

A county for all seasons

Gill Oliver meets a former 'townie' so enthralled with the beauty of rural Oxfordshire when she moved here, that she decided to capture it for all to enjoy in a stunning book

A thinly-disguised eulogy to Oxfordshire is how a designer describes the book it took her a year to create. Danish-born Mette Ahlefeldt-Laurvig's tome *Seasons* takes the reader on a year-long visual journey through the English countryside.

She explained: "Nothing could have prepared me for the impact of moving from London to Oxfordshire nine years ago. I was smitten with the beauty of it.

"Having been a 'townie' for so long, I couldn't believe there was an area scattered with so many beautiful villages."

The book contains more than 400 photographs, most of which were taken within a ten to 15-minute radius from textile designer Mette's cottage in Clifton Hampden.

Kingston Bagpulze House, Waddesdon Manor, Chalgrove Manor, Clifton Hampden Manor and Wittenham Clumps all have a starring role.

"Wherever I turned, there was a timelessness, history and loveliness all around. This book is my personal tribute and was meant as an inspiration to show that it does not have to be a complicated art process. People can just go out of their cottage and see what is there and make things," she added.

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Festooned with holly — a welcoming festive doorway at Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons in Great Milton



Above, a fine gate at Culham Manor

Below, the dovecote at Culham Manor dates from 1685, and has 3,000 nesting spaces



Mette
Ahlefeldt-Laurvig



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She styled the photographs, and researched and wrote about English customs and traditions to produce what is a part-decorating journal, part-recipe book and part-gardening yearbook.

Shots of manor houses, cottages, gardens and the countryside are interspersed with close-ups of wildlife and beautiful ideas for the home and garden.

The book is divided into four sections — one for each season — and each starts with a mood board. The winter part is crammed with around 100 pictures, including scenes from the woodlands near Clifton Hampden, the dovecote at Culham Manor, Raymond Blanc's Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons at Great Milton, and many detailed studies of snowdrops, red crab apples and red berries.

Elsewhere, under Mette's expert direction, fellow Dane and photographer Hans Ole Madsen captures a blanket of heavy mist over the woods, frosted trees and the bleakness of an early December morning.

In hindsight, she realises it was a huge project to tackle in the wake of quitting London and decamping to the village with her husband and two children.

"I kept adding pages to the book. It was madness. Had I known how much work was involved, I probably would not have started," she said.

"I went back to several of the manor houses more than once to photograph them. In fact, I pre-shot everything. Hans made six trips to Oxfordshire, and when he came I would say: 'Here is my guide picture. Now, you do it professionally'."

Some of the interior photographs give us glimpses of people in her life, including her 11-year-old daughter and 14-year-old son, plus other family and friends.

"I ruthlessly captured whoever was near me at the time the photography was happening,"



The drawing room at Chalgrove Manor, which was built in the 15th century

'We Danes have more of a tradition of making our own decorations at Christmas time'

she added. Her designer's eye is much in evidence in the table dressings and festive decorations she creates to deck out her home for the festive celebrations.

"I am more in favour of a Gustavian, white Christmas than a red Santa Claus one, which is why the book's winter section has angels, rather than Father Christmas," she explained.

Most of the ideas she suggests are simple but effective, such as ice hearts on trees (see Page 9), frosted fruit and pearl droplets.

"We Danes have more of a tradition of making our own decorations at Christmas time instead of buying them," she explained.

Since completing *Seasons*, Mette and her family have relocated to France, and she is working on a new book about English remedies from the 19th century.

Although she enjoys living across the Channel, she is obviously still a committed Anglophile, saying: "Villages just don't come any better than the ones in England."

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Woodlands near Clifton Hampden

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Pearl droplets

Pearl droplets

Give some twigs a light layer of gold spray paint. Thread fake pearls on to a golden string and secure with a small bead at the bottom. Attach to the twigs. Finish off by tying a piece of lace ribbon around the top of the sprig.



Frosted fruit

Frosted fruit

Beat two egg whites then brush the mixture over fruit such as grapes, pears and apples. Dust the fruit with caster sugar, then leave on greaseproof paper. When dry, arrange in a fruit bowl and use as a table decoration.



Ice hearts hanging on a tree

Ice hearts

Fill heart or star-shaped ice moulds with water and a few drops of food dye, if wished. For the handles, cut 25cm pieces of wire, bend them in half and immerse the ends in the water. Freeze and hang the ice hearts on a branch outside a window.

Festooned with holly

For a stunning garland, cut 25cm-long branches of fir sprigs. Take a long rope, hold one bunch against it at a time and secure with green wire. Continue until the entire rope is covered. Add holly and fairy lights.



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