



Cottage Christmas

Photography by Khara Pringle. Words by Mandi Millar.





Killinchy home

family, friends and fun... interior designer Ian Thomson and his wife Cheryl have all the ingredients for the perfect Christmas recipe.

Ian and Cheryl's fairytale cottage is the perfect location for a cosy Christmas. Enconced in the drumlins opposite the Georgian Ardview House near Killinchy, this quaint stone gate lodge dates back to the 16th century and has lost none of its quintessential charm in the intervening centuries.

Indeed it was its beguiling sense of the past that captured the imaginations of Ian and Cheryl when they first discovered it. 'Cheryl and I are both keen horse riders and we used to hack around the fields near the cottage, down to the shores of Strangford Lough. We'd always admired the old place – you couldn't not have really! It's real picture postcard stuff – at least we thought so... mullioned windows, climbers round the door. And we used to imagine what it would be like inside,' says Ian. 'It was one of those things you never think will happen – if

you read it in a book, you'd think it was a bit far-fetched, but one Sunday afternoon we were walking the dogs down to the shore when Cheryl spotted a For Sale sign on our cottage as we'd started calling it! And the rest is history.'

Thankfully, the inside didn't disappoint either, with all the trimmings you'd hope for in a historic Irish gate lodge – exposed beams, bare stone work and as many nooks and crannies as any self-respecting interior designer could hope to accessorise in one lifetime. 'It was just what you think a cottage should be. Of course, not everything was to our taste, but I always think it's a bonus when there's enough scope to put your own stamp on a property rather than simply living with what you've inherited,' says Cheryl. 'Ian and I are a couple of romantics, I suppose, and from the moment we first viewed it, I think we just imagined the place kitted out in a sort of lavish cottage style that would bring a touch of big house grandeur to it. One of my acid tests for whether or not a house

is right for me is imagining myself carrying the turkey to the dining table on Christmas day. If I can see myself doing that, then it's right for me!'

Though when they took their first tentative steps inside the cottage, things went one stage further for Ian. 'I could practically smell the sage and onion!' he laughs. 'We knew instantly that this was for us and amazingly the formalities of the sale even went without a hitch – so many people have nightmare stories about that end of things. Fate just seemed to be smoothing the way for us.' So with its new owners in residence, this cosy little cottage was all set for the next chapter in its winding history.

Wanting to remain true to the integrity of the cottage and enhance its sense of history, the couple opted for a traditional look, but erring very much on the side of sumptuous luxury – the sort of look the lord of the manor would have enjoyed rather than his gate lodge keeper. And yet it's this contradiction which sets this property apart.







Killinchy home





'The cottage will never be finished as such – there are still walls to come down, garden areas to design. We're currently putting a log-burning fire in our bedroom. The cottage is constantly changing with new interiors trends we pick up at the shows we visit on buying trips. But I think that's one of the attractions of somewhere so old – there's such a wonderful sense of history, of the people who've gone before you, lived out their lives there, the good times and the bad. I love that sense of continuity too and the fact that with Cheryl's daughter Kes and son Jared, we're bringing life and laughter to the old place. Properties can have a certain resonance about them and we've always felt this to be a very happy house – our friends say so too.'

This is a very sociable house where friends are always

welcome – and Christmas is no exception! 'Some people ask if it isn't a bit of a busman's holiday, decorating our own home for Christmas after dressing so many other people's. It's true that even though it's only once a year, Christmas seems to start earlier and last longer every year – but there's always something special about climbing into the loft and trailing out your own decorations,' says Cheryl, who's also snaffled a few choice items from the studio for the cottage this year.

'Because the run up is such a busy time for us, our own Christmas doesn't really get underway until Christmas Eve when the studio doors close. It's a lovely relaxing evening – now that the kids are teenagers we don't have to sit up to all hours trying to build bikes and dolls' houses without waking them! So we'll be



We always light a log fire on Christmas morning, so by the time we get back, it will be roaring in the hearth and the smell of the turkey will meet us at the front door.

asking friends round for Champagne and smoked salmon. Kes and Jared and their friends always end up with a guitar session round the Aga in the kitchen and there's a bit of a singsong – all the old Christmas classics.'

Christmas morning doesn't dawn too early for the Thompson family. 'Our dog Boushka will be up on the bed with the kids as we all open our Christmas stockings and start the day with Bellini cocktails. It's the only morning of the year that the kids are allowed to eat whatever they want for breakfast – gingerbread men, muffins and chocolate. Well, it is Christmas! Then it's off to family and friends to deliver presents. We always light a log fire on

Christmas morning, so by the time we get back, it will be roaring in the hearth and the smell of the turkey will meet us at the front door. And of course, we'll eat too much, then try to redeem ourselves by taking the dog for a walk down to a friend's for Christmas drinks.'

For Cheryl and Ian, Christmas is all about relaxing and soaking up the atmosphere. 'After all the fuss in the run-up, we just like to kick back and enjoy a really relaxing Christmas Day with good friends, good food and good fun. It doesn't really get any better, does it? How does the song go? I wish it could be Christmas every day!' ●