

The Northern Echo

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The lifestyle magazine  
for the North-East

MARCH 2006



**FASHION**

**Rising to the occasion**

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**Harrogate's first  
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## sharon griffiths

“But finally the day came. Senior Son cleared his bedroom totally and drove off into the sunset

**W**HAT I need is another house swap. It's the only way I'll get the place sorted. About ten years ago, we did a holiday house swap with a family in America. For nearly a month, they had our house, car, bikes, feeble washing machine and feebler tumble dryer and, in exchange, we had their ranch in Texas, complete with swimming pool, Mercedes, a fridge the size of our kitchen and a truck that Hitler could have used to invade Poland.

Their washing machine and drier were also light years ahead of ours.

It was a wonderful experience. The last holiday we had with the boys and one of the best. And it lasted well after we returned, because we absolutely blitzed our house before we went. You know what it's like when you're having visitors? Well, imagine what it's like to have visitors in your house for a month... while you're not there.

It was just the jolt we needed to get all the jobs done. For weeks before the holiday, men were trooping in and out of our house, mending leaky loos, fixing wonky doors, servicing boilers, painting, decorating, cleaning carpets. I stocked up on sheets, cleaned the cupboards and even sorted out the garage.

Just as we were about to leave to catch our plane, my husband wandered plaintively around our sparkling clean and tidy house.

“Can I take a picture,” he said. “I don't think it will ever look like this again.”

Actually the benefits lasted quite a long time.

But eventually, the effect wore off. Doors went wonky again, showers leaked, paintwork smudged, floorboards sagged alarmingly. But every time I suggested getting some major work done, work that might cause a bit of inconvenience, the boys would say: “Wait until we've moved out.”

But they never did.

True, one went to uni but he came home again. Then the other one went and while they were both away I managed some bits and bobs of improvements. But then the big one got his degree and came back home to live before I'd had a chance to do more.

It was lovely to have him here, but I'd wanted to sort out his room, maybe even turn it into a study for his father. And before I could do that it needed new floorboards, and new shelves, and the old desk ripping out. And until I did that, I couldn't get the stuff out of the spare

bedroom, and until I'd done the spare bedroom, I couldn't get the stuff out of ours... And then we needed all new internal doors and it seemed silly to do that until I'd got everything else done.

Not to mention the new shower and re-doing the sitting room. And as for the kitchen. Everything depended on getting that first room done. And I couldn't do it while he was still there, could I?

And his brother, currently doing a post-grad course, will probably never live at home again. But it's still his base. His bedroom's still full of his stuff that has overflowed into bathroom cupboards, kitchen corners, study, dining room, attic.

And that's the way it goes. As the list of things got longer, I did less about them, because I was waiting for the boy to move out. Well, not so much the boys, but all their accumulated possessions.

It was, I have to admit, the most marvellous excuse for procrastination.

But the day finally came. Senior Son cleared his bedroom totally, loaded up his car with all his worldly goods and drove off into the sunset with his girlfriend. And I was left waving on the doorstep, feeling all sad and weepy.... even sadder and weepier when I realised I no longer had any excuse not to get on with the jobs.

So I didn't hang about. Still clutching my soggy tissue I pulled the battered old cupboard out of his bedroom, pulled up the carpet, rang the joiner and the decorators. I have discussed doors, and the relative merits of four and six-panel, looked at paint samples, considered wallpaper. Blanched at estimates.

I have blobbed different colours on the walls, pinned up swatches of materials, haunted carpet showrooms and dithered between loose covers and a new suite.

And I have taken bags and bags and bags of stuff to Oxfam.

Nothing much has happened so far. But it's all planned, the first jobs are booked in and once it's underway, I should gradually work my way through the house from upstairs at the back to downstairs at the front, ending with a new front door and a posh new drive.

And when it's all done, bright, clean and sparkling, maybe then we'll think about another house swap.

Unless the boys are back again, of course.

## NE window shopping

### DOWN THE PLUGHOLE

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SUE Ley and Helen Rennison, who are based in Richmond and design and make a wide range of beaded jewellery under the label Heart and Soul Design, have gone online. Their range is full of pieces that would make beautiful gifts for special occasions.

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It's the first thing people see when they come to your house. GABRIELLE FAGAN goes in search of the front doors that ring her bell



## Simply a-door-able

**F**IRST impressions count and a front door says everything about your house. One in a dingy colour with peeling paint shrieks neglect or – even worse – that the shabby state of affairs outdoors could be mirrored inside.

If you have a door like this there's no time to lose in changing it, especially if you're hoping to sell your home – and also because there's a growing keeping up with the Jones's trend when it comes to front doors.

"People are really paying attention to their front doors and it's noticeable that they're prepared to spend more money on having them designed so they are either unique or historically accurate to match their property," says Mark Barber, managing director of The Door People which makes bespoke front doors. "It's infectious – once one person in a street renovates or has a new door, you often find the neighbours follow suit. No-one wants to find they have the shabbiest front door."

There's a huge selection of front doors available in major DIY stores such as B&Q or Wickes if your budget doesn't stretch to having your door handmade.

Alternatively, architectural reclamation and salvage yards are excellent places to find an original period door. But be aware that modern door frames are standard while old doors come in varying shapes and sizes.

Barber happily describes himself as a "door nerd" dedicated to constantly researching and checking hand-crafted designs to ensure they totally satisfy a client's demands.

"No door's ever identical as there are always small touches or details that can make it totally individual and add huge character to the house exterior," he says.

There is a rising number of front door 'connoisseurs', he adds. "It's partly due to people choosing to invest in their properties rather than move, as well as an awareness that an inferior front door, or one which doesn't match the style and date of a building affects its value and turns off buyers."

Kieren Anderson at The Handmade Door Company, which sells reclaimed and bespoke doors, agrees.

"More people want to return the period detail to their homes, so Victorian and Geor-

gian front doors have never been more popular. Stained glass panels are particularly popular as a decorative feature. The front door is the main attraction on the front of the house, and it's vital to get it right."

### THE KEY TO A GREAT DOOR

- If you're replacing your front door, go doorstepping before making a choice.
- Look at the doors on your street and in the neighbourhood to make sure you suit the style of the area.
- Bright colours can be jarring; it's far safer to opt for dark shades which are less likely to show scuffs and chips.
- Unpainted doors can just look unfinished unless they are in a high quality oak or mahogany and varnished. Even then, leaving glazed and panelled Georgian-style doors unpainted is historically incorrect. A varnished finish is also harder to maintain than paint.
- Don't forget accessories – door furniture, lights, hanging baskets, small trees or shrubs in planters finish the look.

### RING MY BELL

#### Winning front door features:

- Stained glass – if you're worried about security, have laminated glass panels fitted behind the panes so the look and light are unmarred.
- Sandblasted glass panels are attractive on contemporary doors, particularly if they're embellished with a simple decorative detail.
- Door furniture: brass never goes out of fashion but brushed chrome is currently popular even on period doors and in tune with the current trend to mix old and new.

### COLOURS

Smart householders don't paint the door red, according to Martin Ephson, director of Farrow & Ball.

"In towns the trend for doors is for a high-gloss finish in dark shades, particularly dark greens such as Carriage Green or Studio Green," he says, "and the traditional Black Blue, a brighter Hague Blue and Off-Black are also favourites. Country dwellers prefer an eggshell finish in paler shades such as the soft green Lichen and the paler blues."



**NEW OPENING:** ivory panel front door by The Door People; below: Wickes Trent PVCU front door, from £444.97; opposite page: Wickes glazed Chancery door, £239.99

The company's Heritage range replicates the authentic shades historically used on period properties. Farrow & Ball Paints cost: Oil Full Gloss, £11.99 for 750ml; Exterior Eggshell £14.99 for 750ml. 01202 876 141/www.farrow-ball.com

**SUMMER SENSE**

Dark colours absorb more heat than lighter shades, so they're likely to fade more quickly if your door catches a lot of sun.

Some pigments, such as reds, are also more vulnerable to degradation from UV light. Always use a good quality exterior gloss, and if your door faces south consider a Wedgwood-style blue, rich sage green or warm ochre yellow. These will glow rather than go.

**FINDING FRONT DOORS**

- B&Q has an extensive range of front doors, plus door furniture, lights and striking trees and shrubs. 0845 222 1000/www.diy.com
- Wickes also has an excellent range of doors from £84.99 to £544.96, in a variety of styles and materials, including wood and



laminates. 0800 106 068/www.wickes.co.uk

- The Door People provides a complete door service, bespoke design, stained glass and lighting. Prices, including fitting, start at around £1,300. 020 8740 0606/www.thedoorpeople.co.uk
- The Handmade Door Company sells reclaimed stripped doors, from £225 and bespoke doors from around £400. 020 8645 6900
- Lassco specialises in architectural antiques and salvage, including doors and door furniture. 020 7394 2103/www.lassco.co.uk

**THE DOOR TO YOUR PERSONALITY**

**T**HE colour of your front door reveals your personality, according to a survey by Dulux. Black gives an aura of class and adorns the front door at No 10 Downing Street as well as the doors of homes of celebrities Liz Hurley, Madonna, and Gwyneth Paltrow.

Red's the colour of confidence, enjoyed by ex-Atomic kitten, Jenny Frost, and Emma Thompson. The majority of women believe men with this colour front door are romantic.



Model Kate Moss has a green front door – the most popular colour nationwide – while blue's favoured by shy, more retiring

homeowners such as Jude Law. Yellow's for happy, carefree personalities and was chosen by Ab Fab actress, Julia Sawalha.



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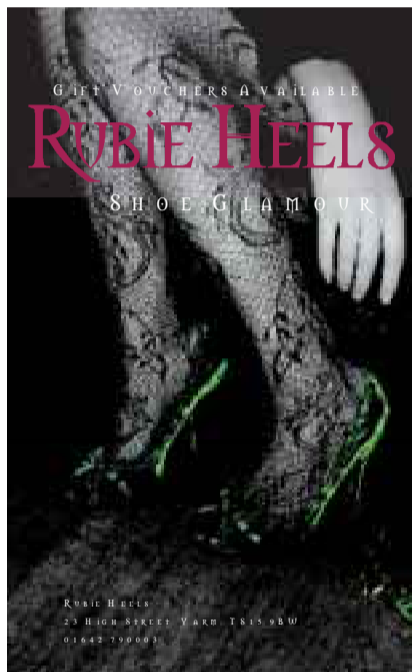
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## NE interiors



**HIGH LIVING:** the view over Harrogate from the penthouse flat

# Room at the top

With the sale its first £1m apartment, Harrogate has really proved it's on the up and up, says RUTH CAMPBELL

It may have top of the range Villeroy and Boch bathroom fittings, a stylish, high-gloss dark blue Conran-designed kitchen, underfloor heating and air conditioning, but it is what lies outside, not inside, Harrogate's highest penthouse flat that makes it so particularly stunning. It's hardly surprising that, 18 months ago, this 2,000 sq ft space became the first apartment in town to sell for £1m.

From the huge, floor-to-ceiling glass walls in every room, there are 360 degree, wrap-around views stretching out from the immediate busy, sprawling urban landscape, to the tranquil open spaces of the Yorkshire Dales beyond. On a clear day, you can even see the White Horse at Kilburn.

Sliding glass doors from all the rooms open onto the spot lit roof terrace: "In the evening, with all the lights outside it looks just like New York," says estate agent Simon Myring.

Of course, this is estate agent speak, for Harrogate is hardly New York. But it is undoubtedly at the forefront of what could be called the New Yorkshire.

Harrogate, just like parts of Leeds, Bradford, Halifax, Sheffield and other Yorkshire towns and cities, has undergone a dramatic transformation over the past ten years. Once seen as a genteel dowager duchess of a town, with a highly visible elderly population, it was renowned for its spa baths, beautifully tended flower beds and elegant Betty's tea rooms.

The emergence of nearby Leeds as the financial capital of the North, along with the trend to redevelop run down town centre buildings into stylish urban apartments has had a knock-on effect. Affluent, young, single professionals have flocked to towns like Harrogate, a short train ride away from Leeds and York.

Far from a dowager duchess, one developer has likened it to Leeds's younger, swinging sister, fast gaining a reputation as a cool, trendy place to live.

Ricky Wilson, lead singer of the chart-topping rock band the Kaiser Chiefs was only half joking when he talked about his ambitions re-

cently: "I won't stop until I've got an apartment in every major city in the world. New York, Helsinki and Harrogate."

And property expert Phil Spencer, from Channel 4's programme Relocation, Relocation, revealed recently that Harrogate would also be one of his favourite places to live.

When the £1m penthouse flat and the other 19 fashionable apartments created out of a former cement company's headquarters - once known as the ugliest building in town - by the cutting edge, award-winning City Loft developments went on sale 18 months ago, there was a buying frenzy.

People queued overnight and all but two apartments, including a range of £150,000 one-bedroomed flats and £575,000 three-bedroomed flats, were sold off-plan on the first day. The secure car parking spaces, costing up to £25,000 extra, all went too.

Simon Myring, of Myring and Heward, who has worked as an estate agent in Harrogate for 12 years says: "The developers took a big gamble. This used to be called the ugly duckling building of Harrogate, a concrete Sixties structure that was empty for years. What they created was great aesthetically. It's stylish, town centre living for people who want to be able to walk to bars, restaurants and shops

"We had more than 900 inquiries and sold the first 15 flats in two hours. Buyers came from London, Newcastle and Manchester. Some are investors, renting out. A few live abroad."

Around 45 per cent of households in Harrogate now are sole occupied and most residents are of working age. "The average age of people buying has dropped slightly," adds Mr Myring. "There is a significant number of younger professionals, many from the south. It has pushed prices up."

Rather than lingering over a cream tea at Betty's, today's young Harrogate professionals are more likely to grab a quick cappuccino or latte in Starbucks. The host of new, stylish bars and restaurants that have opened in recent years reflects the changing population. The town now has a Toni and Guy's hairdressers. And Hotel du Vin, a small, stylish imaginative



**T**HE award-winning City Lofts, based in Harrogate, has forged a reputation for transforming old, run-down city centre buildings into stylish apartment blocks using cutting edge technology and top quality design. It was launched in 1997 when Tony Brooks, a local builder, and barristers Ross Mansoori-Dara and Stuart Wright got together to successfully convert, Centaur House, an old clothing factory in the centre of Leeds, into 47 fashionable flats. Since then, they have launched projects in more than 20 British locations. They went on to develop, Grosvenor Buildings, a 33-apartment block in the centre of their home town before moving on to similar projects in Manchester, Halifax, Newcastle, Brighton and Reading. In 2003, they started working with Sir Terence Conran to provide a high quality contemporary architecture and interior design service on all their projects. Currently working on a

number of major developments, including large residential blocks in Newcastle, Cardiff, Leeds and Nottingham, the company will have sold nearly 1,000 apartments by the end of March and aim to sell 3,000 apartments a year by 2010. Currently employing 40 people, City Lofts, which also has a small office in London, is moving to bigger offices in Harrogate and hopes to employ 20 more staff over the next three years. There is no doubting the company's commitment to its home town. "We see ourselves working more and more in the North in future," says Andre Mansoori-Dara. "We have lived in Harrogate all our lives and have seen lots of changes. Everyone who lives here is very lucky."

**■ The penthouse flat, Harrogate House, is being rented out through Myring and Heward, 2 Princes Square, Harrogate (01423) 500777 www.myringandheward.co.uk**



**CITY LIVING:** bars and cafes in John Street, Harrogate; the flat's tiny laundry

chain of private hotels, has recently opened here too.

Andre Mansoori-Dara of the City Lofts developers says: "Harrogate has changed dramatically, it has everything a major city has in a single town. The stylish bar, nightclub, restaurant and fashion scenes mean people now look on it like a mini-London."

For some visitors, this is not what they expect from a Northern spa town. A Daily Telegraph journalist, recently reporting on Harrogate's latest award-winning deli, Weeton's, couldn't disguise her surprise: "It is glossy, modern, sophisticated and cosmopolitan. It could, in fact, have landed from Chelsea."

No doubt, she would have considered the penthouse flat "now being rented out by the owner, who lives abroad, for £2,950 a month "could have landed straight from Chelsea too. Glossy, modern, sophisticated and cosmopolitan it has everything a single, young professional could want.

City Lofts and Sir Terence Conran have thought of the lot, from the plush wet rooms with travertine marble tiling down to the video entry phone and secure CCTV apartment block car park, which houses Ferraris, Porsches and an Aston Martin.

As I wandered round the penthouse, with everything so perfectly immaculate, I felt as if I was in a top class hotel suite. As Andre Mansoori-Dara explained: "People who live in apart-

ments like this are cash rich and time poor. They eat out or get take-aways. They don't want to be surrounded by clutter, they want to feel relaxed and free."

But, still, I couldn't help thinking something was missing. Then I opened a broom cupboard and discovered the washing machine, just about squeezed into the tiny, dark space. For £1m I would want a large, light laundry room, with washer, tumble dryer and clothes airer.

But, of course – how stupid of me. Whoever lives in this penthouse flat wouldn't care about where they'd put the washing. They'd send everything to the dry cleaners.

**f** *This used to be called the Ugly Duckling building of Harrogate, a concrete Sixties structure that was empty for years*

**Estate agent Simon Myring**

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## NE interiors



**MODERN LIVING:** the former factory has been transformed

If property is the new pension, then many of us are going to struggle in later life as the prices of second homes drift out of reach. But as IAN LAMMING discovers, that doesn't have to be the case



# Lofty ambitions

**L**OCATION is everything when it comes to buying property – or so the experts would have us believe. No matter how nice the house or flat, if it is in the wrong area it will never sell for top dollar.

But if this is indeed so, then why, over in New York, are the beautiful people moving into the meat packing district? The moneyed, the movie stars, the moguls, just the sort of people, in fact, who can afford to live anywhere they would like? And if this is the case in the US, then why not in the UK?

Why not create a new trendy ghetto in some of Darlington's more industrial zones? Why must the aspiring gravitate to leafy west end suburbs only to shun areas that are, on analysis, much more convenient?

Unfettered by geographical prejudice, it has taken an out-of-town developer to spot the potential for change in one of the town's urban regeneration areas, the North Road corridor.

What Bristol-based Circus Homes has been brave enough to tackle is the New York-style loft living conversion of an old warehouse to offer luxurious homes or investments at an eminently affordable price.

Once a warehouse associated with the railways and close to North Road station, Stephenson Court has been gutted and redeveloped to provide 23 one and two-bedroom, high specification apartments from just £75,950.

Given that a few streets away 100-year-old terrace houses are topping the £100,000 mark, this warehouse living must be deemed good value. And the public response at the recent launch weekend was more than encouraging.

When the building was used latterly as a double glazing factory, only those with real vision could see clearly that the area is on

the up. For the shrewd investment buyer, it lies within the High Northgate Conservation Area, just minutes walk away from supermarkets and Darlington's burgeoning town centre.

North Road station across the road is now the popular Heritage Railway Museum and next door to that is a beautifully constructed £1m Sure Start development which is giving new heart to an old community.

Sitting aside the original and restored warehouse brickwork are two newly built blocks constructed to blend in perfectly. Walk through the entrance and the architects have worked hard to create a light and airy welcoming reception with unusual staircase and large windows.

Apartments boast individual character and appeal – no tiny rabbit hutches here – thanks to the retention of Victorian-shaped windows brought up to date with the latest double glazing.

Inside, the flats are smart and modern. Laminate flooring covers the entrance halls and open plan lounges with slate effect in the bathrooms, while the bedrooms are carpeted.

Most rooms feature sexy down-lighters and the ambience is excellent thanks to the predominance of natural light.

Bedrooms are a decent size and the key rooms in the homes don't stint on their appliances. In one apartment the open plan living room cum kitchen is warm and inviting with quality fixtures and fittings including split level cooker, ceramic hob and high quality cupboards.

The bathrooms feature upmarket suites with stand-alone showers or showers over the baths with glass screens rather than curtains. They are also fully tiled and feature a must in any bathroom – a heated towel rail.

Some of the apartments feel more lofty



than others and on the ground floor there are duplex homes with a spiral staircase leading to basement bedrooms.

The flats are also built around a central courtyard and there is the opportunity to buy a limited number of garages.

Central heating is state-of-the-art and very neat. Rooms are fitted with radiators and there is a large hot water tank. In the current climate of spiralling gas and oil prices, the latest electric system could be a highly efficient, clean and cost effective choice.

The development is being managed by Robinsons Chartered Surveyors. Partner Simon Wright believes they could be a shrewd investment or just a great place to live.

**'T**HIS is an area of regeneration so it is only going to get better," he says. "In this area people are prepared to pay £100,000 for a two bedroom terrace house that dates back to the early 1900s. But for those wanting something new and ready to move into, you get something with character and charm with the benefits of modern building techniques and appliances.

"Stephenson Court is ideal for first time buyers and investors and with all the exciting developments currently going on in the town, we are expecting demand for these apartments to be very good indeed."

The renaissance of Darlington is getting into full swing with the Pedestrian Heart town centre restoration project, the Central Park learning, business and residential development and countless business schemes on the town's periphery. Darlington



is aiming to be the gateway to the North-East bringing new prosperity and people to the borough, many of whom will be looking for a close-to-town-centre lifestyle. If that is the case, then Stephenson Court could find itself in the right location at the right time.

■ Saleswoman Louise Macdonald is on site Saturday and Sunday 9am to 4pm and Monday to Wednesday from 10am to 3pm or the development can be viewed by contacting Robinsons on (01325) 484440



# Molly's plot

She may be young but Molly Nichols is not short of opinions when it comes to her great passion – gardening. SANDRA GEERE watches a budding talent at work

IT IS Saturday afternoon in a garden just outside York. Molly Nichols is giving instructions to her Dad, Andrew, who is putting the finishing touches to the fourth of her raised vegetable beds.

Dad is wearing a thin T-shirt today so he has been cast as television's Flying Gardener Chris Beardshaw. After a brief disagreement, Molly and sister Rosie decide that Molly will play celebrity gardener Rachel de Thame and Rosie will be Sarah Raven.

This is Fantasy Gardeners' World. It is acted out most weekends because nine-year-old Molly is obsessed with gardening and has been since she saw her first gardening programme when she was six years old. It was clearly a defining moment. She was enthralled and still remembers (with remarkable clarity) that it featured a "beautiful purple flower called Daphne Pothill and I have been looking for this plant ever since".

Andrew and seven-year-old Rosie are willing under-gardeners and Mum Helen has clocked up significant mileage taking her daughters to visit garden centres and horticultural shows. Even the family's cat, Gordon, is recruited for pest control duties.

Last year Molly collected second prize when she entered a (suitably modified) marrow in the Vegetable Animal Category at the Stokesley Show. Rosie's Cauliflower Sheep was highly commended. And unlike most children her age who want clothes and toys, for her ninth birthday treat, Molly asked to



**MOLLY NICHOLS:** the fanatical gardener harvests her crop of potatoes. She recommends the variety Red Duke of York

go to Kew Gardens. She had a fantastic time and can't wait to visit again.

This young gardener also has strong views on garden design and produced plans for the family's new home even before contracts had been exchanged. Molly's pet hate is tarmac drives. "I think it is a really mean thing to do to a garden. That's not what gardens are for."

Before the family moved to their present home they had an allotment and as an all-weather gardener she enjoyed the changing seasons and watching wildlife.

On Friday evenings Molly watches the three BBC gardening programmes. She has

enjoyed the new one, Christine's Garden, but hopes that the next series will include more in the way of practical gardening tips. She is still kicking herself for missing the deadline for the BBC Chilli Trials but took part in the Dahlia Trials last year with her preferred choice, Minstrel Mixture, with great success. After some initial difficulty, Spring Green tulips were acquired for the current trials. "I've planted them on Tilsley's grave", she says. Tilsley was their last cat.

When it comes to gardening advice, Molly is typically generous. She is a keen advocate of growing your own for economy and flavour and advises gardeners not to pull rhubarb in the first year of planting so that it can build up its strength. Radishes, runner beans and courgettes all feature in her easy-to-grow list but she says the latter need plenty of room and a close eye kept on their progress as they seem to appear overnight. (Her sister strongly advises wearing gloves when picking courgettes as she finds the leaves and stems very prickly).

Molly also grows tomatoes and potatoes. She recommends Red Duke of York for large crops – having harvested over 100 potatoes last year – reliability and keeping qualities. All these crops benefit from large amounts of compost and this is provided from two heaps (shredded paper is sometimes added to prevent the compost from becoming too wet and smelly). Another bin is on Molly's birthday wish list.

Whilst the cast of Fantasy Gardeners' World carry on gardening, Andrew struggles to keep his balance. "It is difficult to talk to camera when you are trying to dig," he says.

Especially when you have such an exacting taskmaster.



*Molly's pet hate is tarmac drives. 'I think it is a really mean thing to do to a garden. That's not what gardens are for...'*

**RACHEL DE THAME:** one of Molly's role models

## GOOD ENOUGH TO EAT...

RHS names top 10 container veg

THE Royal Horticultural Society has just announced its top 10 vegetable cultivars for container growing, all of which have been awarded the Award of Garden Merit.

They are tomato 'Gardeners' Delight', pepper 'Redskin', salad onion 'Guardian', onion 'Turbo', lettuce 'Little Gem', dwarf French beans 'Ferrari', beetroot 'Pablo', carrots 'Napoli', salad potato 'Mimi' (pictured) and turnip 'Market Express'.

If possible aim for containers with a depth and width of at least 45cm. This will avoid you having to water and feed frequently.

Use sterile potting compost such as that from a growing bag. There are also many peat-free composts available, including peat-free growing bags, which are of equal quality.

Mixing well-rotted manure into the compost in the lower half of the container is a very effective organic fertiliser.

Be aware that any crop planted before the end of May could be subject to frost. So if the temperature drops, move pots into the most sheltered position possible and cover with horticultural fleece.



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# NE gardening



## Turf out the old, bring in the new

Gardens often look very sad at this time of year, particularly the grass. **RAYMOND CRISP** explains how to spruce things up

**I**T'S spring, always a busy time for gardeners who are sowing seeds, pruning shrubs and moving plants to new positions. And then there's the lawn.

If you are looking out on an area of neglect, which has been invaded by moss and weeds, damaged by general use and is lacking in nutrients, now's the time to get it looking its best by summer.

First, you need to cut down any tall grass and weeds to a couple of inches above the ground. You may need to use a strimmer, then remove the vegetation and cut it to around 2in (5cm) with a rotary mower.

Once you have done that, you can see how many weeds and how much moss you have and what sort of a state your grass is in. Give the surface a good rake to get rid of moss and thatch and brush it to remove any other debris.

Don't worry if what you have left is looking a khaki colour because it won't take long to bring it back to a luscious green.

Over the next few weeks, if it's not too wet or frosty, mow the lawn about once a week, firstly with the blades set as high as possible, gradually reducing the height each time you mow until you reach the ideal level of around 1¼ inches for a utility lawn. If you have a lot of weeds, use a selective weedkiller, although mowing will slowly kill off a fair few weeds anyway.

If there are unsightly bare patches, you may need to overseed when the soil is moist.

Before re-seeding, prick the area with a garden fork to allow for better drainage and reduce compaction, then rake it thoroughly to create a seed bed.

Buy a seed of a similar type to your existing turf and scatter the recommended

quantity of seed over the surface and gently rake it in. It's best to cover the area with a shallow layer of sifted soil and make sure you net it to protect it from birds. Don't apply a weedkiller or mosskiller to this area for around six months after sowing new seed.

If you have a small area of lawn to repair, you could always re-turf the affected part for instant results. To do this, just remove the dead patch and square up the affected area, breaking up the soil underneath the new turf with a fork.

Once you have the basic repairs in place, you can feed the lawn in early summer,

preferably through a mechanical distributor to help give an even result. Water the lawn in prolonged spells of dry weather.

A fertiliser with both quick-acting and slow-acting nitrogen is best in spring or summer, but go for one with phosphates and potash once autumn arrives.

Humps and hollows can also be removed by carefully stripping back the turf in the affected area using a spade or edging iron and then filling in or digging out the soil underneath as necessary.

Once it is level, you just firm down the turf again and fill in any cracks with sifted soil and water.

Sometimes though, the lawn is past help, and that's when thoughts will turn to re-turfing the whole lot. Or perhaps you've bought a new house, which comes with a plot... but no greenery or plants.

There are all sorts of different turfs to choose from depending on whether you want a bowling green finish, or a grass court on which to impress your tennis friends, or just something more standard for the kids to kick a ball around on.

“

If you have a small area of lawn to repair, you could always re-turf the affected part for instant results... once you have the basic repairs in place, you can feed the lawn in early summer



## 3 WAYS TO...

### DIVIDE THE GARDEN

**1** The cheapest screen is made by planting some well-chosen plants that will simply break your line of vision.

**2** Make a curved path which slopes off behind a flower border to encourage curiosity as to what lies beyond.

**3** Make your own trellis to divide areas, taking inspiration from interior designers, using different patterns, textures and materials, such as willow or bamboo, to achieve a more original look.

**GREEN DREAM:** the lawn and croquet area laid by Farnaby Turf at Judges Hotel in Yarm

Pictures: CHRIS BOOTH

**U**SING professionally grown turf is one of the most successful, and instant, ways of creating that essential element of the English garden – the perfect lawn.

Peter Farnaby, of Farnaby Turf, at Dalton-on-Tees, near Darlington, has been growing turf for over 40 years and supplies everyone from the region's biggest house builders and golf clubs, to the smallest back lawn.

Peter says: "The advantage of laying turf as opposed to growing a lawn from seed is that it is the quickest way of establishing a lawn without all the troubles of seeding – such as damping off and damage by birds and pets. We grow our turf from the best quality seed available, which produces a hard-wearing and weed-free sward, which will not only look beautiful but will also stand up to everyday use – including a kick around with a football."

It's not difficult to lay turf yourself, but you must prepare your ground very thoroughly. Peter says: "Most of the work is in the preparation so, if you're laying turf yourself make sure you follow these basic steps."

- Dig over or rotavate the area thoroughly, removing every trace of perennial weeds.
- Prepare the ground to a good level – without any bumps or hollows.
- Turf comes in rolls measuring one square metre. If you're unsure of the calculation, just measure your plot and your supplier will work it out for you.
- Begin laying the turf from a definite edge, rolling out each turf and butting up closely so there are no gaps. Lay the next row with staggered joints like a house brick pattern. Work outwards off a board across the turf already laid.
- Finally, as the grass begins to grow you should mow with the lawnmower blades set high, removing only the tips of the grass. Gradually lower the blades through the mowing season so they take off a third of the length of the grass.
- If necessary, in late April/May apply a top dressing fertiliser and remember to water well in dry periods.

Or, you can call in the experts to do the whole job for you and then all you have to do is go up and down with the lawnmower once a week to create those classic stripes and make your neighbours green with envy.

■ Peter Farnaby can be contacted on (01325) 378455; freephone 0800 5425920 or [www.farnaby-turf.com](http://www.farnaby-turf.com)

### GARDENING BOOKS

**THE JEWEL GARDEN** by Monty and Sarah Don (Hodder and Stoughton £7.99)



MONTY Don would appear to be on top of the world with the plum job of main presenter of BBC2's Gardener's World but not so long ago he and his wife Sara were on the compost heap of life after the collapse of their exclusive jewellery business. From affluent somebodies, they became bankrupt nobodies and it took years of effort before they turned the corner and became successful again through their shared passion for gardening. Even if you're not a gardens person, this is an uplifting tale of the triumph of the human spirit which can't fail to move you.

**MY ROOTS** by Monty Don (Hodder and Stoughton, £14.99)

Words of garden wisdom, both poetic and down to earth, culled from the last ten years of Monty Don's garden despatches published in the Observer. The presenter of BBC 2's Gardener's World can wax lyrical about the emotional uplift a garden brings, the beauty of a big full moon in a blue sky or the purity of a thrush singing, while at the same time, he is obsessed by mundane matters such as the state of his paths. This is a fascinating peep inside the mind of a green-fingered fanatic.

**LEARN TO GARDEN** from the Royal Horticultural Society (Dorling Kindersley, £18.99)

Beginners will find all they need to know here, from weeds to watering and bulbs to borders, with step-by-step photography and checklists throughout.



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**FOODIE PARADISE:**  
 Andrew Loftus, centre, and some of the fine foods on sale at Weeton's

Pictures:  
 RICHARD DOUGHTY



# The wonder of Weeton's

SARAH FRENCH visits an award-winning deli with a difference in Harrogate

**F**OR most people, doing the weekly food shop is a chore to be done as quickly as possible. Grab a trolley, hurtle to where you know your regular buys lie, rush through the checkout and get back to doing something far more interesting as fast as you can.

Life is too short to waste time buying groceries... until now.

Weeton's is Harrogate's latest upmarket place to shop. It's more like a retreat for foodies; somewhere you actually go to relax, to dawdle and, amazingly, to enjoy shopping for food. Rarely has examining jars of jam and bottles of salad dressing been such a pleasure.

And yet the thinking behind Weeton's is not new.

The cappuccino bar where you're encouraged to linger over a coffee and the paper; the traditional deli of fresh meats, pies, salads and cheeses; the fashionable food hall where capers sit alongside old fashioned ginger beer have all been done before. In these days of food scares, even finding locally sourced produce isn't that difficult.

What makes Weeton's unique is that all of the above have been brought together in one very stylish, contemporary store cum café, a mix it has done so well that it has just been awarded the accolade of Farm Food Retailer of the Year in a competition sponsored by the Countryside Alliance and Farmers' Weekly magazine.

I visit on a rainy weekday and the place is buzzing. While waiting to meet the man behind Weeton's - 28-year-old Andrew Loftus - I'm invited to sit at a large oak table and handed a cappuccino. The table is deliberately farmhouse kitchen in style and I share with two ladies chatting animatedly.

A glance at the lunch menu promises such delights

as Weeton's slicing pie with apple and mint chutney, triple curd cheese and leaves in mulberry and walnut oil dressing.

On joining me, Andrew explains the cheese comes from his family's own herd and is based on the old tradition of using curds of three different maturities, the only alternative when herds were small and productivity low.

He comes from a long tradition of farming, but until he could find a way to still be involved in the family business without being a farmer he headed off to London to work for BP. He was based in the City, initially on the oil trading floor, then in mergers and acquisitions.

An exciting and fulfilling life no doubt, but over the last few years he started thinking about his future. By the time he was ready to come back north, the idea for Weeton's was well formed.

"For every new idea you have, you can always think of ten reasons not to do it but eventually you just have to go for it," he says.

The thinking behind the shop is straightforward - support the local farming community by providing a route to market for innovative producers of seasonal produce and meet customers' needs by bringing traceable, quality food from the farm into town. For Andrew it's the answer to meeting and working with farmers but without the daily grind and pressures.

That's not to say setting up the business has been easy. Andrew received no financial support from Defra to refurbish the premises, which have emerged from a 70-year-old furniture shop.

Weeton's bears the hallmarks of posh London food halls like Harrods and Selfridges but with that ever-important farming link, not least in its name, taken from





*It's more like a retreat for foodies; somewhere you actually go to relax, dawdle and, amazingly, to enjoy shopping for food*



■ Weeton's is at 23-24 West Park, Harrogate, tel: 01423 507100. Opening hours are 8.30am-7pm Monday-Saturday; 10am-4pm Sundays.

his father's herd of 700 pedigree Holsteins. Its contemporary styling, as Andrew notes in Weeton's newsletter, is "more Notting Hill than hills and dales".

The extra investment needed came from his business partners – his father, who still farms in the Ribble Valley in Lancashire, and his friend, Lord John Grantchester, a Cheshire dairy farmer and Labour peer.

Recalling his own childhood, when talk around the dinner table was about nothing but cows, Andrew notes: "After 30 years of being obsessed with cattle suddenly dad seems to have got bored with them and has welcomed a new interest. He thinks the shop is great."

Then there was sourcing all his suppliers, including 35 farmers spread across Yorkshire. Of course, there is commercial pressure too and each product stands or falls on its popularity.

"There is a movement towards local food and traceability but you have to be realistic. It has to be more than twee olde England to meet the needs of today's modern customer. They don't just want to go back to eating what their parents ate so we have to be up to date and provide new and interesting products.

"I'm very comfortable with the past but you can't just sell on history. We will always source locally first provided we can guarantee the quality but people are also interested in world flavours," Andrew explains.

Eighty per cent of the products are British, leaving a proportion of imported items.

Unexpectedly, Andrew acknowledges the role of supermarkets in feeding our appetite for foreign food.

"There are very good supermarkets out there that have done a great job in bringing us unusual food at affordable prices. I can't fault them for that. But shopping in supermarkets is never a pleasure, they're like aircraft hangers with air conditioning.

"There are some great small delis out there too. I think we hit that middle ground, and provide a relaxed place to shop. Customers bump into people they know all the time here," he says.

Product sourcing is the job of head of purchasing Simon Hurley, except for meat, which is master butcher Stuart Cove's domain. His lamb cushions with garlic and olives are a popular choice for Sunday lunch from a counter of outstanding looking meat that's clearly his pride and joy.

After making a selection from a wonderful array of pies, customers can choose from the carefully selected range of fine wines, sherries and malt whiskeys or cider

from Ampleforth Abbey and pear juice from Kent company Chegworth Valley.

One of Andrew's particular favourites is Lowna Dairy goats' cheese from East Yorkshire, then there's Bleikers smoked salmon and trout pates from Glasshouses, near Harrogate, and County Victualler pheasant terrine.

There's an enormous range of honeys, including borage, heather and clover in spring and summer varieties.

"We try not to stock anything you can buy in the supermarket. I'm aiming for Weeton's to be a leader in offering new, innovative products which come here first then, once they've proved their worth, become more widely available. That's good for the supplier too," says Andrew.

There are often tastings in store and special supplier events are planned. On the day of my visit, it was the turn of fudge maker Lisa Hodgson from Butterknowle, near Barnard Castle – Weeton's stocks her award-winning fudge under its own label, something Andrew plans to grow. The current range of Weeton's labels cover mustards, vinegars, salad dressings, jams and coffee, which is sourced from Atkinson of Lancaster. "It was another business I fell in love with and thought I have got to do something to support it," he says.

In time for Christmas there are puddings from Lewis and Cooper of Northallerton and gift sets for Old Buffers, Yummy Mummies and Bridget Jones types.

Meanwhile, for daily shoppers there's a range of fresh breads, cakes and biscuits, many available gluten free.

Fresh fruit and vegetables, all from Yorkshire, are displayed rustically in baskets, with not a plastic tray or cellophane wrap in sight.

For customers with less time, there's a fridge full of oven-ready meals made by Ripon chef Anthony Sterne.

Just a few weeks since opening, Weeton's has caused quite a stir and has already won its first accolade. The 'best food retailer award' has pride of place on the counter, not least because it was won from votes cast by customers presumably impressed by the products and personal service.

"It is very encouraging," says Andrew. "Our job now is to stay ahead by providing new things and supporting our producers to be innovative.

"I believe there is a sustainable future to British farming if we change the way we shop, cook and eat. We live in a fantastic part of the world with some great products on our doorstep and we will always give our customers the best food Yorkshire has to offer."



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## me and my wardrobe



**SUITS YOU, SIR!** Above, coat from Harvey Nichols in Leeds; jeans jumper and shirt from Bakers. Right: shoes from Jeffery West, all clothes from Bakers



**I** |'ve always been conscious of what I've bought

Robin Bell, 24, is the manager of Bakers Tailoring, which opened last year in Middlesbrough, reviving the name of a well-known outfitters in the town

**Describe your look**

Smart, as obviously I work in the tailoring business. When I'm not working, it's smart casual – maybe knitwear, jeans and shoes.

school to designer clothing shops. I've always been conscious of what I've bought and tried to buy carefully.

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

Can it be an accessory? I would say my Alfred Dunhill Messenger bag – it's just like a satchel. If not, it would be my three-quarter length brown overcoat by a company called Day.

**What are your favourite shops?**

Bakers! I also like the Alfred Dunhill store on Jermyn Street in London. I quite like Harrods in the January sales.

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

Probably about £450 on a suit. The label is Hunts, which is not very well known but it's good quality.

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

I quite like Jude Law's look. I really like the mod era – quite narrow ties and things like that, the way Jude Law looks in Alfie. I like trousers cut to the right length, nice pointed shoes and slim fitting jackets.

**What's your worst buy?**

I've been a bit lucky in that I went straight from

**Bakers Tailoring, 194 Linthorpe Road, Middlesbrough, (01642) 226358.**



# NE out on the town

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



**BEN WILSON**  
Ben is a 24-year-old personal trainer. He liked the upmarket feel of the venue as well as the music. Ben wore a great top by Michiko Koshimo with jeans by Yen. To keep fit and healthy, Ben says you should watch what you eat and visit the gym four times a week for 45 minutes. Like his friend Steven, Ben is a big fan of the Kaiser Chiefs and Arctic Monkeys.



BEN WILSON

## McCourt & McKay

**T**HE Glass Spider in Green Terrace, Sunderland, is the new designer bar on the block. It has a total capacity of 970 and a roof terrace to the rear of the property which can hold up to 100 people. Newcastle-based interior designers, Fluid Design Solutions, have given the venue a kitsch, eclectic look – complete with a flock of wall-hung flying ducks, inspired by the 1970s.

The owners, Wylam Leisure, are confident following an investment of £2m that the Glass Spider will rival any bar in Newcastle and will attract the big name acts.

The venue has something for everyone – lots of chill-out zones for relaxing and chatting, as well as a dance floor and standing space.

The roof terrace area with patio heater on full blast did not tempt us to step out to admire the view, but we can imagine it will get packed on those hot balmy Sunderland summer evenings!

### JACK MARTIN

Jack is 18 and a student at Sunderland College. He looked very trendy in a black velvet jacket and jeans from H&M and a shirt from Flip in Newcastle. What made the look, though, was his hair, which was cut and styled by Kitui in Sunderland. Jack enjoys browsing through vintage and charity shops for something different. His favourite album is by The Strokes' First Impression of Earth.

### STEVEN COPELAND

Steven, 23, is a plumber. The Gate in Sunderland is his first stop when he is shopping for clothes. He was wearing a vin-

tage leather jacket with G Star Jeans. His favourite activity to keep his fitness levels at peak is football (his second favourite actually, but we can't repeat his first choice!). Steven chills to the sounds of Kaiser Chiefs, Arctic Monkeys and Oasis.

### CARLY KING

Carly is 24 and studying Media Production at university. She thought the venue was quite stylish; we thought she was too. Her outfit looked great on her petite figure and it didn't cost the earth. Her shorts were from Primark, H&M top and shoes from New Look. Carly's River Island necklace and belt added a little sparkle to a classy looking outfit. Carly wore a pretty shade of silver grey on her eyes by Karen Millen. Her CD choice is Kelly Clarkson.



CARLY KING



HENRY BUTLER

### HENRY BUTLER

Led Zeppelin and AC/DC fan Henry is a buyer for Jules B... very handy as it is his favourite place to shop. Henry wore Hugo Boss and a Pal Ziles suit, which looked great even though he had just that morning stepped off a plane from Milan, gone to a friend's funeral and was finally ending his day with a few drinks at the Glass Spider.

### SHELLEY DEAN & PHILIPPA MAW

The girls were supporting their best mate, Glass Spider DJ Dayne. Shelley wore a dress from Topshop and boots from River Island. Philippa wore jeans from Tucci, a USC top and a cute hat from Accessorize. Philippa's must-have cosmetic brand is Avon and Shelley's must-have hair brand is Trevor Sorbie. Dayne, meanwhile, was belting out tracks from their favourite funky house and indie scene.



SHELLEY DEAN & PHILIPPA MAW

● 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

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STEVEN COPELAND



JACK MARTIN



**HEALTHY OPTION:** Carina and David Evans source all their products locally

Pictures: CHRIS BOOTH

# Vitamins on tap

A new juice bar is keeping customers healthy while helping to boost local business. SARAH FOSTER finds out more



**RELAXING:** the cafe upstairs

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**T**HOUGH from the outside it looks quite small, That Juice Place turns out to be deceptive. Step inside the café, in Darlington's Skinnergate, and you're met with ample space and a few seats. Go upstairs, however, and there's a large and airy room filled with tables and comfy chairs.

David and Carina Evans began the business last November, taking over the former Scope shop. They had a definite aim in mind. "The idea is to offer people a healthy alternative, so all our smoothies and juices are made with real fruit in front of the customer and all our salads are freshly prepared," says David. "People are much more aware of health and the choices that are available to them. What we want to offer them is that lifestyle choice of being able to have something fresh."

Wherever possible, food and drink is made on site. David says its quality is guaranteed. "We make the soup ourselves so we know exactly what goes into it," he says. "We use seasonal stuff and source locally when we can. We go to the market ourselves to buy the vegetables."

A key part of the café's ethos is supporting other local businesses. David says it has a string of good suppliers. "We use local traders like The Cheese & Wine Shop in Clarks Yard," he says. "All our bread is baked by Michael's of Cockerton."

When not local, produce is ethical – the café uses Fair Trade tea, coffee and sugar. David says he considers this important. "We're trying to operate the business as ethically as we can within normal business rules," he says.

A comprehensive menu offers things like wraps, rolls, paninis and baked potatoes, along with a wide range of juices and smoothies. Prices are reasonable, and everything is available to take away. For those with a sweet tooth, there's home-made cheesecake. "We make the cheesecake here but it's made with cottage cheese so it's healthy," says Carina. A testimony to the café's concern with health is that it has won both a Heartbeat Award

from Darlington council and a Clean Air Award from the Roy Castle Foundation.

In line with its aim to involve the community, it doubles as an exhibition venue. "Because it's such a good space we're having a photographic exhibition up here to raise funds for Hummersknott School," says David. "We're also allowing local artists to exhibit."

The building itself has a colourful history, which David and Carina would like to learn more of. "It used to be a Quaker school and during the war it was a canteen for the troops," says David. "If anyone has any more information, we'd be delighted to know it."

While still finding its feet, the café is already proving popular. David says that once people have discovered it, they soon return. "Nearly all our business is repeat business," he says. "Once we get people up here they come back. The idea is just to get them up the stairs."

■ That Juice Place, 7 Skinnergate, Darlington (01325) 487700.

*We make the soup ourselves so we know exactly what goes into it. We use seasonal stuff and source locally when we can. We go to the market ourselves to buy the vegetables*

David Evans





Dressing women of all sizes, from age 20 to their twilight years, is no mean feat, but after 30 years in fashion, Anne Carpenter has more than mastered the trade. SARAH FOSTER visits her shop



**OCCASION WEAR:** Frank Usher suit, above. Left: Anne Carpenter, owner of Marianne

**A**S you enter Marianne, a smart looking store on Cleadon's Front Street, in South Tyneside, you're met by a sea of smiles. One of the smiles belongs to Anne Carpenter, the affable owner; the others belong to her helpful staff.

Anne, 59, has always loved fashion. "I served my time as a tailoress, which means we are able to give a personal alteration service, and started the business 30 years ago with my sister, who's now retired," she says.

To match her own experience, Anne has recruited expert staff - each of her four assistants has worked in fashion for 20 years - and she says that when it comes to dressing clients, their knowledge tells. "When a person walks through the door, we can tell them what size they are. We taught Trinny and Susannah everything they know," Anne jokes.

Although it specialises in occasion wear, the shop sells both formal and casual clothes - along with everything in between. Chunky sweaters vie for space with tweeds and tailored suits, and dotted around the walls are bags, shoes and accessories. Dresses range from the floaty and feminine to the smart and more sedate. Anne says she caters for all tastes.

"We'll have the bride's mum, the groom's mum, the grandmother and the auntie," she says. "We've got to cater for the lady who's a size ten and for the lady who's a size 22. We've got to be all things to all people."

The shop prides itself on the high quality of its service, which Anne believes is crucial. "When people come in we expect to give them that service," she says. "I've got a lot of very good, regular customers who have shopped with me all the time I've been in the village. I've got people coming from everywhere - the Lake District, Scotland and even Australia. It's a reputation that you build up over the years."

Anne's close relationship with her clients means that she buys with them in mind and she and her staff get excellent feedback. "People come back after occasions and the husband will

say, 'My wife looked absolutely fantastic,'" says Anne. "We get little cards and people bring photographs and wedding cake. At Christmas we get boxes of chocolates and wine."

The beauty of Marianne is that it's a one-stop shop - not only can you buy an outfit, but also the shoes and bag to match. There are stunning hats and if you think you'll only wear it once, you can always hire. "All our hats are either £30 or £50 to hire," says Anne, showing me her vast collection.

As the shop's buyer, she has her work cut out spotting the latest trends - and more importantly, predicting what will sell. She sees this as her biggest test. "I think the buying is the business," says Anne. "You have to really work hard at your buying because you've only got to make a few mistakes and you have problems."

To source her stock, she travels throughout Europe, making frequent trips to London. Among her collections are clothes from Spain, Italy, Germany, France and Ireland. Anne says she tries to reflect what's in fashion while still offering choice.

"At least 60 makes have come in for spring," she says. "It's a very soft, very feminine, very fresh look but I've got to cater for everyone so I've got to have a tailored look as well."

Despite the quality of its goods, the shop's prices are kept in check. You can buy a whole outfit, including hat hire, shoes and bag, for less than £250. For a little bit more, you can really turn heads. "You can get a spectacular outfit for about £500," says Anne. "Our prices go up to about £700 for a complete outfit."

To Anne and her staff, the most important thing is pleasing customers - and they have proof that they do. "We have built up the business through word of mouth," says Anne. "I would say that 80 per cent of the customers who come in come because someone has told them to."

■ Marianne, Front Street, Cleadon Village, 0191-536 7310. Open Mon-Sat, 9.30am-5.30pm; Sun 10am-4pm, and Tuesday until 8pm.

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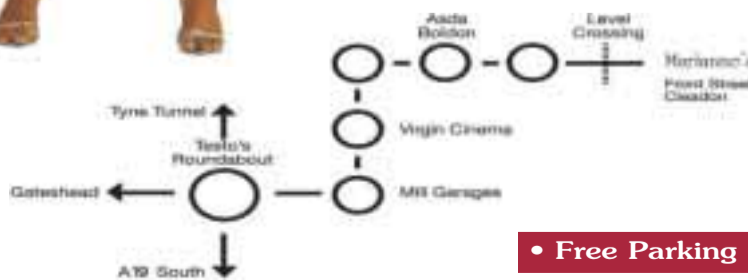
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**TIDY LITTLE SYSTEM: the Yamaha YSP-1**

# For sound all around

■ Don't miss Burton's Bytes - game reviews in The Northern Echo every Tuesday

IF you haven't listened to a movie in surround sound you are missing out on the home cinema experience. NIGEL BURTON looks at systems for all budgets

**O**K. YOU'VE done your homework bought the big flat screen TV, lashed out on a great DVD player and paid a small fortune for decent cables. The picture looks terrific and it's big enough to convince your audience that they could be at the local multiplex. But there's still a nagging doubt. The feeling things aren't quite right.

The answer, of course, is surround sound. Watching a modern movie without multiple speakers is the difference between a black-and-white and a colour picture.

A decent Dolby digital system can add depth and conviction to a movie in a totally unique way. Remember the scene in Jurassic Park 3 when the good guys are stalked by unseen raptors. With a surround sound system you know exactly where the dinos are because their footfalls move around the room - circling, ready for the kill. It's simply terrific.

Before we move onto the best buys, a quick surround sound primer.

Home surround at its most basic is represented by Dolby Pro-Logic. This set up is now virtually extinct so we'll move on quickly to Dolby Digital 5.1 - the current favourite. This technology uses five channels (front, left, right and two rears) plus a low frequency effects channel (the .1 bit) to add some serious bass rumble.

A less common competitor is DTS (Digital Theatre System). It has the same number of channels but enthusiasts reckon it sounds better because the soundtrack is less compressed. The difference to non-audiophiles is marginal.

Look out for Dolby Digital 6.1EX and DTS Neo - these newer sound systems have even more channels and better effects placement. At the moment, though, they are still pretty rare.

**BEST BUDGET SYSTEM**  
 Toshiba SD-44 HK. Price: £215.

FORGET low-cost systems from unknown brands. Why take a chance when you can snap up this beauty from Japanese giant Toshiba?

The SD-44 covers all the bases - Dolby Digital 5.1 and DTS playback - without costing a fortune. The DVD gives a good account of itself with strong pictures to match the dynamic sounds. You'll need to budget for a set of speaker stands, though, and it isn't great with music CDs.

Shop around and you should find this set-up for less than £200.

**BEST ALL-IN-ONE SYSTEM**  
 Sony DAR-RH1000. Price: £900.

IF you can afford it, this Sony system will answer all your digital recording and surround sound needs in one go.

The super sleek recorder can burn to all the major disc formats (including dual layer discs) and there's a 160GB hard-disk for building a library of your favourite shows. Sony reckon it can store up to 269 hours of TV so you'll never be stuck for something to watch.

The sound system is rated at 120w per channel. That sounds suspiciously high for such dinky little speakers but the sound itself is full-some and effects are accurately placed around the room. All the usual soundtracks can be decoded but there's no 6.1, which is a disappointment.

**BEST SYSTEM FOR PEOPLE WHO CAN'T BEAR CLUTTER**  
 Yamaha YSP-1. Price: £800.

HAS the thought of trailing wires under the carpet put you off surround sound? Fear not, because this system can give you the authentic movie-going experience from one elongated speaker.

It's actually made up of 40 tiny speakers that "fire" the sound effects around your room. Although there's no substitute for actual speakers, the Yamaha does a very good job of simulating a full six-speaker set-up.

There are plenty of hook-ups for a TV, DVD, satellite system and a handy remote control. And it looks uber cool sitting beneath a big flat panel telly.

**BEST SYSTEM FOR SURROUND SOUND LOVERS WHOSE OTHER HALF HATES LOUD NOISE**  
 Philips HP1500. Price: £350 (if you can find them)

NOT really a surround sound system at all, the Philips HP1500 are the finest set of "surround" headphones I have ever tried.

Not cheap at £350 but the Dolby Headphone processing is terrific. With a blockbuster movie soundtrack I guarantee you'll be fooled into thinking the sounds are all around. The headphones come in their own presentation box and the decoder also sounds great with plain old vanilla stereo.

These cans are hard to locate in the UK. If you are keen, try a German importer, where the retail price may also be lower.



NE beauty

SPECIAL OFFER

THERE is 20 per cent off the new Gatineau DefiLIFT 3D Radiance Life Facial at Darlington's Beauty Oasis until the end of March. Those booking in for the facial can also buy a Gatineau eight-piece anti-ageing collection, worth £85, for just £25. Call the Beauty Oasis on (01325) 489970 to book. The Beauty Oasis is on Northumberland Street, just off Grange Road, Darlington.

● Home Spa: Indulge by Liz Wilde is published by Ryland Peters & Small, priced £6.99.

Spa quality

WHEN was the last time you spoiled yourself? I mean really truly pampered yourself so you lost all track of time and didn't have a worry in the world. Most of us live fast-paced lives with little room for pleasure, but indulging yourself is not selfish or vain, it's just living your life the best you can for as long as you can, says life coach Liz Wilde, author of Home Spa: Indulge.

"A life filled with pleasure is not just for women who can afford beauty treatments or spa weekends away," she says. "Everyone deserves to feel fabulous and the good news is you can take care of your beauty, health and well-being for a minimal cost."

Personal pampering is good for our self-confidence, so indulging yourself every day is beneficial to our health.

FANTASTIC FACIAL

Spoil your skin by swapping your usual cleanser for a pomade or a balm. "These natural oil formulas melt on contact with your skin and are removed with a wet washcloth or damp cotton wool," says Liz.

Try Liz Earle's Cleanse and Polish Hot Cloth Cleanser, £10.75 for a starter pack with two muslin cloths (01983 813 913/www.lizearle.com), The Sanctuary Cleansing Balm, £10 at Boots, or Eve Lom's world-famous cleanser, £45 at Space NK (020 8740 2085/www.spacenk.co.uk).

Skin experts say cleansing is the most important step in skincare, so don't skimp. Massage up from your collarbone using the pads of your fingers and medium-firm pressure to boost circulation.

Then, massage along the jawline to release tension that can cause headaches, really working into the grooves of your nose and chin. Allow the oil a minute to absorb every trace of dirt and make-up, and then remove gently.

BLISSFUL BEDTIME

"Night-time bathing guarantees a blissful bedtime, and may be the only time in the day when you get to be alone," says Liz.

"Immersing yourself in warm water untightens tense muscles. Set the scene with whatever relaxes you - candles, music - and put a big towel over the radiator, ready for when you step out."

Add around ten drops of essential oil (six if your skin is sensitive) and forget about the day's stresses with Botanics Time To Unwind Bath, Body and Massage oil with frankincense,

orange and juniperberry, £7.29 at Boots, or Espa's Soothing bath oil, £14.50 (01252 353 230).

Or transport yourself to paradise with The Body Shop's Spa Wisdom Monoi Miracle oil, £10, or Elemis Exotic Island Flower bath oil, £22.50 (01278 727 830/www.elemis.com).

Once dry, slather a rich body cream over skin like Molton Brown's Celestial Maracuja Body Souffle, £35 (www.moltonbrown.co.uk), Sothys Eau Thermale Spa Softening Body Gel, £20.20 (01303 262 666), or Aromatherapy Associates Renew Rose body cream, £25 (020 7569 7030).

SALON PLEASURES AT HOME

You can pamper yourself at home without having to splash out on an expensive spa day - and still get the benefits. These simple pleasures bring the spa to you, at hardly any cost.

SALT SCRUBS

"These literally lift off dry skin to expose the smooth layer underneath," says Liz.

Make your own with equal measures of sea salt and grapeseed or soya oil (found at health food shops) - adding three drops of your favourite essential oil will make the mixture smell nice. Stand in the bath and massage all over, then either take a warm bath to prolong the detox benefits or shower off.

BODY WRAPS

Maximise any moisturiser by treating yourself to a body wrap straight afterwards. Here's how to make your own - warm a towelling bathrobe, plus socks and a towel on the radiator.

After massaging in oil or cream, slip on the robe and socks, place the towel over your lap and relax in a chair for 20 minutes or until your cocoon has cooled.

LUXURY MASSAGE

"An all-over massage is proven to promote mind and body healing, not to mention improving the texture of your skin," Liz explains.

Stroking works well for relaxing, kneading for aching muscles and gentle pinching for cellulite-prone areas to encourage lymphatic drainage.

Make your own massage blend with one dessertspoon of grapeseed or soya oil, and no more than five drops of your favourite essential oil, or buy a ready-made one like Neals Yard Remedies Aromatic massage oil, £5.35 (0845 262 3145/www.nealsyardremedies.com), or Decleor Aromessence Spa Relaxing Body Concentrate, £35.50 (020 7313 8780).

Everyone deserves to feel fabulous, and it needn't cost a fortune if you opt to pamper yourself at home, says SHEREEN LOW

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#### THE GS 450h - THE LATEST CHAPTER IN THE EVOLUTION OF LEXUS' HIGH PERFORMANCE HYBRID TECHNOLOGY

May 2006 will see the introduction of a new drivetrain derivative to the Lexus range, in the elegant shape of the GS 450h. This vehicle represents the latest chapter in the development of Lexus' revolutionary hybrid technology, a greener alternative to petrol or diesel power, that draw on electric motors that interchange with and supplement the 3.5 litre petrol engine. This delivers exhilarating performance - the GS 450h is capable of achieving 0-62 in less than 6 breathtaking seconds - whilst offering excellent fuel economy and low carb dioxide emission, more akin to those of a modest family saloon than a high performance luxury car.

The GS 450h offers the perfect solution for company car drivers. Its low CO2 emissions put it in a BIK tax band of just 22%\* (compared to 30%+ of most of its German competitors, whether petrol or diesel) meaning a significant saving in company car tax. It offers the fuel economy associated with diesel engines, yet is the most refined, quiet and generously equipped executive saloon available.

The GS 450h comes with a wealth of standard equipment, including 6-CD hi-fi system with 10 speakers, Bluetooth connectivity, Smart Keyless entry system and push button start and touch screen 7" LED control panel. The SE grades also offer luxurious leather upholstery and a multimedia system as standard - plus all the usual comforts you'd expect from Lexus.

The GS 450h cannot be adequately explained in just a few words. For a more detailed understanding of what this revolutionary car offers, please call us on 01642 808000.

\*Data to be confirmed

**NE** motoring



**LEXUS IS250:** performs as well as the more expensive models

## Whispering class

No longer is the Lexus IS the poor relation, says  
Motoring Correspondent IAN LAMMING

#### Lexus IS250

**T**HERE are places where all of us fear to tread; dark places, sinister places, unsightly places, places best avoided, places to be left alone. But sometimes our journeys through life take us there, or at least our jobs do. This is one of those times, one of those weeks when, given the choice, I would rather stay at home or at least nearby.

But professional pride is at stake, or at least money, so there is no avoiding leaving the comfort and safety of my small pond to swim in the threatening depths of an ocean. When this is the case, the right sort of car is needed and the new Lexus IS250 proves to be the perfect companion.

When there is menace in the air, it doesn't do to dwell in foreign territory, which shall remain nameless for fear of upsetting the locals. But the Lexus IS has the right tools to get me in and out with military precision.

For starters, this particular Lexus operates in stealth mode; a colour so anonymous it is difficult to name, a shape so sleek it is impossible to define. Parked up it blends in with the background, particularly when camouflaged in winter grime.

It arrives without so much as a whisper from its powerful 2.5 litre V6 engine, a motor so smooth and quiet it creeps up on you unbeknown. It finds this strange address, where shops are shuttered and the petrol station boarded up, courtesy of on board navigation, a comforting female voice guiding you through the mire. Programming could not be easier thanks to an alphabetised dash-mounted touch-sensitive screen in the cabin and several satellites in space.

Keyless entry and a proximity fob allow you to walk quickly away from your ride and when the job is over, the doors unlock at your mere presence, allowing a hasty exit. Once inside the Lexus, the driver is cocooned in opulence that reminds you of home; cream leather, air-conditioned luxury, armchair comfort.

Press the starter button and the engine bursts into life; you can't hear anything, but the rev counter jumps to let you know engine parts are on the move. Engage the automatic gearbox, press the delectable throttle and the car glides away, the satnav once again guiding you reassuringly to safety.

You can't feel them but the ratios change seamlessly from one to six and the Lexus gathers pace for the homeward journey. And when the roads turn twisty, there is handling aplenty to tackle the bends and massively powerful brakes to bring things to a halt.

To help you relax there is a Mark Levinson hi-fi, complete with myriad woofers and tweeters around the cabin for concert quality music to help the journey pass. The touch screen also handles the various audio settings as well as levels for the climate control.

For the first time the new IS really deserves the Lexus badge as it closes the gap on its siblings. No longer is it the poor relation, an entry-level model to appease the masses. It now looks like a Lexus should inside and out and performs as well as the more expensive models.

And when you are behind enemy lines and longing for home, it is just the vehicle to get you there in perfect safety.



Once inside the Lexus, the driver is cocooned in opulence that reminds you of home; cream leather, air-con luxury, armchair comfort



**NE connections**

# To the Manor borne



Aldwark Manor was built as a wedding present from a lord to his daughter and a stay there is still the perfect gift, as **CHRISTINE FIELDHOUSE** finds out

**N**OTHING is quite as it seems at Aldwark Manor, near Alne. To get to the hotel, which can be reached via the A1 or the A19, you cross a little tollbridge. There you get the distinct feeling that you're paying your 40p to enter another world. And that's true – Aldwark Manor may be set in the middle of peaceful countryside, far from bustling crowds, but it has the sophistication and elegance of Knightsbridge.

The Manor, a member of the upmarket Marston Hotels group, is a quiet 55-bedroom place, where golfers stroll round the course by day, and couples snuggle up together in the Squadron Room by night.

It seems quiet and unassuming, yet last summer it hit the headlines when David and Victoria Beckham were rumoured to have hired the whole hotel during their visit to Royal Ascot at York. Better still, they were said to have paid a couple whose wedding was booked there £100,000 to reorganise their big day just so they could have the place for their own party.

Whether the rumours were true remains unknown, as discreet Marston Hotels staff keep their cards close to their chest. But once you step inside the Victorian four-star hotel, you can see why celebrities visiting Yorkshire opt for Aldwark. Vinny Jones has stayed there, as have celebrity golfers.

I was staying at the hotel with Gill Varley,

a popular face among the North Yorkshire mummy fraternity, whose only claim to fame is being featured on the front cover of the Scotland Self-Catering Guide when she was ten in 1982. The staff were discreet and if they recognised her, they didn't let on.

Commissioned in 1865 for Lord Walsingham as a wedding present for his eldest daughter, the hotel really is a mix of old and new. My Wensleydale Suite, which was on two levels, was both minimalist and comfortable, with curved walls and portholes strategically placed so you wake up and see the countryside stretching for miles. I even had a balcony and made a mental note to return in summer.

We were treating the one-night stay as a chance to catch up, so we headed to the Re-

flections Spa to the indoor heated pool. After a few lengths we needed a break – and a chat – and the steam room, Jacuzzi and sauna were just the place.

Later, we sampled treatments from the extensive range on offer, including ESPA treatments for men and women, Jessica nailcare and St Tropez tanning. I opted for the ESPA Holistic back, face and scalp treatment, which gave me 90 minutes of bliss while therapist Maggie Hunter treated me with restorative oils. It felt as though Maggie had four hands at times, and by the end of treatment, after even my ears had been massaged, I felt incredibly nurtured.

For Gill, a full body massage released a build-up of lactic acid from months of training for the Swaledale Marathon, another of

her claims to fame. After such pampering, we never made it to the gym, but it looked superbly equipped from the comfort of the relaxation lounge.

The hotel is very proud of the two AA rosettes the restaurant has been awarded over the years, and in minimalist surroundings, with deep red decor, we sampled the delicious food on offer.

Elsewhere in the hotel, we enjoyed cocktails in the Squadron Room, my very favourite spot in the original manor house, which had plush decor, huge paintings and sumptuous sofas, reminiscent of a bygone age.

But with gorgeous countryside beckoning, we really had to get out and walk. Reception has maps of short walks around the 118-acre estate, through which the River Ure meanders, but we went a little further afield. The only threat came from flying golf balls from the busy 18-hole golf course, which is well-loved among golfers for being 6,500 yards long.

The hotel is well positioned for trips into York and Harrogate, Castle Howard and Harewood House.

Aldwark must have come up to standard because Gill has booked to return for a special family occasion – her companion doesn't know so, like those Marston Hotels spokespeople, I can't say more. I'm sure she'll let us know if Posh and Becks pay her £100,000 to cancel!



■ Aldwark Manor, near Alne, York. Standard rooms start at £171 for bed and breakfast. Telephone 01347 838146, e-mail [aldwark@marstonhotels.com](mailto:aldwark@marstonhotels.com) or visit [www.marstonhotels.com](http://www.marstonhotels.com) for more information.

■ Spa breaks and Raceday packages are available. A Revitalise and Energise package costs £85 and includes a fitness test, a specially-designed programme, lunch and a massage, while a Soothing package at £90 incorporates a full body massage, followed by a face and scalp treatment.

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