

# COUNTRY LIFE

EVERY WEEK

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## Interiors special

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Ben Pentreath on the essence of Englishness  
Squidge, squodge, squelch: the marvels of mud

## Interiors

# Made in the Marches

Herefordshire and Shropshire share a rich tradition of traditional crafts, now bolstered by a new generation of artisanal businesses, finds Arabella Youens

Photographs by Simon Brown

**W**HEN it comes to ranking English counties by their rural credentials, Herefordshire and Shropshire score highly; in terms of population density, the latter has only one person per hectare, whereas London has 68. Despite being the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, these hazy counties are criss-crossed by hills, forests, farms and rivers and both are barely touched by the motorway network. Although agriculture, forestry and fishing make up the lion's share of businesses, Herefordshire and Shropshire benefit from relative proximity to the skills hubs of Birmingham and towns across the West Midlands.

where several members of the team both past and present have studied—we offer work experience and yearly projects to students there.' The college operates one of the only BA courses in Artist Blacksmithing in the country and Hereford is also home to the New Model Institute for Technology and Engineering, where students can undertake courses in timber technology.

The logistical challenges of running a business in such an inaccessible location requires perseverance: Tim Crump, the founder of Oakwrights, based just outside Hereford, sets his alarm clock at 3.55am every Monday (01432 353353; [www.oakwrights.co.uk](http://www.oakwrights.co.uk)) in order to meet his team of employees at 4.30am before they set off around the country erecting

oak-frame buildings anywhere from Yorkshire to Devon. 'In terms of financial drivers, basing a business in Herefordshire has nothing to do with retail,' says Edward Bulmer, who established his interior-design and natural-paint business on a farm near where he grew up (01544 388535; [www.edwardbulmerpaint.co.uk](http://www.edwardbulmerpaint.co.uk)). To make the business work, he was an early adopter of selling paint online. 'Although we border Gloucestershire, we are emphatically not Gloucestershire. You can open a spa and sell expensive botanical products there; you can't do that here.'

Lighting designers Emma and Hector Finch followed another well-trodden path from London to their base near Leominster: the search for less expensive premises from →

‘We followed in the steps of a long line of artists and print-makers’

One of the first to see the possibilities of locating an artisanal business in the Marches was the late, legendary rug designer Roger Oates (020-3924 0171; [www.rogeroates.com](http://www.rogeroates.com)). Having studied woven textiles in Farnham, Surrey, in the early 1970s, he took a post-graduate diploma in industrial carpet design at Kidderminster next-door Worcestershire, a town famous for its quality woven carpets. On graduating, Oates set up his eponymous studio, joining forces with his wife, Fay.

In 1993, success allowed them to move into a set of barns on the Eastnor Castle estate near Ledbury in Herefordshire. 'This idyllic setting, with views over orchards and fields towards the Malvern Hills, is still home to the design and finishing studios today,' explains Andy Guard, the firm's creative director. Due to demand from interior designers and customers largely based in the South-East, the company opened a shop in London. 'We remain a Herefordshire business,' says Mr Guard. 'Roger often spoke of finding inspiration from the Nature that surrounded him in the gardens and countryside of Eastnor. We're also close to Hereford College of Art,



Above: Evie Crawshaw at Roger Oates's base on Herefordshire's Eastnor Castle estate. Right: Rural Herefordshire is the setting for Tim Crump and Charlie Mills's Oakwrights



## Interiors



Basing their lighting business in Herefordshire gives Hector and Emma Finch space to expand and access to a pool of skilled workers

which to work (020-7731 8886; [www.hectorfinch.com](http://www.hectorfinch.com)). When he started the company in the mid 1980s, Mr Finch travelled across northern England, buying stock and building up a network of specialist restorers, including metal craftsmen, glass blowers and metal finishers, to bring the antique fittings back to life. In 1991, he moved to London and began

selling vintage fittings, as well as modern stock. Joined by his wife, the couple relocated to Herefordshire in 2006 and started to design and manufacture the Hector Finch collection, selling both in the UK and via a showroom in New York in the US.

'We followed in the steps of a long line of artists and print-makers who had moved

from London and the South,' says Mrs Finch. 'Here, there is room to grow.' An additional boon to the business has been access to local skills based in the Black Country, adds Mr Finch. 'You can still get just about anything done in terms of metal work in Birmingham or its hinterland. Stourbridge used to be a big glass-manufacturing centre →

## Interiors



The Shropshire countryside acts as a form of 'therapy' for furniture-maker Rupert Bevan

and remnants of that remain; we use a glass blower and wheel engraver based three today. We've found CNC engineers from the automotive sectors in Birmingham, too.'

Designer Rupert Bevan followed a similar route to the Finches (020-7731 1919; www.rupertbevan.com). Having started out as a glider and restorer, Mr Bevan pivoted towards specialising in bespoke furniture and finishes, in particular, antiques mirror glass, using traditional skills and techniques. Although the client-facing end of the business is based in Notting Hill, west London, everything is made in its workshop and finishing studio set in a run of Grade II-listed 17th-century barns in the Shropshire village

of Middleton. 'As a young man, I used to come and stay with a friend who lived in this area, but had no other connections before moving the family here in 2000,' explains Mr Bevan. 'I wanted to bring up my children in the countryside and the options near London were simply unaffordable. There's so much more space here, but the challenge—which is true of others in my field—is that the work is largely based in London. The drive takes more than three hours, but even if it takes as much as four or five, not once have I ever thought that it's not worth it. Coming back here to the Shropshire countryside is like therapy.'

Sourcing a team with the necessary skills initially proved challenging. Persistence paid



The work of textile designer Speronella Marsh is inspired by her Shropshire garden

off: the original team of four has now grown into about 34, made up of highly skilled traditional craftsmen, such as metal forgers, woodcarvers and specialist joiners. 'I feel so strongly that we need to make these traditional artisanal skills, such as stained-glass window-making, relevant, modern and viable,' continues Mr Bevan. 'The key is realising that they don't have to be used exclusively in churches; you can adapt these skills and make beautiful pieces of furniture with them.'

**'For inspiration, all I need to do is step outside'**

Almost all of those who have moved to the area in the past two decades cite the creative advantages of being located in an 'untamed' part of the countryside. 'It gives me the opportunity to focus and concentrate,' says Mr Bevan. Another advocate is the textile designer Speronella Marsh (www.speronella-marsh.com). Born in Rome, she moved to Shropshire in 2015 after her husband inherited a house in the area. 'It had a lot of windows that required curtains and, by the time we'd finished renovating it, there was nothing left in the kitty. I set about designing my own instead, using vintage sheets.' The former garden designer had studied decorative painting at the Van Der Kelen-Logestijn school in Belgium, but says she taught herself the art of block-printing through courses and YouTube. The first of her designs that would eventually form the Home collection was >

Rebecca Smith

## Interiors



Former agricultural barns in Herefordshire are now home to Edward and Emma Bulmer's interior-design and natural-paint company

Acorn, inspired by what she found in her Shropshire garden. 'I love flowers, but the shape of leaves is even more attractive and acorns, with their dumpy form and lovely hats, have always appealed. For inspiration, all I need to do is step outside.'

'There's a richness to living here that's informed by being out and about being in the landscape, agrees Mrs Finch. 'It's a very outdoorsy lifestyle, very real and unpretentious.' The Hector Finch team is based in premises

formerly occupied by a local auction house outside the town of Leominster. Mr Bulmer, meanwhile, has converted various former agricultural barns on his land to create pods for paint mixing and warehousing. 'As for me, I haven't moved far; we bought my parents' old house,' adds Mr Crump, whose office is in what was once his brother's bedroom.

Another key to the success of these specialist businesses is that their products chime with a market that is prepared to pay

for good-quality artisanal designs that are made in Britain. 'Our American market is huge; they like the European aesthetic, but there's more to it,' says Mr Finch. 'People want products with soul rather than something mass produced. Because we have the skills to make each piece from scratch, everything we make is fixable—nothing needs to be thrown away. That gives people a good feeling. They are buying something they know has the capacity for longevity.'