

# HOW ANDEAN WAS MY VALLEY

A knitwear designer has brought a dash of Peruvian colour to her weekend home in Snowdonia. By Daisy Bridgewater. Photographs by Simon Brown

Sheep graze freely in the fields surrounding Kathleen Holland's farmhouse in north Wales, built in 1805 in local stone, slate and oak





For Kathleen Holland, the knitwear designer and owner of the childrenswear company Alpaca Pie, the similarities between north Wales and the Peruvian Andes are as startling as the shocking-pink foxgloves that line the steep track to her weekend home. Gazing out on to the dramatic hills of the Snowdonia National Park, her 20-month-old daughter, Willow, on her hip, and talking above the incessant bleating of nursing ewes, she tells me how the abrupt slate rock faces combined with the shock of wildflowers and mosses take her back to the vibrant costumes and stunning natural contrasts of the highlands of Peru, where she was born.

'At Machu Picchu you get these huge, monolithic slabs of stone that have been dragged up the mountainside and set in a very lush, tropical forest,' says Holland, who left Peru at the age of four, but still returns yearly to see cousins, and to oversee the production of her tank tops and jerseys, made from pure alpaca fibre. 'In the



## The farmhouse requires tenacity. There is no telephone and you can forget about email

**Above** the kitchen is lit with paraffin lamps and candles. Lined, custom-printed linen curtains are from Aleta (aletaonline.com). To save electricity, the kettle is heated on the Aga, so a cup of tea can take a long time to prepare. **Above right** in the sitting-room hangs a haunting portrait of an anonymous girl, bought at Bonhams, above a traditional grain chest. A Peruvian blanket adds a pop of fluorescent colour.

**Right** Willow's bedroom, with hand-blocked cotton curtains and bedspread from Aleta



mountainous Altiplano it is impossible to farm anything except alpacas, which are the only animals that eat the mossy grass that grows there. They are free-roaming, and they wear fluorescent tassels in their ears to distinguish one herd from another. The contrasts in colour are quite surreal.' We eye the sheep, munching their way through the Welsh hillside, and agree that accessorising them might be rather time-consuming. Instead, she uses the tassels as key rings for the doors and windows of the hilltop farmhouse that she and her husband, Lewis, have owned for three years.

Perched at the top of a treacherously steep and rocky track, past a series of sheep gates and over a very wobbly bridge, the farmhouse requires commitment and tenacity from any visitor, let alone a couple with three small children in tow (Willow's brothers, Kit and Hal, are five and four). There is no telephone here, mobile reception is patchy at best and you can forget about checking emails. Nor is there a television. There is a little hot water that runs from the oil-fired Aga, but to draw a bath the wood-burning stove must



first be lit. Run a Hoover or a hairdryer and you risk draining the solar-charged batteries that power the occasional low-watt light. For someone who has recently launched a business, I wonder if there exists a less convenient place to hole up for the summer holidays and long weekends. But, rain or shine, the family regularly brave the five-hour drive from the hustle of Shepherd's Bush, west London, to this place of unworldly serenity.

'Decorating has been quite tricky logistically,' Holland says as she steps over the wellington boots and footballs discarded by her children in the entrance porch. 'You just have to slow down here; even the kettle takes its time to boil. So I am decorating bit by bit.'

We walk into the flagstoned hallway, with its enormous inglenook fireplace and invitingly large sofa. Lewis has lit a fire; it may be the middle of the summer, but the weather changes rapidly here, and once the mists settle the cold can be difficult to shift. Initially their main priority was to get the heating and electricity working to a child-friendly standard; candlelit bedrooms and milk cooled in an icy mountain stream quickly lost their charm when babies woke on rain-soaked nights and abandoned warm bottles. 'Having a fridge was life-changing,' Holland says, 'but we have kept the



## The slate rock faces and the shock of wildflowers remind Holland of the highlands of Peru

**Above** Kathleen Holland prepares food for the barbecue with her sons, Hal and Kit.

**Top right** William, the family sheepdog, warms himself by the brazier. **Above right** an inglenook fireplace forms the centre of the house

electric lights to a minimum and always eat and bathe by candlelight.'

There are custom-printed, inter-lined linen curtains in almost every room, coordinating cushions on the guest room bed, and freshly laundered towels piled neatly by the roll-top baths in both bathrooms. Furniture has been pieced together with similar care: there is the Welsh dresser in the kitchen, bought at a local auction along with the kitchen chairs, and a hammer-beaten iron four-poster bed in the master bedroom, designed by Holland and made up by a local blacksmith. 'He made the curtain poles too. I wanted them to

look almost rusty and pitted to sit with the rest of the house. I have tried to keep it as rustic and low-maintenance as possible, but I wanted to achieve a clean, pulled together look,' she explains, admitting that early on she realised it would be pointless asking anyone to take their boots off before coming inside. It is now only William, the family's ancient sheepdog, who is made to stay outside.

Fortunately for Holland it was the decoration, rather than the structure of the house, that was in need of attention when she and Lewis took it on. Her brother-in-law Johnny Holland, of the architects Hackett Holland, had already rescued the



house from dereliction, renovating it over a 10-year period using traditional building techniques and materials. He installed plumbing (though the water, pumped from the stream in the garden, is not for drinking) and converted the hayloft into a bedroom and bathroom. 'The saving grace was that the roof was still on,' Lewis says. 'It had been abandoned in 1948 and used as a sheep shelter, so there was a lot of manure to clear out, but underneath most of the original features were intact.'

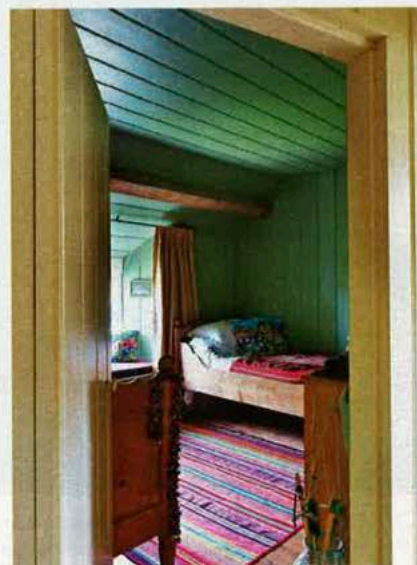
The list of future projects for the house is endless, from reinstating the old water wheel to generate electricity to restoring the barn and walled garden. For now, Holland has the not unpleasant task of soaking up the saturated colour and texture of this extraordinary environment, and dreaming up new colourways for her knitwear collection. 'I am thinking green would be good,' she muses, as Hal and Kit tear past, on a mission to keep the sheep from eating the iris bulbs.

*alpacapie.co.uk*



**'Having a fridge was life-changing, but we always eat and bathe by candlelight'**

**Above** the children's bathroom, in the converted hayloft, now enjoys hot water heated by the Aga, and wood fires. **Above right** Holland commissioned a local blacksmith to make the iron four-poster in the main bedroom, which she has hung with a length of heavily woven coarse linen bought at Ardingly antiques fair. A treasured Peruvian throw sits on the bed. **Right** the boys' panelled bedroom, originally the hayloft above the stables, is enlivened with vibrant Peruvian textiles and cushions



**Kathleen Holland's home truths**

**There is nothing like** sitting in front of a big open fire, chatting with friends and playing shadow puppets with the children before bedtime.

**I love the mixture** of traditional, utilitarian Welsh furniture with flashes of colour and texture from Peruvian textiles.

**I buy a lot of curtain fabric** from aletaonline.com, whose designs are adapted from traditional mogul motifs taken from archive textiles. I had them custom-printed on linen for a rougher, more rustic feel than the traditional cotton.

**In a cold house like this**, heavily interlined curtains in the bedrooms really do keep the cold at bay. Welsh blankets hung in the windows are a good alternative.

**My bathroom is my favourite room.** Nothing beats a candlelit bath, gazing out at the spectacular views of the mountain Cader Idris.

**Alpaca fibre is incredibly warm**, but lightweight and breathable, perfect for little people to wear when they are mucking about outside, and cosy enough to wrap around your shoulders while sitting around the barbecue at night.