

## OLD NEWTON, SUFFOLK

# MY NEIGHBOURHOOD

A MOVE TO THE COUNTRY ENABLED MADELEINE AND MYLES BIGDEN  
TO EXPAND THEIR BUSINESS AND BOOST THEIR QUALITY OF LIFE

Words: **CLARE GOGERTY** Photography: **CRISTIAN BARNETT**



Myles indulges in his passion for extreme BMX with a purpose-built ramp in the garden. Meanwhile, Nikki the cat takes things at a more leisurely pace – something that the Suffolk move afforded the couple







A traditional thatched roof cottage with a modern workshop (and BMX track) out back sums up beautifully how Madeline and Myles Bigden have combined heritage crafts with forward thinking design in both their home life and their homeware business, LayerTree.

“Our workshop, home and surroundings have a positive impact on how we feel day to day,” says Myles. “We love spending time here.” Madeleine, agrees: “We made some difficult choices to leave well-paid jobs to move here and start our own business. There has also been a lot of work to do on the house, not least building the workshop, but it has all definitely been worth it. We enjoy how we live and what we do for a living, which is really important to us.”

Madeleine and Myles moved to the “mad 16th-century cottage” in the tiny village of Old Newton, amid the flatlands of Suffolk, four years ago. They’re a practical and resourceful pair –



they met at Brunel University, where they studied product design – so the run-down cottage and its over-grown garden didn’t faze them one jot. A former kitchen designer (Myles) and teacher (Madeleine), they’re used to fabrication, meticulously drawn plans and generally getting things done. The first thing on their to-do list was to transform the upstairs of the cottage from a couple of ramshackle and draughty rooms to a crisp, contemporary bedroom and bathroom. Original beams were uncovered and sandblasted and sit »

Myles and Madeleine work side by side in their workshop, using steam bending to create elegant wooden homeware products. The modern workshop sits alongside the couple’s pretty thatched cottage in Old Newton



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"Sometimes we take our inflatable two-person kayak to Needham Lake. Once we tried to paddle along the River Dedham to Ipswich but didn't quite make it. It's lovely to walk around the lake and eat a sandwich at one of the picnic tables."



Our nearest place for a drink is The Four Horseshoes Inn in Thornham Magna, a pretty thatched pub a 10-minute drive away. They serve vegan dishes and, in the summer, we sit outside. They also provided a great takeaway during lockdown." [thefourhorseshoes.net](http://thefourhorseshoes.net)



"We make weekly visits to J Lawes in Finbows Yard, Stowmarket, a family-run hardware store. There's always something we need. You can buy individual screws and all sorts of bits and bobs here."







## Old Newton in a snapshot

Myles and Madeleine live in a sleepy village, with a lively community. A short drive takes them to the medieval village of Haughley, with its pink thatched cottages, castle grounds – where there once stood a motte-and-bailey Norman castle – and traditional bakery. The market town of Stowmarket with its busy high street and Georgian town houses is also nearby.



“A group of people from the village look after Little Wood, a community woodland. We bring a flask of hot chocolate on winter walks or a slice of home-made cake in the summer, and it’s only a short walk from the cottage. It’s a young wood of mostly ash and oak trees.”



“It takes about half an hour to cycle to Hawks Mill in Needham Market. The building is private accommodation now but there is a great view of the river from the bridge.”



“Palmer’s Bakery in the village of Haughley has baked on the same site for 150 years. It’s lovely and old-fashioned – in fact, they still pay their staff with brown paper wage slips. We come here all the time for granary rolls and sourdough bread.”







## “WE HAVE A HEALTHY ATTITUDE TO WORK – WE ALWAYS KEEP OUR WEEKENDS FREE TO EXPLORE”

happily alongside neat oak cupboards and a custom-made bed that was built to the couple's exacting standards and finish.

Outside, they constructed a ramp and track in the garden for Myles to indulge his enthusiasm for Freestyle BMX and turned the annex into a packing station to dispatch LayerTree products (all wrapped in carefully sourced sustainable packaging).

Building the workshop, however, was their biggest project, and one they are rightfully proud of – a Glulam timber-framed structure with a larch cladding, its apex shape references the shape of the cottage. “We always dreamt of having a place to make our designs,” says Madeleine. “Moving here meant we had space to build to our specifications.”

These specifications centred around the process of steam bending, a process that Myles fell in love

with and which has grown from a side hustle to a business. “Steam bending is a low energy, low-waste process, that appealed to us,” he explains. The workshop has a large island work bench where the couple work side by side and “bounce ideas around.” Strips of FSC-certified oak, ash, elm and walnut are manipulated into graceful shapes in a steam box on casters, which can be wheeled outside when the weather is good and back in again when it's cold. The result is a range of minimal homeware – simple and elegant hooks, lights and bird feeders – that is constantly evolving.

As the business grows, so does the potential for a greater workload. Myles and Madeleine are determined, however, to put quality of life first, especially now that they have a young family. “I think we have a healthy attitude to work,” says Madeleine. “We don't want to expand the business massively, and we always make sure to keep the weekends free. There are so many lovely places around here to explore, it would be such a shame not to enjoy them.”

LayerTree: [layertree.co.uk](http://layertree.co.uk); Insta: @layertree S

The bedroom was the first project the pair tackled when they moved to the cottage. They uncovered original beams and built a bespoke bed. Madeleine now enjoys a growing Sungold tomatoes in her potting shed (far right)

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