

## **A Step Back In Time** **(Featured in The Guardian Weekend)**

*Mik and Shirley Burkenshaw have kissed goodbye to the nineties and taken their lifestyle back fifty years in time. Terry Hope popped in to check out their vintage surroundings*

Mik Burkenshaw's meticulous directions left no room for error. They filled a side of A4 by the time he'd finished dictating them over the telephone, and it was accurate down to the last Willow tree and piece of curiously-shaped hedgerow. Finally, as the country lane threatened to peter out into yet another vista of pancake-flat East Anglian farmland, there was the tell-tale Morris Minor parked on the driveway, just where Mik said it would be. I had arrived: a two-hour journey that had taken me back fifty years.

As you enter through the side door into the scullery of the Burkenshaw's little detached two-bedroom cottage, the feeling of having entered a 1940s time warp is overpowering. There's nothing at first sight to tell you that this home has anything to do with the latter part of the twentieth century. Certainly Mik and his wife Shirley don't give the game away: he looks like he stepped out of a faded pre-war photograph, clad in a well pressed striped suit with his hair slicked back with a touch of Brylcreem and a finely sculpted pencil-thin moustache gracing his upper lip. His chin drips a spot of blood from the close attentions of a cut-throat razor. She's dressed in an immaculate original forties dress, hair pulled back in period style and with make-up straight from the pages of Picture Post. The first impression of the couple and their surroundings is perfect. After a cheerful greeting, a thirties electric kettle is filled at a Butler sink, and moments later it's providing hot water for a big brown period teapot, which is then covered by a thick woolly tea cosy in the shape of a country cottage. The dainty best china comes out in my honour and a polished wooden biscuit tin, crammed with functional biscuits, is produced for my delectation. The whole affair is laid out on a hand-embroidered tea cloth, and resembles nothing less than a spread you might remember facing at your grandmother's on special Sunday afternoons too many years ago to count.

Elements of vintage style have been popular for years, but this is more than some interior designer's nod to period decor. This is a full scale living, breathing museum, and the way this house is going one day the whole place will have been taken back to its roots. So what's the motivation for this mid-century make-over, especially when you consider Mik and Shirley are far too young to have experienced life in the 1940s first hand?

'I'm fascinated by people of my parents' generation,' says Mik, 'because they're ordinary people who have such extraordinary stories to tell about the war and the way it affected their everyday lives. The experience gave them a knack of making the best of things and made them expert at making ends meet. My mum, for example, could make a single bowl of dough carpet an entire room if she had to.' Growing up in the sixties the couple also had plenty of 40s influences: many of the films showing on TV at that time were of that vintage, while army surplus stores were full of redundant Second World War equipment. 'The war was still alive in the 60s,' Mik says. 'Around where I was brought up in Dagenham you could buy tin hats for 1/6d and gas masks for 6d, and as a child I would run around the playground dressed up in all this gear playing games. I had an old army greatcoat that covered my bed to keep me warm at night, and all our family's cutlery was ex-Royal Navy.'

As Mik grew up, he describes himself as being 'anti-fashion,' and while others took to punk styles in the mid 70s he headed steadfastly in the opposite direction. 'I didn't go to school dressed as George Raft or anything,' he says, 'but I was into smart styles and suits.' He was a friend of Shirley's brother, and her first memory of him was when he turned up one evening ready to go onto a Roxy Music concert. 'He was wearing a suit and brogues,' she says, 'and he looked so smart and gentlemanly.'

The couple's first home, a maisonette in a Edwardian house in Leytonstone, east London, was decorated in traditional style, but there was little sign then of the all-enveloping 40s fascination that

was to come. 'The area we were living was full of older people who maintained all the old values,' says Shirley, 'but it changed beyond recognition as the yuppies moved in.' Looking for somewhere that was more peaceful, Mik and Shirley extended their search to properties in Essex, but these were out of their price range. Casting their net further afield, they finally came across their present home, located near the Cambridgeshire village of Ramsey, ten years ago, and they were attracted immediately by the splendid isolation it offered them.

There was little in the way of internal fixtures and fittings to establish the cottage's Victorian origins when they arrived. 'It was horrible when we moved in,' says Mik. 'Everything bar the panelled doors had been stripped out and the walls were covered in wood chip wallpaper that had been painted magnolia. The ceilings were covered in textured paint and there was a hideous stainless steel sink in the kitchen.'

It was obvious that a complete make-over was required, and as they considered how best to revitalise the place the couple's interest in the 1940s and the lifestyle of a previous generation began to exert its influence. 'It was subtle at first,' Mik recalls. 'There was never a conscious decision to go down this route. We never even spoke about it, it just started to happen.'

Little by little however, as the vintage artefacts began to pile up, the idea of going for a complete period theme began to take hold. Items began to be collected specifically from sources such as junk shops, boot fairs and charity shops, to enable the refurbishment to begin in earnest. Mik meanwhile landed a dream job for anyone planning to collect yesterday's household items when he started work for Huntingdon Sale Rooms, a company that specialised in second-hand furniture, bric-a-brac and antiques, and many of the couple's treasures have come from this source.

Little by little the house began to take shape. Mik installed central heating using salvaged cast iron radiators and the system was set up to run off a refurbished Rayburn range that was rescued from a front garden for £50 and converted to oil firing. The original door furniture for the downstairs doors was discovered buried in the garden on the site of an old shed that had completely disintegrated. Cupboards were constructed from recycled antique wood, and the concrete kitchen floor was dug up, dampcourse installed and hand-made terracotta tiles laid.

'When you're looking for period fittings,' says Mik, 'you can't go shopping to order. You might go out looking for a sofa and come back with a carpet. You have to act on the spot and buy things when you see them, and sometimes you have to piece things together, like our set of matching green and cream enamel saucepans, over a period of time.'

Despite the relative rarity of many of the items around the house, the couple have found that theirs is a cheap lifestyle and, surprisingly, their experience suggests that 40s paraphernalia has become more plentiful as the years have passed. 'What's happened,' says Mik, 'is that people who set up home before the war are dying off and house clearances are bringing things from this period to the market'. The most expensive item in the house is an iron and brass bed that the couple paid £300 for, while their three-piece suite – bought to replace a previous thirties set that had begun to resemble a thread-bare teddy bear – cost £125 at Waterside Antiques in Ely. A 1930s cast iron fireplace currently being fitted in the living room into the hole vacated by a fifties model cost £20, while the rug for the same room, presently rolled up and waiting for the decorating to finish, was picked up for £40. Original period clothes are becoming harder to find and consequently prices are rising. Mik's suits, several of which have been obtained from the shop Radio Days in The Cut near Waterloo, cost him anywhere between £20 to £65, while Shirley's dresses similarly fluctuate wildly in price. The one she's wearing today cost just £3, while a more average price would be nearer £30.

While fixtures and fitting have been pieced together little by little over the years, providing the décor to match it has proved more problematic. The couple's bible has been 'The Modern Painter and Decorator,' a 1930s tome that contains details of typical period wallpapers and paint schemes, but it's proved difficult to get materials that exactly match the bill. 'Some Victorian wallpapers are available,' says Mik, 'but it's almost impossible to get thirties style designs that are made to the original style, with heavy paper and surface printing.'

‘Paints are easier to get now however, with Farrow and Ball producing a range in conjunction with The National Trust that is oil based and which comes in the original shades.’

Although Mik and Shirley insist that they don’t feel part of the modern world, they’re pragmatic about their need to embrace it in part. The trappings of the late twentieth century – such as a colour TV, video, washing machine, and even a microwave - are there all right, but secreted away in cupboards and hidden under wraps designed to make them look like occasional tables. Neither of the couple, given the chance, would fancy a trip back in time to the real 1940s.

‘We’re working class,’ says Mik, ‘but we’ve got central heating, a car and enough food to eat. Go back in time and the working class of that period would have coal fires, no indoor bathroom, a geyser over the sink might provide the only hot water in the house, and the only method of transport you would have would be a pushbike. We don’t have any illusions: it wasn’t a romantic or a wonderful life. If we were around at that time we’d still be in Dagenham, and there would be no time for any funny ideas about décor and things.’

With one foot planted firmly in the real world and the other in the past, Mik and Shirley seem to have found, for them, the ideal lifestyle. The onslaught of modern life isn’t welcome in this little corner of East Anglia: whether they can make it go away forever is anyone’s guess, but one suspects they’ll have a good try.

● *Mik Burkenshaw’s personal museum of 1940s memorabilia can be visited during opening hours at Huntingdon Sale Rooms, 1 St Mary’s Street, Huntingdon, Cambs, admission free.*