

Upwards and onwards

Don't stand still at Katie Jarvis's house or you'll get painted after our self-confessed non-artist is inspired by a fun day of upcycling furniture

This is so stressful. I agree to a cup of tea with a PR ex of London who's moved to the Cotswolds (it's harder to find one who hasn't), and the next thing I know, I've accidentally agreed to go to a furniture-painting workshop in Selsley. You know how it is - Earl Grey one moment, upcycling the next. Happens to the best of us.

Anyway. This is a disaster for two reasons:

a) I'm rubbish at anything artistic. (One of my worst school memories is of my art teacher picking up my painting and announcing to the class, "This is a very naughty girl!". I had absolutely no conception of why. My esprit d'escalier was, "Well, Picasso broke the rules". (Pretty sure that would have turned things around.))

And b) I don't have any furniture to paint.

As it happens, I'm in Stratford the day before the course, so I scour the shops for any cheap furniture I can upcycle. Horrifically, the shops are full of appallingly nice furniture - their market research is clearly rubbish. All the grotty stuff must be in the Birthplace Museum. (Look; I'm not being rude. It was nice before visitors such as Keats graffiti-ed on it, rendering it practically worthless.) (Plus, rumour has it that Shakespeare's house is full of stuff like second-best beds.)

So I sit in my house despondently, the night before the course, wondering whether or not to cancel... when it strikes me. As I look around, I suddenly realise - joy of joys! - my own furniture is *absolutely dreadful*. This is like a dream come true! In fact, I've a fantastically varied choice of stuff to take, mostly bought at auction by Ian until I begged him to stop.

So I shove a very brown (though sturdy) mahogany bookcase - that normally resides



Katie's bookcase - before

in my sitting room - into my car and head off to the Water Lane Workshops. It's here that the wonderful (and artistic) Kate Holloway - a Cotswold girl born and bred - runs courses ranging from needlepoint to plant design, alongside lampshade and wreath-making and more.

But... just a moment! As I turn off the common and into her drive, her house (and the lovely barn where the workshops are based) looks strangely familiar. "Ah!" Kate says. "That's because this used to be Selsley Herb Farm where, in fact, I used to work when I was younger. When it came up for sale - that was it! I already had an emotional attachment to the place. Actually, while we were looking round, they didn't even need to show me the house - I was hooked the minute I saw the outbuildings and realised what I could do with them."

(In other words, poor Mr Holloway was staring defeat in the face the minute they crossed the threshold.)

So, let the course begin: we workshop participants (after tucking into coffee and

muffins) gather our rough bits of furniture together for the kind of 'before' photoshoot that women's

magazines are so keen on. The furniture, quite rightly, looks oversized, badly dressed and is not smiling at all. There's a huge pine kitchen table that's seen better days; two spindly bedside cabinets; a 1940s tea trolley; and two occasional tables that threaten hernias, were you to try to lift them.

On the wall is a colour-chart of paints we can pick from. Utterly gorgeously, these are colours mixed for Kate herself - made from natural earth pigments - for which she has chosen evocative names; Painswick yew; Hidcote lavender; Golden Valley green; Rodmarton rose. My plan for my bookcase-makeover is to paint the frame a lovely dove-y Water Lane grey, offset with shelves in Common blue (while banishing the unbidden voice in my ear, tutting at my choice, and sternly iterating, "This is a very naughty girl!").

I am scared, as I sit with my fellow painters round a table, about to receive instruction from expert Clive Burling, a former London photographer and antique-shop owner, who now undertakes all sorts of skilled paint commissions. "I love bringing things back to life," he tells us. "Finding an old, neglected piece of furniture in someone's garage, painting it, and then have someone fall in love with it."

The Water Lane paints we're using today, he says, are ideal: you don't need to prepare the furniture (just a clean surface; though there is a caveat for the pine, for which he supplies a special (easy) knotting preparation); the paint dries very quickly; it's ideal for creating finishes, from shabby chic and vintage to crackle glazing; and any idiot can do it. (He doesn't actually say this;

