

# Our passion for the past



Guests at Cheviot Holiday Homes can slip luxuriously back in time – and relax in a Victorian bathroom with a real log fire. Graham Stephenson tells **Linda Pyke** how he and his wife Trysha built award-winning cottages which combine traditional style with ultra-modern extras

## *Why did you go into the holiday cottages business?*

We felt our combined skills would help us to create a special business of which we could be proud. Trysha had good people skills from her previous work in the airline industry, and I was, and still am, a chartered surveyor specialising in the residential field. We also felt that The Old Rectory and grounds had a unique appeal not to be found elsewhere – due to its tranquil setting in the small hamlet of Ingram, near Alnwick, in the Northumberland National Park.

## *What were you aiming for style-wise?*

We wanted a sound traditional feel combined with all the conveniences of modern day living. The new cottages used traditional materials and techniques found in Northumberland.

The interiors are luxurious, although still retaining a traditional cottage feel. There are insulated stone and tile floors, pine and oak flooring, polished ceiling beams, antique brick and stone fireplaces, wooden window seating, and honed granite kitchen worktops resembling old-fashioned slate.

Each cottage is individual and has more than one special feature. For example, Victorian bathrooms with slipper baths – one of them in front of a real log fire. Barley Mill's bedroom has a large four-poster with a real log fire and an en suite whirlpool bath. The Stables sunroom is light and airy and opens directly onto its own garden. The Dovecote bedroom looks through the antique brick dovecote feature and has an en suite with a double-ended Orient – freestanding – bath.

We think our cottages provide a combination of a tranquil setting, high aesthetic appearance and an exceptionally good standard of internal appointment. All of the cottages are very well equipped – our guests need only bring themselves!



## **From the top**

Barley Mill

Lounge and snug

Country kitchen

### What are the area's special attractions?

Guests can take bridleways and footpaths direct from the doorstep of their cottage, and one step beyond the three-acre grounds the River Breamish flows through the valley. It's a conservation area with a range of wildlife within the valley, including red squirrels, deer, otters and herons, as well as the usual farm animals on the hills.

Northumberland is a county of natural beauty and wonderful unspoilt scenery. The roads and lanes are quiet and ideal for exploring. There are numerous castles, including Alnwick, an interesting variety of National Trust properties, ancient hill forts and settlements. The Heritage Coastline includes spectacular sandy beaches, quiet coves and the bird and seal sanctuary of the Farne Islands and Holy Island.

A self-catering holiday in Northumberland provides the ideal opportunity for a break away from the hectic lifestyle so many people lead nowadays – guests return home refreshed and invigorated.

### How has your business developed?

We started ten years ago by purchasing The Old Rectory and renovating two existing wings – now Hillside View and West Cottage. Three years later, I converted a listed coach house into a luxury two-person cottage, and reclaimed marshland to form a paddock and stream.

Between 2001 and 2005, we designed and built a development of five cottages to resemble an 18th century Northumbrian farm courtyard. The Stables and Dovecote have been extended and fitted out, and will be ready for Easter bookings.

### Did you experience any difficulties?

The development has been challenging and exciting. The Rectory is one of the largest in Northumberland and, being Grade II listed, it required a



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sympathetic approach to improvement and alteration.

The new-build development of the five cottages needed particular skill and patience, as the site is highly sensitive – it's next to St Michael's Church, which has 11th century origins, and within the Northumberland National Park. We had a very positive dialogue with our planning authority, which is the National Park itself, and it drew on the expertise of its listed building consultant.

Just as we were about to start building, the Foot and Mouth outbreak started. Among other devastating effects, it threatened the tourism industry, but we decided to forge ahead with our long-term plans.

The Breamish Valley is strewn with ancient hillforts and relics from past civilisations, so it was necessary to have a full archaeological excavation before any building could start. Interesting evidence of mediaeval occupation was unearthed, recorded and retrieved before the first foundation was laid. A nerve-racking time for us, as it was not certain the scheme would be able to proceed as planned or indeed at all. It did.

### Do you provide any additional services?

Yes, by special arrangement with local businesses, guests can select worldwide wines and delicious award-winning local produce hampers, all ready and waiting in the cottage for when they arrive. For extra pampering, we can also arrange for our beautician to pay a visit.


### Have guests' expectations changed since you started?

These days there is an increased expectation of high standards generally, and more of our guests are seeking something special in terms of location and setting. The accommodation layout and quality of fittings and furnishings is important, as is, of course, cleanliness.

Personal attention to detail seems to be highly valued. During the initial enquiry or booking, Trysha spends time explaining what Northumberland has to offer, the immediate location, the accommodation and services. In our experience people like to know what to expect before they arrive, and during their stay want personal, though unobtrusive, attention.

### Do you have any amusing stories?

Last year we received an enquiry from someone who proposed a holiday with their pet hamsters, budgie, two ageing goldfish and the family rabbit, oh . . . and a very well-behaved wife!

On three occasions in the last few years, guests have enjoyed their stay so much, and fallen in love with this corner of Northumberland, that they have bought somewhere themselves, relocated and begun a new life altogether. 

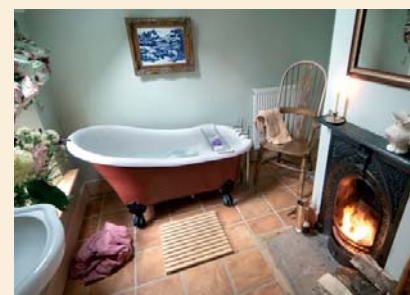
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**Top**  
Graham  
and Trysha  
Stephenson

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**Below**  
Honeysuckle  
Cottage's  
Victorian  
bathroom

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**Cheviot Holiday Homes was the National Silver Winner, England in Excellence Self-Catering Holiday of the Year 2005, and the Pride of Northumbria Self-Catering Holiday of the Year 2004.**

**For more information about Cheviot Holiday Cottages, contact Graham or Trysha Stephenson on 01665 578236 or go to [www.cheviotholidaycottages.co.uk](http://www.cheviotholidaycottages.co.uk)**