



Katie Dockery has created an extraordinary home, but it's not only the architecture that makes it memorable. It's true that the five-bedroom house in the Surrey Hills is impressive on its own merit: a 6,300 sq ft Passivhaus inspired by a modern agricultural shed, with aluminium cladding, a sprawling layout and full-height windows looking on to a stupendous view: the rolling hills and woodland of the High Weald National Landscape.

What makes the property really remarkable, though, is what Dockery has done with it. She has turned it into a healing place for animals and humans.

Dockery, 60, has been an accountant, interior designer and a special constable. Now she has a new career: horse whisperer. She has worked with 160 troubled children by pairing them with horses and ponies in an attempt to overcome their psychological difficulties.

Dockery and her husband, Mark, 57, the director of a construction company, bought the property in 2010, but didn't complete their house until 2018. In 2017, while they were living in a cottage and waiting for the house to be ready, Dockery established the Viewpoint Centre, the charity where she works her horse magic.

She got the idea to work with children after reading about a 2012 programme in which prisoners at HMP Portland worked with horses, and incidents of bad behaviour in the prison fell significantly.

Dockery is a disciple of Parelli natural horsemanship. Its website describes it as a training method "based on mutual communication, respect and trust between humans and horse, which considers the varying needs of different horse personalities".

She started studying the method after her husband gave her a difficult horse as a wedding present in 1993. "I was literally hanging on for dear life. My instructor said, 'She's evil. You need to put her down.'"

Instead Dockery learnt to read what the horse was telling her and changed her own behaviour to calm it down. "Parelli teaches you to use different strategies for different behaviours. It's a people-teaching programme. It's always the human that has to change first."

She works with children who have shut down and aren't responding to talk therapy; many no longer attend school. Children learn to understand horses' emotions by reading their body language, and getting them to perform a task.

"Because the horses are feeding back, it gives the children the ability to understand how they're being perceived



The Dockerys transformed a stud farm and found a calling – using horses to help troubled children. By *Hugh Graham*

The horse whisperers

and to know what they need to do to get a yes. Do they need to slow down, speed up, be more interesting? It teaches them they're in control. What do they need to change to make it work? Because you can't change anyone else, all you can do is change yourself."

"We, say, ask Billy to go off in a circle, hop over a jump or kick a ball. And Billy will only respond to good leadership. If the person is aggressive, the horse might go into fight-or-flight mode. But with a different horse, if the person wasn't assertive enough, that horse might just stand there."

Dockery says the same techniques used with horses – she has nine – can be



applied to human relationships. "If you have someone who is shut down and terrified, and we push them to do something, they'll explode. What we need to do is breathe and wait for them to come round. Whereas with another person you've got to do something interesting to engage them. It's key to understand the body language."

Dockery has an eye for potential – whether it's with horses, humans or property. For years they lived three miles away in a five-bedroom Victorian farmhouse and would ride past the stud farm owned by the former Qatari prime minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Khalifa al-Thani. "I used to think, wow, what a

beautiful spot. But there were these big ugly barns and concrete everywhere. I just thought, no, it needs something. I knew it could be amazing."

The stud farm was divided into lots that came up for sale in 2009 and the couple considered buying one of them. A consultant told them they only had a 30 per cent chance of getting planning permission to build, because the land was in an area of outstanding natural beauty.

So, before they bought it, they hired Hawkes Architecture, which helped them to submit a preplanning application in autumn 2009. "The council sent it back and said, 'We're not even going to look at it. We don't do modern – forget it,'" Dockery says. "And that really enraged me. I thought, that's such a poor attitude."

In November 2009 their architect, Richard Hawkes, suggested that they hire a planning consultant, Rob Hughes, to help them get permission. By August 2010 they were sufficiently confident to buy the smallest of the four lots on the property – 109 acres including an American barn with 36 stables, a Dutch barn, an artificial insemination unit (now a two-bedroom annexe), manège and the cottage (now demolished).

They rented out their own house and moved into the leaky cottage with their

two children, Charlie, now 29, and Ella, 23. When they applied for planning permission in 2011, though, they were refused. Hughes appealed, citing its green credentials (it's a Passivhaus with solar panels, biomass boiler and triple glazing). He argued it should be approved under a national planning policy now known as Paragraph 84, which allows exceptional architecture in rural areas.

In July 2012 permission was granted on appeal. "The appeals guy said the design was fantastic." The secret of its success was that it resembled an agricultural building. "Richard was brilliant at just making something that sits well within the environment. It was important that it didn't stick out like a sore thumb."

They still had to wait five years to start construction, however. They needed to sell their house to fund the build, and three buyers dropped out at exchange. The build finally started in summer 2017, and finished in December 2018. It was the culmination of an almost ten-year journey; the budget was £1.8 million.

Dockery's personality is written all over the animal-mad interiors. In the front hall there's a lifesize Moooi horse floor lamp, as well as several equine-themed sculptures and paintings. The



Katie and Mark Dockery's home in the Surrey Hills is furnished in an eclectic style, reflecting their love of animals, including a Moooi horse lamp, far left, and Menagerie of Extinct Animals wallpaper, below

wallpaper in the hallway is Moooi's Menagerie of Extinct Animals. It's a colourful spectacle that suits Dockery's eclectic mix-and-match aesthetic, which relies heavily on furnishings from Oka and Ardingly antiques fair.

The floors are hard-wearing porcelain tiles, to accommodate their three dogs and two cats. Dockery is something of a Pied Piper – when she goes outside into a yard the ten hens she rescued from a battery farm follow her around. "They would normally go to slaughter at 72 weeks. With us they live to about four or five. They live such horrible lives in those cages." She has four cows, three pigs and seventeen sheep, most of them rescued from slaughter.

Viewpoint has an air of tranquillity, with a natural swimming pond fringed by wild grasses. They have planted hundreds of trees and masses of hedgerow. "When I open our curtains in the morning and look at the view, I always say, 'Welcome to another day in paradise.'"

The visiting children must think that too. Dockery doesn't believe in breaking the spirit of horses – or children. "We call it starting. A much more gentle, communicative approach, rather than, 'You will do this and you will do that.' The horse racing industry is very similar to the school system, where they go, right, you've all got to do this. And the ones that don't make it, they're literally broken. They're done away with. But they've all got their place and their gifts they can bring to the world. It's not a one size fits all – in the horse world or in the human world."

Sometimes the parents are so moved watching their children with the horses they end up in tears. So now Dockery has started doing horse work with grown-ups. She has also set up Men at Walk, a monthly gathering where men walk and talk on the farm to reduce isolation. To raise more funds for the charity work, where executives learn better management skills from working with the horses.

"Horses will always do more out of heart and desire. They don't care how much you know; they want to know how much you care. And it's the same with any leader. For my boss, if I felt he really cared about me and understood me and set it up in a way that worked for me, rather than threatened me or bullied me, I'd certainly do much more."

Who knew that handling horses could impart such wisdom – and that a new-build could end up helping so many people? "This house has changed our lives, and other people's," Dockery says. "We're very grateful."

The next Homebuilding & Renovating Shows are at the SEC, Glasgow (May 10-11) and Sandown Park, Surrey (June 28-29). Free tickets from homebuildingshow.co.uk/the-times

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