

Simply stylish

Heather Dixon meets the couple who have transformed a semi derelict barn in Saddleworth into a spectacular three storey home
Photographs: John Cocks

MOST people wouldn't have given it a second glance. To say it was 'ripe for conversion' would have been overly optimistic. Semi-derelict was a more accurate way of describing the old barn shell which teetered against the winds blowing across Saddleworth towards Scouthead.

But Lorraine Howell isn't like most people. The moment she set eyes on the beautiful stonework and well balanced proportions of the crumbling building she knew it was the home she and her husband, Nick, had been searching for.

'We had been househunting for a while but couldn't find anything we liked, then one day we happened to drive past this half demolished barn which was for sale,' said Lorraine. 'I shouted to Nick to stop the car and we had a good look round. It was a bomb site, but we could both see the potential to create a home which we would be happy with, which would have plenty of light and space.'

The owner was builder Vincent Buckley, who lived next door, and despite fierce competition from other

prospective buyers, he accepted the Howells' offer of less than £60,000 - which included design drawings and selected kitchen and bathroom fittings. He also agreed to transform the building into the home of their dreams.

'Effectively we were buying a shell,' said Lorraine. 'But I was so excited. It was such a wonderful space to work with and I couldn't wait to put our own stamp on it.'

Initial architects drawings were rejected as 'awful' by the Howells, who were determined to maximise the height and natural light flooding into the building.

'The drawings were done by someone who was trying to put a house into a barn,' said Lorraine. 'They used no imagination whatsoever.'

So they turned to architect John Barnes who was renowned for 'thinking out of the box.'

'He was prepared to be more extreme than we were,' said Lorraine.

'He had spent a lot of time in Canada where light and space play a crucial role in house designs, so he was thinking along the same lines.'



Top: Exterior views

Above: Kitchen

Right: Table for two



'We loved the drawings he came back with and, between us, we came up with a final design which suited our ideas and lifestyle.'

This included elevated ceilings, different floor levels, a galleried landing and a third floor storage area to avoid clutter in the main living rooms. But the Howells had to wait nine months for the barn to be transformed from an empty shell into a three storey, three bedroomed home.

'The build went without a hitch, except for a slight problem with the stairs which had been measured wrongly and had to be done again,' said Lorraine.

Then it was time to turn the

interior into a showcase for Lorraine's design talents. The couple wanted their kitchen to be classically timeless, so they splashed out on a Poggenpol.

'We spent a lot of time window shopping in London just to find out what was available and to get some ideas,' said Lorraine. 'We wanted the best we could afford. When you've invested in such a fabulous space you don't then want to fill it with things which are second best.'

Amtico flooring and granite tops offset the white, simple lines of the units, then Lorraine and Nick added a simple kitchen table and a couple of striking posters, collected

Above: Playing to the gallery

Above right: Window seat

Top right: Relaxing in the lounge

Right: Main lounge

'Every single room is light and airy, even on a grey, rainy day'

through Nick's profession as a jeweller, to give the room a warm, personal touch.

The dining room is one of the Howells' favourites with its vast glass 'barn door' windows and elevated ceiling which accentuates the sensation of light and space, but it's in the sitting room where

Lorraine's love of simplicity is most apparent.

The walls are painted white to create a calm, cool atmosphere, complemented by two Peter Guild sofas which have been given a new lease of life with faux suede covers and contemporary new sets of feet.

'I don't like to throw things away



if there's plenty of life in them,' said Lorraine. 'But if it looks old fashioned you need to find ways of bringing it up to date.'

The Italian white lacquered, solid wood sideboard is Lorraine's pride and joy, so she teamed it with two Laura Ashley chairs, loose covered in linen, and a



It's in the sitting room where Lorraine's love of simplicity is most apparent

Conran glass-topped ironwork table from the Fulham Road.

'I love the cool, clean look of white and cream,' said Lorraine. 'But it can look very stark and cold, so I softened it with plants and pictures specifically painted with the room in mind.'

Lorraine also made her own three-legged coffee table, hand finished in subtle burnished gold, which is available through her own company, Renascent Design (01457 878877). The simple theme continues in the bedrooms, where Lorraine's hand made silk bedcover and window treatments in the master room, and the

damask curtains in the spare room, complement the linen fold carving of the oak bedheads and antique wardrobe.

White features again in the bathroom, where Italian Carrera marble and cherry wood sit comfortably side by side to create the uncluttered look the Howells were determined to achieve. 'It's a wonderful place to live,' said Lorraine. 'Every single room is light and airy, even on a grey, rainy day, which is exactly what we set out to achieve. We don't like cramped spaces and small rooms. We love the openness of elevated ceilings and large

windows, which you can so easily achieve in a barn.'

However, after all their hard work the Howells are now thinking of moving again. Their 10-year-old son, Alexander, is growing fast and the couple would like to have a separate study.

'Believe it or not, we could do with more space,' said Lorraine. 'I think you always grow into the space you have, and we would love to renovate or build again. So we're keeping our eyes open just in case something jumps out at us. Who knows, we might even spot another dilapidated old barn just ripe for conversion...'

*Top left: Bedroom style
Above left: Bathroom
Above: Lorraine Howell*