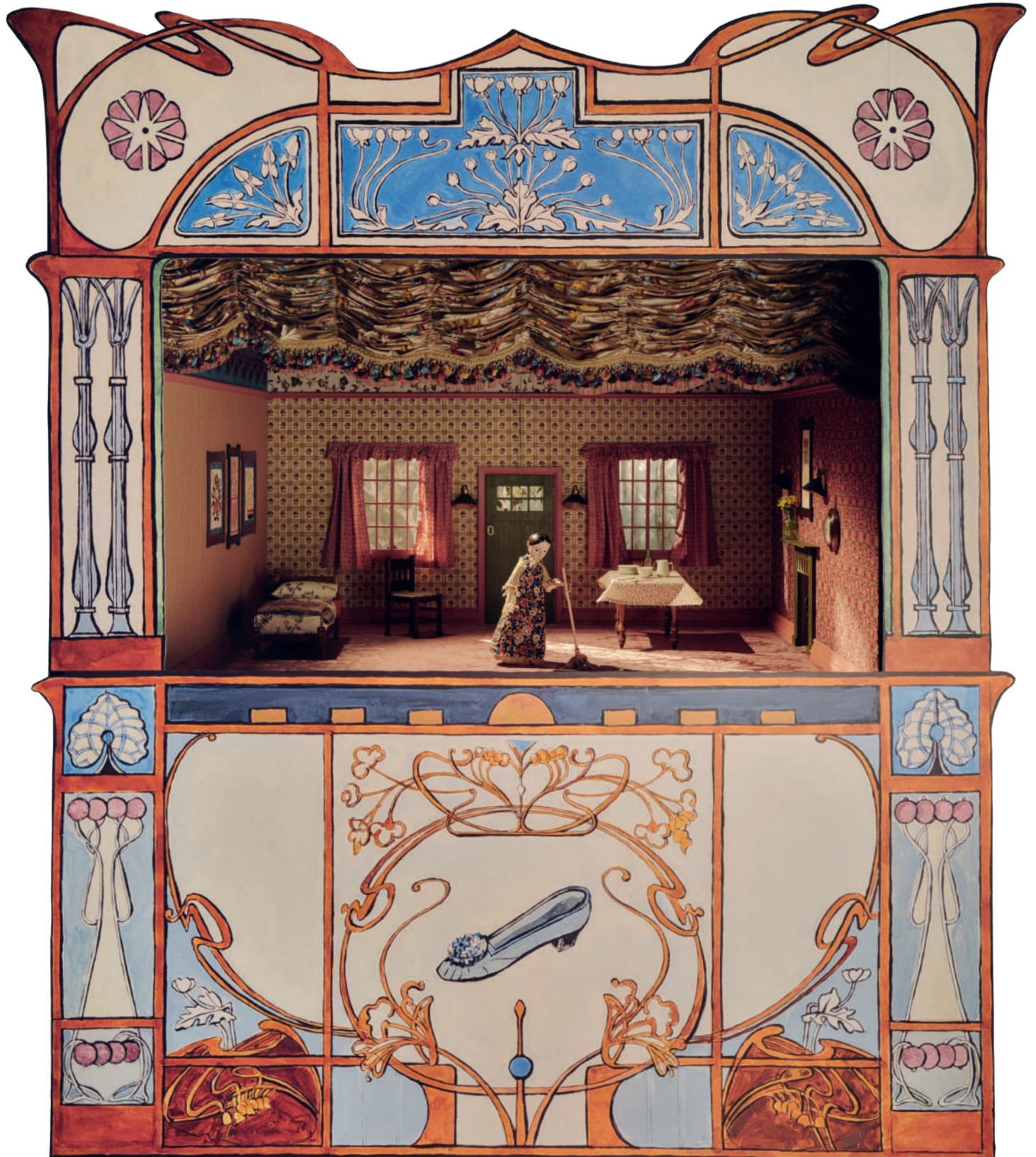


THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

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QUAY NOTES

A nautical undercurrent permeates the lives of artisan all-rounder Greg Powlesland and Katie Fontana, co-founder of Plain English. It extends to their home, a converted boathouse by a creek, where wood salvaged from Nelson-era battleships and Cornish dockyards shares quarters with a porthole repurposed as a ceiling light. And keep a sharp lookout for two elegant vessels dry-docked in their party room. Ruth Guilding prepares to cast off. Photography: Antony Crolla



Previous pages: the Grand Room incorporates reclaimed panelling and is intended for merry-making. To the right is the 'Oriental', an International 14-class racing dinghy designed by Uffa Fox. Above: Greg Powlesland rebuilt the Victorian chairs in the breakfast room, while the window seat features legs from a chapel bench that have been copied and reused in designs for Plain English. Opposite: under the gallery in the Grand Room is a snug with a settle and more seating. The fireplace and a wood stove at the far end provide the heating





Opposite: the entrance hall features a 19th-century painting of fishing in Mount's Bay and Greg's bronze head of his son Rupert atop a Georgian piano case. The ceiling light was made from an old yacht porthole. Greg mixed the blue-green paint, which he calls 'Sea Kelp Green', while the panelling – made out of ancient sequoia wood – was reclaimed and resawn from a huge cider vat dating from 1911

Greg Powlesland is one of the most practical people I know. Robustly self-sufficient, he has lived in many places, but Trem Merlin – this house on the meander of a wide tidal estuary in southwest Cornwall – is different. For it is a place shared with Katie Fontana, his partner of more than 20 years.

Katie is the co-founder of Plain English cupboard-makers, begun in 1992 and known for its Georgian-inspired traditional wooden cabinetry and sculleries; Greg is the salvage king. Their tastes and creative preferences dovetail, but it's the all-consuming passion for boats and sailing that roots them here. They met in the boatyard at Gweek Quay. 'We spied each other at a boat launch, and got talking, and one thing led to another,' Katie says.

Trem Merlin has a long timeline, for Greg came here some 28 years ago with his baby son, Rupert, from his last berth – a boathouse-cum-store he'd rebuilt below Trematon Castle near Saltash. Here, he found a dilapidated 1950s wooden shack, rather like a scout hut, sitting on this sublime landmark site high above the Helford River, and a quay with a washed-away slipway. It had been known as 'Tremelon', which Greg changed to 'Trem Merlin', because 'it sounded more magical'.

As the son of a structural engineer, Greg knows his way around construction. He built another slip and boathouse down on the river, followed by a studio and workshops on higher ground. Then, about nine years ago, he began rebuilding on the original boathouse site near Frenchman's Creek.

The couple's new house is designed around two huge spaces, the kitchen and the double-height Grand Room, with central spiral staircase and back-to-back fireplaces that warm the whole house (there's no central heating), a little breakfast room and cabin-like sleeping quarters upstairs. Katie proffered very little advice here, for as she points out: 'As a designer I totally

control and do what I like in my own house in Suffolk – and this had been in Greg's mind since before we met.'

Greg lives surrounded by beautiful, useful things made lifetimes before his own, and those created – or brought back into use – by his own skilled hands. There is nothing he cannot mend or repurpose, and he would rather forage in the attic of the past than shop for new materials. He came here with two lorries full of wood, salvaged from war-damaged Plymouth and Saltash when its historic dockyard buildings were demolished, or found in reclamation yards ('I hadn't got very much money,' he says). He repairs tortoise stoves and old saw machines, invents roller blinds and reclaims granite from derelict tin-mine workings. Trem Merlin is stitched together with ancient timbers from rare trees felled long ago, with windows made for a dozen historic dwellings, all reworked in a much more esoteric way.

During the pandemic, Katie and Greg pulled a huge bundle of 17th- and 18th-century carved mouldings out of storage. 'We laid them all out in the big room and found all the matching bits and decided where they would go, which were fancier and which plainer, and Greg re-carved the missing bits,' says Katie. Walls and furnishings are freighted with maritime history. Timber for the kitchen island comes from the demolition of Devonport Hospital, where teak lintels were 'reclaimed from the wooden walls of battle-ships from Nelson's time, broken up and sold in Plymouth', while pine panelling in their Grand Room once graced Plymouth's Custom House. Two sea-going craft lie becalmed here – a wooden tender and a racing dinghy. It's a room for music making and parties, but 'I'm very keen to establish a museum of lovely things that are based on maritime things,' says Greg. 'So, you know, I'd quite like that to be a bit of a museum as well. People can mix in with whatever's in there.'

Their kitchen is a marriage of two parallel minds. 'We talked about it,' says Katie. 'I wanted it to be an everything room, the working kitchen. But how lovely it would be to have a big open fireplace and a sofa in front of it, a dining table, a complete living space!' Half the kitchen is a prodigious dining table fashioned by Greg from a fallen yew tree he'd bought 15 years ago. 'In the other, "Plain English" part of the kitchen, I was allowed to have a few cupboards!' says Katie. 'So the working part of the kitchen is very much bringing together Greg's ideas and mine. You've got a big reconditioned Aga and a long run of cupboards on either side of the sink.' Greg spotted the 1.5-metre-long hand-carved stone sink in a Norfolk reclamation yard, and he made the kitchen island, a beautiful mongrel of elm and teak, but the sleekly crafted drawer backs are from Plain English. Food is stored on Greg's chill slate shelves in the larder, but 'I insisted on a dishwasher,' Katie finishes. She admits she's not much of a cook: 'If I wrote the Plain English cookbook, it would be baked beans on toast,' she says. Greg makes salads and does the washing-up.

By symbiosis, then, they seem to have created the house that represents their platonic ideal. Greg concurs: 'But ideals change as you go on. So in the winter, the light comes in from the back and shines right through the house, and it's warm. In the summer, the sun's very high and it's got veranda canopies that keep it cool. The main bedroom is facing east, so you get the morning light, and so is the kitchen,' he explains. 'And then the study, which is dark and sort of cosy, and the fireplace areas are in the middle of the house.' There's everything that two mariners need here, but this is the first draft of a house, designed out of pure aqueous light and long watery views. In years to come it will be different © Plain English. Ring 020 7486 2674, or visit plainenglishdesign.co.uk



Above: the larder has a sunk stone floor and houses the fridges. Opposite: the reconditioned electric Aga has a bespoke rail and handles plated in nickel instead of the conventional chrome. Greg carved the square red-cedarwood washing-up bowl on the teak drainer, and rebuilt the large window – spotted by Katie in an Essex reclamation yard – to accommodate four panes rather than the original six





Above: the spiral staircase at the centre of the house was cut from an ancient cedar that grew on the nearby Glendurgan estate. It spins around a mast saved from a boat in Falmouth, while salvaged 18th-century architectural mouldings frame the doorcase. Opposite: the upstairs bedrooms are built in the pitch of the roof. The window seat here, in the main bedroom, offers a spectacular view of the river

