

STARFALL FARM

CONTEMPORARY SENSIBILITIES AND AESTHETICS TURNED A RELOCATION TO FRESH FIELDS INTO A TRIUMPHANT GEORGIAN RENOVATION

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Xa Sturgis and Anna Benn bought their rundown farmhouse outside Bath, England, to landscape as much as renovate. Earth was excavated from around the house to create a hillside amphitheatre. →



Found at the end of a narrow winding road in a quiet, green English valley, Starfall Farm, just a short distance from the centre of Bath, has a magical quality to it. Owners Anna Benn and Xa Sturgis were instantly seduced when they first came across it three years ago; for Anna – a garden designer/writer – it was the chance to landscape as well as renovate. “It was just what we had been looking for: a small farm, nothing too big, in a good location and with a south-west-facing garden,” she says. “There was the farmhouse, a field, dog kennels and an old trashed cowshed that was being held up by bits of wood and tree trunks. The valley does feel incredibly rural, yet we are just two miles from Bath.”

Anna and Xa moved here after Xa was appointed director of the Holburne Museum, in Bath, and promptly found themselves with a major project on their hands – creating a family home for themselves and their three children, Theo, 14, Fred, 12, and May, 10.

“This was a rundown farm that had been used as a dog-breeding centre for Jack Russells,” says Anna. “There were 11 children living in the house at one point, and the farmer had built a back extension in the 1970s to accommodate his growing family.”

It was a year before they got planning permission to replace the old side barn with a new addition that would give them an open space combining kitchen, dining and seating areas with direct access to the garden. Architect Piers Taylor, of Mitchell Taylor Workshop, was hired to help realise their dreams. “We wanted something that could take everything that was thrown at it – all the chaos of family life,” he says. “The idea was not to create a precious building but to design something for the way Anna and Xa wanted to live in it.” →

Light spills into the dining area (**above and opposite page**) via skylights and large sliding glass doors. A corner window, framing the built-in concrete banquette, offers edited vistas of the redesigned garden, created by Anna (**above**). Vintage Ercol dining table and chairs have been sparingly embellished with a line-up of large Russian dolls set high on a wall shelf, a flower painting, bought when they were in London, and 1950s light fittings, sourced nearby, in Bath.

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The newly built extension, clad in larch (above left), became part of an L-shaped formation when attached to the original house and its 1970s addition. The same timber was used on both of the newer builds to unify the structures. Etchings by Xa's mother, Jean Sturgis, take pride of place in the stairwell (left and below right), while a painting by his sister, Louise Sturgis, hangs above the piano (below left), with two small Natalie Turner prints below. (Opposite page) The bespoke plywood and concrete kitchen was designed by Mitchell Taylor Workshop. In order to save £17,000 on the quoted concrete-island price, this handsome alternative was poured on site, then trowelled smooth by the architect on his way home from work one evening. →



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Piers came up with a plan for a single-storey addition clad in chunky vertical ribs of Siberian larch, which were also used on the old 1970s extension, tying the two elements together while contrasting nicely with the rugged Bath stone of the original farmhouse.

The new addition is highly insulated, with underfloor heating and large sliding glass doors that open up to the landscape. The materials are as organic in feel and tone as the wood that coats the building, with a mix of raw plaster walls and plywood for the bespoke kitchen units. Incorporated is a utility room, shower room and a master bedroom with a bathtub overlooking a wildflower meadow. The extension connects neatly to the main house, which has been simply but sensitively reordered to create four bedrooms upstairs, as well as a study and L-shaped sitting room downstairs. "It is a very flexible house," says Anna. "We tend to spend a lot of time in the new section in summer, around the kitchen, and then transfer to the sitting room, by the fire, in winter."

Meanwhile, the garden encircling the house has been transformed by Anna into a series of unregimented, interconnected spaces, including a courtyard, a cottage garden out the front and a vegetable plot up on a small plateau on the hillside. Earth was removed from around the building itself to give the new addition more room to breathe, and part of the grounds nearby were planted with a wildflower meadow. One of the largest jobs was the excavation and terracing of a substantial section of the hillside to create a dramatic natural amphitheatre, with level lawned areas for the children to play. "There are no boundaries to lock ourselves in, though," says Anna. "It's all open, like a cottage garden should be." ❖

A wall was removed downstairs to create a more open-plan sitting room (**above**), where the centrepiece fireplace is crowned with a photograph by Laura Wilson of a Hutterite boy in Montana – a wedding present for Anna and Xa. Alongside is a vintage Ercol coffee table and an Orkney chair, given to Xa by his parents. A claw-foot bath occupies one end of the master bedroom (**opposite page**), with a slot window providing views out to the wildflower meadow.

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