



## In a literary LANDSCAPE

Charlotte and Boris Starling rejuvenated a forlorn rectory in a sleepy Dorset valley, turning it into a welcoming, light-filled family home



**AT HOME**  
Charlotte and Boris Starling live in an eighteenth-century rectory in a Dorset village with their two young children, Florence, six, and Linus, four, plus two rescued greyhounds, Velvet and Dash. Charlotte and Boris both work from home: Charlotte runs an interiors business while Boris is a novelist and scriptwriter.

The softly weathered Georgian rectory stands four-square in the lee of a peaceful fifteenth-century church. Shadows cast by ancient yews creep across lichen-encrusted tombs while swallows and swifts swoop and dip over tangled summer hedgerows and doves coo softly from somewhere beneath the eaves. It is a picture of timeless English rural beauty. This is Thomas Hardy country, and it is not difficult to imagine the novelist and poet himself riding past this very spot, his thoughts brimming with tales of milkmaids and woodcutters, lost loves and abandoned dreams.

A very different kind of writer lives here: Boris Starling writes gritty, fast-paced thrillers both under his own name and as Daniel Blake in America, but it is this peaceful corner of Dorset that he and his wife Charlotte have chosen to make their family home. With two small children, Charlotte's work as a television producer was no longer compatible with family life and Boris simply needed somewhere quiet to write. "Boris grew up in London and had always been a city boy, and I loved working in television but producing documentaries often meant long hours and days at a time spent on location which just isn't ▶

**CLOCKWISE FROM MAIN**  
The light-filled breakfast room is Charlotte's favourite space. The table came from Sunbury Antiques Market and the chairs are by Tolix from French House. The Butler's sink is from Shaws of Darwen and the counter tops are beech. The house is full of lovely ceramics and glassware collected by Charlotte.





The walls in the sitting room, painted Verd Antique by Farrow & Ball, complement the green check Chesterfield sofa from Circus Antiques. The natural canvas partridge print cushions are from Strummer Pink.



practical with small children. We just both felt that now we had a family, we wanted to start afresh somewhere new," she says.

As a child, Charlotte had spent some memorable family holidays in the West Country and she and Boris had enjoyed a few weekends in the area, so the south west felt like the natural direction in which to head. Their house in London sold much more quickly than expected, and suddenly finding themselves with nowhere to live, a family friend came to the rescue with a holiday cottage near Exeter which they could rent whilst they were looking for a house.

With a thoroughness and practicality born of years spent hunting out locations and organising camera crews for television documentaries, Charlotte registered with virtually every estate agent in Dorset, Somerset and Devon. "During the nine months we were there I looked at over 40 houses," she explains. "I have always been a fan of Georgian architecture, so I was looking for a classic Georgian 'box': a house with tall ceilings and large windows placed

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** The large pendant lights in the breakfast room, from Baileys, were chosen in keeping with the grand scale of the room. The limestone floor is from Mandarin Stone.

A feature wall in Potager wallpaper by Brunschwig & Fils, adds an element of luxury to the utility room. The kitchen was made by DJ Chutter and is painted in Oak Apple by Fired Earth.

The dresser was Charlotte's parents' and is filled with colourful china plates and rose-coloured glassware from various sources. **RIGHT** The hand painted lampshade is from TMO Lighting and the mahogany side table was a gift from Boris' parents.





*Charlotte's taste shows a natural instinct for clean lines, soft restful colours and vintage finds*

symmetrically either side of the front door.” However, even though outwardly the rectory seemed to meet all these criteria, when Charlotte first received the estate agent’s details her initial reaction was that it was not for them. “The wiring was ancient, there was no central heating and despite having seven or eight bedrooms there was only one bathroom – it would just need far too much work. But we thought we might as well go to see it anyway.”

The rectory had been owned by the Church and no one had lived there for several years, so it was very neglected. There was ivy all over the windows and the garden was overrun with brambles, while inside the decor was insipid and institutional with curtains in strange colours that did not quite reach the bottom of the windows. “But it felt very much like the house I had grown up in in Hampshire,” Charlotte remembers. “Although not a rectory, that, too, had been next to a church and had been owned by the Ministry of Defence before my parents bought it, so it had the same faded institutional feel to it.”

Boris liked the rectory, too. Despite years of neglect, the house itself felt well built and solid and a survey revealed that the roof was in a good condition, so the Starlings would not be looking at any nasty surprises. All of the original cornices and window shutters were still intact and the rooms had retained their original Georgian proportions; however, fireplaces had been replaced with large, heavily-tiled monstrosities in the 1950s and ’60s and the staircase turned at an abrupt right angle, blocking off the hall, presumably to keep the private quarters separate from the rest of the house. “The only slightly worrying thing was the asbestos floor in the kitchen, which had to be lifted carefully and disposed of before the building work could start,” Charlotte recalls.

Having obtained three quotes for the building work and renovations, the Starlings chose DJ Chutter, a family-run local firm of builders with its own joinery workshop and plenty of experience working with older properties. “The rectory is a Grade II listed building so we had to get permission to change things like the glass in the front door and the fireplaces,” remembers Charlotte. “We never knew quite which way it would go with any one thing. Some things seemed to go through swiftly, while others took longer than expected. The ▶

**ABOVE** The Edwardian window seat belonged to Charlotte’s grandmother and Charlotte had it re-covered in Spider fabric by Neisha Crosland. The blind was made using gold silk fabric from Designers Guild.

**RIGHT** The iron bedstead in the guest bedroom is from Habitat, and is dressed with bed linen from The White Company, covered in a grey birds blanket from Klippan.

**LEFT** The cast-iron fireplace stands out against the yellow Fan-Tree wallpaper by Cole & Son. The white mirror was from Graham & Green and the miniature long case clock is from Achica.



*“I’m still moving things around trying to find the perfect pieces for a particular place...that’s all part of the fun”*



builders were brilliant, but we were renting temporarily in another village nearby while the major work was being done, so I was trying to keep the pace of the work going so we could move in.”

A little more than six months later, the Starlings finally moved in. “We went about a month over the original schedule, and the builders were still here, but the kitchen was in and the house was habitable. It was all very exciting. Both sets of parents came down to help us move in,” Charlotte recalls.

When their furniture came out of storage, and into a house with proportions so different from the one that they had lived in when in London, Charlotte found that much of it either did not fit or did not look right. “Both the dimensions of the rooms

and the ceiling heights are so much greater here; after nearly three years I’m still moving things around and trying to find the perfect pieces for a particular place. It’s an ongoing process but I think that’s all part of the fun,” she explains.

The couple were not familiar with the area when they first arrived, so it has taken time to get to know where to look for fixtures and furnishings. “I found an excellent interiors shop called Strummer Pink in nearby Beaminster, and Dorchester has a wonderful place called the Curiosity Centre where there are about forty different traders selling all sorts of interesting vintagey things,” Charlotte explains.

Her taste shows a natural instinct for clean lines and soft, restful colours and a keen eye for unusual ▶

**ABOVE LEFT** A feature wall in the master bedroom is covered in Caravan wallpaper by Neisha Crosland, and the accents of gold are picked up in the curtains and cushions.

**ABOVE RIGHT** The painted wardrobe, from the Dorchester Curiosity Centre, fits snugly into the recess. The white chair was a vintage find and the floral cushion came from Niche Antiques in London.



**ABOVE** A claw-foot roll-top bath from Albion takes pride of place in the bathroom. The shower enclosure is tiled with tiles from Fired-earth's Valencia Range, while the stained wooden floor is softened by a sheepskin rug from Graham & Green.

and characterful vintage finds. Family heirlooms sit alongside striking salvage pieces while classic English tweedy fabrics are married with quirky block-prints and touches of Scandi-style.

With large windows and generous proportions, everywhere is infused with natural light and air, and both the sitting room and landing have been fitted with floor-to-ceiling bookcases for the couple's many books. Charlotte's favourite place is the comfortable

light-filled breakfast room and the orderly kitchen with its painted cupboards and open shelves displaying the glasses, plates and homewares she has started selling on behalf of local West Country artisans from her website, Velvet & Dash Interiors.

"Boris has fallen in love with the view of the church," Charlotte smiles. "He can lie in the bath and watch the doves flying in and out of the tower; it's such a quintessentially English scene." ■

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