

PROJECT: Traditional restoration and extension

COST: £26,000 + property



Rescue Mission

Paula Sunshine and Barry Harber have rescued an ancient timber frame farmhouse from ruin.

Words: Clive Fewins Photography: Rob Judges



Paula and Barry have spent the last nine years restoring their 16th century timber frame home. They have also added a weatherboarded extension. The couple insist that spending a long time living with the property before commencing work was essential to understanding what they needed to do.



“All too often, people set their hearts on a period house, but when they move in and discover it needs repairs, they go about it far too quickly — that’s where the mistakes are made.” These words come from house restorer and traditional building enthusiast Paula Sunshine. She learned so much whilst restoring her 16th century oak framed thatched house in Suffolk that she produced a book — *You’ve Been Timber Framed* — aimed at owners of old timber framed houses, based on the experiences she and her husband, Barry Harber, had repairing their house.

You may not believe it when you look at photographs of the topsy-turvy old house, with its low-beamed interior and wealth of exposed timbers, but there is still plenty to do.

“The reality is that old timber framed houses need regular maintenance, which is why the task of renovating them is never really finished,” explains Paula. This is why the first piece of guidance Paula offers to people moving into old timber framed houses is not to rush into jobs. “Be patient and try to understand how your timber framed house functions,” she says.

Her second piece of advice is not to buy a house of this type at all, unless you realise what you are likely to be facing. “If you don’t think you can live with the seemingly endless stream of repair work that you will encounter, it might be best not to live in one.”

Paula and Barry were themselves unaware of all that they would have to do when they moved in nine years ago. To all outward appearances the home had been quite well maintained. There was a wealth of massive internal timber studs and posts and beams showing, even though they were all painted black. They had no reason to believe the cement render that covered all the outside walls had done anything but protect the historic frame — but an exterior skin of this sort can cause the interior studs to have completely rotted away.

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Paula’s first action was to start hand-stripping (she dislikes grit and the sandblasting of historic timber frames) all the exposed timbers to remove the layers of black paint that had been applied by previous occupiers. She was very careful not to obliterate any historic markings such as carpenters’ marks and taper burns.

The next stage was to find out how to fill the gaps they had exposed. Paula received a great deal of advice from traditional building expert Philip Poels at nearby Anglia Limes, and his colleague Rory Summerling, who runs a sister company called Strippers. She also went on a wattle and daub course organised by Essex County Council and developed a passion for the material. “It is absolutely fascinating: easy and cheap to make, one of the oldest building materials known to man, and still one of the best — especially for the environment,” she says.

Next, Paula and Barry removed the clay floor bricks in the kitchen, which had been attached to a cement screed. ►

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Paula hand-stripped black paint from all the original beams in the house; an ancient timber rear porch has been demolished to make way for the new weatherboarded extension; the floor in the kitchen is covered in reclaimed local floor bricks, over underfloor heating.







LEFT: Many of the walls in the house have an undulating surface and you can see the straw. As with the rest of the house it has not been finished with a lime plaster. One theory is that the house was built as a service building, perhaps to serve an adjoining, much grander, house that is no longer there. The internal daub panels would, therefore, probably never have been lime plastered.

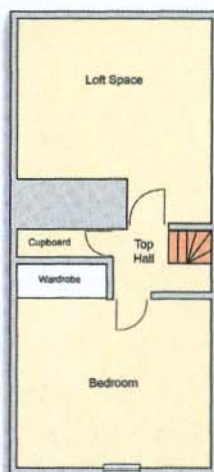


They were able to save enough to lay them in sand on top of the underfloor heating in the rear extension. Having removed the cement screed, they re-tiled the kitchen floor with reclaimed local floor bricks. They were then able to reach the massive timber sole plates in the kitchen. They discovered a lot of rot, but it was not irredeemable; though not all of the sole plates have been repaired to this day and parts of them are still drying out.

Through Anglia Limes they made contact with timber framer Ed Adams who advised on the removal of the ancient timber rear porch, which was to be replaced with a one-storey timber frame extension. Barry drew up the plans, Ed was commissioned to make the frame, and Paula dug the foundations, which ended up being 300mm deep. Into these she poured a hydraulic lime, sand and water mix.

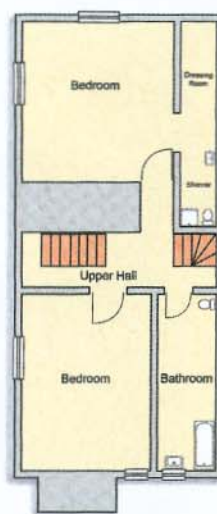
USEFUL CONTACTS: Paula Sunshine, House Mouse: 01284 830492 www.paulasunshine.co.uk Extension design, electrics, plumbing Barry Harber: 01284 830492 Reclaimed bricks and floor tiles Bulmer Brick & Tile: 01787 269232 Handmade clay tiles Aldershaw: 01424 756777 Stripping materials and advice Strippers: 01787 371524 Lime supplier Anglia Limes: 01787 313974 Sheep's wool insulation Thermafleece: 01768 486285 Repairs to oak frame Rick Lewis: 01473 210679 Underfloor heating in extension Kee: 02892 634068 Cast iron range Alpha: 01635 876266 Thatcher John James: 01284 827136

Second Floor



FLOORPLAN: The three storey house has a total of three bedrooms, one with en suite, over the top two floors. On the ground floor, the new extension has made space for a dining room at the end of the hallway.

First Floor



Ground Floor



Fact File

NAMES: Paula and Barry Harber

PROFESSIONS: Homemaker and traditional building consultant, and PR practitioner

AREA: Suffolk

HOUSE TYPE: Three bedroom oak framed traditional thatched cottage

HOUSE SIZE: 170m²

BUILD ROUTE: Self-managed

FINANCE: Private plus mortgage from the Woolwich

CONSTRUCTION: Thatched roof and oak frame with wattle and daub infill; cement render on exterior

BUILD TIME: June 1997 until present

PROPERTY COST: £126,000

BUILD COST: £26,000

TOTAL COST: £152,000

CURRENT VALUE: £350,000

COST/m²: £153

**57%
COST
SAVING**