

Giving peace a chance

Art, music and a remote and beautiful location make Richard and Gina Farncombe's home and holiday cottage near Ullswater especially attractive. **Sue Allan** visits them and calls in also at Gina's studio nearby

Photography by Phil Rigby



It's a glorious morning in Matterdale as I head to Richard and Gina Farncombe's home at High Row, near Dockray, and when the hidden valley of Douthwaitehead and Aira Beck opens up in front of me I'm struck by how wonderful it must be to live in a place like this.

The barn conversion where the Farncombes live is next to their original cottage, which they now let as holiday accommodation. Richard takes care of the cottage bookings and works as a remedial masseur in Penrith's Angel Clinic. Gina is an artist and yoga teacher and their children have flown the nest, with son Jeremy in Kendal and daughter Emily in Leeds.

Richard starts by showing me Lucy's Wood, just across a field, telling me about the wood as we walk with his labrador Jen: "Our daughter Lucy got cancer when she was 15 and before she died said she wanted everyone to be able to enjoy a wild place, so



Gina in her studio bothy at Ulcat Row in Matterdale; below: a carved stone near the entrance to Crookwath Barn; opposite page: Crookwath Barn and Cottage are on the far left

when this 25 acres of fellside came up we bought it, planted 6,000 English broadleaved trees – and 16 years on we now have a wood.”

With the sun shining through the young trees, we walk a circuitous route via wooden benches, Buddhist prayer wheels, carved stones, a swing and a stone-built horseshoe seat with spectacular views over the Ullswater fells and Aira Beck with its waterfalls and pools below.

It’s a quiet and contemplative place, with the only sounds being birdsong and the rushing of the beck. And it’s a place the Farncombes love sharing with other people – walkers who just happen upon the wood and audiences for the Music in the Wood concerts they put on in Lucy’s Barn, an ancient structure Richard restored with friends and family in 1998. The four concerts they put on in 2012 raised more than £5,000 for Hospice at Home Carlisle and North Lakeland, and two weekends of folk, classical and jazz music

are being planned for next year.

The barn is always open so walkers can call by any time, and judging by the visitor book they often do and are entranced by this unique space with simple wooden benches and a labyrinth painted on the floor, in the centre of which a lamp burns for world peace.

“It’s a wonderful place to listen to music,” Richard says. “The acoustic is perfect.”

Just four years after restoring the barn, Crookwath Cottage came up for sale and the Farncombes bought it. So, as Richard says: “Everything changed because of Lucy.”

The main rooms of the Farncombe’s home, Crookwath Barn, are all on the first floor: a light and spacious kitchen with pale blue painted units and oak worktops and cupboards, an ingenious larder cupboard with slate shelves, insulated doors and a vent to the outside, a cream Aga and views over the valley from the large window. The unusual kitchen table was made by Richard





The bright kitchen, which has a table Richard uses to make bread, opens onto the dining room

and a friend from offcuts of oak glued together: “The end grains are brilliant for chopping as they’re so hard,” says Richard. “And I always make my bread on it too.”

The kitchen opens onto a book-lined dining area, overlooking the sitting room and with another table designed by Richard with a yin and yang inlay.

The double-height sitting room has lofty beams but is a cosy space with warm colours, floor to ceiling curtains, comfy sofas and a rustic stone fireplace with log burner.

Next to it, the sun room-cum-spare bedroom has a clever pull-out bed and breathtaking views to the Ullswater fells. The trompe-l’oeil bookcase on the wall apparently hides a secret passage, currently blocked off, to the next door cottage.

Above, there’s a little bedroom straight out

of a fairytale, with a bed tucked under the eaves and a shuttered window looking out over the living room. It’s a room any child would love and the resident teddies show it’s used by the Farncombe grandchildren when they visit.

The barn conversion grew organically, says Richard: “We extended the cottage to create a bedroom and shower room first. Then a couple of years later we did the next bit and so on. We didn’t use an architect but did have some great workmen, including the Dickinson brothers from Ullswater who did all the woodwork.”

Downstairs from the kitchen – past a tiny carved wooden door to a hole in the wall Gina had made especially for children to explore and hide their treasures in – off the flagged hallway, are the master bedroom and a shower room with custom-made curvy

wooden shelves and a circular shower lined with travertine marble tiles. The bedroom is another room with an amazing view – of Mell Fell across the valley and red squirrels, tempted on to the windowsill by a feeder full of nuts.

Despite being a holiday cottage, Crookwath Cottage next door feels like a well-loved family home with its books, games, open fires and big and beamed farmhouse kitchen with Aga, bookshelves and squishy sofa. The original range is now an open fire in the long sitting room, whose deep red walls show off Gina’s paintings of local landscapes and sheep. All three bedrooms sport original art made by family and friends as well as great views.

After I’ve seen round the Farncombe’s home and holiday cottage, Richard takes me to meet Gina, who is working at her studio two miles away at Ulcat Row. The quaint bothy she rents



The sun room, with views of Watermillock Common



The yin and yang table made by Richard



The master bedroom with custom-made shelves



Left, from top: Richard on a swing hung on a beam between the kitchen and dining room in his home; the tiny door for the Farncombes' grandchildren; Gina doing yoga in her studio

Above: the holiday cottage has a colourful interior, with many of Gina's paintings hanging on the walls

as her studio is lined with paintings as well as works in progress and boxes of cards featuring her work. She took part in the C-Art Open Studios in September when more than 200 people came to see her work.

“Of course we’re also on a footpath and a cycle route, and I did offer teas and coffees and lemon drizzle cake,” says Gina. “I made £330 for Eden Community Outdoors, the charity my son Jeremy works for.”

Much of Gina’s work on the walls appears to be watercolours and pastels, but she says she is primarily an oil painter: “This year, though, I broke out and decided to do watercolour as I love the fluidity of it. I was inspired by an artist called Ann Blockley, who just lets the paint do what it wants and only slightly controls it. It means you never quite know it will turn out – which I like.”

Sheep seem to be a popular subject. Gina smiles: “Yes. Two years ago when we were blocked in by snow I just painted the sheep in the snow all around me. I absolutely fell in love with Herdwicks. They just accept the life they’ve got, trotting out every morning to dig and get at the grass and eating reeds.

“This ram here is called Percy,” she says picking up a portrait of a Herdwick tup with curly horns. “Percy was a prize ram, although he always walked with a limp because his back leg was badly pecked at by crows just after he was born.”

I love the vibrant colours she puts into the Cumbrian landscape, although Gina says they sometimes frighten people: “I really see that vibrancy in the landscape and often paint a warm colour like red on the canvas first. It’s the complementary colour of green and creates a vitality and excitement.”

Many of Gina’s landscapes were painted in France including a woodland scene in Burgundy with dappled light among the leaves. It was created in an unusual way, says Gina: “It was a very hot day but beautifully cool in the wood, so I sat in this ride in the centre of the forest with much rustling in the undergrowth, which I think was wild boar. Eighty per cent of it was done upside down, painting marks which seem to give it energy and movement before turning it over to finish.”

Nature informs her work, whether it’s landscape or animals, and she likes sketching people’s faces too. Lots of her drawings are on her computer – puppies snuggled together, Richard driving, Richard reading the paper and grandchildren – so she can show people, believing that sketches are a glimpse into the mind of an artist.

Does she paint primarily for herself or with an eye on a potential market?

She laughs. “Oh, I’m too long in the tooth for that. I just do what I want to.”

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www.musicinthewood.co.uk
www.ginafarncombeartist.co.uk
www.northlakesyogagroup.org.uk

Lucy’s Wood and Barn



Richard and Gina with their black Lab Jen in Lucy’s Wood, planted in memory of their daughter



Above and below: Lucy’s Barn, with Gowbarrow in the background



‘Before Lucy died she said she wanted everyone to be able to enjoy a wild place, so when this 25 acres of fellside came up we bought it’