

ESSEX

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# Welcome to the DARK SIDE

Tucked away in a street just off Leigh-on-Sea's bustling Broadway, **Katy Pearson** explores a home that commands attention.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MAISIE EMILY FREEDMAN**

**K**nown locally as the “black house” the Leighton Avenue semi certainly stands out. And that was exactly what mum-of-two Katrina Kieffer-Wells intended.

Katrina, along with her husband Matt, sons Felix and Oscar (and Gypsy - the family lurcher) bought the five-bedroom Victorian house in 2014. At that point its exterior was a rather tired white, and its interior in need of an update.

And the family have more than done that. But just why did Katrina decide to paint the exterior of her home black, flying in the face of many experts who say that black paint acts as a heat sponge, doesn't last long before fading, is high maintenance and may make it

harder to sell. “I think black is timeless and classy. I also wanted to stand out from the magnolia crowd,” she smiles.

And she's in good company. Calvin Klein's house in Southampton, New York, is black. As is Madonna's in nearby Bridgehampton. Designer Jonathan Adler is another whose New York home has gone to the dark side.

“Black houses are very common in Japan,” he explained in 2017. “Whenever we were there, we vowed to someday have a black house. At first our neighbours thought the house looked very ominous and coffin-like... but with a bit of bamboo, some dune grasses, and a few Japanese pines, it went from being ominous to serene.”

It's not just celebs in the USA falling for this hauntingly beautiful hue. Pinterest reports that saves for photos of black houses have

grown 774 percent since spring 2014, spiking last March.

But back in the real world and this side of the pond right here in Essex, just how have people reacted to the black house? “Marmite,” sums up Katrina. “People certainly look at it. Most love it. It's bold.”

And her dramatic makeover hasn't been confined to the exterior. Though the family are still to tackle the family bathroom and kitchen, the rest of the house is a rainbow of rich colours and quirky details.

“We did the lounge and playroom as soon as we moved in, and we're slowly getting round to doing it all,” says Katrina. “I love the lounge as it is super cosy and full of things I love looking at. The boys' bedroom is a proper flight of fantasy though and is the envy of most people who come and visit.”



**‘I love stuff. I am not good at editing my tastes, so tend to put it all together and hope for the best’**

Indeed, when it comes to children’s bedrooms, Oscar and Felix have lucked out. “The amazing mural in the boys’ room was created by James Mayhew (*the children’s author*) and Toto Martinez. We are very lucky to know them,” explains Katrina.

And their incredible beds? “Matt constructed them by adapting some second-hand bunk beds and reclaimed timber. The pirate ship is actually stained pallets and an old window I picked up online,” she adds.

Where does her inspiration for her home style – which she describes as “antique eclectic” – come from? “The Sir John Sloane Museum is amazing and I am rarely out of the V&A,” confesses Katrina. “I love stuff. I am not good at editing my tastes, so tend to put it all together and hope for the best.”

“I tend to like commercial buildings such as theatres, museums, old buildings that have been repurposed. I’m a huge fan of the TV show George Clarke’s *Amazing Spaces*. We all have one in us if we are brave enough to go for it. My pet hates are playing it safe; commercial ‘trends’.”

Katrina’s family business is garden design and build firm Earth Designs, and along with Matt and the team, she has been responsible ➔

