



ABOVE Cotswold stone and an English country garden define this simple, rural worker's cottage.

BELOW Interior designer Max Rollitt's 18th-century farmhouse features outer walls in a patchwork of Caen stone, Purbeck stone and local flint.



THE Country HOME

Concluding our series on familiar British housing styles, we explore the many different types of rural homes, from simple cottages to rambling farmhouses, each with their own unique characteristics

FEATURE EMMA J PAGE

The classic English country home knows few bounds when it comes to architectural styles. This is in large part because of a rich history of design that dates back centuries, seen in a variety of contrasting buildings, from wattle-and-daub Tudor cottages and stone Georgian homes to brick-and-flint dwellings and distinctive Kentish oast houses. Typically, what unites each is a harmony with the landscape and a reliance on local, often natural, materials. Unlike townhouses, which are more likely to follow a specific template due to space

constraints, country homes tend to be designed with a looser hand. "They are more organic in footprint as they respond to their immediate landscape," says architect Melissa White. "Despite recognisable styles, such as barns, cottages or farmhouses, there's little repetition and many have an appealing sense of honesty, with the structure of the building exposed or the simplicity of form very evident."

Many country homes will typically have been through rounds of additions and reconfiguration. "Every iteration reflects the status of the incumbent and the fashion of the time," reflects interior designer Max Rollitt. "In that sense, the classic English country house is a story of evolution, regardless of when it was built."

PAST PERFECT

Despite a frequent lack of uniformity, in terms of footprint and configuration, country homes – whether old or new – often carry nostalgic appeal. "They are very tethered to the landscape, an idea that has been reinforced through the ages via classic English paintings, such as those by Turner, and in literature too, including the novels of Thomas Hardy," says White. "They also relate architecturally to our idea of the English garden: organic, wild, colourful, earthy, untamed. Many features such as mouldings, beams, and timber and flagstone floors, are details that lend warmth and character. Salvaging, reusing or repurposing them are all ways of honouring the history of the building while shepherding it into its next chapter."

Country homes of course vary greatly in scale. "Many larger homes were intended for wealthy families who wanted an escape from the noise and heat of ▶



Soft hues, antique finds, a pine table and a jute rug complement original beams and wood flooring in this scheme designed by Laura Stephens.

the city, so the focus is on generous reception rooms full of light, leading off a grand hall," says Kitesgrove's Katie Lion. "On the other hand, traditional farmhouses were conceived as hard-working buildings with a warm kitchen and focus on functionality rather than ornamentation. Texture and imperfections from natural materials give all these buildings an endearing sense of comfort and familiarity."

Every rural home has its own story, and a good design process starts by listening to the house. "First and foremost, it is the architectural context that informs the schemes," says interior designer Sarah Peake. "Many have been extended over the years and will have a very old part and a more modern section. I like to work with those elements and enjoy the combination of contemporary schemes in the newer parts and a cosy, more traditional aesthetic in older areas."

LAYER BY LAYER

The key to reworking or updating a country house is to go back to basics. Begin by considering how this type of property will be used and by whom. "Striking the right balance between creating a home that functions for its current custodians and respecting its heritage is essential," says Fentiman Design's Ciara Ephson. "Approach a project with creativity and an open mind, asking what elements can be preserved and how they can be highlighted."

Depending on a property's age and condition, a renovation will likely take in an assessment of its structure and integrity, including electrics and plumbing. "Repairing the roof, addressing rotten timbers, adding insulation and replacing windows are all fundamental, even if the rewards are not visible," says interior designer Emily Rennie. "But these are the building blocks towards creating a comfortable home for the future. Depending on the status of the property, you may also need planning consent, and there will be added restrictions if the house is listed."

Bear in mind that reconfiguring a rural home to suit modern living sometimes involves considered refinement rather than a full restructure. "Many feature servants' corridors at the rear, whose spaces can be rationalised to create practical utility and boot rooms," says VSP Interiors' Henriette von Stockhausen. "Don't hold back from reconfiguring, even if that means moving the kitchen from rear to front for better light." ▶

TOP RIGHT The simple shape of Willow & Hall's Gastard sofa in blends with the lofty proportions of this Georgian home.

RIGHT An antique chair and a rustic dining table and bench create a pastoral feel in this understated scheme by Kitesgrove.



RIGHT In this extension, deVOL's Haberdasher's kitchen, finished in an earthy green, references the rural setting beyond, while deep veined marble adds a contemporary twist. **BELOW** Oak-topped alcove joinery, natural materials and a renovated fireplace add warmth and elegance to this scheme, created by Alice Leigh Design. **BELOW RIGHT** A built-in dresser featuring a modified antique sliding door is finished in a punchy blue-green for a modern take on country style in this kitchen designed by Sarah Peake.



Though the temptation may be to open up rooms, country homes often better suit a balance between open-plan living and more intimate spaces. “I believe there’s a place for low ceilings and small rooms,” White says. “Areas of retreat, compact spaces to contemplate, work and read, are beneficial. These don’t need to take up a big footprint when renovating. Consider leaving a small front room alone and not absorbing it into the main open-plan living. Or make space for a specially designed window seat with a curated view. I like to enhance these areas with elements of the existing building, designing in response to how the timber rafters work or repurposing an old piece of wood for the top of a window bench.”

RIGHT A mid-century Swedish rug from Robert Stephenson sets the tone in this softly modern country scheme by Alice Leigh Design. **BELOW** Rattan wall plates, an overscaled olive pot from Original House and generous oak double doors create the look of a Mediterranean finca in this entrance hall by Alice Leigh Design.



ORGANIC APPROACH

Most country houses incorporate several layers of architectural work, resulting in a rich materiality, from exposed brickwork and beams to limewashed walls. These elements tend to have developed a patina over time and bring their warmth and tactility. “Natural materials and organic forms are very much in keeping with our current desire for slow living or wabi-sabi, which embraces the beauty of imperfection,” says White.

Finishes that complement these architectural features can be both appealing and practical. Warm touches such as wool rugs and thick curtains can soften existing hard-wearing flagstone floors for example. “Soft furnishings such as richly coloured, thick rugs, patterned cushions and plush sofas help to bring tactility,” says Lion. “These touches complement original elements seen in exposed beams, doors and window frames, panelling and staircases.”

Louise Wicksteed at Sims Hilditch suggests making the most of timber. “Boards look great on the floor, ceiling and even the walls of a country home,” she says. “A 50/50 wash of a neutral paint and water on a timber ceiling looks wonderful in a country interior, giving the wood a slightly aged feel that matures over time. The rustic qualities of sisal flooring also work well. A tight weave is best for a household with pets, meaning it will age slowly and charmingly with wear.”

Organic or natural materials, such as Bauwerk’s limewash and Graphenstone’s eco-friendly paint, are a good, sustainable option and so too is incorporating wool upholstery and toxin-free mattresses. “Country houses make an easy backdrop to antique and repurposed pieces, which also has a positive impact on our carbon footprint,” says Rennie. ▶



RIGHT Traditional panelling and built-in joinery make the most of the proportions of this rural dining room by K&H Design.

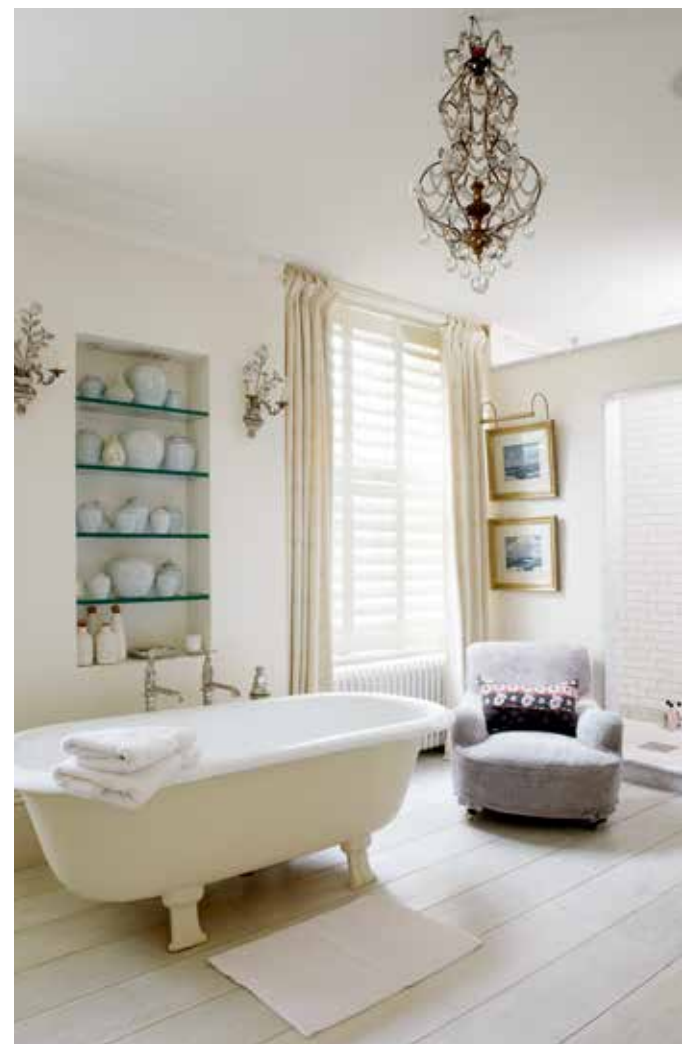
FAR RIGHT An antique bureau and a button back armchair strike an elegant note in this renovation by Susie Atkinson.



ABOVE Natural flooring and a sturdy wooden bed complement the original beams in this scheme by Max Rollitt.

LEFT An original staircase has been given a gently contemporary treatment by designer Susie Atkinson with a blue-and-white striped runner.

RIGHT Reworking the layout means that a well-proportioned bedroom can be turned over to a new bathroom. In this scheme by Susie Atkinson, a freestanding tub fits gracefully between two windows.



Ciara Ephson of Fentiman Design created a deep, padded window seat at one end of a Cotswolds kitchen so that the view could be enjoyed over morning coffee.



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LEFT A home office by Alice Leigh Design is given an informal twist with wallpaper by Robert Kime, a Murano glass pendant and a Gubi Beetle chair paired with an antique desk. **RIGHT** Botanical prints paired with autumnal tones reference the natural world in this scheme by Kitesgrove. **BELOW LEFT** A window seat allows for the enjoyment of garden views as well as copious practical storage in this hard-working space by Alice Leigh Design. **BELOW RIGHT** In a renovation by Sims Hilditch, off-whites and gentle neutrals combine to create a cosy reading corner.



OLD HOUSE, NEW STYLE

Many country houses can carry off deeply contemporary additions, such as minimalist, clean-lined extensions, because a well-considered architectural juxtaposition can be pleasing to the eye. “I enjoy the way that old and new dovetail,” says White. “An old building is like a palimpsest, a story that needs to be uncovered before the next chapter can be added. It can be interesting to repurpose elements such as roof beams and mouldings, either using them elsewhere in a fresh context or bringing them back to their original form.”

When it comes to a decorative approach, a combination of old and new can breathe fresh life into a rural home. “Mixing styles is key to creating a contemporary country interior that is both beautiful and functional,” says Wicksteed. “For example, the sharp lines of a metal coffee table paired with soft woollen or linen fabrics create a modern aesthetic while remaining comfortable and inviting. Likewise, a marble worktop on a kitchen

island looks very smart in a country-style kitchen painted in a natural shade.”

Buying from makers to gather heirloom pieces of the future is a good way of nodding to the past while embracing the present. “I look to modern craftspeople to punctuate existing furniture,” says interior designer Alice Leigh. “Makers such as Galvin Brothers and Alfred Newall produce pieces that work well next to vintage brown furniture. Blending modern art with traditional always works well too. For me, layers, texture, colour, materials and the mix of modern and old really make a country house come alive: above all, it’s about a sense of comfort.” ■

TOP RIGHT The classic lines of the Hampton hand-cast bed by the Cornish Bed Company complement original wooden beams and a door surround in a traditional cottage.

ABOVE RIGHT In this guest bedroom by Fentiman Design, Common Room’s delicate floral wallpaper creates a dynamic backdrop for an antique bureau and prints.

