



Holywell Chapel in Worcestershire, where the composer Edward Elgar once played the organ, has been converted into an exciting high-altitude residence and is one of Debbie's favourite projects.

PICTURE: JAN SEDLACEK

# Word perfect

**Debbie Jeffery** is an award-winning property journalist whose career spans more than 30 years. She specialises in writing about self-build and renovation projects, producing in-depth features on all aspects of homes and gardens for national newspapers, architectural journals, books and home interest titles.



Debbie's articles regularly appear in *SelfBuild & Design* magazine and her work has been syndicated around the world. She and her husband have undertaken several hands-on renovation projects, including a cob cottage, a seaside townhouse and a 1920s Arts and Crafts-style property in Devon. (debbiejeffery.co.uk)

## Tell us about your childhood home

I was born in Newton Abbot, a small market town in Devon and grew up in different houses in the same part of the town. First, we lived with my grandparents, aunt and uncle in a rambling period property, then my parents moved to a terraced house further down the hill. When I was four, they bought a detached 1930s chalet bungalow in the same road, where my dad still lives to this day.

The garden was probably more memorable than the house and every year we would hold a fete in aid of Guide Dogs for the Blind there, with family and friends mucking in. By the final year, it had become so well-known that the TV comedian Russ Abbot agreed to open it. Later, my parents hosted my wedding at their home, with a band playing on the lawn, so it definitely holds many memories.

## Did you always want to be a writer?

It was actually the last thing I wanted, as that would have meant following in my father's footsteps. He was a prolific published writer, who wrote horror and science fiction. Our house was always filled with frantic tapping sounds, as he typed into the night in a fug of pipe smoke.



My own ambition was to become a vet and for years I shadowed the long-suffering local vet at the surgery and out on farm calls. I was soon banned from talking about my gory exploits at the dinner table. Then, my appalling exam performance in the sciences led to a rethink, and I did a total about-face and studied English at A-level, going on to take up a place at Royal Holloway and Bedford New College in Surrey, where I spent my first year living in a turret in the famous Founder's building. I actually chose the university for its incredible architecture and not the course – a decision I later regretted.

## How did you get your work published?

My career was a total accident. I loved writing fiction but was gathering a pile of rejection slips while studying English at university. Then, in my second year, I

## Ground Breaking

Entry award winning actor Bryan Cranston has built the greenest of beach houses using cutting-edge materials and techniques.



**ABOVE:** Interviewing *Breaking Bad* actor Bryan Cranston about his eco beach house has also been a career highlight.

moved to London to live with my partner at the time, who happened to be a construction journalist. It was the 1980s and his work was booming so he secretly outsourced some writing to me while I was still at uni and also working part-time as a children's nanny.

Later, we confessed to the editor that I had written some of the work and I was rewarded with commissions of my own, including writing for the very first issue of a brand-new magazine called *Individual Homes*. It was aimed at readers planning to build their own homes, and I quickly needed to learn about housebuilding and master some site terminology in order to keep up in a male-dominated environment.

## How has your career progressed?

Once I was officially published, other magazine editors were willing to take a chance on commissioning features, and I started writing for *Ideal Home* and other home-interest publications. Some of my first pieces were celebrity interviews, including the writer Monica Dickens and actor Joss Ackland, whose former rectory in Devon was once home to Charles Kingsley, author of *The Water Babies*.

Back then, I would dutifully travel all over the country to visit people in their homes, until a tortuous trip from Devon to Liverpool culminated in my sitting on a doorstep waiting pointlessly for the homeowner to arrive. They had forgotten our appointment, and after that I decided that telephone recording was the way forward!

Gradually, I wrote for an increasing number of newspapers and magazines, always on the topic of building, renovating or remodelling homes. Now, at 53, it is the only career I have ever known, although I have returned to fiction writing as a hobby and recently completed my first novel, a psychological thriller about hypnosis.

## Any embarrassing work moments?

Too many to mention. My old banger of a car broke down suddenly when I visited cellist Julian Lloyd Webber in the Cotswolds to write about his house. I was eight months pregnant at the time, and he gallantly pushed the car and got me going again.

Years later, at a swanky London awards ceremony, I sashayed up on stage to accept my property journalist award, only to realise with growing horror that the neck band holding up my long dress had broken. In all the pictures I am standing with one arm awkwardly raised, holding the choker together, a look of panic plastered across my face.

Then, having arranged a telephone interview with flamboyant TV designer Laurence Llewellyn Bowen, I was totally unaware that my recording equipment had malfunctioned. He gave a sparkingly witty interview, but all I could hear on playback was my own sycophantic laughing. Fortunately, he agreed to another interview, but the moment was lost.

## Tell us about your own home

After living in seven places over the course of seven years, I was happy to put down some roots with my family. We had tired of London life and I wanted to return to family and friends in Devon, first renovating a tiny cob cottage and then a four-storey Victorian terraced house by the sea.

Eighteen years ago, we began looking for a plot of land or a renovation project and found Rosedene, a run-down 1920s house in the Arts and Crafts style, with quirky features, which needed complete renovation and had mushrooms growing out of the damp carpets.



PICTURES: LUKE JEFFERY

I would love to say that the house was quickly renovated, but I'm embarrassed to admit it is still a work in progress – mainly because my husband, Phil, (a former carpenter) tackles almost everything himself. He has converted a coal store into a shower room and discovered a secret space in the eaves, which he turned into a pyramid-shaped dressing room, but we are still arguing about where the kitchen will eventually go!

## Do you have any tips for selfbuilders?

After interviewing literally thousands of people about their homes over the past 33 years, I have learnt that no two projects are the same, but certain themes do recur. So many people are unprepared for how long the process of finding land, gaining planning permission and eventually building or renovating a house can take. It can be frustratingly slow, and although some projects are completed in a matter of months, others stretch over many years.

When budgeting, take this into account and watch out for hidden costs, which can be overlooked. Fees for architects, scaffolding, skip hire, connecting services, rent and a million other expenses can soon add up to a huge sum, in addition to the more obvious outlay for materials and labour.

Also, keep a visual record of every stage. I'm always amazed when people don't take pictures during their build, as it's such an important way to mark progress, and may be needed if any disputes arise. More importantly, these pictures will look wonderful in an article about your project, if it ever appears in *SelfBuild & Design*.

**ABOVE:** Debbie's own 1920s house in Devon, which she and her husband are renovating. Decorative tiled floors, round windows and coloured glass were some of the features which first drew them to buy the run-down property.