



# Seeing the light

Artists have converted a former Methodist chapel in Wellingore to create a bright and open living space

**Words and photographs:**  
*Jenny and Chris Webb*

*Below: The conversion has created a wide open living space*

*Opposite page: The master bedroom high in the roof*

To many people who live south of Watford Gap, Lincolnshire is simply a place-name on a map; a county associated with the Royal Air Force, flat fenland and dykes, and the cultivation of potatoes and cabbages. Most incomers are amazed at the diversity of the landscape in the region, ranging from the infinite sky and farmland of the south, to the magnificent scenery of the wolds in the north and the dramatic coastline of the east. Newcomers excitedly discover the many delightful historic market towns and picturesque rural villages throughout the county and are irresistibly drawn to the city of Lincoln and its majestic cathedral. Conversely settlers often bring new businesses and ideas to the province for the benefit of all. One such couple are Nicola Streeten and John Plowman who moved from London to Wellingore, near

Lincoln, with their small daughter Sally, seven years ago. I visited them at their home, which they have converted from a former chapel.

The characteristic exterior of the building remains but the interior has been transformed.

Nicola enthusiastically took me on a tour of the house and described the events which ultimately led to the purchase of the chapel and significantly changed the building and their way of life.

“John is an artist and we met seventeen years ago when I was a mature student and he was my tutor on an access course in art and design. We hit it off straight away and shared the same ideas and views on life. I had previously studied anthropology and John was interested in that in terms of his artwork. We got married and were living in a one-bedroom flat in London. By now I was an illustrator so we rented a studio for both of us to work in. After Sally was born we were running out of space and more and more things ended up in the studio. It wasn't ideal especially as sometimes we couldn't even park our car outside the building. One evening, we were sitting in a traffic jam and had one of those conversations about dreams, the future, and what we'd really like to do. We agreed that we needed a combined domestic and workspace. We were self-employed which meant we could move away, or should we stay in London and spend a lot of money and gain not a lot more room or sell up and live in another part of the country. We started looking at pubs to convert, which was an urban idea, but they were too expensive. John's father had found his business through a national magazine and suggested we try that. This is how we discovered Lincolnshire and the chapel.”

The attractive village of Wellingore sits on the 'cliff' overlooking the valley of the river Brant to the west. It is only ten miles from Lincoln and still has a local shop, post office and several pubs. Many of the charming houses are built from stone. There are good connections to Nottingham and links to London from Grantham. These were all important factors to be considered. Nicola's





family lived in London and their concern was whether the couple were making the right decision. The Wesleyan chapel was built in 1897 on gifted land given by the owners of Rose Cottage, the adjacent property. A Sunday school was added in 1925. John and Nicola realised the building had potential and loved the village; but would they adapt to the rural lifestyle?

Nicola continued: "Technology swayed the decision. Obviously we both needed to work and maintain our urban links. The internet was in its infancy but it would provide us with the connections we required and keep us up to date with all the latest exhibitions. The chapel had been deconsecrated and was derelict. The reading room had been purchased as an office but the business had gone bankrupt. That's why it was for sale. At one time the chapel and reading room were important to the community. A Sunday school was held in the building which was later used for meetings and jumble sales. We decided to live in the reading room building, which was a huge living space compared to the London flat, make that habitable and then gradually renovate the chapel."

The chapel had a huge hole in the roof so it was covered in tarpaulin and used by John as a studio. A kitchen, toilet and shower were installed in the reading room once all the main services and pipe-work were replaced. Access to the building was at the back where there was also an old kitchen and two outhouses. These were knocked down to create a small courtyard which is now planted with large shrubs. The reading room was then connected to the chapel. Nicola acknowledged the living conditions were difficult at times but she and John did quite a lot of the work themselves and kept the project on track. One has to applaud their tenacity and patience. No renovations are easy and Sally was only two years old at that time.

Eventually they began work on the chapel. The first priority was to mend the roof.

"There was a lot of panelling round the chapel but it was infested with dry rot and woodworm so we stripped the walls back to the bare brick. We then remembered that Lincolnshire winters are colder than in London so we insulated it very heavily and screed the surface. John put in all the metal joists which sup-

port the structure and my Dad, who is a retired structural engineer, designed the steel work for the stairs and the structure which provides a platform for the rooms upstairs.

"We had steel fabricators from Skegness to put in the structure. It was wonderful having this huge space to live in and before the electricity was connected we spent the summer evenings in candlelight." Nicola told me.

The chapel is indeed impressive with its soaring fifteen-foot ceiling and original beautiful, arched stained glass windows which encircle the whole building. The couple intended to keep the vast room open plan but decided to build a small sitting room cum library for privacy and extra warmth in the winter.

One part of the room is fitted out as a kitchen and the dining area, furnished with a long wooden table and pews, is situated by the focal point of the room a large arch. A huge pencil drawing, by John, has pride of place on the arched wall. All the walls are painted white to emphasise the spaciousness and in contrast the steel joists and staircase are painted deep fuchsia. Three cream sofas offer comfort and relaxation and the lighting is provided by a bank of spotlights which change colour at the flick of a switch. A modern floor lamp with a huge stainless steel globe shade gives extra illumination. In addition to several other pictures, the room contains a stuffed owl and squirrel, a powerful looking stag's head, a wooden rocking horse and lots of candles.

The room is heated by substantial-looking radiators which the couple found in a reclamation yard while on a camping holiday near Berwick. They were stored for a few years and, according to Nicola, were a nightmare to plumb in. She said the chapel is a brilliant room for entertaining and at Christmas they can seat nineteen guests.

Upstairs are the master bedroom, Sally's room, a bathroom and Nicola's study. This overlooks the chapel through a large, round panelled window which was discovered in a reclamation yard. The furnishings have been kept to a minimum except for Sally's room which is filled with her collection of soft toys. The rooms are large with sloping ceilings and are very light.

Downstairs we were joined by Holly, a friendly Staffordshire bull terrier. Nicola explained that she and John quickly adapted

*The converted chapel*





to rural living but realised that they hardly walked anywhere which is why Holly became a much loved part of the family. “She is a good excuse for us to get some exercise and have a chance to appreciate the surrounding countryside.”

Nicola is an illustrator who uses a humorous cartoon style to paint people, maps and buildings. She has her own website, as does John. She was funny, eloquent and expressive throughout my visit and confessed to being the loud one in the partnership. John, she said, was a quiet intellectual. Their differing personalities are apparent in their artwork. In addition to working from his studio, originally the reading room, John is a reader in fine art at the Lincoln school of Art and Design.

The couple are passionate about art but soon concluded that visiting galleries and exhibitions in the countryside is vastly different from doing this in London. Many are in the larger towns and have few visitors. John wanted more people to have access to art, ideally presenting new art in a rural setting, and decided it would make more sense to take people to the art, hence the Beacon project concept was born. Initially John approached the district development arts officer, with his idea, who Nicola said, was very supportive. It took time to get the project up and running and get a grant. The project is now funded by the LCSI (Lincolnshire creative solutions initiative).

Nicola said they wanted to introduce people to different forms of art in a friendly way, so a free coach is used to take people to hidden heritage sites to view new commissioned works. This year, John has invited five internationally acclaimed artists to submit work. The theme is appropriately titled ‘No place like home.’ Two of the artists will work with the local schools and give the children access to different types of art. The submissions of four performance artists have been requested nationwide, and also students, who have graduated within the last five years, to give them the experience of showing with established artists and working within a school or community.

“Even if people don’t like or understand the art, they all say they enjoy the four hour day out.” Nicola told me. “It is also helping the economy as all the artists’ materials are supplied locally and the artists and visitors stay in the local bed-and-breakfasts so the project generates income. We would like to establish Beacon nationally and internationally, the growing interest of the public has convinced us there is a need for our project”.

Nicola said the couple’s future plans will involve continuing the work on the chapel and promoting their own work and the Beacon project.

Although the move to Lincolnshire was a step into the unknown, the family have embraced country living wholeheartedly and stoutly defend the county’s rural traditions. They have lovingly restored an important abandoned building and through their commitment to art have brought new ideas and concepts to many Lincolnshire people.

*Clockwise from below: The former reading room provides plenty of space for John’s studio; The enclosed library-cum-sitting room is a quiet and cosy area; Nicola’s study*

