



# Finding AWAY

WORDS BY DAN WARDEN



INSPIRATION

*A case study in fortitude, Frances Healy's latest finished project is testament to her dedication to excellence.*

Those who happened to read our last edition of *DRIFT Abode* may well remember Frances Healy. Training in London and managing the interior design there for everything from classic period homes to contemporary apartments, it was the fond memory of a childhood in Penzance that eventually spurred her to bring her expertise to the coastal fringes of Cornwall. Since being here, she has found interior design in the Duchy to be as good as in any part of the country, seeing no reason why anybody need compromise on design, product, quality or service.

Being so far from the design and fashion capitals of London, Bristol, Manchester and other leading hubs, this last point is reassuring, and perhaps something of a myth-buster for those who feel that they must 'settle' for a lesser result so far from the city. But saying so means nothing without proof. For this reason, I decided to pick Frances' brains on a recent project, completed in St Mawes, as a case

study on how her approach – and her belief in the greatness of Cornish design – stack up.

The house in question is sited on a 70-acre peninsula, jutting out into the Percuil River. As an example of Cornish architecture, it's a great one; having started life as a small Cornish farm, the property has, over the years, extended to include eight bedrooms, four large reception rooms, plus a further three-bedroom guesthouse in the grounds. The scale of accommodation combined with the location is simply staggering. It's one of those properties that many would epitomise as their life-by-the-sea idyll. It's a dream come true, too, for designers, and Frances was delighted



to be approached to take on the property's complete re-design.

The commission came about, as Frances puts it, "as one of those glorious, out-of-the-blue website enquiries!" The family, half English and half American, bought the property to

LEFT  
Frances Healy

INSET  
No detail overlooked



## INSPIRATION

serve as their home for holidays and family visits, and the goal for the re-design was fairly simple. “They wanted a very relaxed, informal feel to the house, with a natural flow between each room,” says Frances. “They didn’t want any one room to feel more ‘special’ than any other. The same paint colours and flooring feature throughout the whole house to provide cohesion and continuity; we simply added different fabrics and furnishings to give each one its personality. Likewise, each bedroom had the same principal of a metal bed, painted walls and simple printed curtain fabrics. The addition of unique vintage pieces of furniture, art and lighting, helped create a slightly different feel to each room – achieving the family’s goal of every guest feeling like they had the ‘best’ room.”

What’s really interesting about this project, says Frances, is that although the property directly looks over the water, the client didn’t want a totally ‘coastal’ vibe. “So, whilst there are clear nods to its location, with the large antique pond yachts and other vintage pieces, the location certainly doesn’t define the new interior.” And it’s true. Whereas some coastal schemes can feel sparse, even cold, as I flick through the photographs of this beautiful property in St Mawes, I get a distinct feeling of warmth and comfort, all with the ocean just moments beyond the window.

With the interiors starting to take shape, Frances was also commissioned to transform the outdoor living spaces, something that’s becoming increasingly important to homeowners across the UK. Having a

feeling of connection between inside and out can enable a seamless at-home lifestyle throughout the year, and whilst this may still be something of a novelty here on British shores, it’s very much a fact of life for families across the pond. “Their main home is in California,” says Frances, “so outdoor space is very important to them. But Cornwall is not California, so we needed to provide shelter for rainy, cooler days, as well as shade for those hot summer afternoons. When we first arrived, we found a nasty, skinny conservatory on the side of the house. It had to go! I suggested that we take that off and create a much larger, open loggia construction, connecting the outside space to the dining room and kitchen. The clients agreed, and so we set about designing it with a local architect. Now that it’s in place, it’s used all year round.”

One thing that Frances is very good at is earning the trust of her clients, of which this home in St Mawes is a case in point. But as is inevitable on a project of this scale, it didn’t come without its share of difficulties. The first and most obvious, was the American / British time difference, making face-to-face meetings tricky. Then, with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, it would soon become impossible to arrange a get-together in person. A key step in the process, these get-togethers allow Frances to run her clients through ideas and allow them to be ‘hands on’ with samples, and so suddenly being unable to meet in person left her in something of a quandary. “Eventually, I decided to put together a huge box of fabrics, flooring, paint



TOP  
It’s easy to imagine holiday evenings spent relaxing here

ABOVE  
Furnishings sourced by Frances come together in harmony



TOP  
There's clear synergy throughout the home

ABOVE  
The new, open loggia style seating area – perfect come rain or shine

colours and furniture ideas, and ship it over to the USA. Some of the fabrics I included in the box were already used in their American home, so it turned out I was hitting exactly the right note! From then on, it just got easier and easier to supply them with just what they wanted, as we found ourselves all very much on the same page. As the client said to me," she laughs, "it's amazing what can be achieved via WhatsApp and online banking!

"The main problem with the pandemic was getting stock. Fabrics were in short supply, furniture makers were working at half capacity – if open at all – and anything ordered from Europe literally took months to arrive! In fact," says Frances, "throughout that first summer, I'd arrive with a lorry of boxes to unload, and it was really a lottery as to what would be delivered. But we embraced the situation, and the clients were incredibly patient throughout the whole period. For example, when they first visited, we had only just managed to get a dining table and chairs in place. I usually aim for that 'ta-dah' moment when the finished project is revealed, so it was frustrating being unable to do that."

I'm interested to know how Frances approaches such a large-scale project. How do you add depth to the new schemes, and how much involvement does the client have? "For me," says Frances, "especially when you


start with a new house that has no furniture at all, it needs vintage/antique pieces to add character and depth. In this case, we had a list of items we were looking for. Some of them I managed to source from a great antique dealer that I use in Belgium, but it was wonderful to also support local businesses. I took the clients to visit Lostwithiel (Cornwall's antique capital!) and sourced some pieces there. We

also went further afield to Ashburton, which has a great selection of antique stores. "I love this part of the job," says Frances. "Taking the client out to find those perfect finishing touches is an element of each project that I absolutely adore. What's not to love about a day spent shopping?"



In terms of the house itself and the scale,

Frances is well versed at bringing projects of all sizes to life, taking properties even as large as this completely in her stride. "I'm a great juggler," she laughs. "At any one time I'll usually be running two or three large projects like this, along with another half-dozen or so smaller ones as well. I love to be busy, and I love the buzz of meeting new clients. What's more, I love seeing new houses and bringing my clients' vision to life for them. This job – being an interior designer – is something I shall never tire of, so to anybody out there with a project like this that they need help bringing to life, give me a call!"

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ABOVE  
Every bedroom designed to feel like "the best room"