



The kitchen was designed by Niall Maxwell and Emily Erlam, using unit carcasses from Plain English and rough-hewn Shaker-style shelves. The link to the tithe barn will ultimately be created via this part of the house

When a derelict tithe barn came up for sale in north Norfolk close to where she was her husband decided to take on the project in two phases, first converting this adjacent

## BARN AND BRED

raised, Emily Erlam seized the chance to create a new family home there. With architect Niall Maxwell, the landscape designer and piggery before tackling the bigger job next door. Dominic Bradbury traces the return of a native. Photography: Rachael A. Smith





Top: Emily designed the dining table, while the Hans Wegner chairs are a mixture of originals and new reissues. The vintage pendant light, bought on a trip to Copenhagen, is by Poul Henningsen. Above: Emily was in charge of landscaping and planting the gardens at either side of the house



The pantry adjoining the kitchen, situated at the far end of the open-plan living area, is one of Emily's favourite interior features. The custom-made, sliding barn-style door - designed by Niall - can be pulled across to conceal the familiar mess left over from preparation and cooking





Top: the vintage Danish sofa in the seating area is by Fabricius & Kastholm, while the Hans Wegner 'Cigar' armchairs are also reissues. The tall 'Hunter Grand' floor lamp is from Rubn. Above: the fireplace, a focal point, is a custom design by Niall. The brick surround matches the floor



Emily and Sean were inspired to introduce brick floors throughout the piggery after seeing the way Marcel Breuer had installed them in a 1960s house in Connecticut. The sliding doors at the far end of the communal space hide the boys' bedroom, which also doubles as their playroom





THE COUNTY OF Norfolk exerts a particular hold over its own. So many of those who drift away for study or work get drawn back in the end, unable to resist its countless charms and big, open skies. That's particularly true of north Norfolk, which has always been so rich in natural beauty and rural delight. For Emily Erlam, who grew up here, the attraction has remained strong, and when a chance came to create a new family home in the area, she and her husband, Sean Perkins, couldn't resist the temptation.

Yet it wasn't just the location that drew them. The building in question is also a treasure in itself: a large tithe barn on a quiet country lane surrounded by farmland. Built from brick and flint, at one point in its history it had served as a school, but was being sold by the local diocese – along with an adjacent former piggery – as surplus to requirements.

'It's on the edge of a village that I know well, as I grew up five miles away and my parents are still in the same spot,' says Emily, a landscape designer, who works both in London and further afield. 'I spent my first 20 years in Norfolk and went to school a few miles from here. But the barn is actually off the beaten track so it's something that I never really knew even existed. It is very hidden away.'

After learning the building was up for sale, Emily and Sean went to see it and were instantly taken by its setting, scale and character. They were delighted when they found their sealed bid had won out, and immediately turned their thoughts to architect Niall Maxwell,

who they had known for years, to help them transform the site into a home. Maxwell had garnered respect from the couple for his work as project architect on an earlier barn conversion, designed by John Pawson, that Sean had commissioned in Essex.

'Having renovated and lived in a barn for so many years, you do become addicted to the space,' says Sean, a graphic designer with his own studio, North. 'No two barns are the same, and it is inspiring to have the space to play with. But they can be quite cold and austere, so we wanted to create somewhere warm, soft and homely.'

At first, Emily and Sean thought that they might tackle the entire project in one go, but the reality of dealing with a vast triple-height building, plus piggery, soon made itself apparent; Niall encouraged them to think about tackling it in two distinct phases.

'My initial reaction to the barn was how fragile and vulnerable it was,' says Niall, whose own practice, Rural Office for Architecture, is situated in the Welsh countryside. 'Inside, the whole floor of the tithe barn was covered in owl pellets and once, when I was up there on my own, I startled the owl and it swooped down past me, very close. It was a lovely, ghostly kind of place and it was really a case of thinking about what we could do with this huge hulk of a building and then this smaller piggery on the outside. So we began exploring ideas, looking at how we could maximise the potential and analysing the path of the sun, the sunsets, the prevailing winds and particular views so we could understand how the different spaces might work.'

In the guest-room, as in the master bedroom at the opposite end of the piggery, high clerestory windows deliver sunlight deep into the house. The wooden wall panelling and pegs betray a touch of Shaker inspiration. The lights are from Rubn and the bedspread is by Eleanor Pritchard



Brick floors and bespoke timber panelling continue to create a Scandinavian flavour in the master bathroom, where the use of brass-finish taps, a cantilevered towel rail and a teak mat help bring a sense of warmth and a rich patina to the interior. The sink, like the bath fittings, comes from Vola





Together, architect and clients agreed to put the conversion of the main barn on hold for the moment and to concentrate on the piggery. This single-storey brick structure offered a more intimate space and a more affordable first phase. Niall designed a new extension to the piggery that would ultimately allow for a direct link to the tithe barn, with the buildings creating a slightly irregular L-shape when seen together.

They raised the roof height of the piggery to create a practical space, encompassing the main entrance and three bedrooms, with high clerestory windows at either end. The new addition, also single-storey, was designed as an open-plan living zone, assigned to a sitting area arranged round a fireplace, a dining area and a kitchen at the end. The couple chose timber panelling for the bedrooms to bring a much-needed sense of warmth to the interiors; bespoke doors were made from the same material. These include the sliding barn-style ones that partition the central bedroom, which belongs to Emily and Sean's two young sons, Josh and Leo, and offer maximum flexibility.

Another key decision was to introduce brick floors throughout, giving a Scandinavian flavour. 'We were looking for a floor that felt slightly lived-in, with a real patina to it, but that was also cost-effective,' says Erlam. 'We started off with the idea of poured concrete, but then one day we were looking through a magazine [*Wol* Dec 2008] and saw a wonderful 1960s house by Marcel Breuer with a brick floor. Instantly, Sean and I knew it was what we wanted.'

One critical ambition for the extension was to forge a strong indoor/outdoor relationship with the two courtyard gardens either side; Emily did the landscape design and planting. A sequence of french doors creates a sense of connection, as does a sheltered veranda, while another set of clerestory windows adds natural light.

Furniture and lighting, chosen by the couple, reinforce the warm, organic character of the interiors, with mid-20th-century pieces by Hans Wegner and Poul Henningsen complementing bespoke pieces, such as the dining table and kitchen. The atmosphere is calm and soothing, helped by conscious links to the outdoors.

'Because of the way the sun moves round the barn the courtyards are very different,' Emily says. 'The east one benefits from a lot of south-facing sunshine, so we have planted a vibrant bed by the building. When you sleep with the doors open you have plants right outside.'

As for phase two and the tithe barn, plans are still evolving. Emily would like a work studio to be part of the next stage, and an indoor garden at the centre of the space. But for now they are content with the Norfolk home they have created. And so is their architect.

'Sometimes when you go and visit a house there is just this feeling that it's right,' says Niall. 'And when I arrive at Sean and Emily's there is this real familiarity and warmth, a real sense of peace. It feels as though it has always been here' ■

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The new extension Niall designed for the house provides a link between the converted single-storey piggery to one side and the triple-height tithe barn to the other. Together, the buildings form an L-shape. Future plans for the barn include an indoor garden at the centre of its vast, soaring space



In the hallway, which is sectioned off with sliding doors, the brick floors form a practical solution for a rural home with muddy surroundings. Throughout the house they are warmed by underfloor heating, and have been acid-treated to take away excess sheen and create a uniform surface finish