

I do like to be beside the seaside



Hastings is undergoing a creative renaissance, attracting designers to its fashionable Old Town.
Katie Forster pays a visit. Photographs by Suki Dhanda



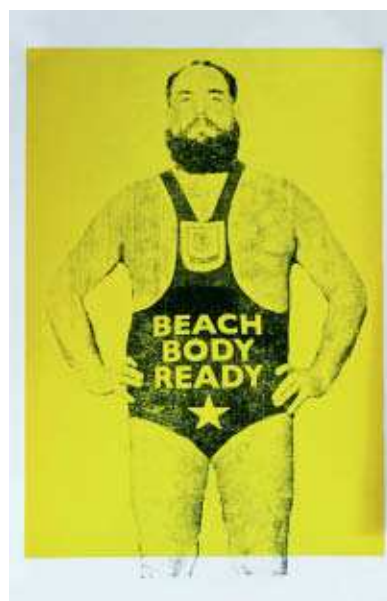
Homes

Wallpaper designer Deborah Bowness moved from London to a former ballroom near the seafront, and on to an industrial estate 'with a proper creative community'

When wallpaper designer Deborah Bowness moved to Hastings from London seven years ago, she didn't expect to be working from a deserted ballroom on the seafront. "It was decayed glamour, battered and worn, with huge windows that looked out on to the sea. I was there for six months," she says, sitting in a deckchair outside her beach chalet. "In London, I worked in a garage with no natural light, so to have an empty ballroom felt ridiculous."

Bowness, known for her hand-printed wallpaper featuring trompe l'oeil bookshelves, lamps and dresses, is one of the many artists, designers and furniture traders who have flocked to Hastings and nearby St Leonards in recent years. "There is a proper creative community here," she says. "I now work on an industrial estate, and there's all sorts going on there: a vintage engineer with beautiful motorbikes, two set designers."

Hastings was the place to be in the 1960s and 70s, with the likes of the Rolling Stones, the Kinks and Jimi Hendrix performing on the old pier. But years of neglect in the following decades left it a depressed seaside town with high levels of deprivation. The arrival of contemporary art hotspot the Jerwood Gallery in 2012, and the unveiling of the pier in April (after a £14.2m revamp following a fire) have both boosted the creative credentials of the town, which has been nicknamed Shoreditch-on-Sea. Along with other coastal towns



Sound of the sea: printmaker Pea Crabtree in her studio (left) and one of her prints (below, left). Opposite and below, right: homewares store Dyke & Dean, housed in the town's former local newspaper printworks

such as Margate, Whitstable and Leigh-on-Sea, it is fast developing a reputation as a more affordable alternative to London and Brighton.

The pier, the redevelopment of which was part-crowdfunded, features a sleek contemporary cafe and terrace, and there are plans for open-air film screenings. In the Old Town there is an artisan brewery at the historic First In Last Out pub and an organic bakery, Judges, run by a co-founder of chocolate company Green & Black's.

Designer and Hastings resident Louise Body recommended the town to Bowness, who was sick of the capital's relentless noise and expense. Body, from Reigate in Surrey, has been in Hastings for a decade. "It feels like Brighton did 20 or 30 years ago," she says. "It's easy to run a creative business here, because everything's quite cheap."

Edward Dyke and Oliver Dean met at Central Saint Martins design school in London in 2006. Together they run homeware store Dyke & Dean in a historic area south of the station known as the America Ground. Their shop is in a grand Victorian building that used to house the printers of the Hastings and St Leonards Observer newspaper (it is now printed in Portsmouth). Their own lighting collection, which they sell alongside other homewares, is so popular they have had to move their workshop to the same industrial estate as Bowness. The pair have another store in Berlin, a pop-up shop in London's King's Cross and are in talks to launch in New York. »

OBSERVER OFFICE





Photographer Alastair Hendy in his restored Georgian shop. Below: Hastings Old Town

There's a long tradition of ambitious design in Hastings, says Dyke: "This building was based on one in St Mark's Square in Venice."

While Dyke grew up in nearby Rye and now lives in Hastings, Dean lives in east London, where he manages the online business and commutes regularly to the shop - an hour and a half from Charing Cross. "Dragon Bar, a bistro on the high street, has a sister restaurant in Shoreditch," says Dean. "When I came here, I thought: I know I can spend some time here."

Designer and food photographer Alastair Hendy also lives between London and Hastings. He restored a Georgian shop on the high street, opening AG Hendy and Co in 2011, selling classic household products. Many look Victorian but are actually new, from old-fashioned ostrich

feather dusters to a best-selling nail brush. "We don't sell anything plastic," says Hendy. "We want to make housework an enjoyable experience. It's practical, but when it's hanging up it doesn't have to be in a cupboard." Hendy has childhood memories of Hastings beach, as his grandparents lived nearby. "There's a bit of 'us and them' - locals and outsiders - but people are pretty warm."

Following the pier's devastating fire, designer Stewart Walton, who runs the Hastings and Bexhill Wood Recycling Project, has been turning its salvaged wood into contemporary garden furniture. Residents have been snapping up the tables, chairs and keyrings made from the former landmark. "The wood has the spirit of all the musicians who played there," says Walton, who employs

'There is a spirit of fun here, like being on permanent holiday'



people from the nearby jobcentre to work on his projects.

Another designer who has been involved in community projects is letterpress printmaker Pea Crabtree, originally from Lancashire, who runs her Lucky Budgie studio on the high street. She is raising money to bring a vintage steamroller, used to make large-scale prints, to one of the town's most deprived estates. She plans to run workshops with young people there to commemorate the 950th anniversary of the battle of Hastings in October.

Like everyone I meet, Crabtree has embraced Hastings, and extols the benefits of coastal life. "There is a spirit of fun here, like being on permanent holiday," she says. "I don't think I could ever live anywhere without the sea again." ●