

A new lease of **LIFE**

Sylvia Marshall was a high-powered businesswoman running a management training company with a staff of 49. When the builders moved in to their new offices, everything started to go wrong so she decided to hang up her suit and do the renovation work herself

There are certain people in life who are happy to take chances and step outside their own personal safety zone, and there are others who wouldn't dream of ever taking a risk. Sylvia is most definitely the former. Her career was pretty much on track when overnight the rent at her offices in Holborn, London, went through the roof.

"I decided we would have to look for other premises very quickly as I just wasn't prepared to pay such an inflated rent," says Sylvia. "One of the estate agents told me about a place in Waddon near Purley, which had been a bank but was in need of some serious renovation. I had no idea just how much until I went to view it. Basically it had no floors, no ceiling and was a complete mess. So I dismissed it and kept on looking. There really wasn't much around so I decided to go back to the bank and have another look. It really was a mess, but I suppose I enjoy a challenge so I decided to go for it and hired builders to come in and get it sorted."

Unfortunately for Sylvia, though, the builders turned out to be serious cowboys. "It was a real bodged job, and I began to realise that it wasn't





rocket science to tackle the work myself. So I got a few books out of the library and began to clear up the mess they had made. As I walked round I took a video of what I was doing and decided to put it on the internet to show my friends what I was up to. I had no idea that it would get something of a cult following. I had about 300 people watching me basically have a nervous breakdown on line, but as I don't have 300 friends I knew it had gone viral and people all round the world were hooked!"

Sylvia decided to give her website a proper name and launched cosyhomesonline.com. She kept the videos running and carried on her business. Then in 2007 she won a Lifetime Achievement Award, and it made her make the biggest decision of her life. She explains: "I really felt in need of a change and decided to sell the company. I made sure, though, that every member of staff had a job to go to so I would never feel guilty for closing my office. I also got ill around then and needed to take life easier."

Although she was supposed to be resting, she took herself off to evening classes and learnt

bricklaying, plumbing, plastering, tiling, basic electrics and how to become a kitchen fitter. At the same time her website was getting ever more successful, and she was getting many, many emails each day asking for DIY advice.

"Doing up the bank had become a passion and I wanted to do another project. My ambition was to find a derelict property and restore it before it either fell down or was demolished. I bought a croft, which was a real wreck in the north of Scotland, and restored it back to its former glory. It was a true labour of love and, of course, I videoed it and put it on the site. I used local builders who all had immense talent and were really enthusiastic."

By then she had the building bug and bought and renovated a wooden house, also in Scotland, which had grass growing through the floor. "As I was in Scotland so much I got to know a lot of people and met a crofter who had quite a large amount of land. There was a five acre plot that he couldn't use because it was largely peat and therefore too boggy for the sheep to graze on. I decided to buy it from him, and when



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WIN A TOOL BOX AND TRY OUT YOUR DIY SKILLS

When moving in to your new home there are a million little DIY jobs that are bound to need doing. This very useful high quality 31-piece tool kit comes complete with a handy tool bag with soft grip handles for easy transportation and storage.

It contains: 1 x 8in adjustable wrench; 2 x pliers (200mm long nose and 180mm combination); 1 junior hacksaw; 2 x hacksaw blades; 1 x semi-round file; 1 x tape measure; 1 x 300mm ruler; 1 x 8in scissors; 5 x knife blades; 2 x 2in spring clamps; 8-piece folding hex key set; 6 x screwdrivers, 4 x slotted and 2 x Pozzi; 1 x bit holder; 20 x 1in CR-V bits; 1 x 16in tool bag.

I went to the planners they told me that you couldn't build on peat. But luckily I decided to investigate further, and I dug down and found that eventually it hit hard ground. I had a survey done, and they confirmed it was suitable to build on so I began to look at the historic ordnance survey maps and discovered that originally it had been a crofting village with four homes on it."

Needless to say, Sylvia decided to take the area back to its roots and built four delightful crofts, which have been commended by Scottish Heritage. They are perfect in every way right down to the last detail. Her latest project, though, has made Sylvia the star of BBC1's *Britain's Empty Homes*. "A magnificent thatched house in West Sussex was totally destroyed by a fire, and the elderly couple that lived there couldn't restore. But it would be devastating if it was left and would probably be turned into a car park or supermarket! So I've basically bought a pile of rubble, but it will be back to its old self soon."

Sylvia has a great deal of DIY and building knowledge, and she decided that she would share this and has now launched another website called bubsydogdiy.com, named after her Yorkshire terrier. It provides insider tips

and practical advice about large- and small-scale projects, like changing a tap or hanging wallpaper, and it's all for free. It also includes a handy trade search with an up-to-date directory of almost 6,000 certified tradesmen across the UK plus a forum where visitors can upload and answer each other's DIY queries.

"I wanted to try to help everyone with their home improvements from competent DIYers to clueless DIY divvies. I know from my own experiences that a website like this would have come in very handy so that's why I decided to start one up."

In the meantime Sylvia is busy researching and working with English Heritage on her burnt-out wreck in Sussex. "The house was originally called the Sessions House and used to be a court house. I have unearthed some interesting things there, and I've recently discovered a staircase that led up to the old wig room! It's fascinating work, and, to be honest, I'm dying to get my hands dirty again soon."

There seems to be no stopping Sylvia.

cosyhomesonline.com
bubsydogdiy.com

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