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milestone that celebrates the passion and care the couple have poured into every stone, beam and corner of the estate. It now comprises beautiful accommodation and a breathtaking thatched barn, which forms the heart of a luxurious wedding venue.

‘We bought Place Barton in March 1997,’ Emma tells me from their humble abode on the family estate. ‘It was a small estate with 70 acres, including a 15th century main house, a courtyard with two cottages and a range of disreputable farm buildings. In the words of the estate agent it was ‘tired’. Read: needs a huge amount of time, money and love!’

‘But the setting is so magical, nestled at the bottom of an idyllic Devon valley. The view from every window was glorious and something instilled into John by his mother was that the back of a house has to be as lovely as at the front – and it certainly ticked all those boxes. It also had privacy and peace – woods, streams, plenty of spaces for our children to have adventures.’

John and Emma had already renovated a couple of London homes, but this was a different scale altogether. However, they saw

the potential. What was on offer was a proper working Devon farm, something they knew could be beautiful again.

‘There was an undeniable sense of history to the place,’ Emma says. ‘Our intention was never to restore it, until it started to work its quiet magic on us! Even in its ruined state, the barn had such a presence.’

‘There was something so quietly majestic about the bones, in particular, of the great barn. With the encouragement of architects and archaeologists, we realised we couldn’t not restore it. It was crying out to be brought back to life.’

Work started on the main house in 1999 for a new kitchen-dining room, boot area and downstairs washroom. Figgy Cottage was restored in 2001, combining two small properties into one generous retreat, with French windows opening onto a walled garden.

Planning began in 2002, with restoration work starting in earnest in 2003. It’s safe to say that renovating the barn, which dates back to the 15th century and is Grade II* listed, was a labour of love. The couple have made ➔

FARMSTEAD FAIRYTALE

TV power couple John and Emma Birkin swapped London life for Devon, restoring a crumbling 15th century barn into a wedding venue. By **Carol Driver**

PHOTOS: RACHEL HOILE

When award-winning TV director John Birkin and his powerhouse producer wife Emma, decided to leave their fast-paced careers in London, they had no idea that two decades later they would be at the heart of one of Devon’s most extraordinary historic restorations.

Known for classics such as *Mr Bean* and *The Fast Show*, John and Emma, who produced major live broadcasts including Comic Relief, swapped studios for rolling Devon hills and a 15th century estate in the Teign Valley.

What began as a search for a quieter life to raise their children quickly turned into a remarkable journey of restoring Place Barton, a tired and crumbling farmstead, into a breathtaking luxury wedding venue, centred around the magnificent Great Barn.

This year marks 20 years since the completion of the barn’s restoration, a





a conscious effort to maintain the original simple 15th century beauty, while balancing authenticity with practicality, keeping within listed building regulations, and working with ancient materials.

‘This cottage was in a terrible state and was totally gutted and reroofed,’ Emma says.

‘It was while we were doing Figgy Cottage that our architect said we should really think about doing something with the very large barn in the courtyard. To be completely honest, we hadn’t really taken it in. It was just one of many crumbling buildings full of old bits of farm machinery!’

After some thought, they decided to take on the restoration with a view to turning it into a business.

Led by Jim Blackburn, of The Timber Frame Company, the green oak roof was assembled piece by piece in the courtyard before cranes lifted the towering A-frames into place. A team of 12 thatchers spent weeks creating the roof. Modern farm buildings were demolished, the courtyard returned to its original shape, and every surrounding structure was re-roofed. ➔



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Completed in September 2004, the Great Barn remains ‘breathtaking’ says Emma.

‘It was extraordinary to watch the transformation,’ she reminisces. ‘The team were with us for 10 months, but it was such a happy project. Everyone wanted to see the barn come back to life. The building still takes our breath away to this day, and we have quite simply never looked back.’

Today, John and Emma still live on the Place Barton estate, though now in a modern eco-house they built in 2020 just up the hill, sharing it with their flat-coated retriever, Mousse.

The original buildings have been transformed into luxurious accommodation, allowing couples and their families to take over the estate for entire wedding weekends.

‘We feel incredibly lucky to spend our days welcoming couples and their families to celebrate here,’ Emma says. ‘Some venues can feel like you’re simply renting a space for the day, but here we want couples to feel like it’s truly theirs for the weekend. A real home from home.’

Emma describes their style as ‘simple, honest and timeless’, with a focus on natural materials – wood, stone, lime and linen.

‘For the barn, the brief was to keep it simple but use beautiful materials. We didn’t want to impose a definite style. We wanted a blank canvas our bride and groom could use for their day.’

But with the cottages, the couple wanted to acknowledge that the buildings are more than 500-years-old while also creating spaces that were luxurious and comfortable with a contemporary nod.

‘I love to mix things up, I pick up interesting bits and pieces from auctions as well as dipping into IKEA,’ Emma admits.

‘I’ve been lucky to have Teresa, from Design at Number Nine, helping us with all our soft furnishings. For many years I used a very neutral palette, but over time have become more confident with using colour and often dip into Collagerie for inspiration.’

The kitchen and dining room in Place, the largest house of the on-site accommodation, is very much the heart of the action across ➔





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the wedding weekends. The kitchen was installed nearly 25 years ago; the cabinets are painted in Little Greene Portland Stone and ironmongery has been replaced with brushed steel handles from Willow and Stone in Falmouth.

‘It’s where everything begins and ends,’ Emma explains. ‘Couples gather the day before the wedding to settle in, share a meal and soak up the excitement.

‘On the morning itself, kettles are boiling, mimosas are poured, hair and makeup happens around the long table with the garden doors thrown open. And the next day, it’s slow brunches, fond reminiscing and relaxed goodbyes.’

The sitting room at Place Barton is cosy. Deep red walls, heavy curtains and Moroccan rugs create a sense of warmth, while large bookcases provide both character and storage. Gold lights by Kevin McCloud, IKEA sofas and auction-found rattan tables give the room its layered, collected feel.

‘We wanted it to be a place to hunker down in front of the fire,’ Emma explains.

Asked for her favourite room, Emma doesn’t hesitate. ‘The Great Barn itself. Even after all these years, walking into it still gives us goosebumps.’

As for the future, Place Barton remains refreshingly grounded. ‘Plenty of weddings are coming up,’ Emma laughs. ‘No two are ever the same, and that’s exactly what we love.’

Alongside celebrations, there’s always lots of work to be done on a property of this age and character.

‘Whether it’s rethatching, repainting, rewiring or just small seasonal details, we’re always having to tend to something!’ she continues.

‘We take huge pride in preserving the estate’s charm, making sure everything looks its best, not just for this year’s guests, but for generations to come.’

