



Maureen Whitmore in her redesigned kitchen, which has painted units and high tech fittings such as a steam oven



The study

Design for the times

Interior designer Maureen Whitmore has transformed the ground floor of her Victorian house in Penrith into a contemporary but very personal space

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Interior designer Maureen Whitmore loves cooking and gardening and the light-filled vaulted kitchen in her Penrith home has been designed around these passions.

French windows lead to patio and garden and give panoramic views of the hills around Ullswater. Sitting at the central island, Maureen and her husband David Luckhurst can watch the sun set through another massive expanse of window. "It's like an ever-changing painting," says Maureen.

Also clearly visible is a copper-framed clock, which hangs on the garden wall. "It's big enough to see when we are gardening and reminds me of Alice in Wonderland," says Maureen. "I want to cover the wall with berberis and bird boxes." ▶



The aubergine sofa is a central feature in the sitting room

The light-filled vaulted kitchen extension



An eclectic mix: the dining room has chairs upholstered in aubergine Moon fabric and a table which can sit 22

Within the kitchen, common sense and contemporary styling combine to form an inspiring and functional space. One end of the kitchen has been designed to allow family to make a cup of coffee or breakfast – Maureen has five grown-up children, David three – while Maureen is baking, for instance, at the other end. She has a storage area for baking trays and a drawer for spices, which are labelled alphabetically: “I’m busy and if I do a recipe, I want to go, go, go.”

Especially made and upholstered bar stools are drawn up to the island, which has an induction hob and a granite work surface. An overhang allows the stools to be set at right-angles to others – “I don’t like stools in a row, it’s anti-social,” says Maureen. There’s a double Belfast sink with a high tap and a long granite worktop beneath the large window. A Miele steam oven which may be programmed for specific menus has been



The double-sided log effect DRU gas fire in the dining room



Leather chair in the bay window



The kitchen opens onto the dining room



The sitting room has two sofas and Roman blinds in Mulberry embroidered linen; below: a quirky sideboard in the study



installed as well as a cooker from Maureen's previous kitchen. The units and ceiling trusses are painted, which would allow the colour scheme to be changed easily.

The kitchen extension, on what had been patio, is part of a recent redesign and rebuild which has transformed the ground floor of Maureen's mid-19th century, detached home in Penrith's New Streets, a conservation area. The architect "put walls round our ideas", says Maureen, and the builder was Inca Construction, of Penrith. "I can show clients the house and once they've seen the quality, there's a trust."

Building a relationship of trust with clients and finding out what they like rather than imposing ideas has been a key driver of Maureen's 45 years in interior design.

She came to Cumbria from Manchester and worked from Watermillock before moving into Foxton House in Lowther

Street, Penrith in 1999. She ran her business, Whitmore & Thwaytes in partnership with Deborah Thwaytes initially but has been sole owner since 2006.

Across the yard from the house, a two-storey stable block has been converted to a welcoming showroom, workroom, and offices. Maureen employs seven people and offers everything from a few metres of fabric to a full interior design service. She is looking to take on an apprentice and works with many local businesses. "Because I've got all the skilled people around, I tend to project manage more and more, especially for people who have holiday houses.

"We mainly work in Cumbria, Lancashire and the Borders but have just completed a nice house in Majorca and one in Hampstead."

Maureen says that in the past couple of years, colour has become increasingly

important, including for painted furniture, and she has been receiving more and more requests for complete colour schemes.

It's important to prepare an overall plan touching on every aspect of a project, says Maureen. "But if a client has a seriously tight budget and has a carpet they've never much liked, for example, I'll say, let's do the things which will begin to transform the room and give comfort – a coat of paint on the walls, some lamps, maybe a blind – then change the carpet later on.

"Lighting can transform a room; LED strip lights under kick boards, on top of units or in shelves are wonderful and I'd refer anyone to the John Cullen website [www.johncullenlighting.co.uk] and books to be truly inspired."

If you want funky touches, incorporate them into smaller things like cushions, rugs, throws, an Ikea painting and choose a practical base colour for furniture such as sofas, Maureen advises.

There's plenty of funkiness to be found at Foxton House including the French oak and cherry wood sideboard in the study, its cupboard doors and drawer fronts all painted in different colours. The room was formerly the kitchen, lacking light when it was used for cooking but comfortable and spacious in its new role. "We used to have a monster brown Formica island. The kitchen looked out on the yard and I could always see work," says Maureen.

Now there's a Chesney woodburner with a hearth from Lakeland Granite of Penrith and wool blinds from Zoffany. "Wool is making a massive comeback, which is very exciting as we have so many producers here," says Maureen. "It's hard wearing, comes in so many beautiful colours and is flame retardant."

As well as leading off the central hall, the kitchen, dining room and sitting room open into each other and there's a double sided, log effect DRU gas fire in the kitchen and dining room. The whole space is linked through the use of different 'scales' or tones of Little Greene Portland Stone paint, with three walls of the dining room in contrasting Adventurer – an aubergine shade echoed by a sofa and rug in the sitting room.

Maureen describes the dining room, which used to be the sitting room, as an 'eclectic mix' and it includes an early Gillows of Lancaster marble-topped

'The architect put walls round our ideas'



Bi-fold doors link the dining room and sitting room



Bold wallpaper in the cloakroom picks up the colour of this Chinese lacquer piece

'You don't buy a home out of a catalogue, it's made up of your life'

Maureen's Victorian house is in a conservation area of Penrith



washstand with a floral tiled upstand, serving as a dresser. "I bought it for £15," says Maureen. "It doesn't go with anything but I like it and it's travelled with me since my mid twenties."

Two oak tables are pushed together to make a sociable square and may be placed end to end to seat 22. There's a runner from a recent trip to China. The dining chairs are upholstered in Moon fabric and in the bay window there's a leather chair "ready for the amazing day when I can sit and read a newspaper," says Maureen.

"I have Roman blinds, all lined and interlined for heat retention. I don't have curtains because I love the woodwork and it is such a shame to cover it."

Bi-fold doors link the dining room and sitting room (previously the dining room) and when the wall was taken out between the rooms, Maureen and David found there had been an arch there a long time ago. The sitting room has two sofas,

Roman blinds in Mulberry embroidered linen, an open fire, and painted wood lamp bases which were originally curtain pole finials from a castle in Ireland. There are two alcoves, one discreetly housing a TV and the other containing an Oriental cabinet. A hallway, its walls hung with abstract paintings by artist Mark Huit, of Keswick leads from the central hall to a stunning cloakroom, formerly a small study, which has bold Romo wallpaper. "A lot of people think you can't have a big pattern in a small space but it works here because it's broken up by the dado," says Maureen.

There's an American rocking chair, minus its rocker and a Chinese lacquer piece, its red toning with the wallpaper.

"You don't buy a home out of a catalogue, it's made up of your life," says Maureen.

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New Year resolutions top tips from Maureen for cheering up your home

- 1 Do a post-Christmas de-clutter. Decide whether you really like the things you've had for years and look at them as if you were coming into the room for the first time.
- 2 Get your paint colours right and don't be afraid to repaint a room if you don't like the colour after a few weeks. Paint a big piece of wood or board and take it round a room rather than applying tiny patches from tester pots.
- 3 Buy good quality paint; the molecular construction is different and the colour is much deeper.
- 4 Root through remnant sales for fabric for funky cushion covers and other touches. And look at Pinterest for funky ideas.
- 5 Make curtains more contemporary, for instance, by removing fussy pelmets and valances and hanging the curtains on a pole.

Maureen begins a regular advice column in next month's Cumbria Life.