

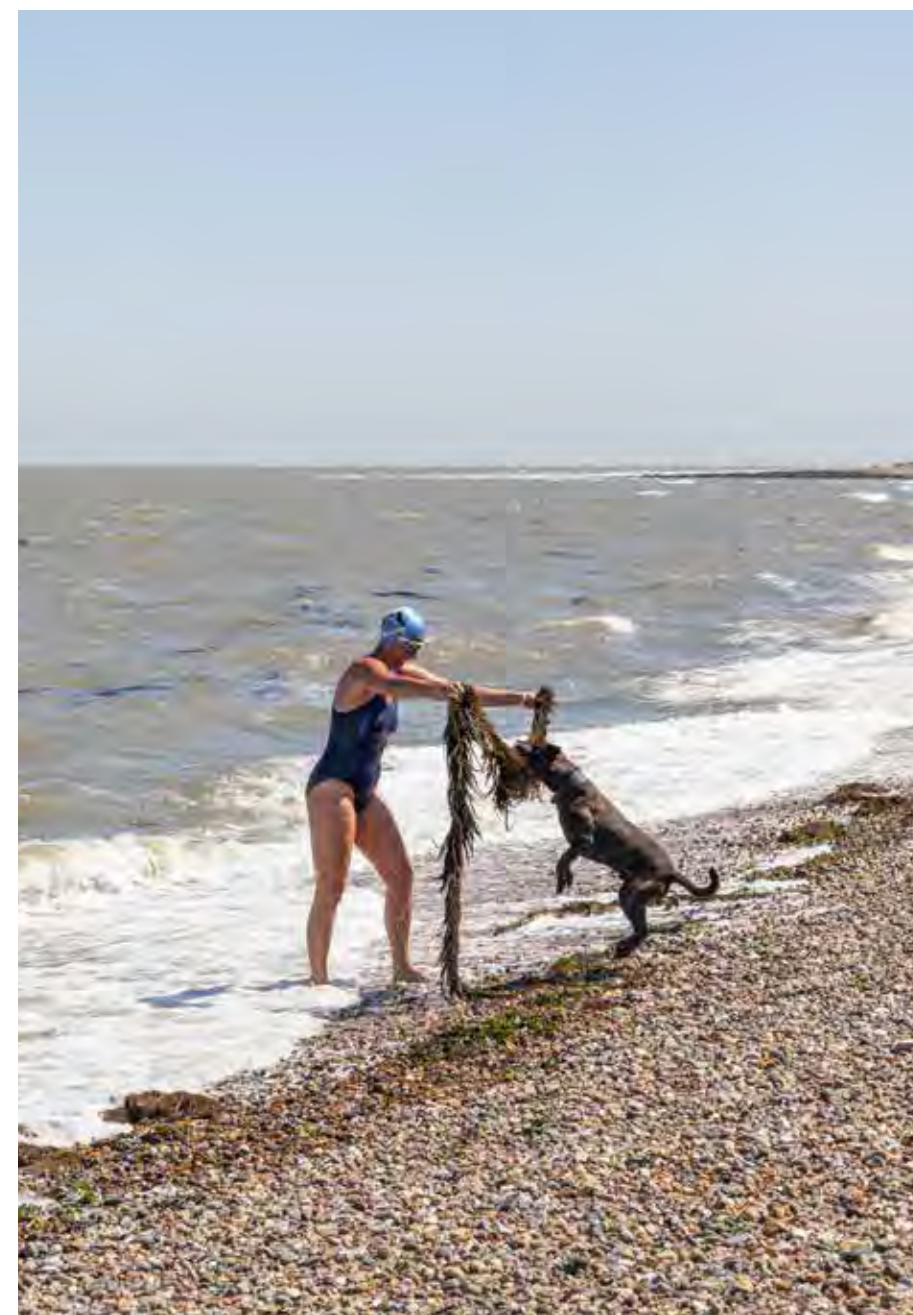
THIS PICTURE The house is clad in black weatherboarding, and has a corrugated metal roof, like the traditional fishermen's huts found in Kent and East Sussex  
 RIGHT Rachael swims daily off the beach, with her Staffordshire terrier cross, Zoot, for company



# THE SHAPE OF WATER

By taking on a challenging building project on the Kent coast, artist Rachael Dickens has created both an inspiring seaside home and an outdoor lifestyle that informs her work

WORDS ALEX REECE PHOTOGRAPHS BRUCE HEMMING



Every day, artist Rachael Dickens walks along the shore beside her house on the North Kent coast, collecting sea glass and other flotsam and jetsam to use in her work. It's part of a daily routine that also includes a swim off this gently shelving beach between Herne Bay and Reculver, where birds such as skylarks and sand martins hover above the soft, sandstone cliffs. 'It changes my day,' says Rachael, who is usually accompanied on these outings by her dog, Zoot. 'It brightens everything, and makes me feel so alive and connected to nature.'

Even before her move to the coast in 2014, Rachael was a passionate outdoor swimmer. From her home in Sydenham, South London, she would drive every day to Brockwell Lido, a mid-century open-air pool in Herne Hill, to bathe in all weathers. 'It's very calming for the mind and soul,' she explains. Indeed, it was Rachael's desire to move closer to the lido that led her to put her house on the market in the first place, but she was struggling to find anything suitable within budget.

Around this time, on a day trip to Whitstable, Rachael went for a drive along the coast with her sister, Beth, and they ended up walking on the beach by the village of Beltinge. Here they saw a small, wooden house for sale, with a good-sized garden and views of the shoreline. 'I said, "I could live here",' remembers Rachael, who was encouraged by Beth. 'But then I said: "But what about the lido?", and my sister just swept her arm out to sea, saying: "What about this one?"' ➡



*'It was a BIG scary PROJECT, this HOUSE  
– but it was THE BEST THING I've ever  
done. I LOVE LIVING here'*



The Ladderax units belonged to Rachael's grandparents. The painting featuring an Art Deco building is by South London artist Christopher Noulton. To the right is a work by Liz Chisholm, also based in South London



ABOVE The front garden features a large piece of driftwood that Rachael and Scott found on the beach  
RIGHT The German-made wood-fired hot tub is perfect for warming up after a sea swim in winter

**BRINGING THE HOUSE DOWN**

Soon after, Rachael bought the house (having sold her place in London) and moved to Beltinge. She describes the 1930s bungalow as 'a bit like a pub on the inside and a scout hut on the outside', which was clearly in need of renovation, as it was both clad and roofed with asbestos. Nevertheless, Rachael lived in the property as it was for a year to get herself accustomed to her new way of life: 'It was quite a wrench at first,' she recalls. 'When I got here, I knew one person in Whitstable. But I got to know lots of artists and they were very welcoming.'

By chance, she soon met an architect too, at a New Year's Eve Party. Michael Shoobridge, principal at Parashoot Architects ([parashoot-architects.co.uk](http://parashoot-architects.co.uk)), produced a set of drawings for the refurbishment. 'It was clear from my first meeting with Rachael that capturing the panoramic views and making the most of natural light was going to be a strong influence,' explains Michael. 'This, along with Rachael's outdoor-centred lifestyle and her art-focused socialising

and entertaining, became the heart of the design.'

When work started in 2015, and the asbestos had been removed, Rachael and her builder Chris Dew San Ris ([sanris.co.uk](http://sanris.co.uk)) took a closer look at the wooden structure and got something of a shock. 'It became pretty obvious that everything – from the floorboards to the roof joists – was rotten, and light was coming in everywhere,' says Rachael. 'I was going to have to knock it down.' As an artist, she responded creatively to this by hosting a well-received exhibition in the skeleton of the house – a film and photography installation called *Shift*.

**A BRIGHTER FUTURE**

Starting again from scratch, though daunting and costly, proved fortuitous in the end, as Rachael was able to create the house she truly wanted. Michael's design was adapted to include additional features such as under-floor heating, generous storage and a more substantial dressing room upstairs. And, by moving into the new, wooden studio she had already had built in the back garden,



Rachael was able to oversee the year-long build herself on site.

In another stroke of serendipity, Rachael met her now husband, Scott Bloomfield in 2015. A Kent-based fellow creative, he provided much moral and practical support during the construction process. 'I was lucky to have met him,' says Rachael. And, when the house was completed in autumn 2016, the couple hosted a painting party so friends could help them get started with the





The John Lewis blue sofa in the living room features cushions by Whitstable-based weaver Margo Selby. To one side is a pinball machine Rachael bought at RG Scott's antiques emporium in Margate and then had renovated







decorating. They married in spring 2017.

Now, on the footprint of the original dwelling, is a striking, contemporary home, with floor-to-ceiling windows allowing the sea views to dominate. Outside, the black weatherboarding and corrugated metal roof call to mind the traditional fishermen's huts found in Kent and East Sussex. The driftwood, shingle and coastal plants in the gardens to the front and rear also help to anchor the house in its seaside setting.

On the ground floor, a bright open-plan living room with whitewashed plywood flooring overlooks the water. 'I don't have a television,' laughs Rachael. 'I sit and watch the sea change colour and the clouds.' The vaulted space, with a dining area and kitchen, is furnished with classic mid-century pieces and quirky vintage finds, such as G-Plan shelving units and a working pinball machine. The kitchen units were salvaged from the original house and repainted, then topped with reclaimed wood from a school science lab. Above them hang green enamel pendant lights, lending an industrial edge.

Upstairs, the master bedroom opens out onto a sea-facing balcony, which has a glass surround so that nothing

ABOVE The old church chairs at the dining table came from a London pub TOP The marine-themed garden is planted with cardoons, lavender, fennel, alliums, artemisia and various grasses RIGHT In the living room is a collection of 1960s ceramic cats, which Rachael found in a charity shop in Herne Bay







### Rachael's favourite Kent seaside things

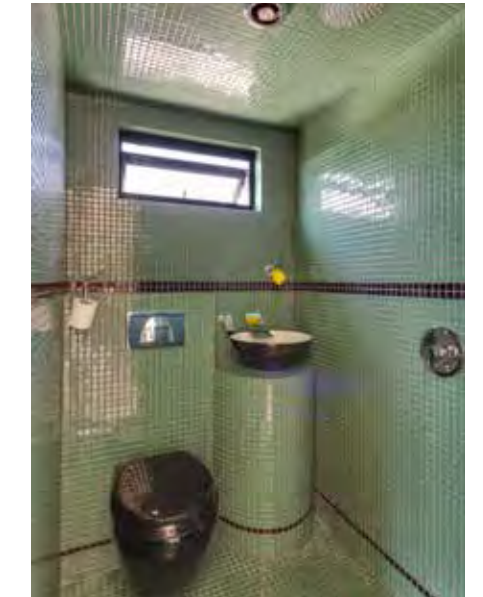
- The thing I love to do every day is swimming in the sea and walking across the cliffs to **Reculver**. I get inspiration from the sea and the clouds, but also the old wood of the groynes.
- You can cycle all the way to **Margate** from here (and in the other direction to Whitstable). It's about two hours to **Minnis Bay**, and the route goes through the **Kentish marsh flats**, which are beautiful. It's part of the **National Cycle Network**

([sustrans.org.uk](http://sustrans.org.uk)) and the **Viking Coastal Trail** ([visitkent.co.uk](http://visitkent.co.uk)).

- There are lots of artists in **Whitstable**, and **The Fishslab** is a great gallery there ([fishslabgallery.co.uk](http://fishslabgallery.co.uk)). It has a sign in the window that says 'Fresh Art Weekly'. I've also shown at **The Horsebridge Arts Centre** (01227 281174, [horsebridge-centre.org.uk](http://horsebridge-centre.org.uk)), which has a cinema, too. In **Herne Bay**, there's the **Number 1 Gallery** on New Street (06683 4458333,

[number1gallery.com](http://number1gallery.com)), and **Beach Creative** (0300 1111913, [beachcreative.org](http://beachcreative.org)), which is a lovely community gallery where they have workshops and studio spaces.

- In terms of places to eat in **Herne Bay**, there's a very good Italian called **A Casa Mia** (01227 372947, [acasamia.co.uk](http://acasamia.co.uk)), with the best pizzas this side of Sicily. There's also a Turkish place right on the front called **A La Turka** (01227 370707, [alaturka.co.uk](http://alaturka.co.uk)), which is brilliant.



obstructs the view. As Rachael grew up around boats in Gillingham – her father built his own wooden vessels – there are nautical touches here and elsewhere. The main bathroom, for example, is lined with upcycled timber to create a cabin-like atmosphere. The Iroko flooring leads seamlessly out onto the outdoor deck, where a wood-fired hot tub is sunk into a secluded corner.

#### COASTAL CREATIVITY

The marine landscape inevitably feeds into Rachael's work, and she regularly exhibits in local galleries. Water has always been a key theme for the artist, and now landmarks of the Kent coast and its birdlife appear in her paintings, too: 'I respond to my environment, for sure,' she smiles. 'I'm drawn to all the very beautiful things that are washed up.' Many of her textile embroideries incorporate beachcombed items, such as ragged cloth. 'I'd find bits of clothing, and it made me think a lot about the refugee crisis,' she says. 'It just seemed like a metaphor for someone's life.' A series of three-dimensional works feature the tactile sea glass she collects, attractively displayed in printer's trays. Another project has involved making

robots from marine plastic – a collaboration with her husband Scott. Every autumn, Rachael opens her home and studio for East Kent Artists' Open Houses (see details below), and it's a chance for visitors to see local creatives in their home environment – and also to buy their work. If the weather is fine, tea and cake are served on the deck in Rachael's garden. 'It's lovely to have an audience who want to know how you work,' she says. 'With this house it's doubly interesting for visitors, because people always stop and look.' This is just one of the many life-enriching events that Rachael has enjoyed since moving to the area: 'The pace of my life has completely changed – it's friendlier, and I can breathe more easily, both literally and metaphorically,' she says. 'It was a big scary project, this house – but it was the best thing I've ever done. I love living here.'

**For more on Rachael's work, see [rachaeldickens.co.uk](http://rachaeldickens.co.uk). East Kent Open Houses takes place on 12-13, 19-20 & 26-27 October ([ekoh.org.uk](http://ekoh.org.uk)). If you would like to rent Rachael's house for a month in early 2020 please email: [rachael@mac1.net](mailto:rachael@mac1.net).**



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The painting behind the bed is by Rachael; the upcycled timber potato crates in the bathroom came from nearby Quex Park; the mosaic tiles in the upstairs bathroom are from eBay; there are views of the Thames Estuary to the left and the North Sea to the right from the upstairs bedroom, which has a balcony fronted by glass so that nothing obstructs the seascape. The stocking advertising on the wall dates back to the 1940s

TOP Rachael arranges sea glass that she has found on the beach in a printer's tray on her studio table ABOVE Drying off after a dip