

Me and my home

# Bedtime stories

A cosy cottage bedroom is an inspired place to write Tessa Dahl tells Cheryl Markosky

*Writer and journalist Tessa Dahl, the eldest daughter of author Roald Dahl and actress Patricia Neal, and mother of model Sophie Dahl, Clover, Luke and Ned, lives in a Grade II-listed 17th century smithy in Oxfordshire as well as New York.*

**T**he Old Forge in Wheatley is much bigger than it looks. It appears tall and narrow on the outside, but has six bedrooms and three reception rooms once you are inside. I was living in Battersea after a stint in America and needed to find something big enough for my family and myself when I divorced. Details for the house came through the letterbox and I realised this was the perfect place for a divorced woman who needed big bedrooms, bathrooms and plenty of space for teenagers and a nanny.

I couldn't afford to stay in the capital, but the joy of Wheatley is that it is only an hour away from London and 10 minutes from Oxford. The town has great facilities: a bank; a village shop that stays open until nine at night; Cinnamon, the best Indian restaurant in Oxfordshire; a doctor's surgery; a petrol station; an Asda; and a bakery, which is glorious because you can smell fresh bread baking at night. The family who previously ran the bakery once lived in my house with then 16 children.

Oxford is our main shopping place, but rather dangerously, I have discovered Bicester Village only 15 minutes away down the M40. It has all sorts of affordable designer outlets and shops and is the most tempting and terrifying thing in the world.

My four-storey higgledy-piggledy house has a separate bedroom, sitting room and bathroom on the ground floor, which is ideal for a nanny or granny. The kitchen, dining room and a big drawing room are on the same floor. There are four more bedrooms on the first floor and two bathrooms, including my bedroom hidden away at the back. There are tons of cupboards and heaps of storage space. Men don't want huge cupboards, but women do. Women adore the house, but some husbands find it a bit too feminine.

There is a huge loft with yet more storage and my son's enormous bedroom and bathroom on the top floor. The basement has two cellars, great for wine buffs, and utility and store rooms. It is a real family house. I bought it three years ago, but with virtually all the children gone now - only 10-year-old Ned is left - and Sophie in New York most the time, I am selling it and buying something smaller in the same area. I have bought an apartment just round the corner from Sophie, so I can spend time there with her.

I had to do tons to the house. My bedroom was more of a studio and I turned the room next door into a huge bathroom. Clover, who is 20 and now studying drama, has a bedroom, living room and a bathroom with a power shower. I insist on proper power showers. The English don't understand why they are so important.

A wall was knocked down to open up the sitting room and I also knocked down the wall between the kitchen and dining room. I had to sort out the electrics too. The garden is wonderful and partially enclosed and I've filled it with 50 old English roses. There is a gorgeous array of colour when they bloom and they look wonderfully old-fashioned and cottagey. My style is very eclectic - a mixture of all sorts. Fabrics come from places like Colefax and Fowler and Chelsea Harbour. My favourite spot in the house is my bedroom. Because it is so big



and leads down into the garden on to an old-fashioned terrace I find it really romantic. It is at the end of the house and is immensely private.

I've collected furniture over the years. I married when I was 22 and got my first "proper" home. There is a wonderful antique shop nearby called The Swan, at Tetsworth. There are 30 shops and a restaurant in an old coaching house hotel and I have bought relentlessly from there. I am a sucker for things under domes and I have early Georgian pieces through to Victorian. My bed is wonderful - embroidered by embroider and artist Janie Sinclair. I do all my writing from my bed - all four of my children's books were penned there. You can't patronise children; they get bored very easily and now I'm writing my second novel. I write by hand, leaning on a book signed to me by Francis Bacon that I think gives me inspiration. I don't use a computer, because

then the words go from the hand to the machine and not past your heart. This is important when you write of things you care about deeply.

I will be bereft when I sell the house and wonder sometimes if I am doing the right thing. Nowhere will have anywhere near enough cupboards like this place. I would love to see another family living here, who like village life and perhaps still have a life of sorts in London. Mind you, I hardly ever stay in London anymore, as it is so easy to drive back here at the end of an evening.

There is a beautiful stream that runs through the upper part of Wheatley and there are great walks along there and at Shotover. You are rewarded with a great combination of town and country here - you get to live in a pretty rural spot, but still have good shops and great facilities close by.

The Old Forge is a very special house with loads of character. I can imagine a divorced or

**Artfully arranged: Tessa Dahl has stamped her character throughout the family home**  
John Lawrence

separated woman settling happily here like I have. There is enough room to put up family and visitors, which can be important to someone who have been used to life in a big house. Also, you can retreat into the cosy bits of the house and hide away when you need to.

*The Old Forge is available through Kemp & Kemp (01865 510000), offers in excess of £600,000.*