



Piece by piece

Caroline Firth's home in Bramhall is the perfect example of this interior designer's quirky, yet practical, style

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The 'book room'



Caroline's bespoke kitchen with its painted floor



Caroline Firth

Caroline is not native to Cheshire, but has found her spiritual home here. Having met her husband Ian at university in Lancaster, they settled first in north Manchester, but moved to Bramhall to access the great schools there. A career in recruitment was out on hold with the arrival of their first child, which was when her long fascination with design was given time to flourish.

'I gave up work when I had my son and then retrained in interior design. Since then I've been balancing work and family. I've chosen to take a slightly unusual approach in this industry, by establishing a 'charge by the hour' business. This way, whatever your budget is, you can benefit from the experience, knowledge, product sourcing skills and understanding of an interior designer >



An upcycled headboard adds drama



A nod to the house's past



Past and present time

Caroline's home has significant ties to Bramhall's past, the time when it metamorphosed from a sleepy village to one of Manchester and Stockport's commuter towns.

Stationmaster John Findlow had the property built to his own specification in 1865, along with the house next door.

It's not close to the station today, but when it was built Mr Findlow would have had a short walk through the fields to his workplace, an area built over long ago.

Caroline has added occasional pieces of vintage railway ephemera to her home, including the customer notice in her loo, a station clock in her hallway and an old, large clock face at the rear of her garden, that - along with her determination to retain original features - link her home beautifully back to its early days, and reason for being.



Soft colours in the sitting room complement the linked book room

but are not committed to a significant up-front consultation fee.

'It works well, I've found. Some people simply want a fresh eye, someone who looks at things with a different perspective, to refresh a single room. It's amazing the change you can make with a simple de-clutter, adding new artwork, changing the cushions, etc. I go from this to more extensive projects, so my work is quite varied.'

Caroline tells me several times that she loves living in Bramhall: 'It's such a great place to live. We can walk into the centre from here and all the local businesses make you feel so welcome. My favourite shops at the moment are Be and Amaranth. It's a small community here, it's easy to get to know everybody.'

Much of Bramhall's residential property was built after 1930 and post-war, which taps neatly into Catherine's personal love of telling a home's story in her work.

'The houses tend to be light and bright, with big windows. I love to balance contemporary living with retro nods to the house's heritage. A few quirky, eclectic pieces that tie into the house's history can finish a room perfectly.'

Caroline and her family live in the old Stationmaster's

House, a home built by the first Stationmaster of Bramhall train station, in 1865.

Caroline and Ian have undertaken a little structural change; making the main living area into a single, front to back room, rather than the two small rooms it was designed to be, but most of the house's original features remain, such as open fireplaces in the bedrooms.

The kitchen is a melody of this season's so on trend shades of grey, and is a triumph of Caroline's skill.

'I saw the style I wanted in a major London kitchen-maker's and then had it made for me by local joiner Philip Howard. We ran out of money, so I painted the floorboards, but what was an option of economy has turned out to be quite high impact!

'I wanted to open up the two small living rooms into one large one, for the sense of space and light, but needed to separate them in some way too, as I wanted to avoid ending with a single long narrow room.'

Caroline has used distinct decorative styles in each space, but the dark grey walls and citrus pops of the front work beautifully alongside the creamy, pastel shades of the rear. The fabulous butterfly picture in this space was created to order by local artist Gabrielle Dow, who came >



Rich colour in her son's bedroom



Vintage style in Caroline's work space

to Caroline's home to undertake the work.

Upstairs, the main bedroom is a symphony of restful greys, punctuated with a dramatic matt black headboard - a charity shop find that originally horrified her husband.

'It was a 1970's piece, made from that awful melamine plastic, all yellowed from the light. I put a couple of coats of blackboard paint on it and it looks so different! I love trawling through charity shops and vintage stalls. I found the original Cheshire Lines customer notice on a vintage market stall and it now lives in our downstairs loo. It makes me smile every time I read it!'

Wandering around Caroline's lovely home, it's clear that it's the extras, the little pieces that she's added to each room, that not only gives each space a personality, but ties it all together - a thread of style that runs throughout, but is fuss-free and subtle.

'In my work I have two key types of client,' Caroline explains: 'Those who want a completely new look and are happy for me to design and project-manage the work and then finish off by styling the house, down to the last cushion; and those who are seeking a more cohesive look on a really tight budget, who only need me for an hour or two - editing and rearranging furniture, recommending new paint colours and adding some beautiful accessories to the room.'

If Caroline's own home is an example of how her mind works when dealing with any type of client, they are in very safe hands. ■

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