

Crossing borders

Through her company, Volga Linen, Theresa Tollemache has shown how Russian linens can be used with style. Mary Miers visits her at home

Photographs by Justin Paget

FOR all the Englishness of the East Anglian vernacular, there's something about Decoy Farm, near Aldeburgh in Suffolk, with its clutch of wooden outbuildings shaded by pines and silver birches, that suggests a painting by Levitan or Shishkin. Hidden down a long track, the flat, sandy settlement might be a wilderness homestead on the edge of a Russian forest. 'When I found this place—tumbledown, overgrown, birchy—it resonated. It made me feel as if I'd stumbled upon a little corner of my grandmother's homeland,' says the founder of Volga Linen.

Theresa Tollemache has assimilated into this bosky idyll many subtle references to the country that inspires her business, from the guest annexe *dacha* and *izba*-like huts, to books, pictures and objects accumulated within. And then, of course, there's her Volga Linen, a fabric she's tailored to suit British taste, with its love of artisan simplicity mixed with a hint of luxury. Decoy Farm is a showcase for these exquisite pure linens, demonstrating how they can be used with style and versatility for richly textured upholstery and tablecloths as well as fine bed and bath linens.

The house is also the embodiment of her very individual personality, in which English family life and the sensibilities of a fine colourist, cook and gardener converge with her worlds of business and travel and, overall, her abiding love of Russia.

She came here in the late 1990s after her three children had left home. 'I'd spent childhood holidays



Above: Theresa Tollemache in her London showroom.

Below: The spare room, with its boarded ceiling and neutral linens, has a New England feel.

Facing page: The sitting room, with Volga Linen upholstery and cushions

in Thorpeness and felt drawn back to the coast. When I found this place, it had been unoccupied for more than a decade and was completely tumbledown and smothered in wild plums, brambles and bracken. What appealed was the number of outbuildings—barns, pheasant-rearing pens, timber sheds: I thought that if and when my children wanted to, we could resurrect them as additional dwellings and create a family hamlet.'

There were more than the usual challenges along the way, not least the fire that entirely destroyed the farmhouse after she'd signed the contract

to buy. Reeling from the blow, Theresa embraced the opportunity to rebuild, with the help of her friends and neighbours the architects Michael and Patty Hopkins. They came up with a simple design that's easy to live in and deceptively large.

The house adopts the local vernacular with a contemporary inflection: the main range, modelled on a Suffolk longhouse, has sand-coloured render, clay pantiles and boarded timber ceilings coupled with exposed steel roof trusses and spiral stairs and huge floor-to-ceiling windows. It's dominated by a double-height living room, which leads, at the far end, into the master bedroom suite and, at the near end, across a small entrance hall into the lower kitchen range.

Theresa lives here with concert pianist Christian Blackshaw, whose studio occupies one of the woodland huts. Her daughter and son-in-law have converted the model dairy and a son lives nearby, so there are regular comings and goings of children and grandchildren and frequent gatherings of friends and family round the large kitchen table as Theresa throws together another of her legendary meals with apparent effortless ease.

'I love cooking and the kitchen is an important part of my life,' she says, 'but I'm allergic to designer kitchens and didn't want mine to look like an operating theatre, so I planned it with everything I needed in a small





space at one end, centred about my Aga, so that I can prepare food while talking to my friends.'

A large, French *armoire* at the other end demonstrates Theresa's tip that you need just one good piece of furniture to make a room and the rest can then be done relatively cheaply—in this case, with kitchen fittings from Ikea ('I just painted them') and loose-checked linen chair covers ('they transform cheap chairs'). Crushed-linen tablecloths and napkins add colour and texture.

Watching Theresa wandering through her house, moving things around, shaking out a rumpled linen tablecloth here, filling a big vase with armfuls of flowers there, one realises that the secret to her relaxed style is confidence. In many ways, it exemplifies English decoration: informal and eclectic, casually elegant, deploying colour and texture with an instinctive eye.

It's best demonstrated in the sitting room, where vibrant *kilims* from Turkey, Moldova and the Caucasus and cushions and chair covers from across the Volga Linen colour spectrum are mixed with antique textiles, table lamps from India and Morocco and paintings from Russia or by friends.

The 'meaningful' piece in this room is the big, rustic mirror above the fireplace, which was made from a *dacha* window painted Air Force blue. 'I find more and more as I get older that colour is vital. Muted colours are not for me—too dull. As a result, I end up with rather a lot of reds; saffron I think is also a terrific colour.'

She admits to sometimes making mistakes, but doesn't think it matters. 'I'm not a decorator; I'm not really interested in it. My rooms evolve organically with things collected on my travels. Everything means something to me.'

Volga Linens are finished with borders and elegant monograms in hand-drawn thread work, a traditional Russian technique

Despite the eclecticism, there's also a touch of New England about Theresa's interiors, particularly in the bedrooms, where neutral colours and painted wooden ceilings combine with the finest white curtains and bed and bath linens to give a very light, airy feel. She's also used Volga Linen for lampshades and even as panels for cupboard doors to transform cheaply made wardrobes into pretty bedroom pieces.

It was with a small collection of bed and table linens that Theresa started Volga Linen in 1995. Six years earlier, she'd gone to Russia to trace her family roots after the death of her grandmother. Communism had collapsed and *Perestroika* was proving traumatic; it was a rough period in which trading and business were lean.

'I got involved with the BEARR Trust, which we set up to bring medicine to hospitals. We found that many Russians were proud and disliked being on the receiving end of a charity; ➤

they wanted to build up a relationship with the West in a more productive way—to have trade, not aid. Meanwhile, I'd noticed that, even though shops lacked basic staple foods, the *babushkas* were still buying table linen—it was about the only thing for sale and I'd bring samples back home as presents.

'That's how it started: I'd discovered an industry steeped in ancient traditions of weaving and embroidery that was little known outside Russia. I was in my fifties and had no business experience, but my friend Aliona Doletskaya, who became the first editor of Russian *Vogue*, encouraged me and, together, we'd go off on trips exploring parts of the Upper Volga that had been out of bounds to foreigners during the Soviet regime.

'This was the heartland of European Russia and we discovered extraordinary places—old estates and abandoned country houses—and visited the great old cities on the Volga with their famous textile mills. Everything in Russia was made of linen then, there was no cotton or manmade fibre to be seen. The mills made all the country's agricultural sacking as well as the finest damasks for the Kremlin.

'We scoured factories and workshops for people I could work with and I began sourcing all my linens from there. Importing from Russia was complex and bureaucratic and I didn't have much to invest, but I borrowed small sums from friends and had a sort of naïve optimism that drove me and made it all work.'

Theresa's commitment to Volga Linen, as well as to supporting the embroidery skills that have been handed down through generations of Russian women, is evident in the way she's adapted her business to meet dramatically changed circumstances. 'Tragically, all the weaving factories have closed down and no flax is grown in the region anymore; Russia has killed off its linen industry and now imports cheap foreign textiles, so I have to go to the Baltics and Belarus for my linen and to Scotland for heavier weaves.

'But I've managed to find one Russian sewing factory that's still operating. It specialises in the hand-drawn thread work that gives my linen its unique Russian character [elegant monograms combined with cross-, hem- or ladder-stitched borders]; I think I'm their only exporter.'

Theresa pares back and simplifies the more elaborate Russian designs—'reluctantly, as they like to show off their skills'—to make them more appeal-



Above: The kitchen tablecloth's woven Paisley design is one that Theresa found in the archive of a Russian weaving factory. The teapot and cups are Lomonosov Imperial Porcelain from St Petersburg

ing to a Western market. She's also created a more subtle range of colours for Volga Linen: 'I'm inspired by what I see in Russia, but I have my own strong vision of what I like and what will appeal to British taste. It's a tight palette, but I think it's important not to have too much choice and I haven't got a single dud colour'—although, she adds: 'If I wanted to, I could exist solely on selling Natural and Ivory White.'

The launch last month of her new print collection represents an exciting new venture for the company. 'Some time ago, an art dealer friend in Moscow gave me an archive of 19th-century linocuts and suggested I might be able to do something with them. I sat on them for a decade, partly because I didn't do prints, but then, recently, I looked at them again and realised they were very original.'

She's now had five of the designs screen-printed (originally, they would

The lower kitchen range of Decoy Farm leads out into a courtyard garden with a fountain

have been hand-blocked) in two colourways: the original colour and one new one. It's the first time she's done printed linens, but they make a vibrant addition to the Volga Linen portfolio and strengthen its Russian identity.

With her Gorchakov and Korostolev blood beating strongly, Theresa takes a deep interest in the Russian side of her business and you can't spend long in her presence without being aware of her deep passion for her motherland, which she visits regularly. As Lesley Blanch wrote, once Russia takes hold of you with its giant hands, the grip never lessens.

Volga Linen sells linen items for the home, fabric by the metre and a limited range of clothing. The showroom, open by appointment, is at The Gasworks, 2, Michael Road (off the New Kings Road), London SW6 (01728 635020; www.volgalinen.co.uk)