

SOMERSET LIFE

Four-Second Commute

With a background as creatives in the Disney business it's perhaps no surprise that Jason and Annie Robinson have a flair for interior design.

So when they decided to get into the B&B business, it was with a view to creating something very out of the ordinary. The result is Swain House in Watchet, Somerset, a gem of a place to stay in a perfect jewel of a town.

Watchet's harbour is said to have inspired the opening lines of *The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose bronze statue now overlooks the water. Otherwise, it's pretty unknown. The Robinsons stumbled on this charming backwater while booking a nearby venue for their wedding. They were looking for B&Bs where their guests could stay.

"We loved the town," says Jason. "It's got a marina, a pretty harbour and the heritage West Somerset steam railway running down to the port. We thought it would make a beautiful escape from our London lives and when we saw there was a house on the market, we bought it and used it as a holiday home for a year.

"One week when we came down we found that the property next door, an unused shop, was for sale and I made a flippant remark about how we could buy it and do bed and breakfast.

"I had left my job as head of design for one of the Disney channels and was turning 40. It seems my mid-life crisis manifested itself by wanting a boutique B&B rather than a Porsche."

The two properties were probably one house originally, but had been separated

in the Victorian period, with a floor added above and an alley in between them. The upper floors still bridge above the passageway. Fortunately for the Robinsons the building was not listed, which Jason finds odd as most other properties in Watchet are at least Grade II.

"The shop was on the market at £125,000. It was a wreck inside and not really suited to a developer. However, as soon as we made an offer other buyers came out of the woodwork and so it went to sealed bids. We put in a bid for £137,000 which was what we reckoned we could afford, and it was accepted," says Jason.

That only left the small matter of change of use from a class A property to one which would be Class C. It's becoming easier to do this but even so there's reluctance in many places to lose shops because you don't get them back.

Undaunted, Jason went ahead with the application, dashing down from London for planning meetings to argue the case.

"They were not happy about losing a shop but it had been closed for years and I talked them round."

By now Annie was expecting a child so the move to Somerset was put on hold until Archie, their son, was three months old.

Jason was told the renovation work would take up to 16 weeks but, inevitably, it took longer. The entire shop had to be gutted, and new floors, electrics and plumbing installed.

Luckily no dry rot was found when the joists were revealed but an old well was discovered in what is now the B&B's

kitchen and Jason decided to have it capped.

"One day I hope that the next person who renovates the place will find the well, which is why I wanted it capped rather than filled in. I believe that it used to be outside the property but when it was rebuilt in Victorian times it somehow came to be inside. I don't think it was used after that."

In addition to all the refitting, there were, of course, building regulations to comply with as well as soundproofing to be installed in order that the Robinsons' house would not be disturbed by the guests next door. Rubber matting made from recycled car tyres and soundproofing boards were used and Jason says that the property is so quiet now that it's hard to tell if anyone is indoors.

The Robinsons employed a private building regulations contractor instead of the council employee, and Jason believes that this was a more efficient solution, which cost only a few hundred pounds extra.

Throughout the process, Jason had been researching other B&Bs and he visited two which were particularly notable: The Ashton, in Lancaster, and The Reading Rooms, in Margate. Both are luxury guest houses with a small number of rooms.

The owners were happy to talk through the problems and experience of running such an establishment. It emerged that it was not worth doing your own laundry: one of the owners, Louise, from The Reading Rooms, said she remembered being up until 3am ironing sheets and in tears because she knew she would have to rise by 7am to do breakfast.

Jason says: "When it came to what the rooms would look like we made three Look Books using all sorts of ideas we found in magazines and other places. We researched all the materials online to get costings and did extensive research on the colour scheme.

"We wanted to repaint the outside of both houses so they matched, and we had to get permission for that and it decided the colour of the interiors.

"We went for a monochrome scheme with Farrow and Ball's Downpipe as one of the main colours. We also bought the murals, which are based on Old Master paintings, from a company called Surface View which is licensed by the National Gallery in London to reproduce some of their works.

Swain House was finally ready to receive its first visitors in August 2012. The Robinsons charge £125 per night for each of the four rooms, all with en suite designer bathrooms.

By luck one of the first bookings was travel journalist Sally Shalham who put Watchet, and its new B&B House, on the map, describing it as "industrial luxe", with just a quibble about the size of the guest sitting room. That is something that Jason would like to address in the future.

"I would absolutely love to do another one, perhaps something that would be classified as a hotel, but my first priority is to make a success of this venture," he says.

Four-second COMMUTE

To misquote Samuel Johnson, Annie and Jason Robinson weren't tired of life, but they were tired of London – and last year they fulfilled their dream of moving to Somerset full time



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It was the weekend retreat that has become a way of life for the Robinsons: a small house in the seaside town of Watchet, where the couple finally escaped their hectic North London life and frantic television careers to open up a boutique B&B with their baby son Archie. The couple discovered the up and coming town of Watchet while scoping out guest accommodation for their wedding. They found the small house on Swain Street and six weeks later, it was theirs. The couple spend many happy weekends at the house, all the time planning what Annie calls their 'great escape'.

And when the permanently closed sign of the dilapidated junk shop across the cobblestones turned into a for sale sign, and bought it, spending around £250,000 turning it into Swain House, a boutique B&B already attracting the fashionable and discerning from London looking for a place to stay while they explore the surrounding area.

Creating the B&B was a way for them to move to Somerset permanently. "People have been really supportive and welcoming," says Annie. "We wanted to live here and contribute to Watchet. "We never saw it open, it was empty when we moved here," says Annie. "There's a really community here, people say good morning to you. We both grew up in a rural setting and we wanted that nursery from 7am – 7pm every day, which is what a lot of our friends in London do. And we don't have to."

"I used to do a four-hour commute – now it's about four seconds across a cobbled path in a beautiful seaside town." The couple spent two years working out how to do it - and admit the planning was a great adventure in itself. The three-story 18th century building now houses four mini-suites, featuring a

"I used to do a four hour commute everyday - now it's a few seconds across a cobblestone in a seaside town"

bedroom, dressing area and bathroom. Each room is dominated by a king size bed and a feature wall of blown up detail from old paintings, make the most of the building's era and add a real touch of glamour to the rooms.

Thought and love has gone into every square inch of the place, really earning nooks in the walk-in shower for toiletries – and even placing the shower controls outside the stall so it can be switched on and the temperature moderated before stepping in, all go to make this a luxurious stay.

Downstairs a spacious sitting area features a single large table made from reclaimed floorboards where B&B guests gather to enjoy locally sourced breakfasts cooked by Jason, who can often be found in the professional kitchen across the hall, creating home-baked banana cakes