

LEAP INTO THE UNKNOWN...



by Oliver Stallwood

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■ Olympic high jumper Ben Challenger and his wife Lucy tell Metro how they swapped their city life for bucolic bliss

JUST six years ago, Ben and Lucy Challenger were confirmed city slickers. After getting married in 2012, the couple settled in Battersea and became accustomed to a life of 24-hour convenience, late-night paninis, and more latte options than you could shake an artisan-crafted stick at.

The closest Ben, a retired English Olympic high jumper, who won silver at the 1998 Commonwealth Games, and Lucy, CEO and founder of domestic staff recruitment agency Polo & Tweed, got to green spaces was a stroll in Battersea Park.

Wootton Bassett, and decided it would be worth the trip out to check it out.



Green days: The couple installed large windows so they can look out on the countryside

'As we stepped out of the car, a deer ran past us. It was at that moment we realised we weren't in central London any more,' recalls Lucy. 'We had left a penthouse in Battersea to be in a place with no neighbours at all. It was one extreme to the other.'

Surrounded by serene rolling pastures and hay meadows, they were hooked. 'It was so tranquil and peaceful,' says Lucy. 'We immediately fell in love with nature around us.'

Ben adds: 'We realised the land around it was incredible but the actual house wasn't great. I convinced Lucy this was the place for us and we could make a home out of it.'

The mid-century property was owned by an elderly couple who had lived there for years. Originally, the house was a hunting lodge for a nearby country estate, and while in a good condition, the layout wasn't right for modern family living.



Glass act: Large windows mean great views of the woodlands. Below: the country-style kitchen

'The windows were small to conserve heat and the rooms were pokey,' says Lucy. 'We completely gutted the house and ripped out the walls and windows, channelling all the beautiful boutique hotels we had ever visited into creating a contemporary space.'

The main hub of the house took a year to complete. The original living room was really small and there was a room for the boiler. But the space has now been combined with the kitchen to create one huge living room with underfloor heating. The result is a beautiful home that blends sympathetically with the surrounding countryside, but with far more functional space inside, and fit for a modern family to boot.

There are four buildings in total on the land – the main house, a three-bay garage, and two outbuildings, which house a gym and an office. In the main house, the interiors have been kept deliberately simple and neutral, with unique details that create intrigue without being overpowering.



The couple clearly favour clutter-free, clean lines and the house has the same attention to detail as Lucy's company Polo & Tweed, which has placed staff in royal households around the world.

It's also designed not to detract from the natural elements outside, as the bold anthracite windows frame the outdoors. 'We wanted to create an inside-out experience,' says Ben. 'With all the vistas and large windows and the wood we have used, you feel like you are outside at any given time. It's wonderful.'

'The thing about the house is you always look outside,' continues Lucy. 'We didn't want to detract from that. Crazy wallpapers and colours distract from what Mother Nature provides. We kept the walls quite neutral, which also allows for more focus on the furniture.'



That old chestnut: The kitchen table was created from a horse chestnut tree



The kitchen work surfaces are uneven, with organic natural edges further reflecting the great outdoors. A giant horse chestnut tree was used to create the dining room table. Complete with rough natural edges, it looks like a living piece of furniture. The staircase is made from driftwood collected in Wales.

But the biggest labour of love has been the floor in the boot room. 'We should have used vinyl LPs,' laughs Lucy, looking at the floor, covered in 27,000 pennies – £270 worth – stuck down and covered in a clear resin. 'It took us a whole week,'

Another cool touch is the miniature dog shower in the boot room created for their long-haired chihuahuas Pan and Chewbacca. 'You can chuck the dog and small children in when they're covered in mud. It's a really practical country addition.'



Mosaic marvel: The beautifully tiled bathroom. Below: The Hendrix portrait



On one area is the 'wall of fame', with highlights of Ben's sporting career, including framed outfits and sporting photos. A Harley Davidson also stands proud as the ultimate ornament (although it does get ridden from time to time), hand-painted with the Olympic rings and the Japanese Rising Sun as a present from Lucy to Ben for his birthday.

There are cool antiques throughout too, including cabinets and a hand-made French clock that was picked up on London's Fulham Road. In the master bedroom, Lucy had a wrought iron and enamel bath installed at the end of the bed, as the ultimate luxury.



'The house is definitely the blend of countryside and modern, with incredible and quite emotional aspects,' says Lucy. Ben adds: 'There are no neighbours and we have bluebells in our woodland. I love seeing the different seasons and the flowers that those seasons bring. It's not uncommon to see badgers, deer and foxes. Everyone appreciates the beautiful spot we have.'

One question remains – would they ever return to city life? 'At the moment, especially with everything that's going on, we have no desire to return to city life,' says Lucy. 'I love the peace and tranquillity of being around nature and I could never imagine living in a city again.'

■ poloandtweed.com

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