

31 Cross Street

The first home that I owned was 31 Cross Street, Sandown on the Isle of Wight. It was purchased in 1978, using inherited money, so a mortgage wasn't necessary. My mum's paternal grandparents had owned a block of flats in Bournemouth and the money to buy Cross Street was realised when the flats were sold in the early 1960s. Ironically, less than twenty years later, this was the equivalent of the price of a small terraced house. New flats that were built on the site in Bournemouth now sell for a million pound each.



31 Cross Street 1978

I think I only viewed four properties, one in Apse Heath, one on The Mall in Brading and one in Fort Street, Sandown, before settling on Cross Street, which cost £8500. I lived there alone until my future husband, John, managed to get a job on the Isle of Wight and joined me. 31 Cross Street, Sandown, Isle of Wight was a Victorian terrace 'in need of modernisation'. There was purple paint in every room, including on every other polystyrene tile on the bathroom ceiling (the alternate tiles were a delightful shade of mustard). I had a bank loan to put gas central heating in, I know I paid back £25 a month for, I think, two years. I also had the property damp proofed and Rentokilled for woodworm. There were sash windows. I used to stuff them with kitchen roll every autumn to keep out the draughts.

I began life in this house with just the carpets and curtains that the previous occupant had left behind. I quickly bought a new double bed with a blue velour headboard. The blue headboard never went with anything and was probably only bought because it was on offer. I eventually covered it with yellow material and don't know why I didn't do this sooner. I had an orange and a yellow blanket and a set of brown and a set of yellow polycotton sheets. Mum crocheted me a bedspread in autumnal colours. I did not go over to duvets until the early 1980s.



The Living Room at Cross Street just after the Furniture Arrived 1978

Initially, the only place to sit was on the stairs. We went to Anton's, a local, second-hand furniture dealers, that had been set up in a disused church. This yielded a white wooden dining chair, later painted yellow and a large oak dining table with leaves, that I still use as a desk. Shortly after, we acquired from the same source a dressing table and chest of drawers,

five dining chairs, one of which was a 'carver' with arms, covered in a vile beige plastic and a chair for the bedroom with a wicker seat, that is still in my bedroom. A van arrived from mum's with my wardrobe unit, my single bed and some furniture from her upstairs neighbours that was surplus to their requirements. There was a two-seater cottage settee with blue and brown floral covers and a heavy, three foot bed with oak head and footboard. Fairly quickly, I bought a new three-piece suite in brown stripes. This was cheap, primarily I think because the wide arms made it take up a lot of room. Later, my children used to bounce round the room from one cushion to another without touching the floor. At one stage I covered this with green material but it lasted thirty years and moved with me to Devon. One of my 'must have' pieces of furniture was a pine dresser that I spotted in a second-hand shop in Ryde. It was 'shiny' pine but I still have this. It was probably the first piece of furniture that I bought because I liked it, rather than needing it. It lived in the kitchen at Cross Street. Other second-hand purchases that stood the test of time were a cupboard with three drawers underneath and a desk made from 1970s' veneered wood.

The wall had been taken down between the hall and the living room so, as you entered the front door, there was a three foot wide, full height, glass panel on the right (ideal for Christmas cards!) but effectively you were straight in the living room. I kept the three foot strip of lino in what had been the linear hall leading to the stairs, which went up across the middle of the house. I am ashamed to say that I succumbed to the fashion of the time and



**John Decorating the Dining Room
I have no idea why the cooker is in there**

obliterated the original features. I took out the cast iron fireplace in the dining room and hard-boarded the panelled doors so that they were flat. We took fifteen different wallpapers in layers from the walls of the dining room when we decorated.

The door to the dining room had been opposite the front door but this had been blocked up, partly by wall and partly by glass. A new doorway but no door, had been created in the opposite corner under the stairs. There was still a cupboard under the stairs to the left of the arch as you went through to the dining room. We kept board games in the top part of this. It was essential to have somewhere to put books. When we got married, we amalgamated two large book collections that, owing to diverse literary tastes, contained few duplicates. I remember counting them. I can't recall the total but I am sure it ran to four figures. To this end, we installed floor to ceiling ladderax shelving all along twelve foot of the bright yellow painted, wood chip wall in the dining room. Unfortunately, although I had DIY experience, neither of us had put up shelves before, or indeed drilled holes in anything. I am fairly sure that all the necessary holes were done without the aid of an electric drill. All went well and we loaded the shelves with our library. Just as we finished, the shelves began to tip forward in an alarming manner. I have a feeling that we grabbed falling books off the shelves pretty rapidly. Neither of us had been aware of the need for rawl plugs.

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**The Book Shelves
Moments before the Great Collapse**

The square kitchen led off the dining room. It was a reasonable-sized kitchen for the style of property but as it contained three doors, not a great deal of wall space was left. The back door and window were on the left as you entered from the dining room and the sink unit was directly in front of you. There were no other units but we did put in shelves above the freezer (to the right of the sink) and two wall cupboards. On one occasion, John badly cut his finger trying to separate frozen lamb chops. As he dripped blood over the sink he fainted, jamming his head between the taps. Once I extricated him it was off to the doctor's surgery for butterfly stitches.

When I first moved in, I didn't have a fridge. I kept things like milk in Tupperware boxes in a square orange bucket of water. I used to shop on my way home from work most days, getting what I was going to eat that night. One day, I was going to have bacon that had been bought a day or two before and had started to fry a slice. At the last minute, I decided I'd have another slice. As I lifted the second slice it revealed maggots underneath. The next weekend, when John came down, he bought me a fridge. While we were in this house, we got our first freezer. We decorated the kitchen with wood effect wallpaper. When we got engaged, I didn't have an engagement ring as we decided to spend the money on skirting board for the kitchen instead. Accessories were mainly in 1970's orange. We had kitchen tins with Snoopy on (great fans of Snoopy) and traditional TG Green containers.

The bathroom was an extension built on behind the kitchen and it remains the largest bathroom that I have ever had, by some considerable way. Anton's provided a full height wooden cupboard with shelves in, which I still have, very useful for towels. I remember that there was a large shelf that we used for the baby bath when Rebecca arrived, we may have put this in ourselves. Mum helped me decorate the bathroom, removing the purple and mustard, a colour scheme that extended to the ceiling and replacing it with a *much* more tasteful brown floral wallpaper. The ceiling sloped and part of this was to be wallpapered. This combined with the pattern made lining up the wallpaper tricky. Every time there was a slight flaw mum and I joked that we could hide it behind some tradescantia.¹ For ever after, this was the recommended solution for decorating disasters. Other typical houseplants were

¹Tradescantia zebrina was a common houseplant at the time.

spider plants and Bizzie Lizzies. I had a cheese plant given to me for my twenty first birthday and this followed me from home to home for over twenty years. We kept the spin dryer in the bathroom (still no washing machine). To begin with, I ironed on the dining table but later we had an ironing board.

The front of the house at 31 Cross Street had been painted green. There was a small paved front garden with a wall. I took up some of the large paving slabs to create planting spaces. The back garden was small but completely covered in six foot high weeds when I moved in.



The Back Garden Post Excavation

After a considerable amount of unearthing, which included removing a buried double bed, we discovered a flower bed down the left hand wall and a path running down the full length of the garden to the back alley. The main part of the garden was divided into three sections each about twelve feet wide and eight feet deep. The first we planted with grass seed. Lacking a lawn mower, we cut this on our hands and knees with shears. I don't think we bought a lawn mower until after we left that house. Then there was a concrete patio. I remember running out an extension lead so I could iron on here. We planted flowers on the bottom portion. We put a tiny shed in the back left-hand corner and planted a mimosa tree, which took well.

Upstairs, the small bedroom led off the back bedroom. Initially this was a spare bedroom, then we decorated it as a nursery, although it was never really used. It had white wallpaper with tiny green flowers on, the daisy and grass carpet from my childhood home and broderie anglaise curtains and lampshade that are still in my spare bedroom. We bought some white, flat-pack furniture, a wardrobe and chest of drawers. Keeping up the habits of my childhood, I alternated between the two larger bedrooms. The front bedroom I decorated in white wallpaper with tiny fawn flowers. For the back bedroom I reverted to

orange. The front bedroom had a walk-in cupboard that became the airing cupboard when the heating was installed.