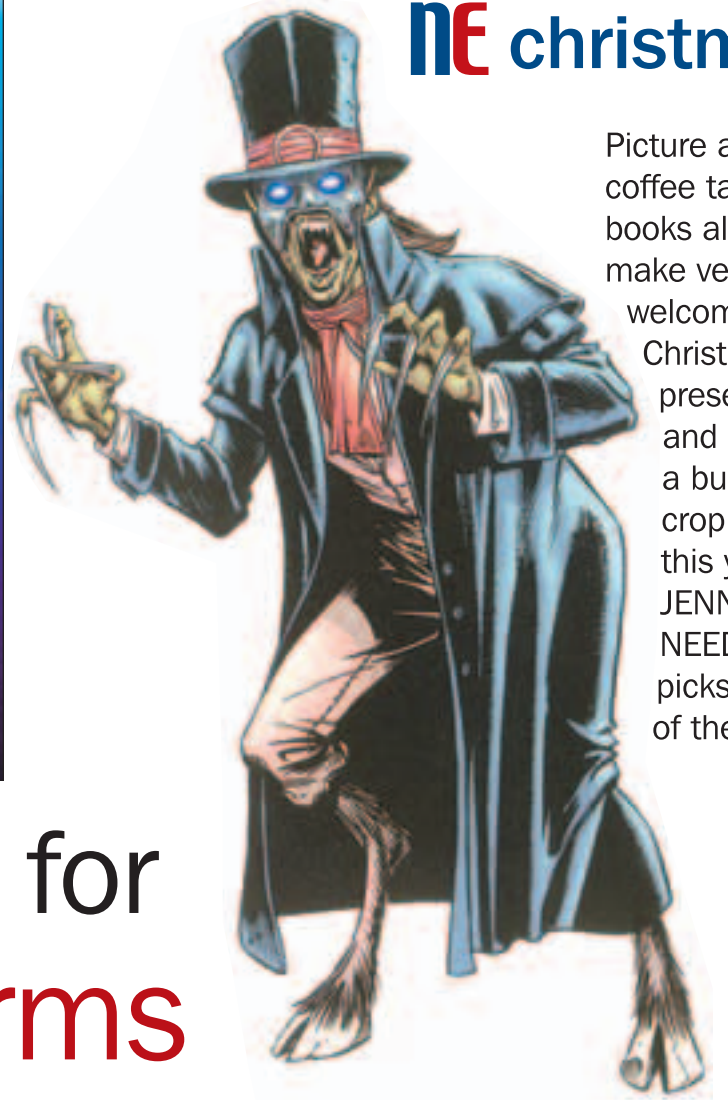
CHARACTER CUPS ◀

Talking Mugs, £9.95, www.boysstuff.co.uk
ADD a bit of spice to the everyday drudge of office life with one of these talking mugs and raise a smile each time you take a slurp. The other plus is that this may be a guaranteed way of getting others to make the tea and coffee.





NE christmas



Picture and coffee table books always make very welcome Christmas presents and there's a bumper crop out this year. JENNY NEEDHAM picks some of the best

Good buys for bookworms

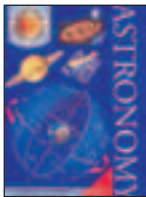
HOW To Draw And Sell Comic Strips is a fantastic gift for a teenager with an artistic bent. Packed with superb illustrations – see right – by industry professionals, the book takes you step by step through the entire process, from initial idea to final printed page. (Titan, £12.99) www.titanbooks.com

FOR the older cartoon fan, there's always **The New Andy Capp Collection Number 2** (David & Charles, £7.99). This will have grandad chortling, especially if grandma rules the roost!



A LITTLE deeper and more meaningful than Andy Capp is the stunningly illustrated **Universe** (Dorling Kindersley, £30), with a foreword by Astronomer Royal Martin Rees. It will appeal to anyone fascinated by the night sky, from families to dedicated astronomy enthusiasts and students. It's out of this world...

If Universe is a little big for a Christmas stocking, **Astronomy** (Kingfisher Pocket Guides, £5.99) is just perfect. This practical guide to the night sky for the amateur astronomer is packed full of facts and figures, diagrams, charts and tables, including star maps and moon charts.



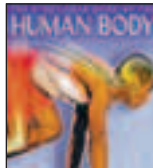
WHEN you've had enough of star-gazing, take a look at what's under our seas. **The Encyclopedia of Underwater Life** (Oxford University Press, £30) turns its attention to the remarkable diversity of a world that remains largely hidden from the human eye. It describes in detail, with breathtaking photographs, the anatomy, breeding, behaviour, habitat and conservation status of species: from microscopic, single-celled organisms to monsters of the deep. The Day octopus is pictured at the top of the page.

IF you prefer your squid battered and deep fried, **The River Cottage Family Cookbook** by Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall with Fizz Carr (Hodder & Stoughton, £20) will whet the appetite. The River Cottage books have inspired and this latest will give pleasure to

everyone: toddlers and grandparents, families discovering the fun of cooking together, and everyone who enjoys simple home-cooked food. From how to make butter from a jar of cream to how to make your own sausages, it should become an essential ingredient in every household's kitchen.

BEHIND every good garden there's an underlying structure that defines the space: the decorative detailing of paving, paths, steps, walls and fences, and the romantic elements such as arbours, pergolas and water need to work in harmony to set off the planting. **The Garden Maker's Manual** by Rosemary Alexander and Richard Sneesby (Conran Octopus, £20) deals with every aspect of hard landscaping, from design through to materials.

SCIENCE ain't what it used to be. Children no longer have to put up with dry old text books as **The Kingfisher Book of the Human Body** (Kingfisher, £10.99) proves. This is packed with fascinating facts and mind-boggling pictures, such as the magnified head louse gripping tightly on to a human hair.



THE I Wonder Why Big Book of Knowledge is also teeming with fascinating facts and gives children clear and interesting answers to all the questions they love to ask. High quality realistic artwork brings people, events and the natural world to life.



FINALLY, one book no curious family should be without is **The Top Ten of Everything 2006** by Russell Ash (Dorling Kindersley, £12.99). This is the ultimate book of lists, from the most expensive pop lyrics and the countries with the most executions to the world's longest running shows.



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NE interiors



Ian and Sandra Day: mad about the 1940s

Pictures: RICHARD DOUGHTY

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Give me
 shelter!

Their Hoover is 70 years old – and still works a treat – and most of their furniture and possessions could be straight from a museum. LINDSAY JENNINGS meets a couple who live in a real 1940s house

MOST people would have a luxury holiday or a top-of-the-range car on their wish-list. At the top of Sandra Day's is an original Anderson air raid shelter.

"I'm desperate for one because it would just set my house off," she says, pointing to her small back yard. "I would put it just there and put some benches in it and run an extension lead so I could play my tapes and listen to the stories. While he watched his football, I could sit out there on my tod. I would die for one of those."

It is evident as soon as you step foot in Sandra and husband Ian's three-bedroom house in Melmerby, near Ripon, that there's a bit of a 1940s theme going on.

They've always had an interest in the era, but the real collecting began when their home was flooded three and a half years ago and they decided to replace many of its contents with furniture and equipment from the Second World War era.

Off came the cupboard doors in the kitchen, to be replaced with curtains, and the floorboards throughout the house were stripped and painted dark brown. Sandra then ripped up the stair carpet and painted the steps and the house in muted colours.

The telephone was changed to a wood and Bakelite affair and Sandra started doing the washing using an old dolly tub and mangle.

Sitting in her kitchen, wearing a snood and looking uncannily like a Land Girl, Sandra goes through some of the other changes. A modern stereo sits behind the front cover of a 1940s wireless and they're hunting for an old 1940s television set to sit in front of their own TV, she explains. On the flagged kitchen floor is an old trunk packed with paraphernalia from the late 1930s to 1940s, from old magazine cuttings and patterns to scales and pans.

In the spare bedroom there is a wartime



The fairly ordinary exterior of the Day's property hides a 1940s interior

tall boy, chest of drawers and Lloyd Loom bedside table, along with an original CC41 utility bed.

"Someone rang up from Elvington and asked if we wanted it. It used to belong to an Italian prisoner of war," says Sandra, lifting up the covers to reveal the metal bed frame and the distinctive utility number.

The couple's main bedroom was decorated with a complete set of furniture, including dark wood bed, tall boy, dressing table and wardrobe, picked up at an auction in Thirsk for about £60. On the bed is a modern duvet, but Sandra soon wanders off,

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WHAT I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS

IF they can't have an Anderson shelter, Sandra would like a 1940s toddler's pushchair – "not a doll's one, a real one we use with our reenactment groups" – and Ian would be thrilled to get a

1940s train set. And their favourite presents ever? "My Hoover!", says Sandra, not something many women would admit to, while Ian absolutely loves his 1940s gentleman's watch

Clockwise from left: the wood and Bakelite phone above the dark wood sideboard; the porcelain tub and mangle, which Sandra uses to do all the washing; a leather suite in the 1940s-style sitting room

I don't actually feel comfortable when I go to people's houses and everything's modern

iron flat-iron which she warms up on the lounge's coal fire if the electric goes off, which it does frequently apparently.

"The only modern things we have are the television, the computer, the fridge freezer and the washing machine," says Ian.

When asked why they have such a love of the 1940s era, they chime in unison: "Because it's comfortable."

And they have a point. In an increasingly anti-social world, why not live in a time when community spirit was at its best and you could buy things knowing they would last a lifetime, possibly two?

"I've got stuff and I know it's solid and I don't have to keep going back to replace it," says Sandra, who at 51 wasn't even alive in the 40s. "I actually don't feel comfortable when I go to people's houses and everything's all modern."

The couple, who are originally from Liverpool, buy all their gear from auctions, car boot sales and eBay – although the latter is getting too expensive, they point out. The 1940s look is not just reserved for their house either.

Sandra has a range of clothing and handbags from the era and the couple enjoy following wartime recipes. "Spam fritters are the best," says Ian, 53.

Sandra even uses that staple of the wartime kitchen, powdered egg, in her cooking. She

► **Continued on page 10**

bringing out a beautiful peach coloured satin bedspread from her chosen era.

"It's just normal furniture to me," she says.

In Ian's study, there is a computer, but it is surrounded by posters of spitfires and original artwork commemorating VE Day. There are rows and rows of books on the Second World War and dozens of classic miniature cars and vans from the era, still in their boxes.

The original cast iron bath is still in the house, which dates back to the late 1800s, but Sandra has replaced the bath panel with an authentic 1940s curtain.

In the lounge, the couple are awaiting delivery of an original 1940s sofa three-piece suite courtesy of someone who knew they were keen collectors and contacted them. A dark wood glass sideboard contains many of Sandra's porcelain-faced dolls. The walls are painted in a muted green and pale yellow.

As well as the 70-year-old Hoover (a present for her 50th birthday), Sandra also has a 1938 ironing board she still uses and even a cast

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The fireplace with 1940s ornaments and the bedrooms with utility furniture and salmon-coloured, silk quilt



Give me shelter!

► Continued from page 9

prefers the taste. "You can make a nice cake with it," she says.

She also makes her own furniture polish using beeswax, lavender oil and turps. When she's out shopping, she converts all the modern currency into shillings. "I won't pay more than 15 shillings for a loaf," she says.

Both Ian and Sandra are co-ordinators of the Home Front section of the Frontline Association, a Yorkshire-based re-enactment group. It's not a role playing group, they say,

but a living history one, making sure the sacrifices made in the war are never forgotten. "We take it seriously but we also get to have fun as well," says Ian.

They enjoy going to re-enactment weekends around the region.

So as Christmas approaches, remember... if you know of anyone with a 1940s train set or an Anderson air raid shelter, there's a couple in Melmerby would love to hear from you.

● To join the Home Front section of the Frontline Association contact Ian and Sandra on (01765) 640643.

NE christmas



ARE YOU SITTING STYLISHLY?

WANT something completely covetable for the home this Christmas? Sedini, launched in the summer by Darlington woman Roz Henderson, specialises in stunning stools for contemporary kitchens. Roz was inspired to start the company, with the help of Darlington Business Venture, after she spent months searching for some fashionable stools to add the finishing touch to her newly fitted kitchen. "I knew what I wanted and they simply weren't out there, so I decided to bridge the gap," says Roz. Her stools are made in Italy. "They seem to be the world's best at manufacturing seating and furniture. The quality is evident in the weight of the

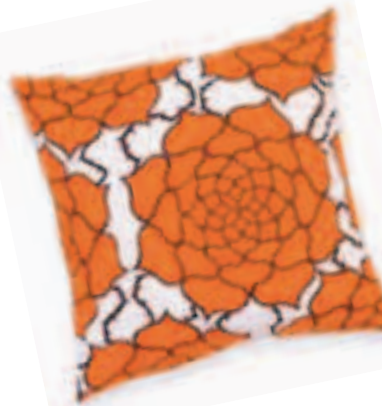
stools, which is around three and a half stones, which makes them particularly stable for children," says Roz. Sedini offers a range of stools, with or without backs, in a choice of different finishes, including chrome, satin chrome and powder coated, as well as a range of fabrics and wood finishes. "The growing trend in the home is that the kitchen is becoming more of the social hub and so customers are happy to spend money on a product that is not only comfortable but which also makes a real statement," says Roz. The stools cost from around £150. For more information: website: www.sedini.co.uk; tel: 0870 770-7714; email: customerservice@sedini.co.uk



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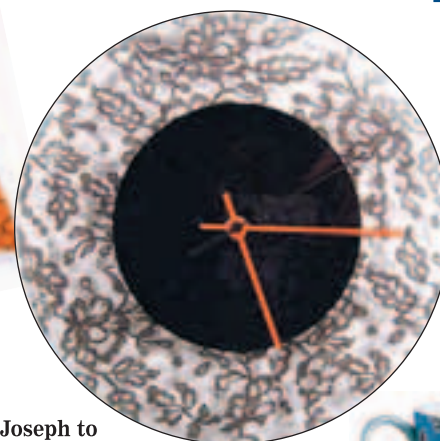


MINT COLLECTION

FASHIONISTAS can indulge their passion for contemporary home and fashion accessories from up and coming designers at MINT in the Old George Yard, just off High Bridge in Newcastle. The designer boutique's unique range of hand-made jewellery, handbags, T-shirts and greeting cards nestles alongside clocks, cushions and glassware, featuring well known names such as Mawi, Tatty Devine and Joseph

Joseph to the more obscure but equally desirable Joanna Louca, mylittlesistersays, Servane Gaxotte and local designers Rose Wilson and Doll Deluxe. Owners Nicci Hardy and Merry Ashford make it their job to hunt down the best in designer accessories from around the world, many of which are not available elsewhere in the region.

www.mint-boutique.com



LIGHT STUFF

GET lighting right and it can change the whole atmosphere of a room. This stylish Jasper Conran Aura Cafe table lamp is £195 from House of Fraser



FLOWER POWER

THIS Ditsy floral four-piece mug set makes a perfect present and is great value at £18 from Marks & Spencer.



Home improvements

Irons aside, there are lots of household gifts that will be welcome this Christmas



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NE gardening

Gardening Correspondent BRIGID PRESS talks to a woman who likes to hide herself away in the garden shed when she comes over all creative



Jean hard at work arranging flowers in her workshop

Far right: the slate feature garden

The lone arranger

AT LAST I have found a garden shed that does not belong to the 'man' of the house. One that is not stuffed full of oily car parts, jars of rescued, rusting nails and varnish stiffened paint brushes. This one has the best part of a fitted kitchen, an antique chest of drawers and a softly padded high stool.

Jean Dixon prefers to call her shed a 'workshop'. This is where her sparks of inspiration get turned into creative displays of art. This is where the fruits of her garden are planted into oasis, twisted around filament thin wire and sprayed with gilding.

Jean is chairperson of Ferryhill and Sedgfield Flower arranging club, and likes nothing better than working on her latest project, tucked away cosily at the bottom of the garden.

Much of the produce, and often the beginnings of many a brainwave, is harvested directly from her garden. Slowly, over the years Jean has transformed the garden into a flower arrangers' paradise. Anything growing within the boundaries (and often anything that pokes through from neighbouring gardens as well) is here because it has a purpose, and has the potential to be used in one of Jean's amazing floral displays.

Foliage forms the backbone of the site, with large leathery clumps of hosta, hebe, bergenia and griselinia dotted around the border that frames the lawn. These are the

Gardeners: Jean (and Alan) Dixon
Location: Woodham, County Durham
Age of garden: 18 years
Time in garden: daily potter
Favourite tools: hand trowel and ladies' border fork
Favourite flowers: Pansies, delphiniums and roses

staples. They are green, and they are strong and bold. Variation comes in the form of the soft and serrated lime green leaves of sambucus aurea, the pointed and angular fronds of the deep purple acer palmatum, and the blue tinged circular foliage of the eucalyptus. Tucked away in a corner, the soft unfurling fronds of the large shuttlecock fern shelter under the stiff, upright spikes of the phormium.

The maintenance of all this greenery doesn't pose a big problem. All the shrubs receive a regular and joyful pruning, and Jean does just that, as and when something is needed for her displays.

In front of and in between the mounds of foliage are the colours and the textures. Soft and frothy white pompoms of gysophilia contrast with tall, upright, spiny spears of acanthus mollis. The fine, feathery leaves of fennel rub shoulders with thick, leathery

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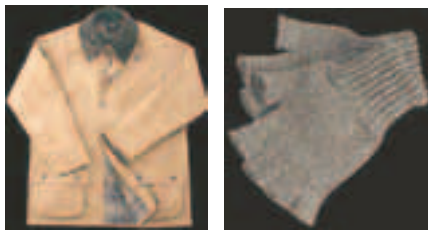
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WHAT DO YOU WANT FOR XMAS?

GIFTS FOR THE GARDEN
– See overleaf



White lillies in the foreground of the view down the extensive garden

shoots of the sedums. Fiery red petals blaze their colours on top of the stiffly veined leaves of crocosmia Lucifer, contrasting well with the pure blue heads of nodding cornflowers.

Jean once had the beds sectioned off into colours, but gradually over time, the boundaries have merged and now they mingle and play with each other, changing the border palette with the seasons.

Ground cover comes in the form of heucheras, hellebores and telemia. Periwinkle pokes its head up in one or two places, but unlike most other manicured gardens, here it is welcomed (but only in controlled doses), as the leaves can be twined around candlesticks, or draped over the edge of fruit bowls. Other wilder visitors are encouraged too: feverfew, for its button like heads and dainty leaves, and lords and ladies, for the hooded foliage and autumnal display of berries.

Pots are used to grow those slightly tender plants. The most striking examples are the calla lilies, with their stiff, waxy hoods in shades of bright yellow, dusky orange and plum purple. The tall, wispy fronds of an asparagus plant, a mainstay for flower arrangements, billows out of another pot.

It isn't all flowers though. There is a large area of the garden that is designed for easier maintenance. Jean and Alan made a special journey to Honister in the Lake District to get the blue slate chippings to cover the ground. Slate is a much more practical alternative to chippings, as the stones, being flatter, don't get kicked around by the birds, or disappear into the ground over time. They are smoother underfoot, and much warmer. They also change colour depending on the weather.

Dotted around on this slate are various small conifers, which, as well as being easy to look after, also contribute to Jean's artistic

► **Continued on page 14**

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Slowly, over the years, Jean has transformed the garden into a flower arrangers' paradise



Main picture: Jean with her Easter Island-style heads
Above: the view from the gazebo

Pictures: CHRIS BOOTH

► Continued from page 13

creations. A small, circulating water feature amongst the slate adds to sensory stimulation, as does a large, smooth white sculpture. In the corner stands a hexagonal pergola. Alan is in the process of creating a set of benches and a table to fit inside the pretty summer-house so that they can fully appreciate the stunning views offered by the elevated position.

The pergola also looks out over the top of Jean's workshop, in which she has just sprayed a white plastic bowl with matt black paint. Wrapped in plastic are polystyrene

balls which have been covered in euonymus leaves (gleaned from a bush poking through from next door). She is preparing a piece for a local show, and shows me the packet of pearl-ended pins that she has bought to stick the leaves down with. She laughs as she tells me that the pricetag is actually more than the payment for first prize in the competition. Which, of course, only goes to emphasise the love of a hobby that she has pursued for more than 20 years.

● If anyone is interested in joining or finding out more about Ferryhill and Sedgfield Flower Club, e-mail brigidpress@hotmail.com and she will pass on contact details.



Above and right: the huge array of pots and statuary on show at the Castle Howard plant centre

Gifts for gardeners

CASTLE Howard's plant centre has all you need to make your garden just that little bit grander. As well as the almost obligatory Grecian-style statuary, the sales area has everything from ladybird larvae and hedgehog houses to terribly tasteful wastebins and watering cans. Even the wooden seed trays (nothing so vulgar as plastic) have Castle Howard

stamped firmly on them. And the shop sells trugs and baskets, handmade in Yorkshire, definitely designed for a more elegant style of gardening. Castle Howard Plant Centre, near Malton, North Yorkshire, is open 10am-5pm daily, except Christmas Day. Free entrance and parking.



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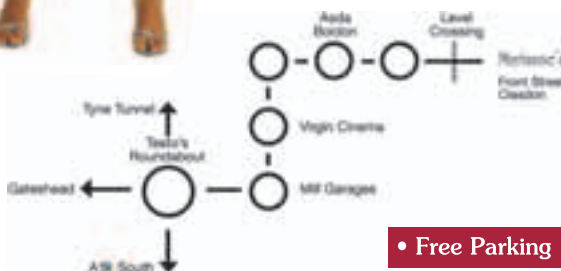
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What not to wear to the office party



Turn up looking like a trussed-up turkey at the office party and you can guarantee the jokes will be filed away to be recycled at your expense when you get back to work. AMY CAULFIELD explains how to avoid any fashion faux pas

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FROM getting drunk and making a pass at the office geek to punching that boss you hate and laying him out cold on the floor – the staff office Christmas party can be a minefield of potential disasters. But by making sure you pick the right outfit, you can be certain that – whatever else you do – at least you won't be remembered for your festive fashion faux pas.

Even though you will be spending the evening with people you see day-in, day-out slumped over your computer screen, there is no excuse for not making the effort. Start off your office party preparation with a manicure and a haircut – to make sure you look sleek and groomed while you chat to the company bigwigs. Then you are ready to select an outfit to kill.

First of all, think about the venue. Some of the worst fashion offenders are those who don't take into account their surroundings when choosing their ensemble.

It seems obvious, but if your invitation says black tie and cocktail dress don't turn up in your scruffiest pair of jeans. And if the do is pints and sausage rolls down the local pub, that little black Armani dress will probably not be appreciated.

Eleanor Strauss, deputy fashion editor at *Company* magazine, recommends that, whatever the venue, you should leave your navel-skimming top and mini-skirt at home. Anything that reveals too much flesh is a great big no-no, she says.

"If your MD is sitting next to you, you don't want to be showing too much cleavage. Stay conservative – it's not a Saturday night out on the town."

Stick to the old rule. Show legs or cleavage – but never both.

It is also important to dress for comfort. Strauss says: "Do not wear anything you don't feel comfortable in as it will reflect in your behaviour. This applies to squeezing yourself into something that is two sizes too small – don't think no-one will notice. They will. Stick with something that you've worn before, like that old, faithful little black dress."

Luckily, black is the new black this season, so your old LBD should be just perfect for this year's office do. For those who are a bit more daring, there are also plenty of purple dresses in the shops this winter – but only consider this if you have the confidence to get away with it.

If in doubt – stick to black.

Shoes are also an area where comfort should be taken into account. On a night where you will want to make a good impression, you do not want to be hobbling around by 9pm. Strauss says: "Go for height by all means but make sure your shoes

Leave the feather boas and the long, black, satin gloves at home. It's the office party, not Come Dancing



DRESS TO IMPRESS

LEFT: Sequin waistcoat £35, Angel Rock T-shirt £28, metallic bangle £5, embellished scarf £22, tutu £55. From Oasis

BELOW: Sequin plunge-back jersey £80, satin skirt £80, beaded bag £40. From Precis Petite

will be able to see you through the night.”

Often, the outfits that are most likely to alert the fashion police are those that are just too over-the-top. It is important to look glamorous and sophisticated but don't take it too far.

“Leave the feather boas and the long, black, satin gloves at home,” says Strauss. “It's the office party, not Come Dancing.”

Tailoring is big news this season, so go for a slim-fitting pencil skirt to keep it sophisticated but sexy at the same time. And keep the accessories to a minimum. It goes without saying that those novelty Santa earrings that you got out of a cracker last year should never see the light of day. (That applies to men too. Keep the comedy Christmas tie that plays Jingle Bells in the drawer where it belongs).

But if you have to accessorise, keep it understated. A set of large, black beads is both classy and fashionable at the moment. Or go for some plain, silver earrings and a necklace.

Add to all this some natural make-up and you will be ready to become one of the company's high-fliers. But, be warned, if you are after a promotion, make sure you don't carry off the sophisticated look too well, or you might find that you've out-dressed the boss.

Now all you need to do is get out there, network and enjoy yourself.

But make sure you don't have too much fun.

After all, if you end up singing along to Slade while dancing on the tables or dragging Keith from accounts under the mistletoe, it won't just be your stylish outfit that the night is remembered for.



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me and my wardrobe



Green goddess: this is one of Victoria's favourite dresses by Roland Joyce. Shoes are from Carvela



Horse code (right): Victoria wears top and trousers by Next, Dubarry boots and body warmer by Toggi

Victoria Baker, 35, runs The Nail Studio, offering a range of beauty treatments, from her home at Hall Farm, Carlton, near Stockton. She is also an avid three-day eventer

Describe your look?

Smart casual

What couldn't you live without?

It would probably be my waterproof Musto jacket and my Dubarry boots, which are like leather wellington boots.



They're really comfy and keep the rain out.

What's your best bargain?

I've got a coat I bought from Coast last year which cost £120 but it had 75 per cent off it. It's in multicoloured pastel shades and I really like it.

What's your most expensive item?

A Frank Usher dress for £340.

What's your worst buy?

Probably the Frank Usher dress above. It's cerise pink with orange in and it's paisley, which sounds disgusting but it's better than it sounds. I've only worn it

twice. It's cut beautifully and everybody says it suits me but when I put it on I think, mmmm, it's not great.

What your favourite item?

The green Ronald Joyce dress (in the picture) because I always feel comfortable in it and I really like it.

High street or designer?

Definitely a mix and match of both

Who is your style icon?

Audrey Hepburn, for her timeless look.

● Victoria Baker can be contacted at The Nail Studio on 01740 630951 or 07710 193422.

It's cerise pink with orange in and it's paisley, which sounds disgusting but it's better than it sounds

Casual style: Victoria's favourite look is smart casual. Jeans are by French Connection with shirt from Dubarry

Pictures: SARAH NICHOLSON

NE out on the town

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



McCourt & McKay

THIS month we decided we were due a well-earned break to recharge our batteries, so we packed our bags and headed off to Turkey. We stayed at Ovacik, near Olu Deniz, a place you can relax on golden sands by a beautiful blue lagoon, and Hisaronu, where you are spoilt for choice for good restaurants, dancing, karaoke bars and some great bargain shopping.

A favourite place for paragliding enthusiasts and diving, the scenery is stunning with lush green hillsides and crystal blue waters. And if you like a bit of culture, this area is steeped in history and tradition.

Sounds perfect? It was, but with eight girls let loose for five days we forgot to recharge our batteries!

FERHOT AND HOUVA BILGIG

We were strutting our funky stuff in a very lively bar when a wedding party came in. Traditional music greeted the couple - Ferhot, 25 and 21-year-old Houva - and everyone stood up and clapped them in. Through a translator we asked them why they were there. Houva explained that they were from a mountain village and had never been in a disco bar so it was their wedding request to



FERHOT & HOUVA BILGIG



FRANCES CAPE

visit Time Out. Traditionally, weddings must be finished by midnight so it was almost like a scene out of Cinderella as the clock struck 12 and they quickly left, heading back to the mountains. We didn't quite understand what label Houva's dress was but all agreed it had to be an Emmanuel, as she looked every inch a princess.

WENDY TRICKETT

Wendy is an Education Business Links Co-ordinator from Leeds. It was her first time in Hisaronu and she was having a ball. Her dress was from Morgan in Leeds, her favourite place to shop, along with Wakefield.

Wendy likes a wide variety of labels but she loves a bargain and likes to jazz up a boring outfit with accessories.

At 47, Wendy looked a picture of health and she credits that to a positive outlook, dealing with stress as it comes along, going to the gym now and again and regular moisturising. For music, she listens to Damien Rice, Steven Fretwell, Nora Jones and Frank Sinatra.

CARKAN KOGYIGIT

The 23-year-old works in the Time Out Karaoke bar. We had to include him because he complimented us on our singing (oh, they are so polite!). He is from Ankara but loves the summer season in Hisaronu.



JACKY TURNER



CARKAN KOGYIGIT

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

amcreativeproductions.com



WENDY TRICKETT



HAKAN GIGDAN

These guys never need the gym as seven days a week they are dancing. Carkan shops during the winter when it is quieter, usually in Ankara or Izmir. He loves any dance music but prefers the songs sung by the original artists.

JACKY TURNER

Jacky is a foster carer and support worker from Fife in Scotland. Shw was having a break from domestic life and spending time with her friends.

Having three-year-old twin girls doesn't leave much time to shop so Jacky shops anywhere she can find comfortable, flattering clothes that wash with minimum effort. She wore a white linen skirt from Quiz and a se-

quinned top from River Island.

Jacky recommends not overdoing make-up. By keeping it light and natural you don't get a shock when you take it off, she says! She is a big believer in a healthy mind assisting a healthy body, and that you only have one life so you'd better make the most of it. She is a big Daniel Beddingfield and Gabrielle fan but has recently been listening to Bread and David Gates.

HAKAN GIGDAN

The 27-year-old works seven days a week in the Lycian Bar in Hisaronu.

Hakan wore a Polim Pier shirt, Levi jeans and Puma shoes. He only ever buys Levi's as they are a very good fit and comfortable.

As well as working seven nights a week, Hakan plays a lot of football and runs. Like a lot of Turkish men, he goes to the Turkish baths and barber every second day where he gets a shave, massage and moisturiser. His family make him feel happy and his favourite music is R'n'B.

FRANCES CAPE

Frances is an equestrian and leisure manager from Kirkcaldy in Fife. She was staying in a villa her friends bought last year. Frances was visiting for the first time and confessed to falling in love with the stunning scenery and culture. She thinks it's a great place for all ages, especially families, as it is safe and welcoming. Frances likes to shop in Warehouse, French Connection and River Island and indulged in some bar dancing wearing cropped trousers from Miss Selfridge and a top by Faith.

For the feelgood factor Frances recommends a holiday in Turkey, always using a cream with a good SPF and keeping hair in good condition by using Kerastase hair products from SAKS.



A gastronomic joy: the cosy interior of the gastropub

The Carpenters Arms, Felixkirk, near Thirsk

TUCKED away in the pretty village of Felixkirk is a gastronomic joy. The Carpenters Arms may look like a local pub, but the Les Routiers sign on the door gives the game away. This is no ordinary hostelry. It serves top-notch quality food in a friendly, comfortable setting. At a time when less upmarket pub restaurants are increasing their prices, The Carpenters Arms is consistent in giving extremely good value.

It was a rainy evening when we arrived. Sandbags lined up along the front of the flower-decked pub greeted us, but once inside the cosy restaurant, we soon forgot the threat of floods as we enjoyed our first drink – a kir for me, and a less classy, but apparently equally delicious, pint of beer, for my husband Ian.

Starters include baked queen scallops in lemon, garlic and gruyere for £6.95 and deep fried crispy-coated squid in lime and coriander for £5. I opted for the very tasty toasted goat's cheese crostini while Ian chose the potted rabbit with caper butter, chutney and toasts. Both our starters were £4.95 and came in ample portions.

Meat-eaters may find the options for main courses limited – there were six on the menu when we visited and one of those – the lamb – wasn't available. But who can complain when choices include breast of chicken stuffed with goat's cheese wrapped in bacon with a sauce forestiere (£11.95) and fillet of pork stuffed with black

pudding, wrapped in Parma ham, with caramelised apples and port wine sauce?

The fish choices were extensive, with offers of Cajun-spiced fillets of sea bream with rocket and red onion salad for £12.25. The several vegetarian main courses available included tagliatelli with woodland mushrooms, truffle oil and fresh herbs for £9.50.

I chose a delicious honey and soy-glazed duck breast with stir fry vegetables and an oriental plum sauce (£13.95), while Ian went for the fillet steak from the char-grill, along with a Diane sauce (£16.95). Both came with new potatoes and vegetables.

By this stage I was wishing my dress was a size bigger, but this didn't stop us investigating the desserts. The "Queen" of the puds was obviously the "study of chocolate", which cost £6.50 and had girls on the next table squealing with delight.

All other desserts were £4.50 and included black forest chocolate pot and boudoir biscuits, and pink peppercorn meringue with fresh strawberries, Chantilly cream and strawberry coulis. I went for a crème brulee trio – why have just one pudding when you can have three? Ian shunned all things sweet and chose three cheeses, Denhay Mature Cheddar, Jersey Blue and Pont L'Eveque for £5.95.

Although there was an extensive, reasonably-priced wine list, we ordered by the glass and rounded off our gigantic meal with a liqueur coffee each. By this stage, if sandbags had been needed outside, and fortunately they weren't, my rotund girth would have been very useful. Our bill came to £72.90, excluding service.

● **The Carpenters Arms, Felixkirk, Thirsk. Tel: (01845) 537369. Open Tuesday to Sunday lunchtime, closed Sunday evening and all day Monday.**

Christine Fieldhouse

I went for a crème brulee trio – why have just one pudding when you can have three?



Above: Thorpe Farm owners Jo and Paul Barks

● **Thorpe Farm Centre, Greta Bridge, Barnard Castle, (01833) 627242, www.thorpefarm.co.uk**

● **This year's Christmas fair is on Saturday and Sunday, November 12 and 13.**





There's something for all the family at Thorpe Farm... deli delights, Christmas decorations, cuddly toys...

Peel appeal

With its new additions, Thorpe Farm Centre hopes to put Teesdale firmly on the map. SARAH FOSTER pays a visit

TUCKED away down a country lane – although just metres from the busy A66 – lies Peel House, a stately stone building backed by quiet farmland. Built in the 1730s, it was once a family home; a place where weary workers came to rest. While it still serves as a sanctuary, its warmth and cheer undiminished through the years, it's now a stop-off point for travellers.

Peel House, the hub of Thorpe Farm Centre, near Greta Bridge, has, since 2001, been a farm shop. Yet while this conjures up a small-scale business selling eggs and jars of jam, the description hardly does the venture justice.

Stepping through the narrow doorway, I seem to have entered food heaven. The shelves are packed with gourmet treats – from luscious-looking cakes to fine wines; from pates to home-baked biscuits, and the atmosphere is instantly inviting. Going through to another room, there are cheeses by the dozen and large vats of frozen fruits. It seems that every corner is filled with some delicious delicacy – and what makes them extra special is their local leaning.

Owners Paul and Jo Barks take me on a tour of the building. Beyond the foodstuffs is a roomful of gifts, where Christmas features subtly in the form of real silver tree ornaments. Alongside these is delicate jewellery by Newbridge Silverware.

Going upstairs – the staircase is festooned with evening bags – there are another two rooms brimming with goods. The first has grown-ups' gifts and is the perfect setting for country-themed collections such as Border Fine Art china. In a similar vein, there are quirky tea towels by Simon Drew and Cally & Co. aprons, thick and practical in 100 per cent cotton. The room smells delicious, thanks to products by Arran Aromatics and a vast array of candles, and browsing is a pleasure in such a warm and cosy place.

Next door is devoted to children, with many distinctive products that would make ideal Christmas presents. The farmhouse stocks the Jellycat range, and legions of cute cuddly toys sit waiting for good homes.

There are also brightly coloured raincoats in fun guises, including one with ladybird spots, and a fireman's outfit. Animal-face slippers would prove a hit with any youngster, and mini wax jackets and chunky knitwear

would keep them warm on winter days. After all that shopping, you can refuel at the downstairs café, complete with wooden beams and an old range, and it is to here that the Barkses and I repair. Paul explains how the business came to be.

"I've lived here all my life. This has been in the family since before I was born," he says. "I used to be a pig farmer and Jo worked for Saks in Darlington, but I'd always had this crackpot idea of a farm shop. It was just an add-on to the farming to begin with, then foot-and-mouth came and that was the end of the pig farm. Now the business is evolving all the time."

With two young children of their own – Harvey, seven, and five-year-old Claudia – the Barkses were conscious that there wasn't much for families in the area. As a result, they've created a large play area to cater for kids. Paul says the aim is to attract as many people as possible.

"We're trying to create something that has destination appeal," he says. "We're trying to bring people here from elsewhere. It's trying to create something that makes people stop in Teesdale as opposed to Penrith or Scotch Corner."

The Barkses's ethos is one of working with other traders for mutual benefits. As part of this, they've brought in two other companies, reclaimed goods specialist Dales Reclamation and Broom Mill butchers. But Paul says their ambitions don't end there.

"We've got a falconry centre planned for the spring – Ridgese Falconry are going to be based here," he says. "There will be falconry displays every day. We're also planning a specialist garden nursery growing plants and running courses."

Since starting up, the business has slowly built a reputation. Its main event – now a firm fixture on the local calendar – is its Christmas fair. "We have two marquees – one full of food and drink, where we launch new products, and the other full of crafts and gifts," says Paul. "Last year, we had more than 3,000 people through."

The farm as a whole averages 55,000 visitors annually, and Paul says he hopes this year will be even better. "Hopefully, we will be somewhere near 60,000 for this year, which we will be quite pleased with," he says.

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gadget man



● Don't miss Burton's Bytes – game reviews in The Northern Echo every Friday

As far as gadget lovers are concerned, smaller is most definitely better. That's why manufacturers are spending millions to make familiar objects fit into our pockets. With Christmas just around the corner NIGEL BURTON looks at some of the objects of desire that could be in your stocking come December 25



The iPod Nano

DESPITE an embarrassing climb-down, forced upon it by angry customers in the States who claimed their Nanos had duff screens, this is another Apple success story. Possibly the coolest digital music player ever designed, the Nano is impossibly slim and has a terrific colour screen. You can also use it to display photos and set the software to play songs at random. If only it could display video as well.

From any decent electrical retailer. £139

Perfect for the Christmas stocking



The Sony Bean

OH how Sony must be gnashing its corporate teeth at the success of the iPod. It had the portable music market stitched up with the Walkman and then the Discman until upstart Apple came along. Now it is playing catch-up. The Bean aims to beat the iPod Nano in the style stakes by becoming even smaller and cuter. I'll leave it to your aesthetic judgement to decide if it has succeeded. It's also cheaper.

Try www.sony.co.uk. Prices from £79

Sony PSP

AS objects of desire go, the Sony PSP is up there with the iPod. It's so much more than just a games machine (although it happens to be the most powerful portable ever built) because it plays music, movies and even has wireless technology built in. If you can find one – buy it.

Try any electrical store but be quick because supplies are scarce. £179.

iTECH Bluetooth virtual keyboard

IF you have an all-singing all-dancing smartphone the only real frustration is the difficulty of entering text. Predictive texting is fine if you are limited to 160 characters (as with all SMS text messages) but today's handsets are capable of so much more. The first time you see Virtual Keyboard in action it's hard not to think it must be some kind of a joke. Linked wirelessly to your phone (or PDA), it projects a keyboard on any flat surface. You just 'press' the virtual key and the letter appears on your handset. It's still no replacement for a proper keyboard (and RSi sufferers will be crippled by the lack of key movement because there isn't any) but it beats hunting and pecking any day.

From PDA specialist Expansys 0161-868 0868. £114.95



Nintendo Game Boy Micro

EVERYONE wrote the old Game Boy Advance off when the dual screen replacement arrived earlier this year but Nintendo had other ideas. Its designers were packed off and told not to come back until they had a hand-held gaming system that was as cool and cute an object of desire as the iPod Nano. The Game Boy Micro is very small and light but the colour screen makes the most of the wide range of software available for the system (much of it at reduced prices). It also comes with replaceable fascias which incorporate a protective screen.

From all good games stores. £69.99

XBox 360

SURE the PlayStation 3 is coming but this games console will be here in time for Christmas.

Multiple processors and a glut of memory should make games on this beast look better than even the fastest PC.

It also plays DVDs (but not hi-definition movies) and pipes out music from a built in hard disk if you opt for the more expensive version.

From: www.amazon.co.uk £279.99

Sennheiser PXC300 Noiseguard Headphones

NOISE cancelling headphones sound like a contradiction in terms – by definition, all headphones make a noise.

However, these little beauties from Sennheiser produce a sound that blocks out external racket and allows you to concentrate on your music. Just the job for long train journeys.

From: www.sennheiser.co.uk. £129.



Fossil watch

THE Fossil watch packs quite a punch. It combines a sophisticated timepiece with a fully spec'd Palm PDA. You can even write on the touch sensitive screen and

synchronising with your PC is a simple job. The battery life isn't too hot and you'll need to juice it up every few days, but thankfully the cells are rechargeable.

From www.amazon.co.uk. From £59.99

NE christmas

LITTLE AND LARGE

Program-a-Bot, £29.99, from www.iwoot.com

AT the budget end is this quite superb Program-a-Bot. Use the control panel on his back to program a series of up to 36 moves that it will then perform when

you clap. The sound-response feature means you can clap your hands to his left or right and he'll turn towards the sound. He can spot large obstacles and avoid them, act as a sentry, and comes with a mini-sidekick.



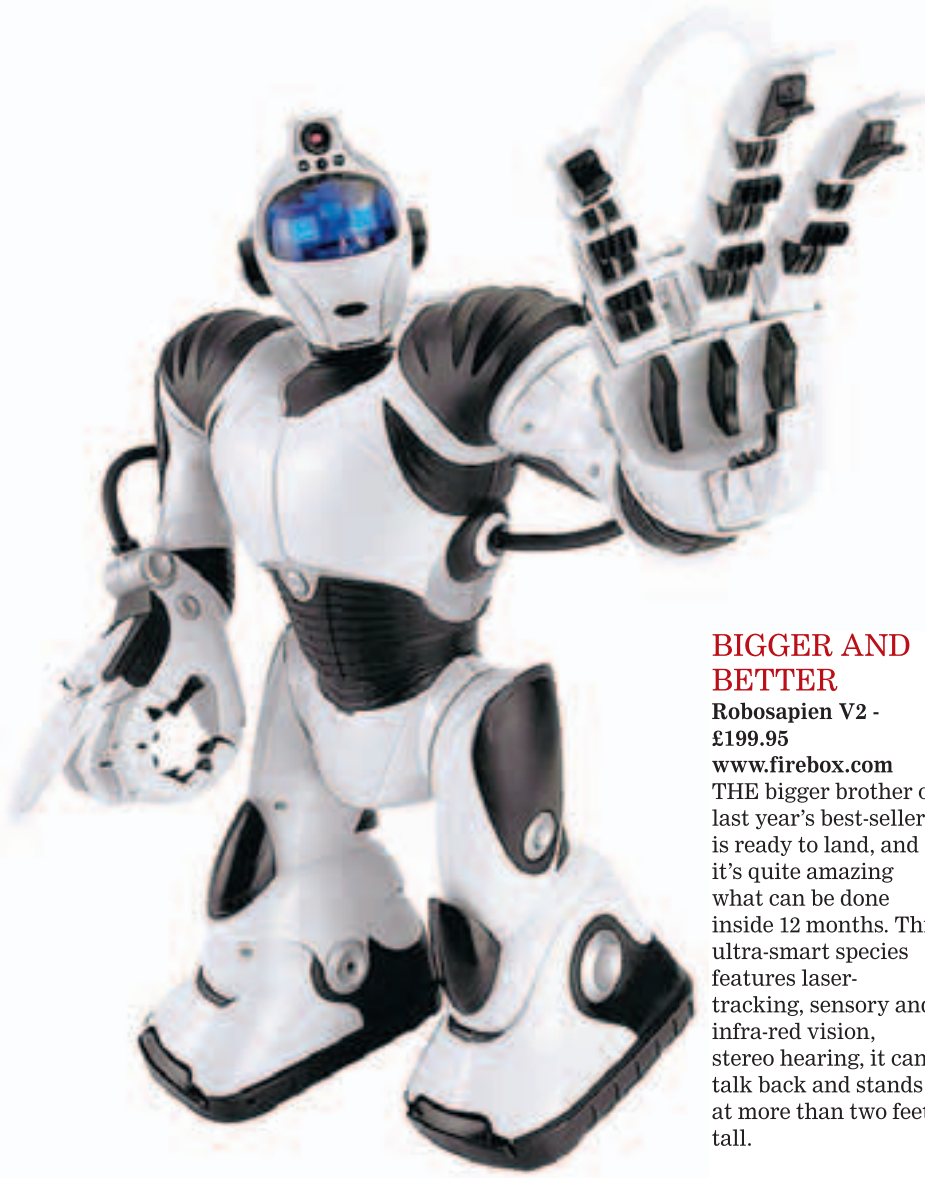
AUTOMATON WITH ATTITUDE

Robosapien, £89.95, from www.boysstuff.co.uk
 ONE of the biggest selling gadgets of 2004 is still worthy of a mention. With 67 pre-programmed actions on-board this is a robot with real attitude. String together a few moves of your own and enter these into a personal button for future entertainment or simply stick him on demo and watch him dance, karate chop and high-five.



PERFECT PET

Robopet £59.95 from www.boysstuff.co.uk
 WALK, run, crawl, sit, stand, get-up and roll-over and that's just for starters with this strange looking cat/dog crossbreed. Use either via your remote or let him run free. All the benefits of a pet minus the bad stuff – chewed carpets and terrified postmen.



BIGGER AND BETTER

Robosapien V2 - £199.95 www.firebox.com
 THE bigger brother of last year's best-seller is ready to land, and it's quite amazing what can be done inside 12 months. This ultra-smart species features laser-tracking, sensory and infra-red vision, stereo hearing, it can talk back and stands at more than two feet tall.

6 of the best Robo-gifts

ROBOTS really have developed over the years. Back in the 60s there was B9 from Lost in Space, who couldn't really do very much. Then the 70s saw the arrival of K9, CP30 and R2D2, more intelligent by far. The 80s saw the robot race break into kids' entertainment with Metal Mickey and they even offered themselves up as sex sirens in the shape of Daryl Hannah as Pris in Blade Runner.

As for the 90s, well, there seemed to be a robot of one kind or another around every film script corner.

So here we are in the middle of the Noughties, and although scientists and engineers have managed to make some incredible automatons, they are still in a price league that makes them unviable as home-helpers. An automaton which could cycle was unveiled this autumn – clever indeed, but hardly a snip at £25,000.

Now though, some of the technology has been harnessed by toymakers, so here's a selection of robots that are strictly for fun and will make great Christmas gifts.

SUB WOOFER

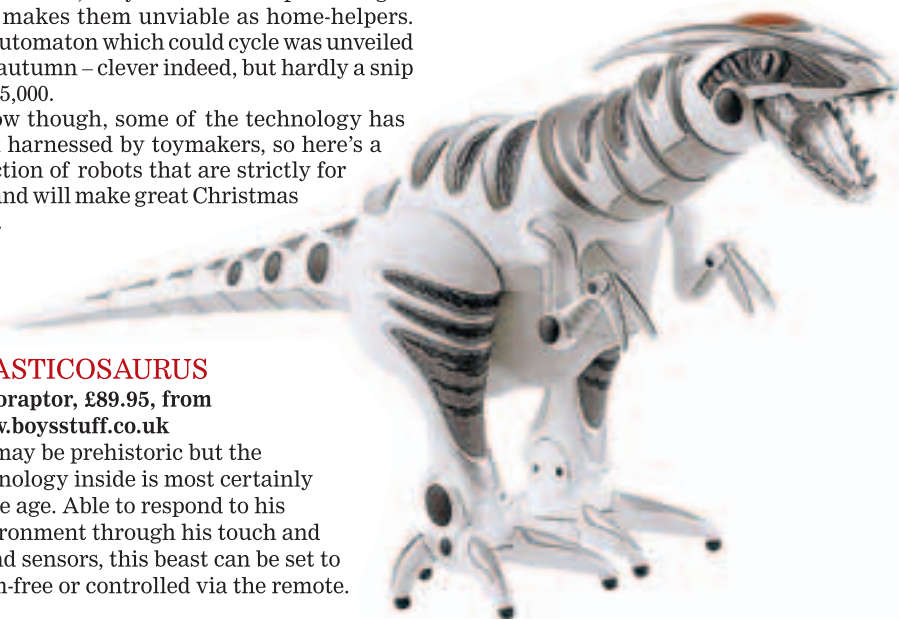
I-Dog - £29.95 from www.firebox.com
 THIS disco-doggie is the perfect partner for anyone who has a portable

audio device, just stick in the jack lead and watch this mutt strut his stuff. LED lights flash on the face and the ears move, the tail wags and the head nods, all in response to the type of music you play.



PLASTICOSAURUS

Roboraptor, £89.95, from www.boysstuff.co.uk
 HE may be prehistoric but the technology inside is most certainly space age. Able to respond to his environment through his touch and sound sensors, this beast can be set to roam-free or controlled via the remote.



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Jars of fantastic foods make great presents. SARAH FRENCH talks to the head of a jam and pickle-making empire

Perfection in a jar: Elspeth Biltoft found her Yorkshire Dales childhood stood her in good stead when she wanted to set up a business working from home

Below: a vat of chutney in the making



ELSPETH Biltoft has just got back to North Yorkshire from New York. She's been meeting with her US distributors who ensure Rosebud Preserves reach homes across America via stores like the Pasta Shop in San Francisco, the Whole Food Group and the wonderful Dean and DeLuca in New York.

After a four-day visit in which she also took in the New York Fancy Food Fayre, she's back at work in Healey, near Masham, overseeing the latest batch of jars ready for export. It's a case of from the Big Apple to apple jelly.

"Twenty-five per cent of what we produce goes to America now," says Elspeth. "We sell 17 different products there and the most popular by far are the herb jellies, with the mint jelly being their favourite."

Over here and it's the likes of Liberty of London and Neal's Yard Dairy as well as more than 200 independent shops that stock Rosebud's jams, chutneys and pickles. They also make preserves for the Black Sheep Brewery Masham, Harewood House, Castle Howard, Theakstons Brewery and most recently Alnwick Castle, all made at the former village farm.

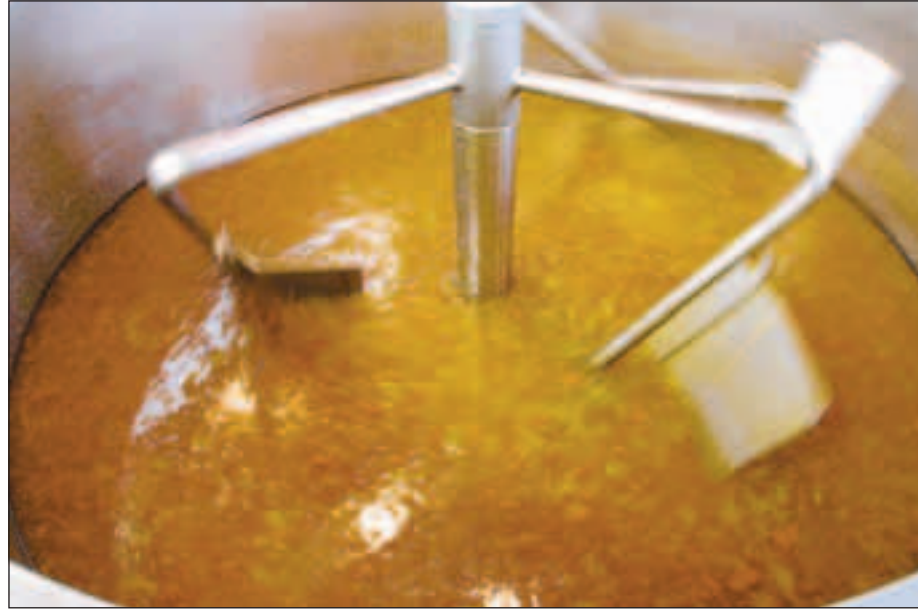
Elspeth started the business with her ex-husband in the late 1980s. Neither had any relevant experience. With a degree in fashion design, Elspeth worked in museums for four years while her husband was a deep sea engineer. "He wanted to be self-employed and have a land-based job, but we weren't farmers and had no knowledge of food," she explains.

Three things Elspeth did bring with her to Rosebud Farm, however, were a country childhood – having grown up in Marske, near Richmond, and Barnard Castle – a love of quality things and an interest in social history and English traditions. "As children, we were very involved in following the seasons. We'd pick brambles in the autumn and wild watercress in January. I was making jellies from rose hips and crab apples from a very early age.

"My dad was a countryman and we always had big gardens with lots growing in them. It was a natural follow-on to put things into jars."

When their planning application to allow light industrial use of the 19th century barn next to the house was granted and a grant

From Big Apple to apple jelly



from the Rural Development Commission followed, they started cooking. "We made our first products in the winter of 1988 and started selling them the following January. There were eight things including marmalade, mint jelly and cucumber pickle," recalls Elspeth.

Those early products remain staples of the range, which has now grown to 50 different products, along with strawberry and raspberry jam and Old Yorkshire chutney.

"We've got to 50 through listening and responding to customers. Things like our lemon curd and redcurrant jelly were as a

result of specific requests. We always like to offer something different such as the sweet onion marmalade which people really seem to like, and the red tomato and chilli jam which is lovely with chorizo sausage or young goat's cheese. Last year we introduced quince jelly, which is another old favourite.

"Everything I know I've learned as I've gone along," admits Elspeth. "Boiling points and pH levels are about as technical as I get. For me it's all about experience of eye and taste.

"The thing that interests me the most is

sourcing the best raw ingredients with the best flavours to produce even better products, to constantly improve in terms of quality and value for money. I never ever tire of trying to reach perfection."

Achieving perfection has just become a whole lot easier. A £30,000 grant from the European Regional Development Fund secured through North Yorkshire County Council's Economic Development Centre has allowed Rosebud to expand and make major improvements.

Work has just finished on converting out-buildings adjoining the barn into a large kitchen with dry storage area, a walk-in refrigeration room and an eight-metre extension for a state-of-the-art deep freeze facility.

"Before, there would be cries of 'does anyone know where the damsons are?' and we had to scabble about in freezers. Now there's a place for everything," says Elspeth.

A logical flow through the buildings starts at the freezer and fridge and moves through to the dry store area with its comforting aroma of spices. Sacks of sugar are neatly piled up while on the shelves there are raisins, currants, sultanas and peel above crates of Black Sheep Ale and Rigwelter beer from Masham, and Theakstons Old Peculiar, all ingredients for chutneys and pickles.

Into the kitchen, which is twice the size of the old one: stainless steel abounds in the fruit and vegetable preparation area to the jar drying and heating cabinet. Opposite is the piece of equipment which best symbolises how far Rosebud has come.

Alongside Elspeth's old faithful pan which is full of Bramley apples being pulped



Mary Leckenby prepares aubergines for one of the Rosebud Preserves pickles

Pictures: MIKE GIBB

I like to get out on a morning and look at the lovely view and be in my own community. It's part of what we're selling when people in America buy a pot of our jam

to make jellies for the United States, is her pride and joy – a 200 litre, digitally-operated pan, imported from Italy. Despite its size, its three steel paddles are gentle on fruit, as proven by the whole gooseberries bobbing about in a jam mix. The pan, its gas supply and sophisticated extraction system have transformed the efficiency of the production, as has the depositer machine, which fills jars automatically.

A board on the wall lists all the products with a key to indicate where stocks are getting low. A 'needed-now' asterisk next to the damson jam explains why kitchen supervisor Brenda Cundall prepares to load bagfuls into the pan, while five stars next to beetroot and horseradish relish suggests an emergency.

"People love it," explains Elspeth, "but it's only good made fresh and it's not the right time of year for beetroot."

With other seasonal ingredients like the wild crab apples, elderflower and rowan berries, Elspeth returns to her childhood. She and some of her team of nine ladies and two men "pick like mad" straight from the hedgerows of the Yorkshire Dales to store up enough to last the year. Everything else is carefully sourced and stored. Mangos, plums, red and blackcurrants, gooseberries, strawberries and raspberries come in mixed palettes a tonne at a time and are blast frozen to ensure a year-round supply.

The herbs come from down the road at Sandhutton, near Thirsk. The same supplier will grow beetroot for Rosebud this year, while the rhubarb comes from Wakefield and the damsons are Cumbrian. The quinces are grown in Essex and the organic green tomatoes come from Lancaster.

Wherever possible, Elspeth sticks to a single grower with whom she builds up a strong relationship. The oranges come from a certified organic grower in Seville; Elspeth buys a couple of tonnes in January and they're washed, dried and frozen in North Yorkshire.

Whilst not registered organic, there are no additives or preservatives in Rosebud Preserves. Natural pectin and lemon juice in the jams, and sugars and vinegar in the chutneys, bottling while the products are hot and careful storage combine to create a natural set-

● Rosebud Preserves are available via mail order (01765) 689174 and they also have stalls at farmers' markets. If you want to pick up some tasty presents or stock up for the festive season, the Country Life Guide to Farmers' Markets has a list of markets in the North-East and throughout the country, detailing when they are on. For a free copy visit your local tourist information centre or send an sae with postage to the value of 62p to: The Country Life Guide to Farmers' Markets, PO Box 49, London SW19 5AT.

ting process. From the kitchen, the jars are put on trolleys and rolled up the ramp into the labelling area to cool. The labelling is done by hand using high quality, cream paper labels, no self adhesive stuff here.

The jars are then stored in boxes from A-Z, a system devised by despatch supervisor Barbara Wallis, and packed at a rate of 20,000 a month.

The business has evolved and grown gradually in 15 years but does Elspeth pinch herself over the slick and professional operation Rosebud has become?

"I have grown with it so it hasn't been a shock for me but I was really excited on the days that we moved departments into their new homes and set up the new equipment. That was really thrilling."

Despite their growing size and popularity, Elspeth is determined Rosebud will stay where it is.

"We could move onto a trading estate tomorrow and it wouldn't affect the integrity of the product and might even make the business more efficient."

"But this is a nice environment to be in. I like to get out on a morning and look at the lovely view and be in my own community. It's part of what we're selling when people in America buy a pot of our jam. It's who we are."



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DARLINGTON



It may be tucked away, but Inspirations is a real gem of a gift shop, as SARAH FOSTER finds out

IN the year that it's been open, the main problem for Inspirations has been that it's off the beaten track. "People still don't know we're here," says assistant Linda Lee, who's also mother of the shop owners, sisters Dawn and Joanna Lee. "We really just want to let people know about us."

Lying at the bottom of Tubwell Row (its actual address is 2 Stonebridge) the shop is, in fact, pretty central – and as those who have discovered it would doubtless confirm, it's well worth seeking out.

Inspirations sells mainly gifts, cards and party items, such as novelties for hen and stag nights. Yet instead of the usual range of stock to be found at most high street outlets, it tries to offer something different. Christmas decorations encompass tasteful ornaments and a cute snowman cork, while wedding favour boxes in pretty designs adorn the walls. There are hand-poured candles that look good enough to eat, and well-known ranges include Clay Mates tiny animals and Teapottery tea pots.

Many of the cards are handmade – Linda herself makes quite a few – and wedding invitations can be tailored to the bride's wishes. For those who feel like having a go themselves, there's the Mic Craft range, which offers stylish decorations.

One of the prettiest and most innovative lines is the gift boxes. Solid cardboard structures, the boxes can be opened with ease and presents simply placed inside – ideal, says Linda, for those who struggle with giftwrap and bows. "We try to make them so that anybody who can't tie a bow can use them without disturbing the decoration," she says.

A big advantage of being small and independent is that the store can offer a personalised service. "If somebody comes in and wants something we don't have, we will try to get it for them," says Linda. "That's something we can do that a high street store maybe can't."

● **Inspirations, 2 Stonebridge, Darlington (01325) 367522**
www.inspirationsdarlington.co.uk



Get your skates on... Michelle Murphy, right, co-owner of Urban Chaos

Wheel thing

A GREAT place to shop for lads and lasses is at skateboarding and snowboarding specialists, Urban Chaos in Duke Street. The business, run by Michelle Murphy and Paul Naisbitt, is packed with top names. "If you want to turn up to the Christmas get togethers looking just that little bit different, we have the gear for you," says Michelle.

The shop stocks everything you need to go snowboarding and skateboarding and has a huge selection of boards as well as all the protective gear you need.

"We're more than happy if people want to come in and talk about their requirements so we can get it right and they're satisfied," says Michelle.

And if you're a bit bemused about what to buy for someone, don't worry – the shop also sells gift vouchers.

Great gift ideas this year include headphone beanies, with built-in headphones, which detach when you want to wash your headgear. Volcom beanies cost £30; Bonfire beanies, with a built-in amplifier, cost £39.95.

Its Stinking Bishop may be flying off the shelves since featuring in the new Wallace and Gromit film, but there are many other top class cheeses at The Cheese & Wine Shop – and a whole lot more besides. SARAH FOSTER steps inside

WENSLEYDALE, once the darling of Wallace and Gromit, has now been replaced in the duo's affections by another cheese – Stinking Bishop. For The Cheese & Wine Shop, in Darlington's Clarks Yard, which sells the pungent-smelling stuff, this has been something of a boon.

"Sales have gone very well since the film came out," says owner Terry Farr, although he admits: "It's a terrible smelling cheese. It's not fridge friendly."

For the past six years, Terry has been trading in fine cheeses from Britain and abroad. He stocks 120 kinds – and clearly knows his cheddar from his Caerphilly. "Montgomery's cheddar is the best seller, then Colston Bassett stilton – that's a blue cheese," says Terry. "You can taste any of the cheeses here before you buy. Lots of times people say they want six cheeses for a cheese board and leave it for me to choose. I like cheese – I've tried all the cheeses."

As well as cheese, Terry specialises in wine and while his cheapest is under £4, his main market is the connoisseur. "We keep good, Grand Cru French wines, which are top of the league in Bordeaux," he says. "We go up to £120 for half a bottle. You get what you pay for. I think we offer excellent value."

Alongside the wines are various tempting treats for real food lovers. The shop sells 12 different kinds of mustard as well as pickles, jams, chutneys and marmalades. Much of the stock is local, such as Rosebud Preserves, but Terry says it's quality that counts.

WHAT I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS

What I want for Christmas is... a ski lift pass for the whole season in the resort in Italy where we have an apartment.
If money were no object... I would like to be taken by helicopter and dropped off on Mont Moro, Europe's second highest mountain, to ride down.

Michelle Murphy

Waterproof leather skate belts with built-in tools are another great gift for the dedicated snowboarder. "Then, when you're riding and anything comes loose, you have all you need to hand," says Michelle.

● **Urban Chaos Mens Clothes Shops Website**
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www.urbanchaos.co.uk



Say cheese: Terry Farr with his produce

"We tend to source quality," he says. "If we can't find quality locally then we'll find it elsewhere."

The store prides itself on being different and offering goods you won't find elsewhere – except, perhaps, in the kitchens of top chefs. "We do Spanish meats and we use the same importer as Rick Stein," says Terry. "We sell the same chorizo and beans that Rick Stein uses for his chorizo and bean stew. "We also stock spices that no-one else stocks, that might be in Nigella Lawson's or Jamie Oliver's books."

The perfect gourmet gifts, Terry makes up hampers to people's requirements, which he sends all over the world. He says the service is especially popular at Christmas. "We do hundreds," he says. "Because we give people the choice of anything they want, they're not limited."

One of the shop's biggest selling points is its friendliness, and Terry says he loves chatting to customers. "I like people to come in and have a look and a natter," he says.

● **The Cheese & Wine Shop, 8 Clarks Yard, Darlington (01325) 384803**
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Flat screen TVs can be mounted straight on to the wall by one of Goodricks specialist installers

Plugging in to the future

AT Alan H Goodrick Limited, in Darlington's Blackwellgate, they recognise that experience counts. With 40 years' trading under its belt, most at the old premises in North Road, the family-run firm is widely trusted. When it comes to audio visuals, there isn't much they don't know. "We're very specialised in plasma and LCD (Liquid Crystal Display) installation," says managing director Brian McPherson. "We have our own in-house service department and our own in-house installation team. If you want a television mounted on the wall or if you want multi-room audio visuals, we can lead you in the right direction."

Rising in popularity at the moment are home cinema systems, with Bose a leading brand. At LifeStyle, not only can you buy the equipment, you can see it in big-screen action.

"We've built a cinema ourselves to give

After 40 years in the audio visual business, LifeStyle by Alan H Goodrick Limited has built a reputation for being something of a specialist. SARAH FOSTER finds out more

people an idea of what it's all about," says Brian.

An exciting new development in the area of television is 'high definition' broadcasting, due to be introduced by Sky in February, and many of LifeStyle's sets are 'HD ready'. Brian explains: "It's the best picture quality available - it's about three or four times better quality than normal DVD films. The whole of the World Cup next year will be broadcast in high definition and the BBC are talking about bringing in high definition in 2012 for the Olympic Games. The lifespan of our televisions is up to 20 years so people are buying HD ready to last."

As well as the latest plasma and LCD TVs, the store has a wide selection of digital radios. For less than £150, you can also buy a

CD/radio microsystem. A separate section of the shop sells washing machines. "We're a member of Euronics, who do all the white goods," says Brian.

Such is its reputation that the store does repairs for high street giant Currys, along with service work for Fenwicks of Newcastle. For Brian, providing excellent customer care is what matters most. "A lot of people come to us because of the aftercare service. They want to know that the person they are dealing with knows exactly what they're doing. That's why they come to an independent dealer - to meet their individual needs."

● LifeStyle by Alan H Goodrick Limited, 41 Blackwellgate, Darlington (01325) 353234 www.goodrick.co.uk



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NE motoring



Nissan Murano: takes bends as if it's on rails

A car for every mood and occasion

North-East car makers Nissan have finally come up with the perfect blend of size and sportiness, says Motoring Correspondent IAN LAMMING

IT'S human nature that we always want what we haven't got, the grass always being that bit greener in a place just out of reach. It's the same with cars, of course.

Sporty is great and by far the best drive. Sports cars handle better than any other type of car, they go round bends with aplomb, they accelerate with alacrity and they stop in the shortest space possible. If buying a car was all about driving dynamics, we would all own sports cars – but we don't.

Why? Because when it comes to the practicalities and the realities of life they are pretty useless. They don't carry many people, they don't offer much space, you can't fit granny in the back or the shopping in the boot. They are, in fact, as hopeless as they are great.

If only you could somehow combine the size and practicality of a big off-roader with the dynamics and pride of ownership of a coupe. If only...

Of course, you know what is coming next – you can, thanks to the efforts of North-East/Japanese car maker Nissan, bless them.

In the new Murano they have come up with something with the engine, handling and road presence of a sportster and the supreme practicality of a 4x4. What's more, it is thoroughly modern, totally unique and superb to look at.

Aesthetics are the Murano's forte. Physically, it is a huge car with all the benefits of size. Yet it is totally sleek, seductive with its curves and contrasting shapes and beautifully proportioned. Put simply, it looks the business in a way no other off-roader manages.

In many ways it is a pumped-up version of the gloriously-styled 350Z sports car and, to add to your further pleasure, shares the same wonderful 3.5 litre V6 engine. If that excellent motor sounds great in the Z, it sounds just as good under the bonnet of the Murano.

With that mighty engine under the bonnet, performance is never going to be an

issue and, if required, Murano will simply fly. If it isn't required, it will cruise supremely smoothly, making it a car for every mood and occasion.

Most off-roaders are compromised in the handling stakes because of their sheer size and terribly high centre of gravity. The worst offenders actually come with a written warning lest you forget they generally don't handle like a normal car and can tip over.

With Murano this isn't an issue. It drives like a huge rollerskate, rounding bends flatly, as if it's on rails, with razor sharp steering and perfect poise. Ride is comfortable but not at the expense of body control and while it is a big vehicle, it actually drives like a much smaller car.

Thankfully, it isn't a small car, it's a big one and the interior is a match for anything on the road. Swathes of leather and aluminium blend the traditional with the ultra-modern. The dashboard and centre console are hi-tech and the 3D colour Birdview satellite navigation the best there is available.

Toys also abound and include an excellent Bose hi-fi, electrically adjustable seats and climate control. Stick it in reverse and the satnav display on the dash suddenly becomes a colour TV screen showing you what is behind.

For me, Murano has no flaws and in this class of car isn't badly priced either at under 30K. It breaks the mould by being all things to all men, women and grannies. In the world of motoring, the grass is no longer greener over there. It is pretty lush right here with Nissan's delightful Murano.

In the new Murano they have come up with something with the engine, handling and road presence of a sportster and the supreme practicality of a 4x4



Dream team: Dave Manners and Guarin Simpson can make all your speed dreams come true

Picture: SARAH NICHOLSON

The drive of your life

Teenagers and people who have everything are notoriously hard to buy for at Christmas. Fortunately Driving Sensation in Teesside could provide the answer, as LINDSAY JENNINGS reports

WHIZZING around a racetrack in a Ferrari is something most of us only dream of – unless you happen to be Michael Shumacher. But at Driving Sensation at Teesside Autodrome, near Middlesbrough, the Ferrari experience is on offer for a snip of the cost of buying one.

At Driving Sensation, run by Dave Manners and Guarin Simpson, the onus is on having fun around the racetrack while keeping safe.

Dave, of Darlington, spent 20 years on the racing circuit competing in Formula Ford – where he clinched four British Championship titles – Formula 2000 and Formula Two. He’s also an ARDS (Association of Racing Driving Schools) instructor. Guarin has raced Formula Ford cars – he won the Northern Formula Ford Championship in 2001 – and Formula Renault; is a qualified ARDS instructor and used to run his own driving school.

Dave, who ran an international racing school at Croft Circuit, near Darlington, in the 1980s, had the idea for Driving Sensation through people’s love of high performance cars. “A couple of years ago there were a lot of people wanting to drive Ferraris so I bought a Ferrari and hired it out to various op-

erators. But then I decided it would be a good idea to start my own experiences,” says Dave. “This is more dedicated to the general public and is an experience of driving super cars and the various different cars we’ve got.”

Prices for the race experience start from as little as £35, which includes three passenger laps with a professional driver. The experiences continue with cars ranging from a Mini Cooper to a Lamborghini or Porsche, but of course, it’s the Ferrari and Lotus which have proved hugely popular so far.

The two and a half hour Ferrari experience includes five laps in a Lotus Elise, five laps in a BMW M3 and five laps in a Ferrari F355.

Says Dave: “We have a racing instructor with them at all times showing them the racing lines, how to balance the car through the corners and how to keep safe. Anyone can put their foot down on the straight but it’s the corners where the skill comes in.”

Driving Sensation also offers a special package for first time drivers aged 11 years and older with a minimum height restriction of 4ft 10ins. For £75, it includes a safety and techniques briefing and

learning about clutch control, pulling away, stopping safely, changing gear, steering and use of mirrors.

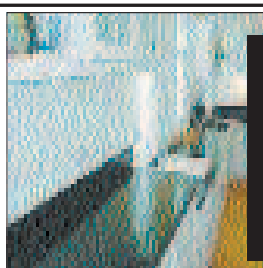
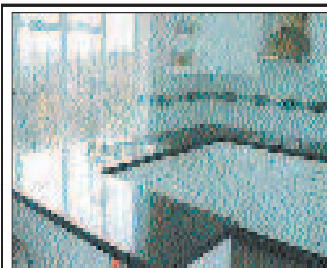
“It gives them experience of driving the car before they go out on the roads,” says Dave. “We teach them how to control the car and it makes them better drivers. Each instructor is a fully qualified ADI (Approved Driving Instructor) in a dual controlled car.”

When people book for a driving experience they are sent a gift voucher which is valid for 12 months. Everyone who completes an experience gets a certificate.

“The most popular one is the Ferrari, that’s the one everyone wants to drive,” says Dave. “My favourite is the Ferrari. They just sound so nice and they handle really well.”

● Dave and Guarin are offering £50 off the price of their full Ferrari (£275) or Lamborghini (£375) experiences for bookings made before Christmas. For more information contact (01325) 384143 or email enquiries@drivingsensation.com or log onto www.drivingsensation.com.

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Making a good impression

YOU'VE got to hand it to them, here's a novel idea for a gift. Little Impressions, set up by mother and daughter team Jan Massey and Melanie Crow, is the only place in the region crafting three dimensional casts of hands and feet. Most are of children and babies, but one family commissioned a casting of the feet of three generations and one dad "kidnapped" his five-week-old baby and took her to the studio so the finished product would be a surprise for the new mum.

"It is so rewarding to see the reaction of parents and grandparents. The casts are so special because they are an exact replica of the child's hand or foot showing every line and detail," says Melanie. "We can include photographs as well and the casts are beautifully mounted and framed in solid oak boxes so they do become family heirlooms."

The Little Impressions studio is in Tantobie, County Durham. Contact 01207- 299500 or at www.little-impressions.com.

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