

She sells SEASHELLS

A lifelong collector, Linda Fenwick now recycles her beachcombing finds into tactile picture frames, mirrors and panels, as well as bespoke room schemes

Words RACHEL CROW *Photographs* JEREMY PHILLIPS



THIS IMAGE & RIGHT Linda and Crumbles, her golden cocker spaniel, outside her studio, which is housed in a converted stables building beside guest accommodation



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT A small selection of Linda's shells; she refers to an architectural encyclopedia when sketching designs; a sundial shell ringed by mussels, bubbles, scallops, volutes and limpets; an intricate mirror frame

Linda Fenwick's idyllic studio, which is housed in a converted stable block next to her Victorian rectory home, brims with shells. Shelves are lined with boxes spilling over with scotch bonnet, star limpet, leopard cone, conch, cockle, cowrie, scallop and a multitude of other shell varieties, the myriad spiralling shapes, pearly sheens, natural colours and variegated patterns a feast for the eyes. The rolling waves of the sea, however, are nowhere in sight. Instead, surrounding the honey coloured stone building is her three acre garden filled with rhododendrons, azaleas and in summer a riot of delphiniums, beyond which is the gently undulating countryside of north Yorkshire. 'My work brings a little of the sea to people's homes, but it is as much about the texture in the pieces,' Linda explains, as she indicates her bespoke panels and mirror frames that rest against the walls, encrusted with these leftover homes of creatures of the sea.

Hailing from Dallas, in Texas, Linda worked in fashion before she met her husband, James, who is of the Fenwicks department store family. The family retail business brought them back to London and then on to Yorkshire, where they have lived in their current home for about 17 years. 'I have worked in interior design since moving to >



'I have always collected shells and wanted to do something with them, and I love architecture and art, so all of these things have fed in to each other and go hand in hand'



OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE

FROM TOP Linda designed and created the shell folly with the help of her joiner Colin Thomas – he measured and made each wooden panel to which the shells are fixed, and then installed them once completed; it sits in a quiet corner of the garden; a pearl trochus is surrounded by branch coral, pearl turbans, abalones, pearl monitas and moon shells

CLOCKWISE FROM

TOP LEFT Linda works on new designs, while Crumbles watches on; she mocks up a pattern with shells; shapes are drawn on to a backing board to act as guides; light reflects off the pearly interiors of abalones and mussels

England and while I was visiting a friend in the Caribbean about five years ago, I saw a few shell houses over there and got the idea in my head of starting my own project,' she explains.

The project was a purpose built hexagonal folly in her garden, the interior of which is entirely decorated in shells, their tactile forms covering alcoves, arches, ceiling and walls. 'I worked with my joiner, Colin Thomas, and it took about four years to get the building finished, grabbing free days as and when. It took me a year altogether to finish the interior, creating and putting up each panel separately, and I added the last shell in 2010, the night before we opened the garden for the NGS,' Linda explains. 'I have always collected shells and wanted to do something with them, and I love architecture and art, so all of these things have fed in to each other and go hand in hand.'

Just a stone's throw from the house, the atmospheric folly is now used for lunches and dinners, when candlelight reflects off the iridescent forms covering every surface. 'People find it very peaceful sitting in a room full of shells,' Linda confirms. 'You just imagine where they have travelled to and come from.'

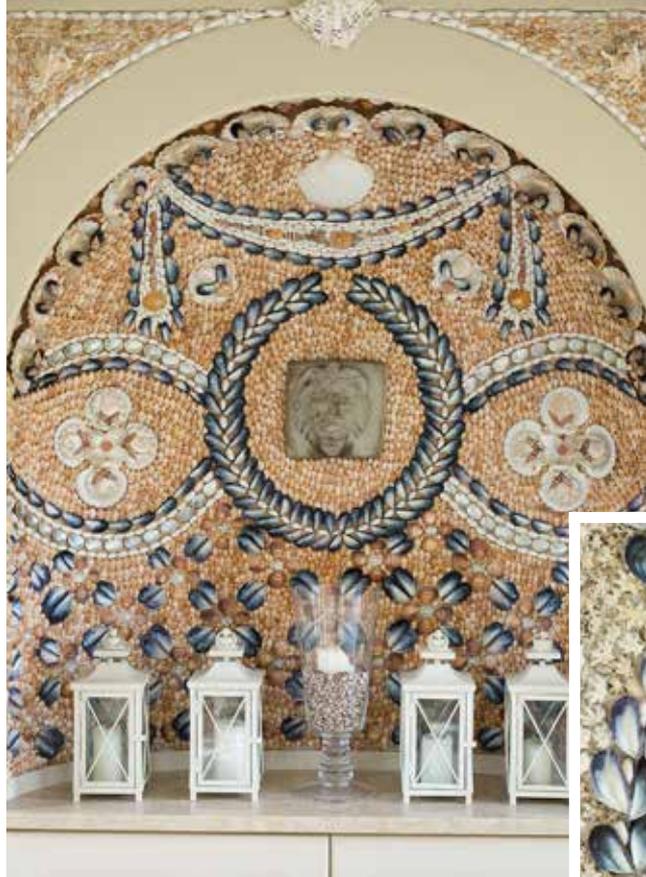
She soon got enquiries to create similar picture and mirrors frames, adorned storm lanterns and shell rooms, including decorating the interior of a loggia at Skipwith Hall, and the business has grown

gradually by word of mouth. 'I'm lucky that the work comes to me and is enough to keep me busy but is not overwhelming. I just completed a mirror for a friend in the Cotswolds to coordinate with some of her wallpaper, but I also enjoy the larger projects like a garden room, although I have a team of workers and friends who I can call on to help me stick on the background shells for these.'

Inspired by Georgian designs, including classical wreaths and swags, Linda uses the shells as an artist would paints, gradually building up a design. 'I love to visit stately homes and find inspiration from the likes of old plasterwork and cornicing. I am constantly sketching and taking photographs.'

Her fascination with shells developed from a young age, when family holidays were spent on Sanibel Island off the coast of Florida, which she describes as 'completely covered in them'. She sources many for her work now through agents, but still collects razor clams and limpets off the ➤

The Artisan



'Any holiday I go on, I will comb the beaches... I don't think that thrill of finding a beautiful shell ever fades'

west coast of Scotland, picking the remnants left by the food foragers who arrive with the spring tides. 'Any holiday I go on, I will take an extra suitcase if allowed and comb the beaches for more,' Linda explains. Even her three children, aged 24, 22 and 18, are handed a bucket and spade. 'They are happy to do it with me and I don't think that thrill of finding a beautiful shell ever fades.'

Once she has sketched out and agreed on a design and palette, the shells have to be carefully sorted – 'the longest and most tedious job' – first to remove any broken ones and clean them, then to arrange by size and colour. Only then will she lay them out in the chosen design, not yet committing any to paste. 'Sometimes as I work I will find different shells that work better. There are always natural variations in the colours and no two are exactly the same, so the end result will never match up exactly to the original drawings.' Any imperfect specimens are recycled in a shell path she has created in the herb garden next to her studio.

Fixing each individual shell is slow, delicate and patient work. 'Once I start, though, I just get completely absorbed in what I am doing and the hours fly by,' Linda says. 'Sometimes the most common shells are the most attractive, like little cowries, mussels, or abalones with their mother of pearl inside. They are delicate looking but quite tough and durable. They have survived in the sea for years, and live on now in these pieces.' ↪

• For more details visit lindafenwickshelldesign.com



TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT A bespoke mirror frame incorporates a sconce; Georgian inspired wreaths and swags feature in many of Linda's designs; the coral tones of queen scallop shells stand out in this panel
ABOVE Hundreds of star limpets make up this piece's background
ABOVE LEFT Having experimented with various pastes, Linda found a swimming pool tile adhesive the best
LEFT She carefully positions each shell in the paste to set
BELOW LEFT A large mushroom coral is surrounded by white dog conches. Linda hand mixes the background paint colours