

Going with the flow . . .

MY SECOND HOME

Derek Frost

KAY MARLES visits a cottage that once housed a coastguard—but which is now an interior designer's perfect seaside retreat



Above: Derek, with his partner Jeremy Norman, surrounded by scavenged items he uses as objets d'art

OVER the water from the genteel English seaside resorts of the Isle of Wight, Derek Frost's weekend cottage sits low on the banks of the Solent in a wild, bracing and windy seascape. To reach the brick-built 1870s coastguards' houses, you drive past rough-coated donkeys, through the New Forest and into the middle of a wildlife preserve. It feels a million miles from London but is only an easy, two-hour drive away.

Once here, like most people in this heavily naval country, Derek and his partner, Jeremy Norman, owner of the Embargo Club on the King's Road, spend most good weekends sailing. Nine years ago, they watched the Falklands armada sailing past their sitting-room windows.

Disaster has struck only once when their 27-foot cabin cruiser sank rapidly in Lyme Bay, en route to Cornwall; a helicopter rescued them from a stormy sea. Today they own a solid 30-foot Swedish motor boat bought for £70,000 two years ago.

"It costs us half as much to moor our boat as to rent this cottage," says Derek of his expensive hobby. "But the pleasure is in being able to sail over to Cowes for lunch with friends, or making expeditions to Alderney and Guernsey."

In a setting that would be every bird-lover's nirvana, they have seen egrets, peregrine eagles, ospreys and the even rarer avocets. Derek Frost designs the interiors of boats, but is better known for his work on houses. He designed the interior of Ted Heath's celebrated Queen Anne house in Salisbury. "It is a little like living with God," he says. "From the bedroom window you look directly onto the cathedral spire." By contrast, a commission from Pink Floyd's Nick Mason got him doing what he describes as "mad things, like space for a 1930s Bugatti in the Georgian hall".

In his own environment, he is a natural scavenger. The cottage is full of dried roots, parts of bricks, an old wooden keyhole, a hairbrush with no bristles, rounded pebbles and textured shells which he has laid out like objets d'art on a burr maple-veneered table and a chest in Douglas fir.

Outside are a garden table and four chairs he designed in iroko hardwood. They have been inlaid with locally collected oyster shells and have naturally taken on the weathered grey-green of the nearby tumble-down wooden fence.

Come the winter and the cottage, one in a row of eight, of which the two largest at either end used to house the captain and coxswain when the coastguards manned a rowing boat, is battered by howling gales that come right off the sea. When the tide comes up and, on some occasions, floods the low-lying ground around, the cottages stand aloof on their piece of ground like Noah's ark. Remarkably, in the summer, the south-facing cottages and their front gardens are so well sheltered and warm that agapanthus grows and Muscat grapes, good enough to eat, flourish, while on the watery wastes in front, minute wild roses appear in the grass, and thrift and sea lavender in the sand.



Derek has not touched the cottage structurally; it remains two-down-and-three-up with original boarded doors and latches. He heats it with electric radiators which, though expensive, are the most efficient form of heating for the two days a week they are there.

An L configuration of bold plaid sofas means the sitting-room can seat eight comfortably, and eight can also fit around the narrow fruitwood dining table—thanks to two antique French school benches which are only six inches wide.

The washed pale green walls are covered in paintings, drawings and prints, but don't diminish the strong sense of space created by the muted shades on curtains, furniture and walls. Derek shops every Saturday in the nearby town, which he describes as a positive pleasure because of the friendliness of the shopkeepers (the butcher just happens to be called Mr Butcher and runs Butcher and Butcher). He employs the wife of the local gamekeeper once a month to act as cleaner, but otherwise finds running a second home on this scale minimal work.

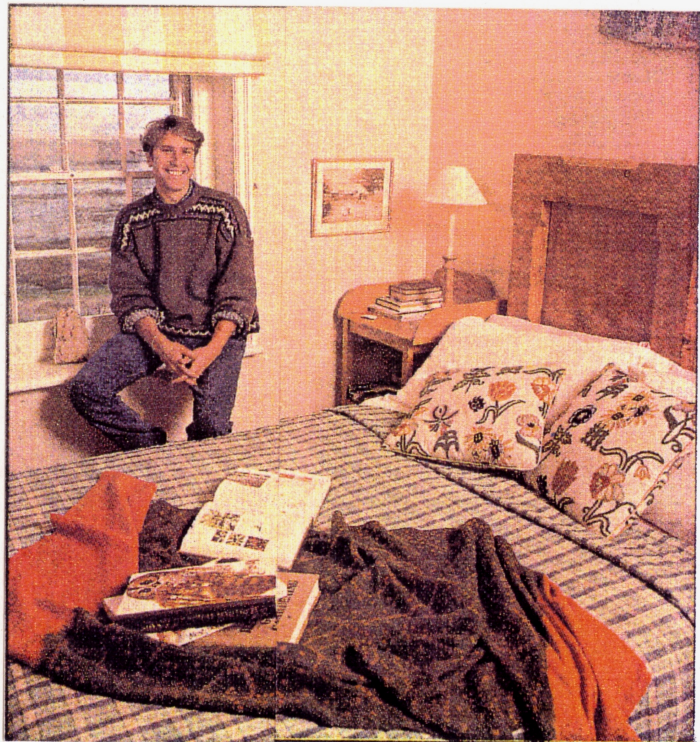
An annual event always marked with great gusto is the beginning of spring. It is heralded by the arrival of a huge number of blackheaded gulls which nest in front of the cottages and screech and cry non-stop for weeks. Then the inhabitants—weekenders all—phone each other excitedly with the news that means winter is over. In many ways, the cottagers form a friendly community.

"It is fantastic having a second home," says Derek. "It's like having a second life. We have completely different friends here. We have watched our neighbours' children growing up and they have become good friends."

All of them are tenants on a private estate, personal friends of the landowner, and Derek is on his second seven-year lease. "The advantage is that the estate looks after the property," he says. "The hurricane of 1987 was particularly bad, but things fly off the roof every year. The drawback is that it's not an asset. But this place is like a spirit base. Even if everything else collapsed, I would try to hang onto this."

When the coastguard cottages were decommissioned at the beginning of this century and agricultural workers moved in, the back gardens became renowned for their beauty. Queen Mary is said to have made a special journey from the Isle of Wight to see them. Today Derek grows escallonia, lupins and polygonum in his, while, over his shoulder, he can see boats riding up and down the river which flows into the sea.

Above: Derek Frost's windswept bolt hole is a rented terraced cottage on an estate by the banks of the Solent



Right: From the bedroom is a sea view of a bird-lover's heaven where even the rare avocet has been sighted

Pictures by
DENIS
JONES

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By: William Pounds 1986