



THIS PAGE An extra window has made the open-plan kitchen feel much lighter and brighter. OPPOSITE Vintage tiles make a decorative statement in the sitting room



# French lessons

A palette of chalky whites, soft greys and delicate blues is the perfect partner for a beautiful collection of vintage pieces gathered from the flea markets of France

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY NICK CARTER





THIS PAGE Painted furniture, a rise-and-fall pendant lamp and old wirework accessories bring French style to the dining area. OPPOSITE Claire travels regularly to France to source individual pieces



There was a sense of symmetry about Claire Gray's move into her cottage in rural Essex. The previous owner had sold up to start a new life in France; Claire, on the other hand, was determined to bring a French feel to the early Victorian property. "I'd spent many holidays touring the Atlantic coast and had fallen in love with the effortlessly chic interiors," she explains. "I was sure the cottage could provide the perfect framework, while the village, with its traditional green, duck pond and Norman church, was the ideal setting."

Bringing her vision to life was not to be without its challenges, as the cottage needed substantial work both inside and out, and problems soon began to emerge. Claire was desperate to change the 1970s kitchen situated, as with all Victorian properties, towards the back of the house, but was unprepared for what lay beneath the crack in the rendering at the front. "The beams holding up part of the structure needed replacing and I had to live with a huge, gaping hole in the cottage for weeks," she says.

Inside, despite their pleasing, weathered patina, all the floorboards at ground-level needed changing because they were laid on mud with nothing beneath. "You could see the beetles and smell the damp," Claire recalls. She replaced them with new wide oak boards and also decided to block up the French windows in the kitchen area to allow more ▶





*“It’s a good idea to live in a house for a while first to see how the light changes before choosing your colour scheme”*



room for worktops. An awkward partition wall was removed to create a much brighter, open-plan space, and Claire commissioned a local carpenter to make two new sash windows for the back of the house, creating much better views of the garden.

Inspired by her love of all things French, Claire chose a palette of chalky whites, soft greys and delicate blues, and these shades now flow from room to room and provide the perfect backdrop for a mix of country furniture and decorative pieces. So, in the sitting room, a display of vintage patterned tiles adds interest to the plain walls, while a painted chest keeps clutter out of sight. A rise-and-fall lamp brings instant French style to the dining area, with painted farmhouse furniture and enamelware completing the look. Many pieces were sourced from the *brocante* shops and antiques auctions of western and southern France, and soon friends began asking Claire to hunt for items for their homes, too. In 2009, she took the plunge and launched her business, Maison Claire, at the *Country Living* Spring Fair. Now buyers flock to her website to snap up the wonderful pieces she brings back from her regular French forays. Some finds she can’t bear to part with, though, such as the tiny painted chair in her bedroom and the dairy stool that doubles as a table in her sitting room. “Every piece has a beautifully weathered quality but, above all, they evoke a memory of France.” 🐾

*For more details visit [maisonclaire.co.uk](http://maisonclaire.co.uk)*



OPPOSITE, ABOVE LEFT  
Kenny, the Blue  
Persian. ABOVE RIGHT  
Travertine tiles suit  
the Mediterranean  
feel of the bathroom.  
BELOW LEFT AND THIS  
PAGE Soft blues  
and greys create a  
calm mood in the  
main bedroom