

THE EDGE OF HEAVEN

Designer Emily Readett-Bayley has transformed a derelict wartime lookout post on the North Norfolk coast into an uplifting family home

PHOTOGRAPHS *GAP Interiors / David Giles* WORDS *Stephanie Smith*



When you take in the panoramic view from Emily Readett-Bayley's home – which stretches far out across the North Sea, and along the North Norfolk coast, encompassing Cromer's iconic pier – it's easy to see why it was deemed the perfect place to station a lookout post during the Second World War. 'I think it's probably one of the best

views along the east coast of England,' says campaigning designer Emily, who is lucky enough to live on this cliff-top site. 'I love living in such an elevated position,' she adds, 'waking up to the sea and the clouds in front and the tree tops behind.'

So when this one-off property, which had never been lived in before, came up ➡➡➡

ABOVE & RIGHT Emily outside her Norfolk home, a property with a wartime history; a small sun terrace (part of the two-storey extension) with some of Emily's own furniture is a great spot for breakfast or watching the sunset







*'I have NEVER KNOWN a PLACE where
you see SO MANY RAINBOWS'*

ABOVE Emily has given the kitchen character by displaying oriental bamboo bowls along the top of the units LEFT, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Emily's reclaimed teak post box with aluminium letters by POSH Graffiti; the slanted bronze windows wrap around the front of The Lookout giving a great sea view; the house also has a garden; Emily has added a splash of colour on the metal legs of the kitchen stools; the landing is bright and airy

for auction back in autumn 2011, Emily could see what a fantastic home it could be, despite its then-dilapidated state. 'I just fell in love with it, because it was so unusual. It needed work to turn it into a family home, but it's in such an incredible position with unrivalled views, that I was hooked.'

When the day of the auction came around, Emily took a friend along with her for support. 'He owns a garage and was used to bidding at car auctions, which are incredibly fast. So he bid for me, which was very useful,' she explains. 'The guide price was £125,000, and there were plenty of people interested until the bidding hit £230,000 and then it was just two of us left – me and one other person on the phone. People are generally not keen to go over the stamp duty threshold, so I bid

£252,000 and got the house. It was really nerve-racking but incredibly exciting.'

IMMACULATE CONVERSION

As there was quite a lot of work to be done, and Emily still had to sell her existing property – an old coach house in Lincolnshire – it would be another two years before she could move in properly. 'I wanted a property on the Norfolk coast as my sons (twins Raj and Mark) were settled at a Norfolk boarding school and I was really keen to downsize,' she says. 'I travel a lot and didn't really need a big house. Also I wanted to get rid of lots of clutter, but I wanted this property to be my home, rather than a holiday place, so it had to be right.'

Following its beginnings as a lookout post, the property had been used as a coastguard station, but had lain derelict for several years. 'It is built of solid concrete and flint, and the walls are more than a foot thick, so I had to do something initially about the insulation, as in the winter it would have been like





living in a concrete fridge,' Emily explains. A solution was found, and the whole building was wrapped in a layer of insulation which keeps it warm and protected. 'The windows are made of a rust-proof bronze alloy and were in great condition, so they didn't need to be replaced. I applied for planning permission, after consulting architect Nicholas Hills, for two different phases of work, and phase one has now been completed, which included an extension to provide a sun terrace at the side, plus a second bathroom and utility area.'

A GLOBAL CONCERN

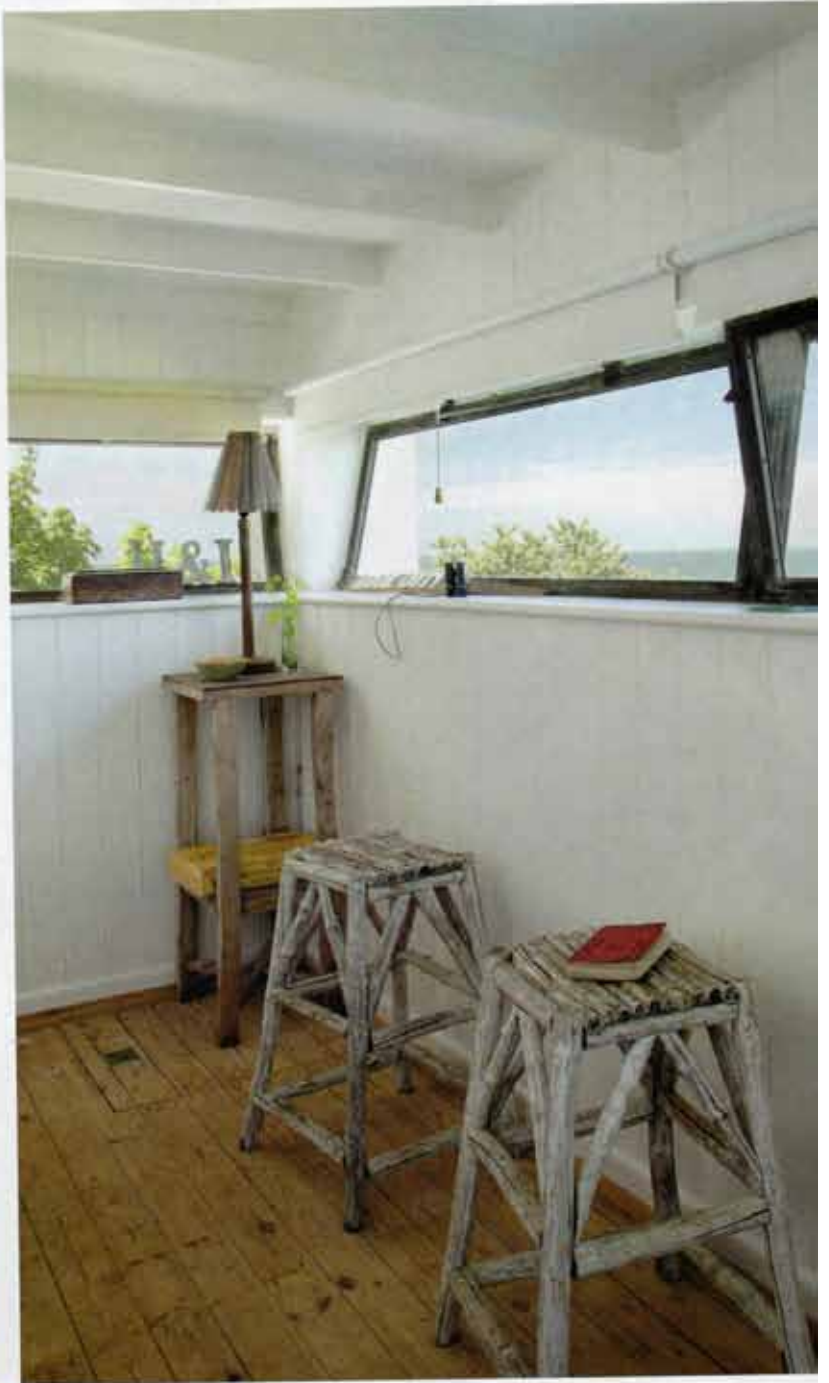
With an edited-down collection of her favourite possessions around the house, Emily loves the tranquillity of the property's situation, and as her work involves frequent travel to the Far East, she is always happy to see its white walls again. Emily started her own design company more than 25 years ago, working directly with craft co-operatives in Indonesia, and is

credited with being one of the first people to combine style with an ethical sourcing policy.

Launching the trend for interior wall letters with her brand POSH Graffiti, she added her POSH Salvage furniture range to utilise salvaged materials such as reclaimed teak, wasted coffee wood and old vines. But it is her new charity project, Earth's Baskets, a small but critical part of a global rainforest regeneration initiative in Indonesian Borneo, that has really got her fired up. Emily has set up wicker workshops in the jungle, working with the indigenous Dayak people who weave baskets and make furniture and matting from wild rattan, providing an alternative form of employment to illegal logging and palm oil cultivation. Emily says: 'I am really passionate about this and I would urge people to go onto my website, emilyreadettbayley.com, and find out more about it.'

Phase two of Emily's planning permission for her Norfolk home would allow for an ➡➡➡

ABOVE The seating in the living area can double up as extra beds for guests, and the room is simply boarded and painted in Peace White, from Francesca's Paints RIGHT, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Sampling local seafood is a passion of Emily's and her best friend, artist Sarah Vaughan, painted the lobster pictures; one of Emily's reclaimed teak garden sets sits among a sea of edible Alexanders; it's easy to see how The Lookout got its name; the unusual vase is an old shell cartridge that Emily found in a junk shop



EMILY'S IDEAL CROMER WEEKEND

The Pavilion Theatre Bar on Cromer Pier is perfect for coffee (01263 512281, cromerpier.co.uk). It has amazing views and great outdoor seating where you can even find a sunny sheltered spot in winter. And you are sitting on a piece of history.

The Norfolk Food & Drink Co on Tucker Street (01263 513677) has a fantastic selection of craft

beer and gin, plus food from local suppliers.

Sheringham Park (01263 820550, nationaltrust.org.uk) has beautiful woodland and unspoilt ancient pastures where you can find a huge variety of fungi in autumn.

I learned to sail at Morston (Blakeney Point) and it is still one of the best places to do so, with a nice variety of sailing

conditions. My boys also sail here with Norfolk Etc (01263 740704, norfolketc.co.uk).

Ben and Patricia at the Glide Surf School on the prom in Cromer run a very cool set-up (07966 392227/01263 805005, glidesurfschool.co.uk). Cromer is a great place to learn to surf when the waves come in, or try stand-up paddleboarding when it's calm.





ABOVE The Lookout occupies a site just above the pretty coastal town of Cromer **LEFT**, **TOP** The extra-short bath, which fits in neatly, was bartered for one of Emily's rattan log baskets with a neighbour, and she has opted for a simple, industrial look **LEFT** As her boys spend most of their time outdoors, Emily has created a simple practical space with single beds at either end of their room

extension linked by a glass box to be built at the back of the house away from the sea, but it's not something she's in a particular hurry to do. 'It will probably happen but not for a few years yet,' she says. 'I think this is such a special property and while I'm travelling for work I often let it out on Airbnb, not so much for the money, but to be able to share it. I get such lovely comments back from people who appreciate it as much as I do.'

INSPIRED BY NATURE

The rewards of living here are many, including being close to nature. 'Most of the year the cloud formations change constantly and you can watch rain clouds roll in from the sea and move across the vista past the windows,' explains Emily. 'I have never known a place where you see so many rainbows.'

In her spare time, she enjoys walking along the cliffs to Overstrand every morning, while keeping an eye out for the resident muntjac deer, and the kestrel that is often seen

hovering and diving above the garden. Emily's two teenage sons also like to go surfing, sailing, kayaking and stand-up paddleboarding on the nearby coast with friends. But even if they all stay at home, there is plenty of action to be seen on the water, such as the famous Cromer lifeboat being launched every Sunday and the surfers in their wetsuits catching the breaks in all weathers.

'One of my guests described it like "living on the edge the world" and it does feel a bit like that, the sense of freedom it evokes,' Emily says of the great coastal location. 'Yet, in under 10 minutes, I can walk into a busy town like Cromer, connected to Norwich by trains and buses.' All in all, it's an ideal balance between peace and activity, as Emily confirms: 'It is hard to describe how much I love living here.'

● For more on Emily's work, see emilyreadettbayley.com/operation-planet-basket-strong-wicker-baskets/. The Lookout is available to let through airbnb.co.uk/rooms/1112045.