



ENGLISH COTTAGE INTERIORS

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Countless thousands of small houses and cottages, built to shelter the workers in the Great Wen, spread south of the River Thames. Legatees of this massive expansion must now find ways to counter the inevitable uniformity, like the owners of this Battersea cottage of c. 1800–30, who have resorted with considerable success to the device of subtle colours and forgiving contents. A sink, draining board, and cupboard made from salvaged pine soften an architecturally featureless kitchen. The rich brown 18th-century stick-back Windsor chairs, the slatted wooden sack carrier or hicking barrow above the sink and the diagonally scored wooden riddle (left of the window) all add texture and interest to the scene. Riddles, for spreading out the dough for oatcakes before baking, were commonly used in Scotland and the North of England.



Another corner of the kitchen in the Battersea cottage shows what can be done with an informal assortment of pottery and kitchen bygones. At the bottom of the wall display is a chopping or mincing knife. The heart-shaped object is a North-country peel used for moving oatcakes in and out of exceptionally hot beehive ovens. There is a late-19th-century rotary whisk, a truncheon-like stick, which could be a thible for stirring porridge, and a wooden-handled toaster fork. To its right is a rather primitive home-made skimmer – these were usually made from iron, brass or copper.

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The staircase in the same Battersea cottage is of the dog-leg variety, rising in a straight flight to the half-landing and doubling back to reach the first floor. It then repeats the operation but turns across the window by means of winders and a quarter-landing. The mahogany handrail and newel post are of a design much favoured in the first half of the 19th century. The staircase window is an eight-pane double-hung sash with thin glazing bars – a pattern which followed the multi-paned forms of the previous century.



Until quite recently, most people endured the stark, uniform and visually cheerless bathrooms which replaced those dignified and formidable affairs instituted in the Victorian and Edwardian eras. Mahogany-look bathrooms are now distinctly fashionable, but not always suited to cottage surroundings. This one has been fitted with pine dado panelling which has also been used to conceal the side of the modern bath. The taps and shower unit are brass. The laundry basket is encrusted with gesso flower decoration.



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The sitting room of the Battersea cottage has the straight walls, smooth plaster and formal proportions of a more sophisticated building. Its relatively lowly status is made apparent by the lack of cornice mouldings, although these might be omitted or simplified on the upper floors of a house. Somebody has had fun painting the fireplace surround and decorating the frieze with naive topographical scenes, reminiscent of those seen in the main panel of early-18th-century continued chimneypieces in grand buildings. These were frequently the work of itinerant artists from the Low Countries. The oak joined stools are in the 17th-century manner with stretchers placed very low to the floor. The piece in the right foreground is a cobbler's bench upon which the craftsman sat astride while working.

