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RAT RACE**
*How one couple
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THE BEST OF **BOTH WORLDS**

How Karen and Conrad Allen created the perfect balance between *Cornish outdoor living* and their London careers – while renovating three historic properties by the sea

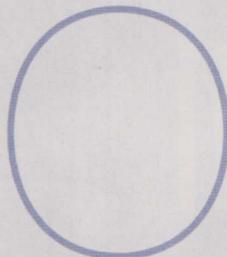
WORDS *Alex Reece* PHOTOGRAPHS *Jason Ingram*





OPPOSITE Conrad and Karen and their sons Noah and Oscar at Northcott Beach in Bude
THIS PAGE The side elevation of The Cob is clad in larch. The farmhouse can be seen to the rear

CLOCKWISE, FROM RIGHT Karen and Conrad in the larch-built extension to their farmhouse. The table and bench were made by artist friend, Marcus Coates; the couple bought the breakfast honey in Bude; they used locally sourced reclaimed oak for the dining table in The Cob, while the Eames chairs came from The Lollipop Shoppe (thelollipopshoppe.co.uk); B&Q units in The Cob's kitchen area were painted in Farrow & Ball Railings (farrow-ball.com)



n any week night, it's not uncommon for Karen and Conrad Allen, along with their two sons, Oscar and Noah, to pile into the car after

school and head down to the sea. Their family home, Venn Farm, is only a short drive from Bude's Northcott Beach, an unspoilt stretch of pebble and sand, where their boys, aged 13 and 10, like to go surfing. 'If it's nice weather, we'll have the stuff all ready, and go straight to the beach for a barbecue,' says Conrad. 'And we'll probably stay there until eight or nine o'clock, watching the sunset.'

The outdoor lifestyle was a big factor in the couple's decision to move to the Cornish coast – Conrad is half-Australian, and he and Karen loved the culture of after-school surf lessons and municipal barbecues that they experienced when they spent time down under.

Plus, after a near-20-year spell in the capital, pursuing busy careers in the fashion industry, Karen and Conrad were ready for a change. 'We definitely felt that the balance wasn't right for us,' says Karen, whose afternoons back then involved a stressful commute across London in order to pick up the boys from nursery on time. 'I can remember thinking that I was just working to pay for the childcare. And on top of that, the schools in our area weren't great. It just got to the point where it wasn't for us anymore.'

A BARNSTORMING IDEA

In their quest for a change, the couple began scouting in early 2007 for a home, plus a holiday let, in either the far west of Cornwall or South Devon. Then, in May, Conrad came across a 17th-century farmhouse with two outbuildings – one of which had outline planning permission for a holiday cottage – near Bude, on the Devon border. 'It was an area we didn't really know,' says Karen, 'but you can definitely get more for your money here. It feels a little bit untouched as well.'

Another big plus was the fact that the buildings weren't listed, which meant there would be fewer restrictions on redevelopment. Although both the barns were pretty much derelict, Karen and Conrad – with the help of Conrad's father, a retired architect – could see the potential in the site, which had seven acres of land.

In September, the family moved down in time for Oscar, who was six at the time, to begin the new school term. Karen admits to having a 'What have we done?' moment when the removal van 





COAS



IT WAS AN AREA WE DIDN'T REALLY KNOW. BUT YOU CAN DEFINITELY GET MORE FOR YOUR MONEY HERE. IT FEELS A LITTLE BIT UNTOUCHED AS WELL

CLOCKWISE, FROM FAR LEFT A vintage Ercol unit stands out against a tiled feature wall and polished cement floor in the farmhouse diner; a fabric Matthew Hilton sofa and textured rug soften the look; Conrad bought the disused Jøtul woodburner for The Cob's living room from a local farmer for £50, then had it shotblasted and re-sprayed; the green vinyl desk in the couple's home office was made by local carpenters Red Post Joinery (redpostjoinery.co.uk)



finally pulled away. 'The romanticism of the whole thing was blown away when we walked into the house; we noticed the damp much more,' she says. Then there were other aspects of rural living that took some getting used to. Forgetting to buy milk, for example, would involve a 15-minute round trip to rectify.

The transition was made easier by regular visits from friends and a welcoming local school. Also, the Allens were both delighted to continue their work in fashion on a freelance basis – retaining their links with the capital and the industry, while securing an additional source of income.

MADE OF BRICKS

The first building they chose to tackle, in early 2008, was the 100-year-old Red Barn, which had a roof and four brick walls but was otherwise void. Conrad's father re-drew the plans to create a reverse-level layout, with two bedrooms on the ground floor and an open-plan living space upstairs opening out on to a private deck and garden.

However, during the build, the family suffered a setback when a vehicle ploughed into the back of Karen's car at high speed on the A30, and she ended up in intensive care. Karen was lucky to survive. 'It was quite horrific, but we got through it and I'm absolutely fine now,' she says. 'It was not an easy period, in the midst of building work, but it didn't make us doubt the move at all.'

Happily, the Red Barn was completed by the autumn, and the family moved in

for a few months while the living space in the farmhouse was improved. After decorating the barn in their signature style of gallery-white walls, classic mid-century furniture and accents of bright colour, they began letting it out in spring 2009.

BACK TO EARTH

The next project – the larger Cob barn, converted in 2012 – was more ambitious, owing to the size and dilapidated state of the building, and the nature of its construction. For this, Karen and Conrad enlisted the expertise of award-winning architects Feilden Fowles, whose earlier work they had admired while visiting Conrad's sister in Wales.

The 200-year-old barn had been built first in stone and then extended in cob – a natural building material made from sand, clay, straw, water and earth (plus, in this case, horse hair). The Allens were keen to keep the chequered history of the building intact. To this end, the architects partially demolished walls that had been poorly repaired in concrete, retaining the



ABOVE In this guest bedroom in The Cob, a friend made the cushions from remnant fabric to echo the Designers Guild Yukata wallpaper (designersguild.com) BELOW An accent wall in The Cob's master bedroom is papered in Wisteria by Kuboaa (kuboaa.co.uk) and creates a bold foil to the otherwise white interior. To the left is a chest of drawers, bought second-hand and upcycled with a coat of paint and some custom-made metal handles. A framed cushion cover and fresh flowers add a personal touch



QUITTING THE RAT RACE: KAREN AND CONRAD'S TIPS

- **Before you quit**, consider whether you could still do your current job from home. If you're prepared to travel and can be flexible, it might work for you.
- **Always check** broadband speeds in your chosen area if you

will need the internet for work.

- **If you want to convert** a building into a holiday let, choose something with outline planning permission, as this will shorten the process and you'll have money coming in sooner.

- **Beware of upkeep.** It might be nice to have 40 acres, but what are you going to do with them? Land management can feel like sunken money.
- **If you have children**, or plan to in the future, don't forget to

check out the local schools. It's good to plan for the long term.

- **Try to integrate yourself** into the community through a local activity (for example, Karen has taken up mud running). It's a good way to meet new people.

