

# You'll find a WELCOME in WIRKSWORTH

*In the centre of one of the county's finest towns, Rachel Sharp and Mark Fleming have created a unique retreat at Agricola House*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HOLLY BOOTH

NESTLED down a quiet side street, near to Wirksworth's stunning St Mary's Church, is Agricola House. An unassuming, 1960s, single-storey building, slightly overshadowed by the surrounding historic architecture, the exterior belies this hidden gem.

Formerly an office, then the local Health Centre, and latterly the headquarters of the charity Derbyshire Rural Action Trust (opened by Princess Margaret) the building's current incarnation is as a guest house for large groups. It has been totally transformed by owners Rachel Sharp and Mark Fleming and it now lends itself so perfectly to sociable, open-plan living that it's hard to believe it was designed for any other purpose.

Rachel and Mark are no strangers to running guest houses and they've poured their experience and a huge dose of personality into this property, which sleeps 14 people in seven characterful bedrooms and also features a large kitchen diner, sociable living space, five beautifully fitted bathrooms, a soundproofed cinema room and a wellness sauna.



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'This is our third holiday let property,' explains Rachel, 'so we've used everything we've learnt over the years about what our guests want and need, and made sure Agricola House is the perfect place for groups – whether it's a hen party, family reunion, birthday or anniversary celebration, corporate retreat or even a cycling holiday in the Peak!'

Mark, who's from an engineering background and clearly has a great deal of practical ability to back up his artistic vision, has built much of the furniture in Agricola House, helping to cultivate its wonderful distinctive character.

'I started off making a few bedside tables, and then I thought "If I can do that, I can do something bigger...". I've ended up making the huge bespoke dining table, which is so big it had to be built in situ, as well as dressing tables, coffee tables, and my favourite – the door-drobe, which is my own invention and a slightly different take on a wardrobe!'

Rachel's hobby is upholstery and her creativity has also been put to good use; she has reupholstered the vintage Ercol chairs in the cinema room and, with her mum's help, made beautiful cushions and blinds throughout the property. ▶



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The couple spent a year doing up the former office building, lovingly transforming it into the warm, welcoming luxury guest house that it is today. From structural alterations to smaller touches – like creating a collage from recycled tools acquired from a local Freecycle site or the unusual headboard made from an old farm gate – there’s been a huge amount of time and effort put into each and every room.

‘When we first saw the offices we could see the potential, even though others thought we were mad! It was a blank canvas to begin with and we could have gone to a generic home furnishings store and fitted the whole place out quickly,’ explains Mark, ‘but we didn’t want to. Wirksworth is a vibrant town with a thriving arts scene, so we wanted Agricola House to be in keeping with this. We also wanted to create something truly unique and memorable for guests. We started with some vintage wire swimming pool lockers and this set the scene for the interiors; it all developed from there. It may have taken a long time and a lot of effort but we’re thrilled with the result and feedback has been fantastic. My Monday morning buzz is coming into the property and reading the comments in the guest book, many of which refer to its quiriness and individuality. I feel we’ve succeeded in turning what was an ugly duckling into a swan!’

It’s not just the sociable open plan, single storey layout of the property that lends itself to get-togethers, but also the location.



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Conveniently placed right in the centre of town, Wirksworth’s shops, bars, restaurants, coffee shops and boutique cinema are just moments away. To enjoy all that Wirksworth has to offer, there’s no need for visitors to move their car from Agricola House’s generous car park as there’s plenty to keep all ages entertained in the popular market town. During the annual Wirksworth Festival in September there could be no better location.

Just a short walk away in Stoney Wood, the former quarry reclaimed as a community space, is the StarDisc. This phenomenal stone sculpture, created by artist Aidan Shingler, is a must-see. It features a twelve metre black granite star chart, illuminated at night, which mirrors the Northern Hemisphere’s night sky. And, just across the road, the Ecclesbourne railway offers rides up and down the Ecclesbourne Valley on Derbyshire’s longest heritage railway.

Just a little further afield visitors can enjoy water sports at Carsington Water, and there are a wealth of opportunities to enjoy the stunning Derbyshire countryside on the doorstep, hiking or cycling in the Peaks or on the nearby High Peak trail. Cromford Canal and Arkwright’s Mill, both steeped in history, are also worth a visit and frequently run family events.

It’s not just guests who think highly of



Agricola House, either. The guest house was recently recognised by retail tycoon Theo Paphitis, well known for his role on TV's Dragon's Den, during his Twitter 'Small Business Sunday' #SBS. Theo created #SBS to give a boost to deserving independent businesses, and Mark and Rachel were thrilled when Agricola House scooped the prestigious accolade.

'It's fantastic to be given a "seal of approval" by someone with as much business acumen as Theo Paphitis; it's given us a real boost,' says Rachel. 'We'd like to encourage businesses to use the guest house for corporate retreats and midweek events, so it would be great if he could bring the Dragons to stay!'

The couple are now looking forward to meeting Theo at an exclusive #SBS winners' event in Birmingham in February. In the meantime, however, they have a busy Christmas and New Year period to look forward to, which are fully booked both at Agricola House and their other guest house, Thornleigh House in Matlock. 'We're busy and it is hard work, but we get a great deal of satisfaction from knowing people appreciate what we do and have a great time together in our guest houses.' ♦

For more information, prices and availability visit <https://wirksworth.holiday>.



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