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SEASONAL SIMPLICITY

Vintage decorations, winter greenery and flickering candlelight create an atmospheric backdrop for a family celebration inside a charming rustic cottage in West Sussex

WORDS BY CAROLINE ATKINS | PHOTOGRAPHS BY CATHERINE GRATWICKE | STYLING BY CAROLINE REEVES

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On Christmas Eve, a Scandinavian-style candle garland, woven with ivy, myrtle and eucalyptus leaves, bathes the beautifully set table in a warm glow

as well as woollens. The property is less than ten minutes' drive from the sea, and backs onto a path that leads straight up to the South Downs, where they enjoy long walks on frosty mornings.

With its small bay window overlooking a quiet street, the front sitting room provides a grown-up retreat. The big family dining room behind – knocked through into the kitchen and extended into the garden – has a table that's large enough for Anna's design work during the week ("I've got a studio shed in the garden, but I use the kitchen a lot, too, particularly in winter") and becomes the centre of festivities at Christmas. Up on the first floor is a bedroom for the boys and a spare, and the loft is Anna and Jeff's – an incredibly versatile space that's the sunniest room in the house in summer but feels cosy in winter. Anna's mother is Danish, so she has a Scandinavian sense of light and colour, and the walls throughout are painted in contrasting shades of off-white, the highlights and accents chasing away any hint of December gloom.

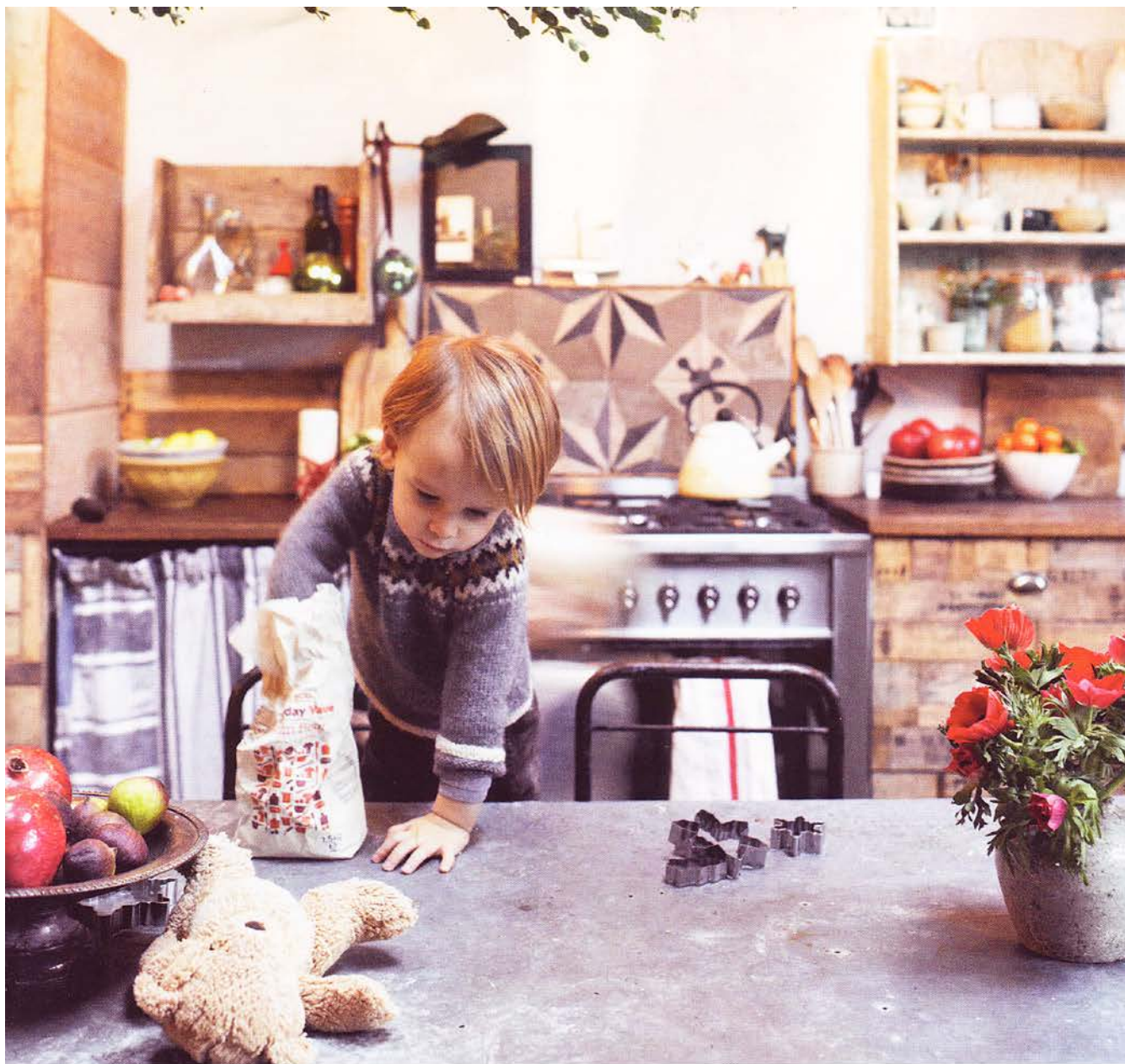
Anna's approach to interiors is one of comfortable rooms that can be used and lived in. Despite the elegant palette and antique cushion covers, there's a robustness that stands up well to the frenzy of games and present opening. "I'd hate to have to worry about fingermarks on furnishings," she says. "With two small boys, things will always need cleaning and patching." It's just that hers are particularly lovely patches – squares of vintage French linen that make the original upholstery even more beautiful. "I don't hide anything," Anna says, "except the TV – and the underfloor heating, which was our one concession to modern luxury! I like being able to see how things work." Hence the uncarpeted floorboards, the kitchen >

Tradition comes naturally to Anna Phillips at any time of year. She likes the feel of individual, handcrafted things that are made to last, whether it's the children's knitwear she designs in natural yarns and classic styles or the hand-built furniture she and her husband Jeff have created from old floorboards and packing crates. At Christmas, she loves digging out vintage baubles to add a burst of vibrant colour to the backdrop of winter greenery and simple furnishings. Sprays of mistletoe berries gleam among the ornaments on a mantelpiece, while garlands of festive foliage trail along bedheads and bookshelves, framing pictures and mirrors; and the little corner fireplaces that create interesting angles in each room are filled with baskets of holly and clusters of big pillar candles.

Their Victorian terrace cottage, in the West Sussex town of Steyning, has a cheerful intimacy that makes it the perfect place for Anna and Jeff to celebrate with their sons Miller, who's four, and Herbie, two, and as many friends and family members as they can squeeze in. "Jeff and I both work from home, so this is a rare chance to just 'be' and have family time together," says Anna, who designs interiors

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE
The kitchen cabinets were made by Jeff from packing-crate slats. The wooden bench on one side of the dining table came from i gigi in Hove, while the two antique metal French school chairs were found at Josephine Ryan Antiques in London





This is a winter house and really comes into its own at this time of year.
 “It’s a great place to enjoy the children’s excitement,” Anna says

cabinets built (by Jeff) from the slats of packing crates, and the squirrel-cage lightbulbs – mostly unshaded – on their old-fashioned twisted-cord fittings.

All of this gives the festivities a simple, handmade feel. Upstairs in the boys’ room – where Miller and Herbie will be awake and bursting with excitement from about 5 o’clock on Christmas morning – the twin beds are made from the same salvaged boards as the floor Anna and Jeff laid in their attic bedroom. The children will rush in to open stocking presents on their parents’ bed, which has a headboard constructed from a pair of old doors picked up from nearby Ardingly Antiques Fair. Nothing goes to waste in this

house, and everything finds a use: the kitchen work surfaces are cut from old school laboratory benchtops, and Jeff even made the oven splashback from leftover fireplace tiles. It takes longer to source furnishings this way, Anna admits, but there’s nothing to beat the satisfaction of finding exactly the right thing – the old office swivel chair that acts as a carver chair at the head of the kitchen table, the striped beach windbreak that creates a canopy over the spare bed, and the fireplace in the boys’ room that she found for £20 on ebay.

It’s a winter house, Anna says, and comes into its own at this time of year, when glowing candlelight brings rooms to life. Bunches of baubles hang on >

THIS PAGE Anna and Jeff’s two-year-old son Herbie loves to help with the festive baking. *opposite* The pared-back style and pale palette offset the colourful Christmas decorations, candles and flag-bedecked tree to beautiful effect





THIS PAGE Anna decorates shelves and cupboards with sprigs of mistletoe, eucalyptus and ivy. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The boys' beds were made from salvaged boards and designed by Anna; a pair of old doors forms an interesting headboard; one of Anna's Scandi-inspired designs; a striped windbreak creates a canopy over the spare bed



wall hooks, coat rails and even from kitchen shelves. Little white-painted wooden stars create frosted silhouettes against walls and windows. Strings of knitted Danish red-and-white flags are swagged across mantelpieces and around the tree ("It's a tradition in Denmark – everyone does it"), and a candle garland woven with ivy, myrtle and eucalyptus hangs above the kitchen table. They celebrate Christmas Eve in Danish style, with a feast of roast pork and caramel potatoes, traditional recipes handed down by Anna's mother,

and when they sit down to lunch late on Christmas afternoon – after a long walk on the Downs while the turkey roasts – the candlelight will reflect in antique pewter plates and her grandmother's silver cutlery.

"It's a great place to enjoy the children's excitement," Anna says, "and when the wrapping paper is finally cleared away, the house has a lovely sense of quiet, which is the perfect way to end the day."

To view Anna Phillips' knitwear designs, visit hambroandmiller.co.uk.