

# 'We converted a dated basement area into a modern, sociable space'

Esther and Paul McKay have transformed their terraced house into a bright and colourful home that suits its vibrant seaside setting

WORDS **ANDRÉA CHILDS** PHOTOGRAPHS **DAVID WOOLLEY** STYLING **JASMINE ORCHARD**



**OLD KITCHEN**  
Right The couple wanted to convert the lower-ground floor flat, which had only a small kitchen, into an open-plan family kitchen-diner for the whole house

**FACADE**  
Below An iron balcony provided by the building company replaces the old rotting one. The door is painted in Dulux Trade High Gloss Rock Candy 2

**BEFORE**



**FACT FILE**

**THE OWNERS**

Esther McKay (above left), who runs online children's clothes boutique Smallfolkrun.com, lives here with her husband Paul, who is a property finance lawyer, and their children Billy, five, and Jude, four

**THE PROPERTY**

A three-bedroom Victorian terraced house, built in 1851

**THE LOCATION**

Brighton, East Sussex

**WHAT THEY SPENT**

The couple bought the house for £720,000 in 2010 and have spent around £50,000 on the renovation work. The property has recently been valued at £950,000

**KITCHEN**

As the space is on the lower-ground floor, white Uber Furniture units from Brighton & Hove Kitchens, plus Hanex acrylic solid surface worktops, have been chosen to keep it light and bright. The stainless-steel Neff appliances are built into the cabinets for a streamlined look, and the Ligne Roset bar stools add a colourful touch. The floor tiles are from The Tile Depot

Esther and Paul McKay had been house-hunting for six months when they found a beautiful four-storey terraced home in one of Brighton's prettiest Victorian streets. 'I could immediately see its potential, but Paul wasn't convinced,' recalls Esther. 'Although it had been well cared for by the previous owner, its décor

was dated and the lower-ground floor was a separate one-bedroom flat. I knew that it would take a lot of work to turn it into the family home we wanted, but I convinced Paul it would be worth it. It's hard to buy a complete house in this area as so many are divided into flats, and the garden of this property was one of the largest in the street.'

In the end, the proximity of the house to both the sea and the train station – ideal for Paul's daily commute to London – won him over. The couple bought the property in Easter 2010 and have spent the past two years renovating it room by room.

Before work began, the McKays lived in the house for a year, getting to know the

space. 'What's now our basement kitchen was a separate one-bedroom flat with its own entrance on to the street, which we rented out for the first 12 months,' says Esther. The couple's original plan was to keep it for five years and eventually use the rental income to fund its conversion back into the main body of the house. 'After a

**DESIGN TIP**  
Clever design can turn even a basement into a light-filled space. Minimise the light lost by using window dressings that don't reduce the opening area, and use a light, bright colour scheme and reflective surfaces





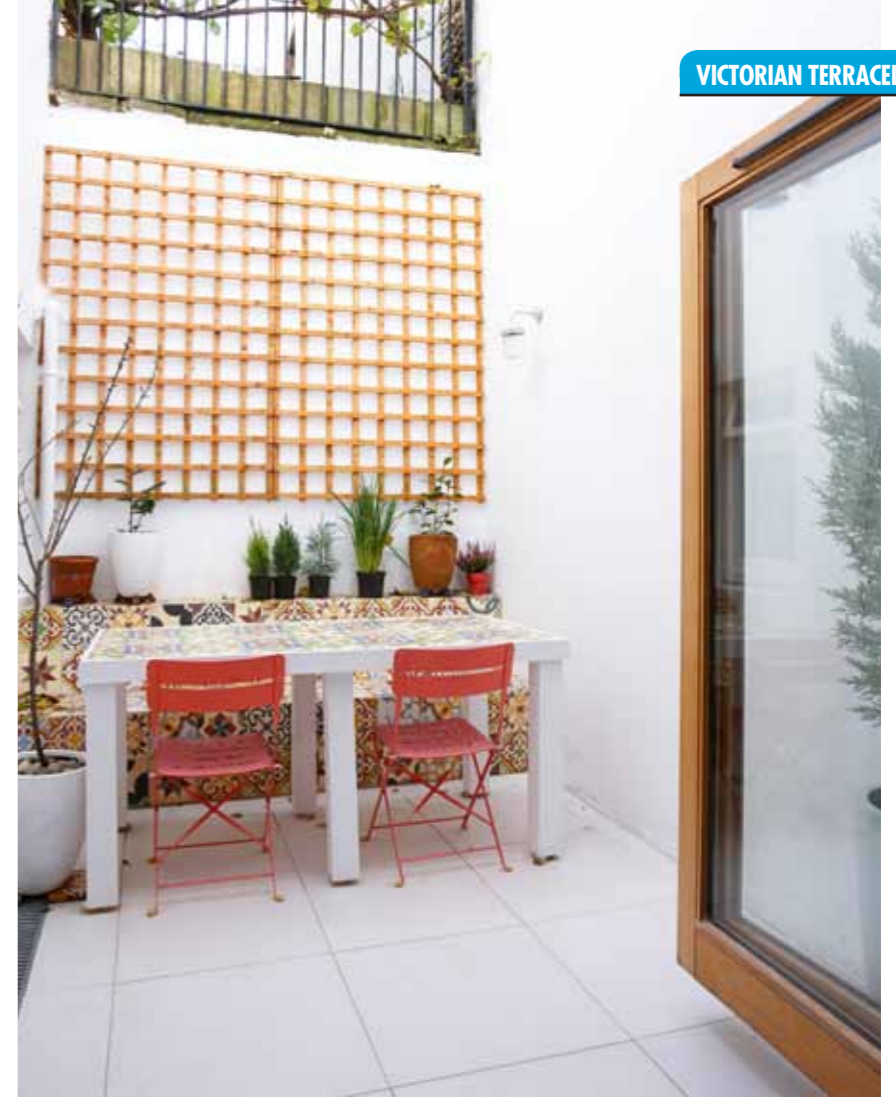
**DINING AREA**

Folding-sliding doors from Jeld-Wen allow light through from the rear of the house. A Tom Dixon copper pendant light hangs above a dining table and replica Eames DSR chairs, all from Coco Interiors. The staircase was made by Cambridge Construction and colour has been introduced on the stair risers using Holiday Blues paint by Dulux



**PATIO**

Right Outside the kitchen, Esther has created a Moroccan-style patio with encaustic tiles from Alhambra Home. The floor tiles continue out from the kitchen. Try John Lewis for a similar outdoor table and chairs



**LIVING ROOM**

Below Walls painted in Pavilion Gray by Farrow & Ball and floorboards in Dark Oak Ronseal Diamond Hard varnish create a contemporary setting for the original cornicing. In the rear of the space, the Deep Dream sofa is from Graham & Green and the Eames rocking chair is from John Lewis. The Clarence doughnut light and the floor lamp are both from Heal's, where the leather chair is from, and Ray Infield made the shelving



year of putting up with a small kitchen on the ground floor, however, I told Paul we had to do the work,' admits Esther.

She sourced quotes for the work from five building companies, shortlisted three and interviewed them all before selecting one for the project.

'I knew that they had worked on a house further along the street, so, to be absolutely certain that I was making the right decision, I knocked on the owners' door and asked them for a recommendation,' Esther recalls. 'The owners went one better and invited us in to actually see the work that had been done for them. The quality was brilliant, so I booked the same builder the next morning.'

**The kitchen is a really social space—we've had a lot of parties in here**

Work on the space began in May 2011 and was finished five months later, paid for with savings and the profits from the sale of the couple's previous house. They used a structural engineer to draw up the plans, which included installing

stairs to connect the lower-ground floor with the house above, and steelwork to strengthen the ceiling. 'It was a huge job but, fortunately, it was self-contained. I spent only one week without a working

kitchen in all that time,' Esther says.

The old one-bedroom flat with a living room and bathroom is now a stunning kitchen/dining room with folding doors leading out to a small suntrap patio. An existing extension that was part of the

self-contained flat now houses an adjoining utility room and wet room. 'Paul couldn't see why we would need a separate space for the washing machine and tumble dryer; he wanted a bigger bathroom instead,' says Esther. 'But he totally gets it now – it keeps the living space quiet and uncluttered.' The clean, white space is airy and bright, with stylish details such as stair risers painted in blue, a blackboard wall for the kids to draw on, and bold artworks that add character. 'The kitchen is a really social space,' says Esther. 'I love to sit at the table with my friends and we've had a lot of parties here!'

The next major job was to update the garden and rear of the house, which the couple completed between April and May 2012. The house sits on a hill, so the terraced garden is reached via steps leading up from a patio outside the playroom. 'There was no fence, only a four-foot drop, ▶





**LIVING ROOM**

Left At the front of the space, a window seat makes the most of the bay window. The sofa is from Rume and the wallpaper is by Eco Wallpaper. The tables are from Heal's

**DESIGN DETAILS**

Above Eclectic pieces such as the chest of drawers from Graham & Green keep the look modern. The footstool is from Rume, with artwork from Art Republic above

and the ground was covered in uneven paving slabs. It was a nightmare for the kids as they couldn't play safely,' says Esther. The couple employed a landscape gardener to plan and revamp the plot. The paving was removed and sold for £250 on eBay, then the ground was levelled so that a lawn could be laid. Finally, a wall and gate to the garden was installed. 'Paul began building the wall himself. He'd never done it before, but it seemed like a worthwhile, hands-on project,' says Esther. 'He got up to three layers of bricks before he had to admit he needed help. There's a reason that people call in the experts!'

**“ I didn't buy anything for the living room until we were ready to do the whole job properly ”**

The house is in a terrace, with no rear access, so every bag of soil and paving slab had to be carried through the property. When it came to repairing the back of the property it was even worse, as all the scaffolding had to be brought through the house. 'All the old plaster was chipped off

**PLAYROOM**

Right The garden, reached by the stairs from the patio, is an extension of the playroom. The doors are from Jeld-Wen and the Animal Farm wallpaper is from Smallfolk Run. The rug is from Great Little Trading Co





**MAIN STAIRCASE**

Colour brings a contemporary edge to the period house, with a Louis de Poortere Color Net striped runner from Naken Interiors on the stairs and the dado painted in Holiday Blues by Dulux. The chandelier is from Not On The High Street



**BATHROOM**

**Above** The whole space was completely renovated, with a new suite, shower screen and mirror from Parker Bathrooms. The Limewashed Oak vinyl flooring is from Karndean Designflooring, while the Retro Metro wall tiles in Crackle Glaze Richmond Park are from Tons of Tiles

**HOME OFFICE**

**Left** Esther runs her online children's boutique from the top-floor guest bedroom. A local carpenter made the desk, box shelves and racks for wrapping paper. The chair and cowhide rug are from John Lewis



and the brickwork was newly rendered. It was a dusty, noisy, dreadful job,' says Esther. It was about to get worse, too. Although the plaster on the front of the house could be patched up and painted, the wrought-iron balcony on the first floor was completely rotten. 'It took the builders only three minutes to knock it down. All I could think was that I'd stood out there with the boys and it could have collapsed,' says Esther. It cost the couple an unexpected £3,000 to have it rebuilt.

With the big, messy jobs out of the way, Esther could enjoy the final stages of the renovation – decorating the house room by room. 'I'd lived in our grotty beige living room, with its horrible brass fireplace, for two years,' she says. 'I told myself not to buy anything for it until we were ready to do the whole job properly. It was difficult, but it meant that I didn't make mistakes!' The double-aspect room, which can be divided by folding doors, features a stunning rose-print feature wall and sofas in Esther's favourite shade of purple. 'I love this room,' ▶

**DESIGN TIP**

Long pendants and tall table lamps can balance rooms with high ceilings. When rewiring, consider adding a lighting circuit of 5A round-pin sockets in the key bedrooms, switched two ways by the door and bed

**MASTER BEDROOM**

After painting the bedroom in grey and white, Esther felt the space needed a pop of colour, adding the chandelier from Velvet in Hove and a John Marshall print from Two Kats & A Cow Gallery. The bed, bedside tables and Kartell Bourgie table lamps are all from Heal's, and the carpenter made the shelving in the alcove







### KIDS' BEDROOM

Left Esther plans to get new cupboards, but has updated the existing ones for now. The pendant and beds are from John Lewis, and the bedlinen and Cowboy wallpaper are by Cath Kidston

### OUTDOOR SPACE

Below The back of the house was re-rendered by Belgrave Building Services. Ray Infield did the landscaping work. The pizza oven is from The Stone Bake Oven Company



she says. 'By 7pm, all the kids' toys are packed away and it's a really elegant space. Paul loves the wood-burning stove; he was determined to have one.'

The theme of white walls punctuated with bursts of colour continues throughout the house – Esther loves the way it brings a contemporary feel to the rooms while retaining their original features. 'My ideas evolved,' she explains. 'Mine and Paul's bedroom looked too pale, with its white and grey walls, so I added shots of hot pink for impact. I've also used pendant lights to

bring colour and fun to the rooms.' Her one regret is the black-painted floorboards in the hallway. 'They're noisy and hard to maintain; at some point, I'd love to replace them with classic black-and-white floor tiles.'

**I've used pendant lights to bring colour and fun to the rooms**

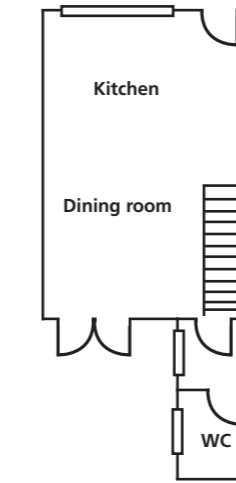
Patience and knowing what to keep and what to redo is one of Esther's strengths. She has saved money by keeping the built-in cupboards in all the bedrooms and revamping them with new paint and smart handles. She decided to replace the old family bathroom, however, rather than giving it a budget makeover. 'I knew I could

spend a few hundred pounds replacing cracked tiles and painting it, but I wouldn't have been happy with the result, so I chose to invest in a new shower and bathroom suite that we'd all enjoy using,' she explains.

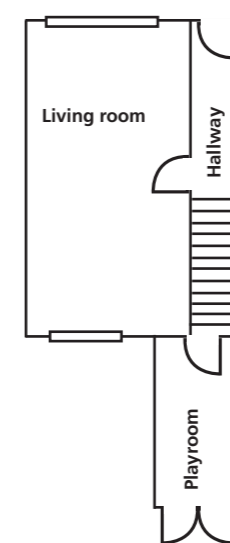
This is the first spring since moving in that the family can enjoy their new home, without worrying about a renovation to-do list. 'Paul can't wait to fire up the pizza oven in the garden,' says Esther. 'It took four men to carry it through the house and on to the kitchen patio. We took one look and said, "It doesn't work here," so they had to haul it back upstairs and out into the garden.' Like all the decisions and hard work that have gone into the house, it was worth the effort. 🏠

### THE PLANS

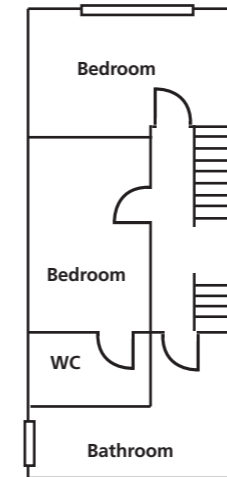
#### LOWER GROUND FLOOR AFTER



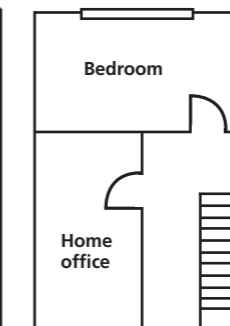
#### GROUND FLOOR AFTER



#### FIRST FLOOR AFTER



#### SECOND FLOOR AFTER



A one-bedroom flat on the lower-ground floor was converted into a large kitchen-diner, and a staircase was built up to the ground floor

### THE COSTS

Kitchen fitting and appliances	£20,000
Bathrooms	£17,000
Plumbing, including radiators and underfloor heating in the kitchen	£5,000
External render	£5,000
Balcony	£3,000
Rewiring	£2,000
Decorating	£2,000
Sliding doors to the patio	£1,500
Carpentry (window seat, shelving and cupboards in living room)	£1,500
Staircase to kitchen with understairs cupboards	£1,400
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£58,400</b>

### THE CONTACTS

**Construction (including conversion and staircase)** Sam Hickmott, Cambridge Construction, 07775 741659  
**Structural engineer** Carl Vener, Desbruslais Chartered Surveyors, 07879 556640, Rd-surveyors.co.uk  
**Carpenter and landscape gardener** Ray Infield, 07717 847587  
**Rendering** Belgrave Building Services  
**Kitchen Brighton & Hove Kitchens**  
**Appliances** Neff  
**Bathrooms** Parker Bathrooms  
**Folding-sliding doors** Jeld-Wen  
**Wood-burning stove** Mendip Stoves  
**Shutters** Shutterly Fabulous  
**Flooring** The Tile Depot, Karndean Designflooring

Below A take on a classic, the Eiffel-style dining chair in Teal is made from beech and propylene, (H)81x(W)46x(D)51cm, £75, Alexander & Pearl



Use a vibrant colour in a neutral space to let the shade stand out. Striking Cyan matt emulsion, £24.29 for 2.5 litres, Dulux

Bring your hallway to life with a statement runner in contrasting shades. Chatham wool stair runner in Mallow, (W)70cm, £115 per m, Roger Oates



Below For luxurious style in a bedroom, choose glamorous lighting. Kartell Bourgie plastic table lamp in black, (H)68x(dia.)37cm, £166, John Lewis



# Style file

Add bright accents and statement pieces to create a scheme inspired by Esther McKay's unique style



Choose statement wallpaper as the basis of a unique scheme. Exclusive wallpaper in 2569 (above) and 2566 (right), both £109 per roll, Eco Wallpaper



Below Use artwork to add a personal touch to your space. London Bridge landmark picture with wooden frame, (H)22x(W)90cm, £29.95, Dotcomgiftshop

