



The yellow bricks, Crittall windows, new slate roof and original hay loft ladder all reflect the property's industrial heritage. Cobbles were found under the floor and relaid in the courtyard. The balcony was made by Forging Matters

# INSTANT ATTRACTION

Isobel James found inspiration from across the generations when she renovated a former coach house in Surrey

Words Heather Dixon | Photographs Penny Wincer

## Former Coach House

Isobel in the kitchen with Belle, the neighbour's beagle and Isobel's walking partner. A skylight from Rooflights & Glazing works light into the space. Isobel turned the cabinet doors round, and added antique pull handles and

granite worktops from Granite & Marble to create the look she wanted. She cleaned the exposed warm bricks on the back wall and painted the adjacent wall in blackboard paint. The storage shelves are British Rail luggage racks





## THE STORY

**Owner** Isobel James is a freelance interior designer (assisbyilj.co.uk), landlord and property manager.

She lives with Gilbert, her ginger Tom cat

**Property** A late 19th-century, two-bedroom former coach house on the Surrey border. It was last used as offices for a graphic design company. Isobel bought the property in 2011 and moved in two years later

**What she did** Isobel worked with an architect to remodel the space, creating an open-plan living area on the ground floor and two bedrooms on the second floor. The building work took a year to complete

unchtime shopping took on a whole new meaning when Isobel James stepped out of the office and came back with... an office.

'I viewed it the week before, during a ten-minute whistle-stop tour with a group of other potential buyers,' says Isobel. 'A week later I went out for a sandwich and returned to work with a new home.'

The house had been bought at auction and Isobel went £20,000 over her self-imposed limit in a moment of determination, knowing it would involve a major renovation to transform the former coach house from an office and workshop into an open-plan family home.

Although the house is not listed, the façade is protected so any external alterations required planning permission. Isobel also needed consent to change its purpose from commercial to domestic.

Having done this she enlisted the help of an architect to design a spacious open-plan living area, plus a cloakroom and utility, on the ground floor and add two bedrooms – one en suite – with a study on the first floor. The major sticking point, however, was the windows and amenity space. Isobel wanted to lower the height and it took months of 'toing and froing' to get permission and reposition and replace the windows with double-glazed Crittall alternatives. The building work took a further year to complete.

'It was a radical renovation and the building was taken back to a shell,' says Isobel, who comes from a family of landlords and auction hunters. The former coach house needed a new roof, new floors, rewiring, replumbing, a steel structure to create the first-floor rooms, the remodelling of a side return and new windows. An organic treatment removed exterior paint to expose the beautiful warm brick underneath and the builders took out hundreds of cobble stones, found buried under concrete, to be reused in the courtyard. Beams were installed in the open roof area and two extra conservation skylights were fitted to flood the upper floor with natural light.

'My aim was always to restore sympathetically to the building and replace the character that had been ripped out by the previous commercial use,' says Isobel. That commercial past helped Isobel to shape the property's residential future by influencing

a combination of styles – including industrial, Art Deco and experimental. She also drew on her experience in creative retail to introduce clever design details, such as a frosted acrylic loft hatch to draw light into the main bedroom.

'I asked the same company to produce the balustrade templates in acrylic, which were needed to overcome the minimal design. I used a sustainable recycled acrylic, Greencast, which has a good range of colours,' says Isobel.

'The staircase was another major challenge. Initially the architect recommended a spiral staircase but at the very last minute we realised it wouldn't fit between the new steel beams – luckily, with no millimetres to spare, the staircase maker was able to fit a return staircase and I designed the balustrade myself.'

Isobel furnished the house with an eclectic mix of furniture bought at auctions and car-boot sales, inherited items, and her own recycled pieces. 'I love hunting for treasures,' she says. 'When I was growing up I loved weekend trips to the brocantes in France. For me it's about creating something that I love. It's fun to be able to build on something and find your own "red thread".'

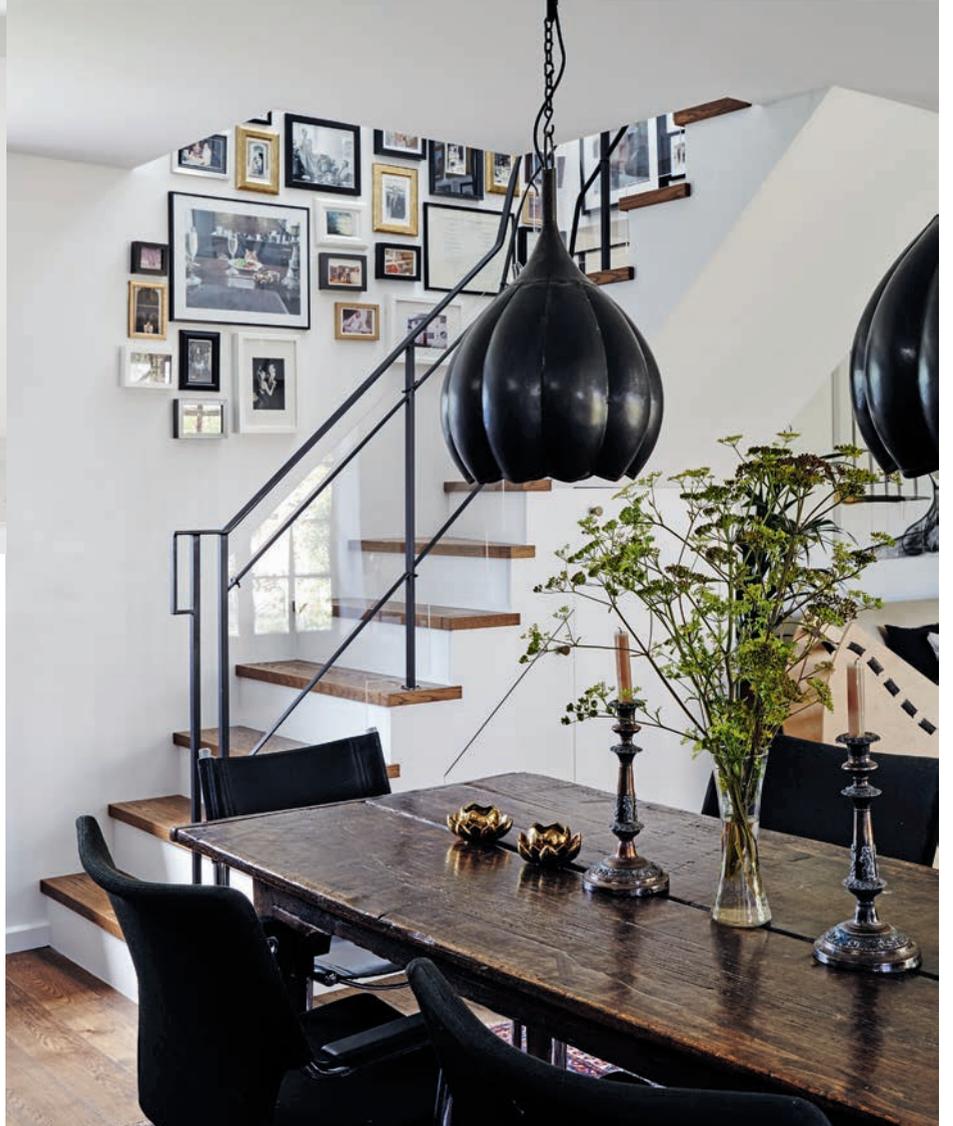
The ground floor is open but divided into comfortable living areas, including the kitchen, which features a salvaged British Rail luggage rack and a sitting area dominated by Isobel's self-designed prototype rocking chair, made of plywood and jute. The bedrooms feature more of Isobel's handiwork in the wooden shutters, which she made from timber planks.

'My interior design and sourcing business is entwined with my home,' she says. 'I like to be resourceful, reusing whatever I can. It's good to have a starting point and I knew I wanted to use a large 17th-century oak dining table that had been stored in my mother's summerhouse for nearly a decade. It was just by chance that the office chairs, which had been left in the property, worked with it to create the soft industrial look I was going for.'

Although the house is just 100m<sup>2</sup>, Isobel has made use of every inch, using light and height to emphasise space and adding lots of storage ideas, which are often lacking in modern homes.

'It's a really easy house to style,' says Isobel. 'I love the combination of different eras and the way everything just works together. Everything has its own story. It's what makes my home unique.'

## Former Coach House



Top: Isobel had to press hard to get planning permission to lower the window level and add these Crittall doors, both from Clement Windows  
Above: A display of inherited childhood toys from Isobel's father  
Right: Isobel designed the staircase and balustrade herself, and had the balustrade made by Forging Matters, who also made the exterior balcony. Though barely visible, the Perspex panels were a building regulations requirement as the gaps exceeded 100mm

The antique dining table was integral to the interior design for the space and is paired with office chairs, which were left in the building. Isobel added two striking pewter pendant lamps from TK Maxx above the table and completed the dining area with a large antique rug and leather armchair



*Right:* In the guest bedroom, a signed Lowry print hangs over the bed. Isobel made the headboard with Sanderson fabric. The Art Deco lights were bought in a car-boot sale and Isobel had an ironmonger realise her design for cast-iron holders  
*Below right:* The bird mirror is a love/hate auction find  
*Below:* Isobel had the walls curved in the master bedroom when the upper floor was created, and kept the loft space open to let in as much light as possible. The grey feature wall is painted in Dulux's Urban Obsession and the ladder was bought at a salvage yard in Kent. Isobel made the canvas at her work in Onward Display, to cover a TV above the antique drawers, and she made the shutters from timber planks. The bedding is from Zara and the rug is antique

