

# ‘I was desperate to add some character’

Faced with a neutral-painted home that lacked light in places, Caroline Firth used colour and creativity to inject some style sass

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## The big CHANGE

FITTING A NEW BATHROOM AND KITCHEN, KNOCKING THROUGH TO OPEN UP THE LIVING ROOM AND REDECORATING THROUGHOUT THE HOUSE

Get the  
**LOOK**  
PAGE 82

### 1 Living room

Caroline knocked through the existing living room and a small reception room to create a bigger, brighter space, then added colourful accents. Miss Clementine sofas, from £1,889 each, Sofa Workshop. Rug, from a selection, City Cows. Felix cushions, £45 each, Habitat.



## Take the **60-SECOND TOUR**

**BOUGHT FOR**  
£725,000

**SPENT**  
£23,000

**NOW WORTH**  
£975,000

### THE PROPERTY

A five-bedroom, semi-detached, Victorian house in Bramhall, Cheshire, bought in July 2006.

### WHAT IT COST

Building work.....£1,500  
Kitchen.....£11,000  
Bathroom.....£8,000  
Flooring.....£2,000  
Decorating.....£500  
**TOTAL.....£23,000**

### WHO LIVES HERE

Caroline and Ian Firth live here with their children, Sam, 14, and Erin, nine. Caroline is an interior designer and Ian is a musician and music teacher.

### THE LOOK

Colourful and eclectic, with period features and informal furnishings, as well as a mix of classic, retro and high-street buys.

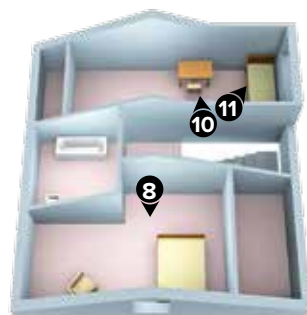


### LESSONS LEARNED

*“Tackle your garden early on – we left it until last in our previous home and it took ages to mature. This time I made it a priority and we’ve been able to enjoy it so much more.”*

### SECOND FLOOR ▶

The children have the top floor, with Sam's bedroom on the right-hand side of the house and Erin's on the left. There's a bathroom between their rooms



### ◀ FIRST FLOOR

The main bathroom is at the top of the stairs on the left, next to the main bedroom. There's also a guest bedroom and another study



### GROUND FLOOR ▶

The hall has a dining room on its right, leading to a kitchen-diner and tucked-away utility room beyond. The living room is to the left of the hall and a study is at the front of the house

‘When there’s limited natural light, strong colours really stand out and energise a room’



### ② Kitchen-diner

Caroline had the units made by a joiner, then recycled the old ones to fit out her utility room. For a similar kitchen, try the Chichester, from £640 for a W600mm base unit; for a similar dresser, try the Chichester 5ft, from £2,285; both Neptune





**K**een to swap their Manchester home for one in a more family friendly area, Caroline and Ian Firth began looking for a period house in nearby Cheshire.

'When one of the few Victorian properties in the area came onto the market, we were determined to buy it,' says Caroline.

Built in 1865 for the local stationmaster, the house was a double-fronted semi with high ceilings and period fireplaces. Caroline and Ian stretched their finances as far as possible and, although they weren't the only ones bidding on it, they struck lucky.

Inside, the rooms were bland and were fitted out with uninspiring budget floors and fixtures. 'The house had been decorated to sell, so it was all liveable and nothing needed doing urgently,

but none of it was what I'd have chosen,' says Caroline, who gave birth to daughter Erin shortly before they moved into the house. 'I was desperate to add some character, so as soon as we were settled and Erin started sleeping through, I was ready to spring into action.'

Those first few months gave Caroline time to get to know the new house and start planning. She soon discovered that parts of it felt dark at certain times of day, so opening up the space to add brightness was key. In terms of decorating, it would have been easy to go for a pale, pared-back look, but Caroline was keen to introduce colour and individuality, too. 'I was very aware that I would need to think creatively to achieve my vision on our limited budget,' she says.

Caroline tackled the kitchen first. Its wood-look floor and oak-effect cupboards made the ➔

**③ Kitchen-diner**  
Caroline saved money by repainting the kitchen's existing floor. Her faded dining chairs were also given a new lease of life with a coat of paint

Floor painted in Dark Lead Colour floor paint, £61 for 2.5ltr, Little Greene. For similar chairs, try the Tulip style, £99.99 each, MDM Furniture



#### ④ Office area

On one side of the dining room, there's an office area defined by a calendar wall sticker. The retro-style desk is a reinvented dressing table from eBay. For a similar desk, try the Portobello, £649, Maisons du Monde. Calendar wall sticker, £69, Ferm Living

#### ⑤ Dining room

Bright prints and eclectic artwork add colour and personality to the space. For a similar tablecloth, try a selection, Etsy. Lucky lightbox, from a selection, Goodwin & Goodwin. England's Green & Pleasant Land XXL print (unframed), £69.95, King & McGaw







**‘I’ve tried to work with the original building but still make it ours, so there are traditional features next to modern pieces and unusual accessories’**

room feel narrow and dark, and there was a window and back door sitting either side of the central range cooker, which felt unbalanced. To counter this, Caroline designed a single symmetrical run of units to incorporate the range and add storage, and placed a slim dresser opposite. She then framed the range cooker with a false chimneybreast, and turned the back door into a second, matching window.

Having a local joiner make the Shaker-style cabinets at a fair price meant that Caroline could splash out on quartz worksurfaces. In a further bid to save money, she cut back with the flooring. ‘We simply lifted the laminate and re-laid it horizontally to accentuate the width of the room, then painted it,’ she says. ‘It was

supposed to be a temporary measure, but we ended up really liking it so it’s here for good.’

Caroline then focused on the downstairs layout. ‘The living room was dark and uninviting, and a little front reception room was a bit of a nothing space, but it benefitted from the afternoon sun,’ she says. ‘I wanted to even out the natural light between the two rooms.’

With that in mind, she decided to knock through from the small reception room at the front of the house to the larger living room at the back, giving the space more light. The room is decorated in fresh off-white and vibrant mid-green, which Caroline contrasted with a dramatic dark grey and yellow scheme for the adjacent study. ‘When there’s limited →

**6 Study**  
**Zesty yellow accents give the house's period features a modern edge**  
For a similar fireplace, try the Nottage, from £850, Victorian Fireplaces. Tub chair, £395, Oliver Bonas

**7 Hall**  
**A pinstriped runner brings an element of surprise to the hallway**  
Halle runner, from £125 per m, Roger Oates. For a similar clock, try the Gardman Paddington, £19.99, Charlies Direct

**8 Sam's bedroom**  
**Simple furniture, a black wall and acid-yellow highlights give the room a linear, modern edge**  
Feature wall painted in Off-Black Estate Emulsion, £39.50 for 2.5ltr, Farrow & Ball. For a similar lamp, try the Sven, £65, Wayfair



### 3 of the best MONOCHROME ARTWORK

**I never read, I just look at pictures.**  
Andy Warhol  
Moderna Museet, Stockholm Sweden  
10/2-12/3 1968

£124

**Skim read**  
Keep it simple with a contemporary statement piece  
‘I Never Read’ print (framed), King & McGaw

**Joie de Vivre**  
£3.60

**Fine print**  
A whole book in just one picture  
‘Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland’ print, Spineless Classics range, Amara

£29.99

**Happy vibes**  
Download this printable piece and frame it at home  
‘Joie de Vivre’ DIY printable, Bonjour Laura J range, Etsy





### 9 Guest bedroom

Caroline made the artwork herself by painting the silver feather onto a panel of MDF. For a similar artwork, try the Aerial I (91cm x 183cm), £200, Art.co.uk. Cushions, £75 each, Original Little Bird.

natural light, strong colours really stand out and energise a room,' she says.

Throughout the house, Caroline has used money-saving tactics, such as finding furniture from eBay, charity shops and vintage sources, to add to her home's period feel. She also altered high-street buys for an individual look. 'I've tried to work with the original building but still make it ours, so there are traditional features next to modern pieces, and unusual accessories, such as the station-style clock in the hall, which is a nod to the house's history,' she says.

A wooden parquet floor now extends from the hall into the dining room, the living room and the family's study, creating a unified feel. Supplied by a local firm, the flooring was a surprisingly cost-effective replacement for the modern wood-effect floor. 'It's made from slender oak batons and all the edges were sanded, so it looks a bit battered, and everyone thinks it's original to the house,' says Caroline.

Investing in their home for the long term has been the right move for Ian and Caroline, who has since turned her love for interiors into a business, Cheshire Interior Design (cheshireinteriordesign.com). Now, as she pursues her passion and her children are growing up, the family's house is evolving with them. 'It's a comfortable home that's full of character and in a lovely location,' she says. 'We've put our heart and soul into creating it.' 🏡



### 10 Erin's bedroom

The second-hand table has been painted and topped with a marble offcut.

For a similar table, try the Chantilly, £199, The Cotswold Company. For similar wall stickers, try a selection, Koko Kids.

### 11 Erin's bedroom

Add a canopy to give a day bed a youthful feel.

For a similar canopy, try the canopy with bunting, £40, Blu Bobbin range; for a similar cushion, try the personalised, £20, Plumps Creative range; both Etsy.



### 12 Main bedroom

Covering a fireplace in blackboard paint helps it to stand out.

For a similar paint, try the Graphite chalk paint, £18.95 for 1ltr, Annie Sloan. Hairpin stool, £175, Suburban Salon.

**DON'T MISS**  
the details

Lively prints, dramatic accents and bold pops of colour give this period property renewed personality.

### 13 Living room

Caroline has made a high-street buy her own by upholstering it in a bold new fabric. Tub chair, £395, Oliver Bonas; covered in Rothesay Grass, £35 per m, Designers Guild.



### 14 Living room

Illustrator Gabrielle Dow painted the two butterfly canvases. 'They bring the room to life,' says Caroline.

For similar art, try the Butterflies 1955, £13.95 each, King & McGaw.

