

Telegraph magazine

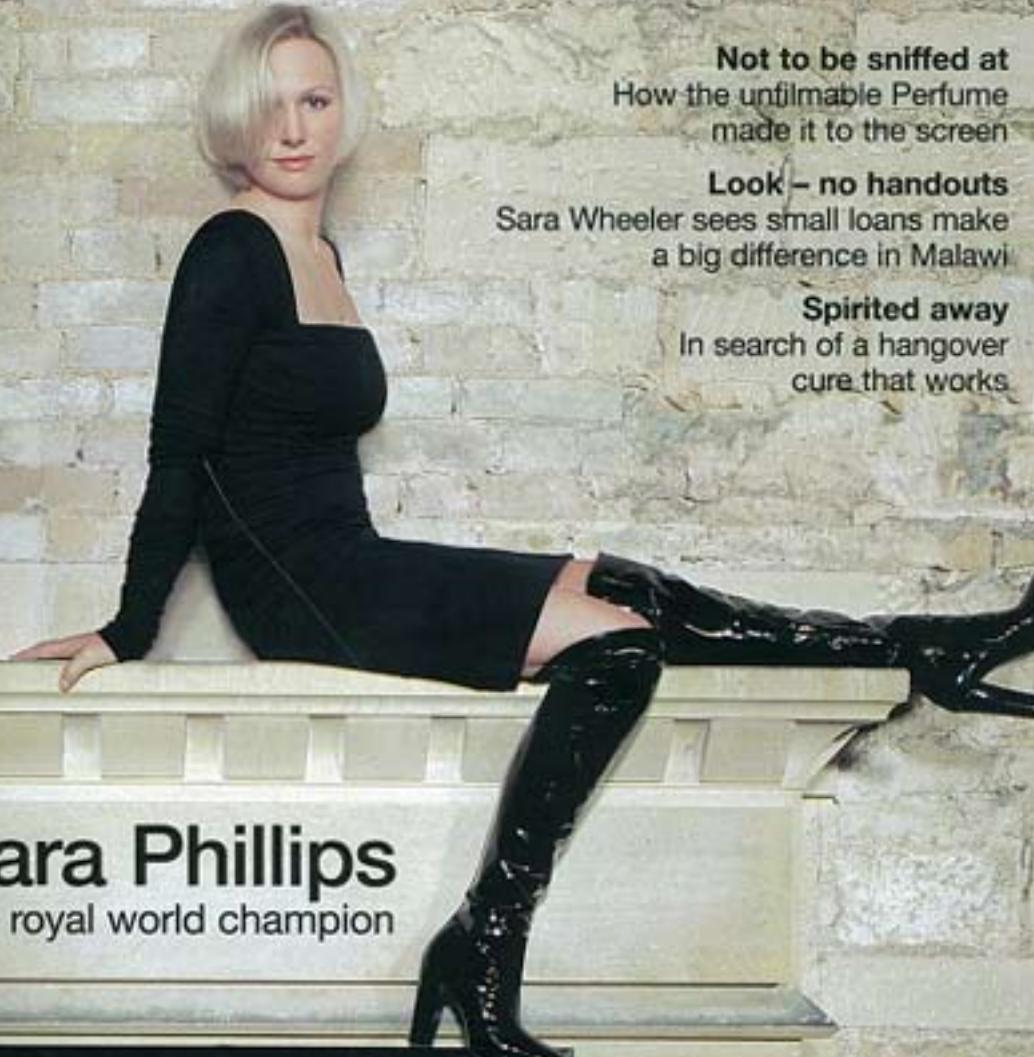
9 December 2006

Newspaper magazine of the year

Not to be sniffed at
How the unfilmable *Perfume*
made it to the screen

Look – no handouts
Sara Wheeler sees small loans make
a big difference in Malawi

Spirited away
In search of a hangover
cure that works



Zara Phillips

Just an ordinary royal world champion





For me, it's very important that the chalet suits the valley,' Philippa Thorp says firmly. 'Each valley is so different. We use local materials – reclaimed ones as much as possible – and blend these with contemporary architectural solutions such as high ceilings and vast glass panes to ensure they sit happily in their environment.'

In the past decade Thorp has become something of a chalet expert. Her company, Thorp Design, has built four of them – the latest will be ready for Christmas – and there are two more in the pipeline. Alpine valleys whose vernacular architecture has been contemplated so far include those in which the resorts of Verbier, St Moritz and Méribel sit.

The family's own chalet, Thorp's third, is the only one not built from scratch. Philippa and her husband James, known as Tig (they have three daughters, Camilla, Annabelle and Laetitia, all keen skiers), had been looking for a site in Méribel for four years and found only poky apartments – 'developers tend to squeeze in tiny

3x3m bedrooms,' she points out ruefully. It was their ski guide who came across a far more promising building via a roofer friend, just as its roof was going up. Not far from Méribel, it is situated in St Martin de Belleville, 'a proper French village with lovely shops and restaurants,' as Thorp describes it.

What appealed to her about this chalet was its tremendous volume – lots of rooms with double height. 'It works because it's on half levels, which is a feature we've continued to use in chalets,' she explains. 'You can create volumes in chalets that are far more challenging than the things you can do with English houses. And it's more about comfortable living and lovely old floors, not about precision.' This is in sharp contrast with Thorp's usual work. 'It's a breath of fresh air to use gnarled wood with nails in it,' she claims. 'In London I spend most of the time on the floor examining minutiae, like whether the skirting is out by a couple of millimetres – bonkers details.'

The fact is that Thorp is a perfectionist, as she

Going off-piste

Working on her family's gnarled Alpine chalet was a breath of fresh mountain air for a precision-obsessed designer. By **Annabel Freyberg**. Photographs by **Mark Luscombe-Whyte**

Left the chalet's double-height sitting-room. The leather on the coffee table and chairs came from a saddlemaker in Birmingham. **Below** James and Philippa Thorp on the main balcony; above them stand two of their three daughters, Camilla and Annabelle





readily admits. Thorp Design, which she set up with James in 1991, specialises in high-tech, high-spec private homes 'from concept to reality', drawing on its own architects, interior designers and any other specialists required. 'We're currently designing a Georgian-style house in Essex, a large summer villa on Canouan – the island next to Mustique – and a new chalet in Verbier,' Thorp says. 'And lots of projects in London.' Commercial work, such as the terrifyingly high-end KX gym in Chelsea and – rather improbably – several pubs, is undertaken only when she already knows the owner. Among more unusual projects are the interiors of four private planes. 'We've also done shooting lodges – often converted barns, which have the same feeling as chalets. The only thing we haven't really done are boats – we've prepared schemes, but they've never got off the ground.'

The decor inside the family chalet was orchestrated with military speed and precision. 'We did it up completely in one hit,' Thorp says. 'We started placing orders in November 2003 – everything, including the upholstery – and then six weeks later took the van out with it all. We haven't done anything to the chalet since.'

That may sound daunting (if not impossible), but for Thorp it is the only way. 'It's what I make our clients do,' she says, by way of explanation. 'Do it, finish it, move in and enjoy it finished – don't do it room by room; it's never harmonious and always disjointed.'

Thorp speaks from painful experience, as this was what happened with the family's home in Hampshire, a derelict Queen Anne house that took 10 years to do up (this included the creation



Top left the kitchen cupboards were made from wood reclaimed from a Beaufort cheese maker.

Above Camilla and Annabelle at the zinc dining table – it took seven men to carry it. **Left** a ladder converted into a bookcase in the bedroom

'In London I spend most of the time examining minutiae, like whether the skirting is out by millimetres – bonkers details'

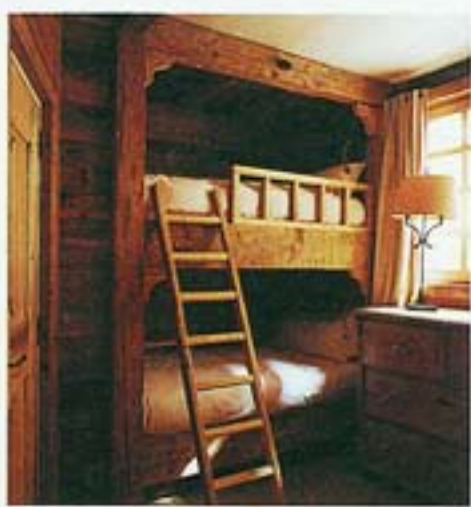


of two lakes and an island in the grounds). 'A labour of love,' she admits.

Her most distinctive decorating trait at the chalet is the use of salvaged architectural pieces: lights made out of farm ratchets and cartwheels; a bookcase fashioned from a ladder. Thorp is also keen on comfort. 'Beds are important to me,' she says, at a loss to understand why people who happily buy a car for tens of thousands of pounds balk at the far smaller price of a bed, which is where they are likely to spend years of their life. The beds in the chalet are all handmade in England, with duck-feather duvets and pillows. The children's room houses a quartet of built-in bunkbeds, made from locally sourced, aged wood. (The chalet itself, like all new chalets in the locale, was constructed using wood from Romania.) True to Thorp's comfort philosophy, at 4ft 6in each bunk is wider than the average single bed.

'If I had my time again I'd definitely be an architect,' says Thorp, who has not let a lack of formal training (she studied fashion and textiles at Leicester) get in the way of designing more buildings than most architects. Until 18 months ago, her husband ran the business side of Thorp Design, leaving to pursue property development, so now Thorp hopes that one of her daughters will one day follow her into the company. In the meantime, she relishes the challenges of each project – the bigger, the better, like the St Moritz chalet, a cool 26,000sq ft, with four separate roofs. She rhapsodises about the woody look of Alpine interiors. 'They have more character and heart than minimalism,' she says animatedly. 'That's what makes my heart beat about chalets.'

Thorp Design: 020-7731 6887; thorp.co.uk



Above left, and left every bedroom has a balcony, and on the main one are stools made of salvaged metal; the telescope was a present to James from Philippa. **Above** one of the pairs of bunkbeds in the children's bedroom, made from reclaimed wood

The decor was orchestrated with military speed. 'We did it up in one hit. We haven't done anything to the chalet since'