



Victoria Merrick, who runs a series of rural craft workshops at Wicked Stepmother's World in Somerby, North Lincolnshire

Swapping city life for love and rural self-sufficiency is something of a modern-day fairytale in itself. HEATHER DIXON meets the self-proclaimed 'wicked stepmother' whose craft classes provide a happy ending for traditionalists

**W**hen Victoria Merrick moved to North Lincolnshire ten years ago, she was a city girl to the core.

She loved the café culture lifestyle so much she ran her own chic cosmopolitan coffee-houses and barista courses in Sydney, Australia, and immersed herself in everything the city had to offer.

But all that changed when she met and married her husband, Shaun, and swapped her hectic cosmopolitan lifestyle for the highs and lows of rural self-sufficiency. The contrast couldn't have been greater.

"I couldn't even grow my own potatoes, let alone weave willow and plant hedges," she says.

But Victoria isn't the kind of person to look back wistfully and overlook an opportunity on her own doorstep. Although she missed the bustle of city life, she quickly embraced the charm of country living and adapted to a completely different pace of life.

The first few years were spent adjusting to family life in a large old farmhouse standing in 40 acres of land in Somerby, near Brigg – miles from urban civilisation and on the other side of the world from her native Australia. Then, four years ago, Victoria decided to put her developing rural skills and long-standing business acumen to good use by setting up Wicked Stepmother's World – a series of workshops based at the farmhouse in which people could learn how to live the "good life".

It's a world away from Victoria's upbringing in Australia.

Her great-grandfather was Australia's fourth Prime Minister Sir George Reid and her father, an engineer, also bought and ran his own farm.

Victoria worked as a nanny for Australian comedian Barrie Humphreys before establishing cafés and patisseries in Sydney.

She was eventually invited to help set up an Espresso School in London, met Shaun and married him after a three-year long-distance romance, giving up everything to move to his family home in Somerby.

"Shaun suggested we build a vegetable garden," said Victoria. "I knew absolutely nothing about growing things but was completely hooked by the time we had the first harvest.

"As my passion for the rural life evolved and the courses took off, everything I was interested in became the subject of a workshop."

The name Wicked Stepmother's World evolved from Victoria's self-effacing and humorous view of her role in relation to Shaun's four children. The name stuck and the good life followed.

She ran tester courses, which proved so popular that she was soon organising workshops in everything from planting a willow coppice and weaving baskets to organising an aromatherapy garden and keeping chickens. Rag-rugging, sausage-making, keeping pigs, baking bread with wild

## WICKED STEPMOTHER'S WORLD WORKSHOPS

■ An introduction to green wood-working

Tutor: Ray Lister. Friday 14th October. From 10am to 4pm. £95, includes materials, equipment, refreshments and lunch.

■ The healing garden – blues and flus – herbs for natural winter health

Tutor: Trudy Norris. Saturday 15th October. From 10am to 4pm. £55, includes refreshments and lunch.

■ Orchard management – maintenance, harvesting, storing and preserving

Tutor: Ray Lister. Sunday 16th October.

From 10am to 4pm. £85, includes refreshments and lunch.

■ An introduction to spinning

Tutor: Joan Halliwell. Saturday 22nd October. From 10am to 4pm. £75, includes materials, equipment, refreshments and lunch.

■ The art of pruning

Tutor: Dustin Hamilton. Friday 4th November. From 10am to 4pm. £65, includes refreshments and lunch.

■ Weave a willow frame basket

Tutor: Ray Lister. Friday 11th November. From 10am to 4pm. £95, includes materials, equipment, refreshment and lunch. Limited to six places.

■ The art of burning wood for fuel – all you need to know

Tutor: Ray Lister. Saturday 12th November. From 10am to 4pm. £65, includes equipment, refreshments and lunch.

■ Driftwood trees, wreaths and decorations

Tutor: Jean Hall. Wednesday 23rd November. From 10am to 4pm. £65, includes materials, equipment, refreshments and lunch. At Home Farm, Somerby

■ Christmas wreaths, decorations and flowers

Tutor: Rachel Petherham. Thursday 24th November. From 10am to 4pm. £85, includes materials, refreshments and lunch.

# Good life lessons

yeast and making rustic ladder-back chairs swiftly followed, as word about Victoria's rural courses spread far and wide.

"Over the years, my interest in rural crafts and sustainability has developed and evolved as I have discovered new skills," says Victoria, who now makes cakes with eggs laid by her own chickens and grows fruit and vegetables in raised beds.

"I started the workshops on a small scale, inviting a few local crafts and business people to share their knowledge, but now they come to me asking whether I would be interested in running a course on a particular subject," she says.

Victoria believes the recession has had a significant impact on the success of the courses.

"For many people, the 'buy now, pay later' culture has been replaced by frugality and self-sufficiency," said Victoria. "The workshops focus on mending and re-using, rather than throwing away; on growing your own produce and improving wellbeing. The programme includes more than 70 courses, workshops, demonstrations and lecture days embracing the kitchen, the garden, living in a sustainable way and traditional rural crafts."

As well as organising courses, Victoria and husband Shaun manage 40 acres of

“ We are going back to basics. People are beginning to appreciate the satisfaction of growing and eating their own fresh food, of mending something instead of throwing it away ”

garden, woodland, lake and fields.

She also helps out neighbours Bill and Linda Hobson, who launched Somerby Vineyards Ltd in 2006, with a modest 150 vines that are planted in Victoria and Shaun's walled garden. They now have more than 2,000 vines and Victoria is planning to introduce more courses related to grape-picking and wine-making.

She gears the programme around the seasons and over the next few months, from October to December, workshops will include basket weaving, nature-based decorations for the home, orchard planting and management.

"Orchards are important as they preserve a rich history of the variety of local fruit as well as providing a wonderful habitat for wildlife," says Victoria. "The course will cover planting, varieties, restoration and management to enhance productivity, as well

as ways of gathering, storing and preserving the season's fruit. We will learn how to press apples for juice and cider, how to dry fruit and understand storage and preserving."

Lincolnshire woodsman and craftsman Ray Lister will lead workshops in basket making using locally grown willow and the art of wood management and burning.

"Ray has travelled worldwide practising his craft and now manages local woodland, growing hazel, willow and ash for coppicing and charcoal making," says Victoria. "He coppices wood for fuel and makes charcoal."

"The workshop will offer the chance to rediscover the art of burning wood as a fuel and learn about growing, harvesting, gathering, processing, seasoning, different varieties, storing and burning wood."

"When used correctly, wood is a fuel that is totally sustainable and carbon neutral."

The workshop will include a

demonstration on how to use a wood-fired stove to its optimum, how to clean and maintain it, as well as teaching how to effectively and safely use a chainsaw, a splitting axe and mauls.

Now a supporter of Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's Landshare movement, Victoria is opening a community shop at her home, selling local produce, which is likely to include her homemade bread and wine.

"We grow all our own fruit and vegetables and, for eight months of the year, I don't have to buy flowers because we have a grow-and-cut garden," says Victoria. "We are not completely self-sufficient, but we are well on the way."

And she is convinced that the growing success of Wicked Stepmother's World reflects a significant shift in the way people want to live.

"We are going back to basics," she says. "People are beginning to appreciate the satisfaction of growing and eating their own fresh food, of mending something instead of throwing it away. Before long, the ethos of self-sufficiency and the revival of rural crafts and traditions will no longer be alternative, but mainstream."

■ Call 01652 628560 or visit [www.wickedstepmothersworld.co.uk](http://www.wickedstepmothersworld.co.uk)

## Oaklands Hall Hotel



### Christmas Party Nights

A fantastic calendar of party nights are available including:

**Christmas Day & New Years Eve Packages**

Tribute Nights, Murder Mystery and Medieval Banquets. Private Hire is also available please call for details.

Oaklands Hall Hotel  
Barton Street, Laceby, Nr Grimsby, North East Lincolnshire. DN37 7LF  
Tel: 01472 872248 Fax: 01472 878143  
[meetingsandevents@oaklandshallhotel.co.uk](mailto:meetingsandevents@oaklandshallhotel.co.uk) [www.oaklandshallhotel.co.uk](http://www.oaklandshallhotel.co.uk)



We'll help your Christmas party go with a swing

Call our NEW MANAGEMENT TEAM NOW to book your table!

At Laceby Manor Golf Club you'll find the perfect venue for your Christmas celebration. Set amidst beautifully manicured parkland fairways, natural woodland and sparkling streams, the newly refurbished clubhouse restaurant and bar can provide an unforgettable party experience.

We are currently taking bookings, so please contact the new dedicated management team for more information on prices or to book your table.

Telephone: 01472 873468  
[www.lacebymanorgolfclub.co.uk](http://www.lacebymanorgolfclub.co.uk)

LACEBY MANOR RESORT LTD  
Laceby Manor Golf Club, Laceby, Grimsby, North East Lincolnshire DN37 7LD



LACEBY MANOR GOLF