

JANE SLADE meets Kiloran McGrigor who swapped an exotic life in London for that of a rural landlady

THE NOSES of two golden Labradors are pressed up against the French windows of the kitchen and the front door is ajar: this has to be the country! I tap politely and nose in. The hall table creaks under the weight of the piles of country magazines and scuttling paws bound warmly towards me followed by my hostess. I am fascinated by the intriguing collection of china hippos somewhat incongruously at my feet. This is going to be fun.

Kiloran McGrigor bought her Cotswold home 11 years ago when it was a tumble down cottage with four bedrooms, one bathroom and no central heating. "It was very classically Cotswold pretty," she explains. "I felt the warmth of it instantly."

Wren House dates from around 1600 and sits in an acre plot in the delightful hamlet of Donnington, not far from the site of the last battle of the English civil war on March 21, 1646, and just down the road from the fashionable Gloucestershire market town of Stow-on-the-Wold.

Kiloran paid about £300,000 for her cottage in 1999 with original stone fireplace and oak beams but has invested considerably more in creating a stunning home which encapsulates everything a traditional English cottage should be; comfy window seats in the cosy sitting room, baskets of logs by the fire and invitations crammed on the mantelpiece.

"I set about refurbishing and extending the moment I owned it," she says. "I lightened the interior and de-tarred the beams. It had no good-sized living space so I knocked out a wall, demolished a garage and built a light, spacious kitchen."

IT HAS made the house feel bigger and pulls the sunlight in." Indeed, the kitchen is now the centre of the house. With the French windows open on a sunny morning, the garden seems to be drawn in as well.

Kiloran had swapped a three-bedroom cottage in Battersea, south London and prestigious job for country life.

"I just didn't want to spend the rest of my life in London," she says. "I loved my work but I was increasingly

wanting the space and beauty of the countryside. Running my house as a B&B seemed obvious and it was a dramatically different challenge." She packed away her smart suits and shoes and got stuck into her new life and wardrobe of jeans and green wellies. She took jobs locally as a secretary to make ends meet while she renovated.

Her quintessential English country garden didn't always overflow with catmint, valerian, astringia, delphiniums, buddleias, hebes and roses. She sub-divided it into "garden rooms" with lovely places to sit and soak up the sun and enjoy the views to fields beyond. "My mother was a wonderful gardener. My interest was sparked and I learned a lot from her."

It is hardly surprising that Kiloran is now chatelaine of one of the most sought-after B&Bs in Gloucestershire.

Her background as a professional cook, she used to feed hungry guests at top Scottish lodges during the stalking season, means that her largely organic English breakfasts are memorable feasts served off a big farmhouse table which groans under pretty blue and white china, jars of her delicious home-made, Seville orange marmalade (now sold

in Finns of Chelsea), toast and pots of freshly-brewed tea and coffee. No surprise that she gained an Alastair Sawday food award last year for attention to this detail.

There have been many eclectic gatherings round her kitchen table, where on occasion dynamic debate has spellbound visitors including captains of industry, financiers, authors, politicians and newspaper editors from all over the world through till nearly lunchtime.

"There have been some very stimulating conversations," Kiloran reveals. "People come from all walks of life; recently I hosted two eminent anthropologists who were experts on Amazonian Indians. People stay at a B&B these days to experience someone's personal home in comfort but also to meet others."

"I have taken a drop in income for lifestyle. I work much harder physically but the benefit is that I am my own boss, everything is down to me, success and failure. You have to be motivated and disciplined. It is about making maximum use of your property asset to provide you with an income."

Last year Kiloran opened the Granary; a delightful grade II listed 17th-century barn that stands on a plot next door to Wren House. The two plots are now integrated and the

Granary converted into a two-storey, one-bedroomed holiday cottage.

"I wanted to buy the land more than the building for parking," she said. "I was tired of people reversing into my walls and wanted the garden of the house to be just garden but the Granary is a great addition."

SHE NEGOTIATED the price down to £265,000 for the building and the land in 2007. She laid Indian sandstone on the terraces and surrounded the cottage's own private garden with locally quarried dry stone walls, employing local artisans and builders.

During the winter she has installed a log burner and the new walled garden of Wren House is to be planted in the spring with fruit trees and raised beds and, foxes permitting, she hopes to keep organically reared chickens as well.

The Granary, which re-opens in March, is detached from the main house, standing on its own grounds.

The plot including her own Wren House must now be worth in excess of £1million due to its stunning location 1 hour 30 minutes from London and Heathrow, 45 minutes from Birmingham, 1 hour from Bristol, 25 minutes from Stratford-upon-Avon and 35 minutes from Oxford or Cheltenham; in other words, slap bang in the middle of England.

The Cotswolds has always been fashionable with its honey-stone cottages and villages, rolling countryside and charming market towns. The relatively recent invasion of glamorous film stars Liz Hurley and Kate Winslet and supermodel Kate Moss has ensured the spotlight remains on the area and property prices command a premium. As local agent Martin Elliott confirms: "There is a shortage of country homes for sale in the Cotswolds."