

A Creative Conversion

A former registry office in Newbury has been transformed into a modern family home by architect Kate Cooper, while retaining its period features



ALL IMAGES: CRISTINA BARTON



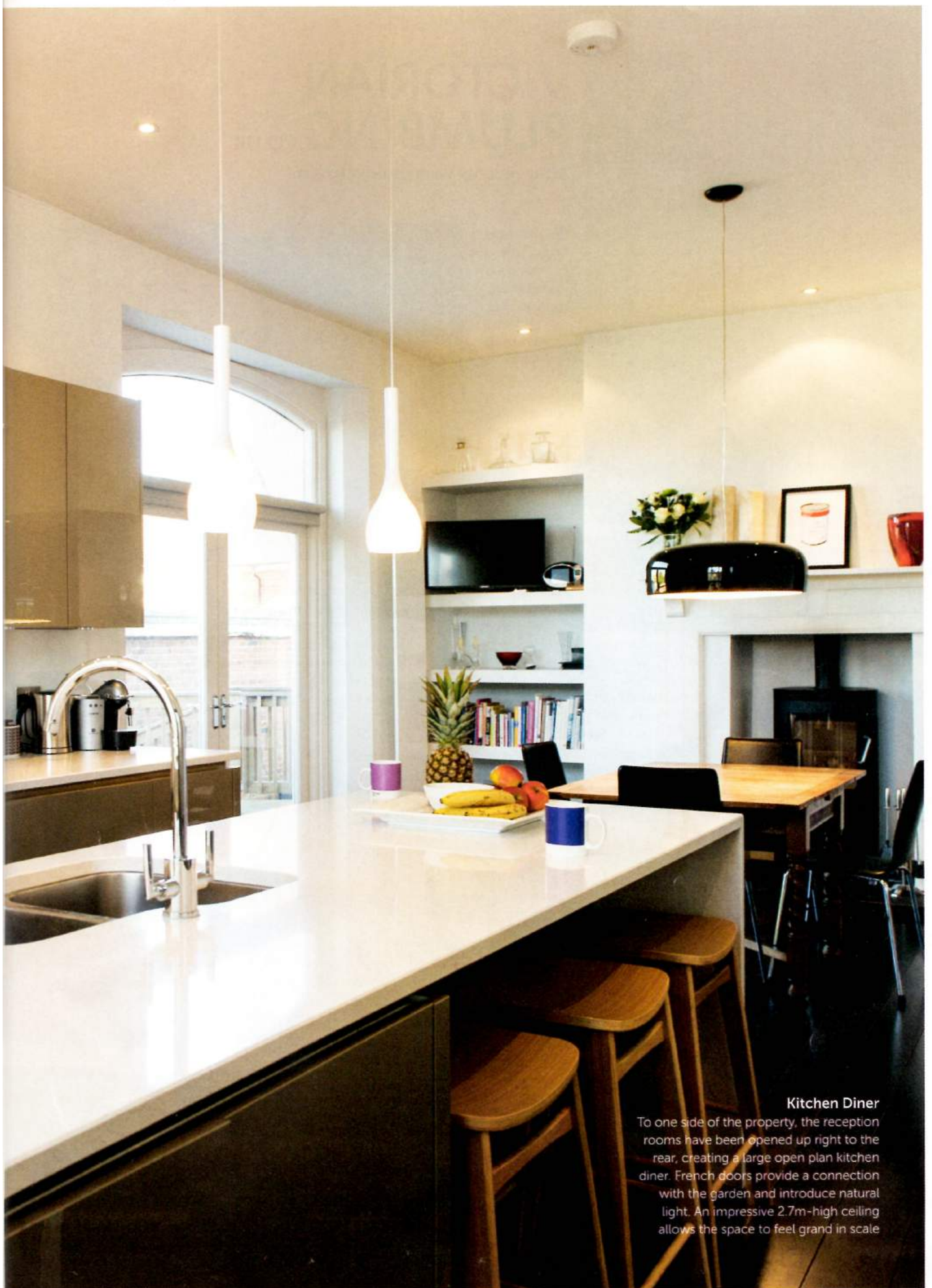
KATE COOPER

Kate (left of shot – homeowner Claire is on the right) is the director of Absolute Architecture (absolute-architecture.co.uk)

HB&R: The property was originally built as a house in 1897 before becoming a registry office in 1949. What process did you go through to return it to its former use?

Kate Cooper: Being a home originally, the building lent itself to being transformed back to its former use. Over the years as a registry office, it had been gradually adapted, including the addition of a 1980s extension at the rear, and some of the period features had been hacked around. So, the key starting point was to sit back and envisage how the property would have looked initially, which involved taking down the dividing walls that had been added and emphasising the home's classic proportions. We gutted everything and pretty much started from scratch.

There was a classic floorplan to the home originally, with a central hallway and double-fronted reception rooms, and we wanted to retain this while also opening up part of the house to suit modern-day open plan living. Opening up the rear, which housed the 1980s



Kitchen Diner

To one side of the property, the reception rooms have been opened up right to the rear, creating a large open plan kitchen diner. French doors provide a connection with the garden and introduce natural light. An impressive 2.7m-high ceiling allows the space to feel grand in scale

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Below: Marrying Old with New

While the emphasis of the project was on retaining the home's classic features, a clean and crisp interior scheme provides a modern twist to the period home. Here, the fireplace in the dining space has been reinstated, while the new black flooring laid throughout helps to unify the whole ground floor

extension, allowed the plan to really work, yet we knew this would be the biggest challenge — integrating this space to become part of the house and not just look or feel like an add-on. It was all about creating that fine balance between reinstating the old proportions and opening up the spaces to suit modern living.

What state was the building in when you took it on?

It wasn't derelict, but it was unloved and hadn't been invested in for years. The reception rooms, where they used to hold the wedding ceremonies, had some rather nasty wallpaper and everything was very dark. There was a lot that needed replacing, including the electrics, plumbing and plastering, and we had to recondition the windows and fireplaces. However, the priority was to let in more light and keep the classic layout, with some minor tweaks.

How did the design process work?

Did the clients have a lot of input?

The clients Claire and Jason had quite a good idea of their requirements and it really helped that Claire is a graphic designer, so she could really visualise how the end result was going to look. Even from the outset, we both looked at the house and had the confidence that we could make this work.

The couple came up with a brief and then had to make decisions about what could be done now and what could be done at a later date, due to their finite budget. There was a philosophy to tackle what needed doing first — prioritising different elements that required more immediate attention. We sat down and looked at different layout options, and ended up going with the more radical ➔



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decision to open up the rear rooms. In order to connect the home to the garden, we also designed in the French doors, which open out to a raised deck area.

The project took about six months on site — all in all, it took a year from first plans to moving in. Thanks to the reduced VAT on the building for being a change of use, this offered the couple the opportunity to do more with their budget, which they wouldn't have got if they'd have gone for a different property.

Were there any issues with the planners?

Fortunately there were no planning issues, just a change of use. In the past there had been developers looking to turn the property into a block of flats, and so when people heard that we were planning to transform the building back into a home they were really happy.

How does the reconsidered floorplan work to meet the homeowners' requirements?

We looked at how we could incorporate a studio into the house for Claire. With a growing family, the design also needed to be flexible over time, so we chose to keep one of the large reception rooms, but this could always be divided up over time if need be. A big kitchen diner was one of the key requirements from the homeowners, and we also squeezed in two extra bathrooms to serve the family better, without impacting too much on the classic proportions — the ceiling heights on the ground floor measure 2.7m, which is quite grand for the area.

Being a former registry office, the building was of a certain significance. Was this a personal project for you, too?

It was quite a personal project — the building was very popular

Above: Master Bedroom

The large space with bay window was previously used as an office. In order to prioritise this bedroom, an en suite bathroom was located in an adjacent room

among the locals, who had many happy memories attached to it; even I was interviewed in there before I got married, so it was an enjoyable case to work on. The homeowners and I are good friends, and in terms of the local context, I used to live just 500 yards away so, like everyone, I was happy to see the integrity of the building kept and become a family home as opposed to a block of flats.

What makes the home so successful?

I think it's a very well proportioned house and, as with many period properties, it has the big beautiful sash windows to the front and a bay window at the back, along with classic details. We've managed to strike a balance between the modern and period features, and the consistent approach to the interiors, such as the black flooring throughout, really helps to unify the ground floor, which could otherwise have felt very 'bitty'.

How has the home improved the family's way of life?

The home has really served the family well as it enabled them to continue living in the area where their children go to school, and since moving in Claire has established her business and can now work from home and invite clients round. Jason is in the army and is often away, so the home also provides the family with a settled base — they're comfortable, and really enjoy living there. **H**