



Printed fabric chairs inject colour into the back room



Owner Steve Wooldridge in Glen Cottage, Allonby

# Percy's legacy

The former home of Percy Kelly, one of Cumbria's most influential artists, has been restored as a holiday let, drawing fans to the Solway coastal village of Allonby

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When Steve Wooldridge and his son Luke bought a damp rundown cottage in the Solway coastal village of Allonby, they were simply looking for a good investment.

They snapped up the deceptively spacious Glen Cottage at auction for the bargain price of £53,000. Father and son knew they had the skills and the vision to

transform Glen Cottage into a desirable holiday let.

What they didn't realise, until a few days after the purchase, was that they had bought a cottage of huge historical significance in West Cumbria.

Neither Steve, 48, nor Luke, 21, had heard of artist Percy Kelly, the troubled genius who lived in the cottage for 12 years, producing much of his best work during that time.

Today, the cottage is something of a pilgrimage site for the most devout Kelly

fans; it features in a number of his paintings. There are also pictures of Kelly working in his scullery studio which is now a modern kitchen.

Glen Cottage was not marketed at auction as having belonged to Kelly. But within days of taking ownership, Steve discovered the history of the cottage and began swotting up on knowledge about the artist and his paintings.

He discovered that Kelly, who died in 1993, is now regarded as one of the county's finest and most remarkable artists. An exhibition of his work at Carlisle's Tullie House last year was an astounding success with record numbers of visitors.

Born in Workington in 1918, he was brought up in a poor working-class family. But his natural talent was evident from as soon as he could hold a pencil. Despite this, he received no formal art education until he was in his 40s and spent most of his adult life working as a postman, along with six years in the army during World War Two.

Among the many influential people who came into Kelly's life, including ▶

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poet Norman Nicholson, artists Shelia Fell and LS Lowry, and collector and patron of the arts Helen Sutherland, was Sir Winston Churchill.

They first met, during the Blitz, in a room next to the Cabinet War Rooms, and chatted about art and drawing for several hours then and on subsequent occasions. Churchill encouraged Kelly, who'd never been to an art gallery, to visit the National Gallery.

But Kelly shunned recognition and was loath to sell his work. Instead, after the war, he returned to his job with the postal service in West Cumbria although he became frustrated and depressed with life. After a nervous breakdown in 1958, he resigned and moved to Glen Cottage.

The 12 years at Glen Cottage produced some of Kelly's best watercolours; he also used oils for the first time and turned to etchings and charcoal, finally enrolling in art school at Carlisle College of Art.

His time at Glen Cottage, and his marriage, came to an end when his wife Audrey returned home one evening to find him sitting by the fireplace, wearing her clothes and asking her to help him put on

***'I would rather starve than sell one piece of my work,' Percy Kelly once told a friend***

mascara. She was horrified, told him to leave and changed the locks.

The fireplace had been built by Kelly in 1958 and it remains a feature of the living room today.

After finding a picture of the living room in Kelly's time, Steve recreated the original picture of Maryport harbour that hung above it, asking a graphic designer to Photoshop a photograph. It works brilliantly.

Steve, who lives at Bolton Park, near Caldbeck, also used a clever ploy to show Kelly's work throughout the cottage. "Obviously, I couldn't afford to buy his original art so I bought a Percy Kelly calendar from Tullie House and framed the illustrations," he says. Surprisingly effective, at first glance the pictures look like good prints.

Steve, the managing director of two websites which supply dye sublimations, is full of ingenuity.

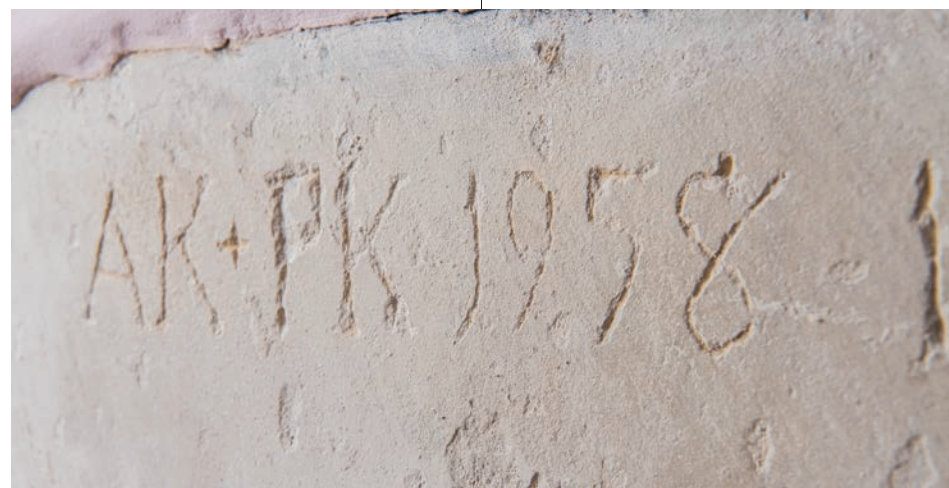
The cottage is now warm and airy. The first job he and Luke did was to remove all the cardboard and plywood that lined the inside walls and the cement render on the outside walls, allowing



The initials of artist Percy Kelly and his wife Audrey were discovered in the lintel above the fireplace during restoration work



***'We discovered the letters AK and PK 1958 carved there. I used a toothbrush to gently clean them up'***



the cottage to breathe again.

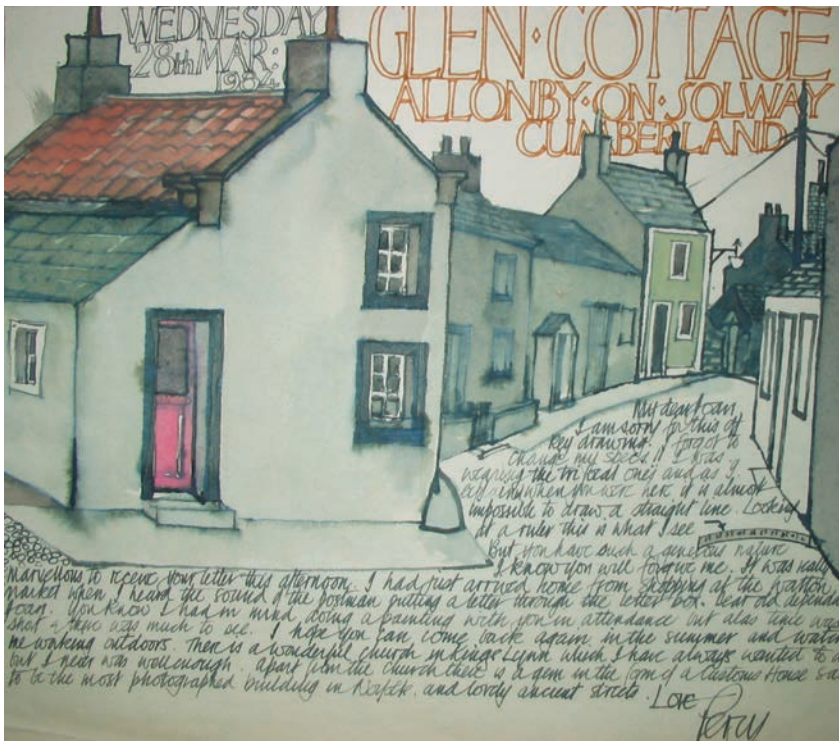
Diathonite cork render, a natural cork and lime plaster, was used to insulate the house both externally and internally. Ecological Building Systems, based near Carlisle, carried out the work.

The damp sandstone-flagged flooring was removed and underfloor heating installed before modern sandstone was relaid with a dark grout which gives an illusion of age.

All the ceilings were also pulled down and replaced. In fact, Glen Cottage was virtually rebuilt, with all the family pitching in to help.

Steve's wife Lindsey and her friend





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Percy Kelly painted Glen Cottage in March 1983. Steve has retained many of its characteristics while modernising it to make it suitable for the holiday let market; below: the step-down bathroom under the eaves of the cottage and the painted-pine kitchen



Carla McTear, who has a Wigton business Made To Measure, took care of the interior design, while his parents Ian and Joan pitched in with painting and cleaning.

Following the transformation, the cottage retains the atmosphere and many of the characteristics from Kelly's time there.

The decor, however, is aimed at the contemporary eye, with neutral shades spiced up by arty splashes of colour. The linen blinds, for instance, are purple and green.

One of the most exciting finds is upstairs in the master bedroom. Steve had hired a specialist to sandblast the fireplace which he had uncovered in the bedroom. "I am just so glad he didn't blast the lintel over the fireplace as Luke, who is studying business with management at York University, discovered the letters AK and PK 1958 carved there. I used a toothbrush to gently clean them up," says Steve. The bathroom, which fits under the sloping eaves of the house, features the original cast iron bath that Kelly would

**The bathroom features the original cast iron bath that Kelly would have used**



After finding a picture of the living room in Kelly's time, Steve recreated the original painting of Maryport harbour that once hung above the fireplace

have used, although now it is surrounded by smart white tiling.

Downstairs, there is a modern shower room close to the painted-pine kitchen, coloured in a cool, contemporary grey with Fusion mineral paint. This was the room where Kelly created his astonishing images and where he also kept a printing press.

Steve intends to uncover the crook beams in the ceiling, which will become vaulted with sky lights.

It is the next project on the house, which he intends to do this winter when the holiday lets tail off.

The house has been fully booked this summer with letting aided by the fascination with Kelly.

Kelly, of course, is famous for his reluctance to sell his work or paint for monetary gain. "I would rather starve than sell one piece of my work," he told a friend.

At the end of his life, he was still living hand to mouth and turning down offers that would have afforded him a comfortable life.

No doubt, he would be staggered to discover not just the cost of his works today but the fact that his former home is now renowned to devotees of his art.

Percy Kelly Cottage is available to let through [www.percykellyscottage.co.uk](http://www.percykellyscottage.co.uk)

