

Home TIME

INTERVIEW: DEBBIE JEFFERY

Sophie Conran

*Designer and
cookery writer*

Homeware designer and food author Sophie Conran is the daughter of renowned designer and restaurateur Sir Terence Conran and iconic food writer Caroline Conran. An interior designer since the age of 20, Sophie recently launched her own online store showcasing homeware designs, including bed linen, garden accessories and cookware. She is a mother of two and an entrepreneur who has published several cookbooks and writes a regular blog.





What are your childhood memories of home?

Until I was eight we lived on Albany Street near Regent's Park, and I used to love feeding the ducks in the park and going to London Zoo. Then we moved to the country when my parents bought a dilapidated old school in Berkshire, which they converted into a family home.

When we first moved there we lived in the bell-house wing while the main work was going on. The rooms were damp and a lot of the ceilings had fallen down. I remember bizarre things like mouldy old moose heads, rows of tiny little school toilets, a big walled garden full of Christmas trees and greenhouses without any glass. It was a huge project for my parents and we lived on a building site, with diggers and piles of gravel, which was fantastic and meant I've never found big building projects particularly daunting.

As it was the time when dad was building up Habitat there were always interesting people staying and product samples arriving, because the catalogues were shot at home. I also had a new baby brother and new bunk beds – so it was all very exciting, and our mother painted everything in

the nursery yellow to match the bunk bed. My brother Sebastian had an incredible train set in the attic, but I was into dolls houses and had three. One was a Georgian house, with wrapping paper for wallpaper; one was a shop made by my aunt out of an old wine box, which I used to window dress according to the seasons, and my brothers Jasper and Sebastian also made one for me out of an old beehive. I spent a lot of time making things for those dolls houses and enjoyed being in my own little world.

Were you always going to follow the family tradition and become a designer?

I left school at 17 and worked as an apprentice for the milliner Stephen Jones before joining my brother Jasper's fashion studio. I also worked as a junior buyer for The Conran Shop and for the Design Museum, and launched a little shop of my own called Wong Singh Jones. I even worked with a handmade lollipop company at one time!

CAPTIONS FOR BOTH PAGES

When I was 20 dad gave me some shares in Habitat and said I could use them to start a business or buy a property. I paid £140,000 for a three-storey maisonette in London, which I still live in. It had been chopped up into bedsits and wasn't in a very good state, so I employed an architect and worked with a really good builder to strip everything out, take down some walls and put back original features and fireplaces. When friends saw what I'd done they started asking me to do their interiors, and I took on a number of commissions at that time.

Later I went to Australia to work for a company called Country Road, because I knew the guy who was running it. I started going out with him and I stayed. He had a rammed earth shack in Victoria, which had originally been built as a tractor shed, and together we did it up. The loo was outside, if you wanted water you had to pull on a string, and I stood on a chair to cook at a tiny stove. We lived there for two years and made it very nice.



When we returned to the UK we renovated an old farmhouse near Honiton in Devon, grew vegetables and kept pigs and chickens. I worked for Jasper and then in 2004 I changed direction and set up Sophie Conran Pies, as well as writing my first cookbook.

How did your online shop come about

A friend showed me the pie dish I'd designed to Portmeirion Pottery and I was invited to design a line of china and glassware for them. After that came wallpaper, gardening tools and candles, and most recently my online store. I bought the flat next door to mine and made it into an office, but the company quickly outgrew this so we've just moved to new premises and now I commute to work.

There's always so much to do, and the shop still feels very new, but it's lovely to see everything together. I've just launched a range of bed linen, which I'm really pleased with, so that's very exciting but terrifying as well because it's taking a big risk. I'm always surprised and of course really happy when things work!

Would you consider building a new house?

I think it would be very liberating to build a house from scratch. My dream home would be on top of a



hill with lots of glass so that I could see the sun rise and set. I love vintage finds and enjoy going to antiques fairs and markets, so the interiors would definitely be a mixture of new and old. I use my own products in my home because I very selfishly design things that I would like to own!

Have you ever had any decorating disasters?

When I first did up my flat in London I painted one room yellow with dark blue corning. There was a lot of yellow and blue around in the 80s and the colour scheme was supposed to be a Provencal-inspired look, but it was hideous! Now I'll test things out a little bit more – I'll put some paint on a wall in a square and look at it for a few weeks, or hang a piece of fabric near a window to see if it works.

Sum up your style in three words.

Clean, comfortable and eclectic.

Have you noticed any recent trends?

People are more interested in doing their homes for themselves now, and not simply to sell on, which I think is great. The recession meant that people were staying put and improving existing homes instead of moving up the property ladder.

Sophie's own home

I still own the property in Bayswater that I bought when I was 20 but a year ago we also bought a house in Wiltshire, which is a huge project. It's a 1760s listed building in beautiful countryside and was a restaurant for a while, so there are still fire doors and exit signs everywhere, which we're gradually getting rid of. It's a beautiful place but because it's been slightly neglected we've got every type of weed in the garden that you could possibly imagine. I've redecorated the guest rooms and the laundry, which is magnificent. I've also recently put in an application for planning permission and listed building consent. The house is a huge puzzle, with all sorts of peculiar features, but I'm quite a tidy person and a lot of the design is common sense about what should go where. Once the kitchen is finished I'd like to write another cookery book there, because it enjoys lovely views out over the garden. I don't cook as much as I used to, but when the family are at home we like to cook together. Felix is studying product design, and has just launched a company called CLAMcollective with other designers from Central Saint Martins, and Coco is just starting at the London College of Fashion, so they are both interested in design and following the family trend.



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Sophie's advice for selfbuilders:

Give each space its own personality

I think each room must fulfil its function, whether that's a little girl's bedroom or the kitchen, so in terms of style I would approach a project room by room and give each space its own personality. You don't need to employ an interior designer if you feel confident to do it on your own. It is a lot of work, and some people just aren't interested in design, but it can be immensely rewarding to create your own look. Storyboards are really useful, using images from magazines or Pinterest to put together a room that works as a whole.