

Baiting the hook

No longer a forgotten backwater, north Norfolk, or Chelsea-on-Sea, has opened up a host of opportunities for interior designer Miv Watts.

By Clover Hughes. Photograph by Mark Luscombe-Whyte

'Sometimes I think life really was meant to be a bed of roses,' says interior designer Miv Watts, staring out through her blunt blonde fringe and looking every bit like a States film star as the smoke from her cigarette curls around her. She is sitting on an antique Indian day bed, surrounded by opulent cushions and fabrics from her toy shop in Burnham Market, north Norfolk. A few miles along the coast is the Victoria Hotel in Holkham, decorated by Watts and recently named as one of *Tatler's* top 100 hotels.

Watts's permanent move to north Norfolk six years ago was timely. As urban types have discovered the haunting, desolate beauty of the coastline, she has watched the demand for holiday homes rise dramatically. Amused locals have found that their previously empty beaches have become the escape for Londoners that the Hamptons represent for New Yorkers.

Aware of living in 'Chelsea-on-Sea', Watts opened House Bait I above a fish shop in 1999. It is packed with decorative gifts and quirky pieces as delicious and seductive as a box of violet creams: Cath Kidston cushions and Sophie Abbot bags jostle for space with Vietnamese storage boxes, Côte Basille toiletries and Watts's collection of paints, designed with Francesca Wood and inspired by the faded colours of a scrap of original William Kent material. Local oyster farmers might not be seduced by the leopardskin waffles trimmed with plastic roses that she sells, but the owners of the Range Rovers and Porsches parked bumper-to-bumper outside clearly are.

House Bait II, a five-minute walk away, followed in 2001, and is stocked with linens, furniture and china bought in the markets of Norfolk and southwest France, as well as Jaipur, Spain and Morocco. The look is tactile, bohemian and dramatic. Here a Forties leather bag is propped up against an antique French soap box; enamelled Indian lamps and a Thirties gilt chandelier hang from the ceiling; and a brass bed is dressed with Peruvian silk and mirrored Rajasthani cushions.

'I like to build a history through my design, and I use local crafts people for restoration where possible,' says Watts. 'The Bloomsbury generation are my inspiration: a conglomerate of luminaries who enthused one another. I think that sort of society still exists in Norfolk.'

Later this month she is hosting an exhibition of local artists Cathy Lazell, Mary McCarthy and Chloe Mandy, entitled *A Bloomsbury Summer*. She also has plans for another shop, in Holt, and feels that there is room in north Norfolk for another exclusive hotel. 'Norfolk is such a stylish place,' she says, pulling a cashmere scarf around her as another Range Rover roars up and spills its cargo of weekenders on to the beach. www.housebait.com; for exhibition details, call 01429-780588

