



The garden at Foel Ortho is a showcase for Eddie's outdoor hobby – folly building.



This old house

*The Welsh hills are alive with the sound of music.
Deanna Delamotta meets the class double act responsible
Pictures by Andy Compton*

Musician Eddie Matthews reckons he has made two inspired decisions in life. The first was marrying pianist Jenny Miller and the second was buying Foel Ortho.

Foel Ortho is a 15th century farm house in Penybontfawr, Powys, nestling in the stunning Berwyn Mountains.

It is mentioned in Pevsner, the historic homes bible, because of the ancient cruck – the curved timber stretching from the roof framework to the ground.

Eddie and Jenny fell in love with the place in 1967 during a visit to their friends Steve Winwood and his brother, Muff, who have a cottage nearby.

Like the Birmingham-born singer musician who shot to fame in the Spencer Davis Group, Traffic, and Blind Faith before enjoying a successful solo career, Eddie and Jenny were unable to resist the lure of the Mid-Wales countryside.

And so began a 30-year labour of love to transform the ramshackle house into a cosy home

that draws musicians from far and wide to enjoy the scenery, the quirky features and, of course, the hospitality of its owners!

"If I charged B&B I could make a fortune!" laughs Eddie. But the only "paying guests" to Foel Ortho are the film companies who have homed in on an interesting backdrop for their work.

Eddie and Jenny fell in love with the place

In the interest of accommodating large groups of people who frequently drop in, Eddie has built various "mod cons" like a double double bed – an adult version of the bunk bed!

The house has other eccentric features such as a secret bedroom, accessed via a doorway, disguised as a bookcase.

The garden is a showcase for Eddie's outdoor hobby – folly building. The architectural toys which enjoyed their heyday in the 18th century appeal to Eddie.

"I started building follies when we lived in Harborne, Birmingham. I turned the back garden into an Etruscan folly which was the subject of a TV programme. I like building strange buildings



Eddie and Jenny relax in another corner of their quirky garden.

and beds and secret bedrooms. I'm fairly eccentric."

His eccentricities bely a man with vision. He is far from whimsical and once he has set his mind to something – either marrying the woman of his dreams or transforming the house of his dreams – he achieves his ambition.

"Every so often a bell rings in my head. It happened the first time I met Jenny, then seeing this house, it happened again.

"Jenny and I spend 95 per cent of our time together now but we have so much in common, it's nice."

Jenny recalls those early days with fondness even though she and Eddie had to fit in a major restoration project with bringing up two sons, and travelling between Birmingham, where they lived full time, and their rural idyll.

"When we first bought it, the house was practically derelict. There were hundreds of holes in the roof. There was no electricity and we had rats and mice. I had an inquisitive toddler as well as a premature baby. We took it on with no knowledge but plenty of enthusiasm. All our friends said we must be mad."

The family only moved in on a permanent basis in 1986 when Eddie took early retirement from lecturing in management in Birmingham.

While in Brum, the couple kept up their music, playing as a duo – Eddie on trumpet and

Jenny on piano – at dinner dances and parties. They were joined by sons Will (bass guitar and vocals) and Ben (drums and vocals) during school holidays.

The couple have enjoyed several musical appearances on television and radio and in venues ranging from dungeons to dance halls, to wine bars, to Westminster Abbey and Claridges.

They have played for Prince Edward, the world's top racing drivers, athletes, sportsmen and a sprinkling of lords, ladies and cabinet ministers.

Eddie co-wrote the music to *Swinging 60s* film *Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush* and Jenny has written music for television.

Names who have passed through the Matthews/Miller household from time to time include Simon Le Bon, Fleetwood Mac's Christine McVie, Midlands soul diva, Ruby Turner, jazz trumpeter Buck Clayton and pianist Eddie Thompson.

Nowadays Jenny and Eddie mainly do duo work – that is the Jenny Miller Duo,

entertaining guests with a range of music at upmarket gatherings.

But mum and dad are joined whenever possible by Will, who heads the design and technology team at Radley College, Oxfordshire, and Ben who is promoting his Brit pop band, *The Dreaming Liars*, in London and designing interiors for the great and the good of Eton Square.

"We play for people who are discriminating enough to like live music without being deafened," says Eddie. He and Jenny are natural born jazz musicians "but there's no money in that", so they tune into commercial radio to ensure they are up to the minute with what's popular with the younger generation.

Radio and the Internet are their links with the world of communications as they don't have a television.

"There isn't the time," laughs Eddie. "The average adult Briton watches more than 24 hours of TV a week."

"We had one when the kids were little, but not anymore. It's like a blotting paper absorbing all your spare time."

Currently much of the couple's spare time is taken up with *Musical Invitations*, a concept dreamed up by Eddie which he is sure will end up being the third inspired

move of his life.

"The idea is that when folks decide to splash out and have a party, for birthdays, anniversaries, weddings or just to celebrate high tide at Greenwich they send musical invitations to their guests.

"We discuss with clients their individual tastes and requirements, including a few interesting biographical details and then go on to produce reasonably priced CDs to send out to all the guests.

"It's new, it's different," says Eddie, excitedly. And yes, it's true the idea of receiving a personalised invitation you can treasure and keep rather than a mundane

RSVP is appealing.

Eddie and Jenny are fortunate in that they have such a wide range of contacts in the music business, which will help to make their latest venture a success.

And this coupled with boundless enthusiasm is bound to hit the right note with potential customers.

"We hope to play as the Jenny Miller Duo until we're 70, but you never know, *Musical Invitations* could see us into our nineties!"

■ **Musical Invitations (01691) 870626**
www.musicalinvitations.co.uk



Coffee break in the conservatory.



The bookcase hides a secret entrance to a bedroom.

All our friends said we must be mad



The sound of music: Eddie and Jenny at work in their hi-tech recording studio.