





ABOVE AND LEFT: Sally and Steve Mitchell moved just a stone's throw away from their previous property when they fell for this period cottage in the same Sussex village. Once unloved and poorly kept, it's now a busy family home for the couple and their two daughters

Words: Clive Fewins
Photography: Jeremy Phillips

“We Transformed a Run-Down Cottage”

Beetles, rats and squirrels? Nothing was too much of a challenge for Steve and Sally Mitchell when they took on the task of renovating a tumbledown 17th century cottage ►



When Steve and Sally Mitchell decided to sell their 19th century four bedroom detached house and move to a three bedroom listed 17th century semi-detached cottage in the same Sussex village, they knew that they were buying themselves into a large list of problems. However, tackling all of these subsequent challenges proved well within the capabilities of this resourceful couple. The result, four years later, is a house well adapted to the lifestyle they enjoy with their two daughters and that has every likelihood of proving a very good investment.

There were rat and beetle infestations in the cellar, squirrels in the attic space and patches of rising damp when the family moved in during June 2004. In addition, the house was unloved and unmaintained, having been lived in for the past 30 years by two elderly ladies. "Everything was boxed in and there was black paint covering the old timbers," says Sally. "We had to remove skip loads of rubbish before we even began any work."

ABOVE AND RIGHT: Being the hub of the home, the kitchen was the first room to be renovated. A country scheme, with built-in and free-standing furniture, complements the cottage beautifully. Retro touches such as the 1950s-style fridge freezer sit happily next to original features including the beams and brickwork





At least the roof was in good condition, which was more than could be said for the family's previous house, which they sold for £400,000 — £80,000 more than they paid for Vine Cottage. Nevertheless, Steve was keen to get inside the roof void in the third floor attic room to inspect the timbers, as he suspected they would be original. Having seen a number of successful old cottage renovations over the years, one of the ideas at the back of his mind was to remove the existing ceiling and expose the original timbers as a beautiful feature.

This is exactly what he has done — and the result is stunning. In addition to this, Steve and Sally have successfully completed the entire renovation and extension within their £80,000 budget. In the early days, they had thought they might exceed this when they ran into their first problem — reinstating the chimneys. They soon realised there was no way they could rebuild the two capped chimneys and get them back into working order without buying in expert help, and this cost £10,000 which was a huge chunk of their allocated budget. "We had realised all along that for some things we would need specialist labour," says Steve, an environmental consultant.

In May 2004 — the month before they moved in — Steve went on a weekend course for owners of listed and other period houses, run by the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) in Norfolk.

"It not only taught me about how old houses 'work' and a whole lot of other useful things, but also the wisdom of moving in and living there before starting any major alterations," he says. Within a few months of moving in to the cottage, he and Sally realised that one of their preconceived ideas — building a conservatory at the rear of the property — was probably not going to work. All in all it would make the kitchen far too dark and take up too much valuable garden space. The search for an alternative means of adding to the downstairs floor space, using the £20,000 they had allocated for a conservatory, started at that point.

"In our previous house we had a lot more downstairs living space and that's what was missing here," says Sally. "We had to convince ourselves that size is not everything. I must say that after moving we had a lot of misgivings. On several occasions we looked at the chaos around us and wondered what had come over us in

deciding to move from a perfectly sound four bedroom house to the upheaval and disarray that now surrounded us! But we realised that we both had an overwhelming desire to live in a period house of real character. To people like us, there is something about old houses which centres on an overwhelming sense of history — you are constantly wondering about who lived here. If only walls could talk!"

Work soon began and it started with the kitchen. They then gradually moved round the house, changing the rooms they all slept in to keep to the work schedule. Sally, in between being a mother and working three days a week as a nurse, concentrated on a time-consuming and painstaking chore — gently stripping the thick black paint from more than 200 beams. Steve used all his spare time to tackle most other tasks.

The living room was next in the couple's sights. It contains the first of four fireplaces which Steve and Sally lovingly reinstated. They also remodelled the staircase and then used it to move upstairs to work. Here the great challenge was to turn the attic room into a master bedroom with en suite bathroom.

"The previous owners had stored things in it, but it had been used very little," Steve says. "We could see the potential as a bedroom because of the height. Our architect, Peter Searl, had managed to get us permission to install rooflights in two perfect places to give us good views over the village.

"One piece of luck was using my brother, who is a plumber and central heating engineer. He was able to install a fully pressurized system, so we were able to convert the adjoining small storeroom which had housed the tank into an en suite bathroom."

It has worked very well. And the room is given added character by a massive diagonal beam that runs at knee height from one corner of the front section of the room to the other. It is a most unusual feature and is thought to have originated as a means of tying in the rear of the building when, at some unknown date, a three storey rear wing was added to the property.

Steve did all the repairs to the roof timbers, which he found in far better condition than he had expected. However, this was nothing compared to the major carpentry undertaking that followed. He and Sally had decided that the best way to gain the extra living space they desperately needed was to place it upstairs. And the plan they came up with

Restoring Old Beams

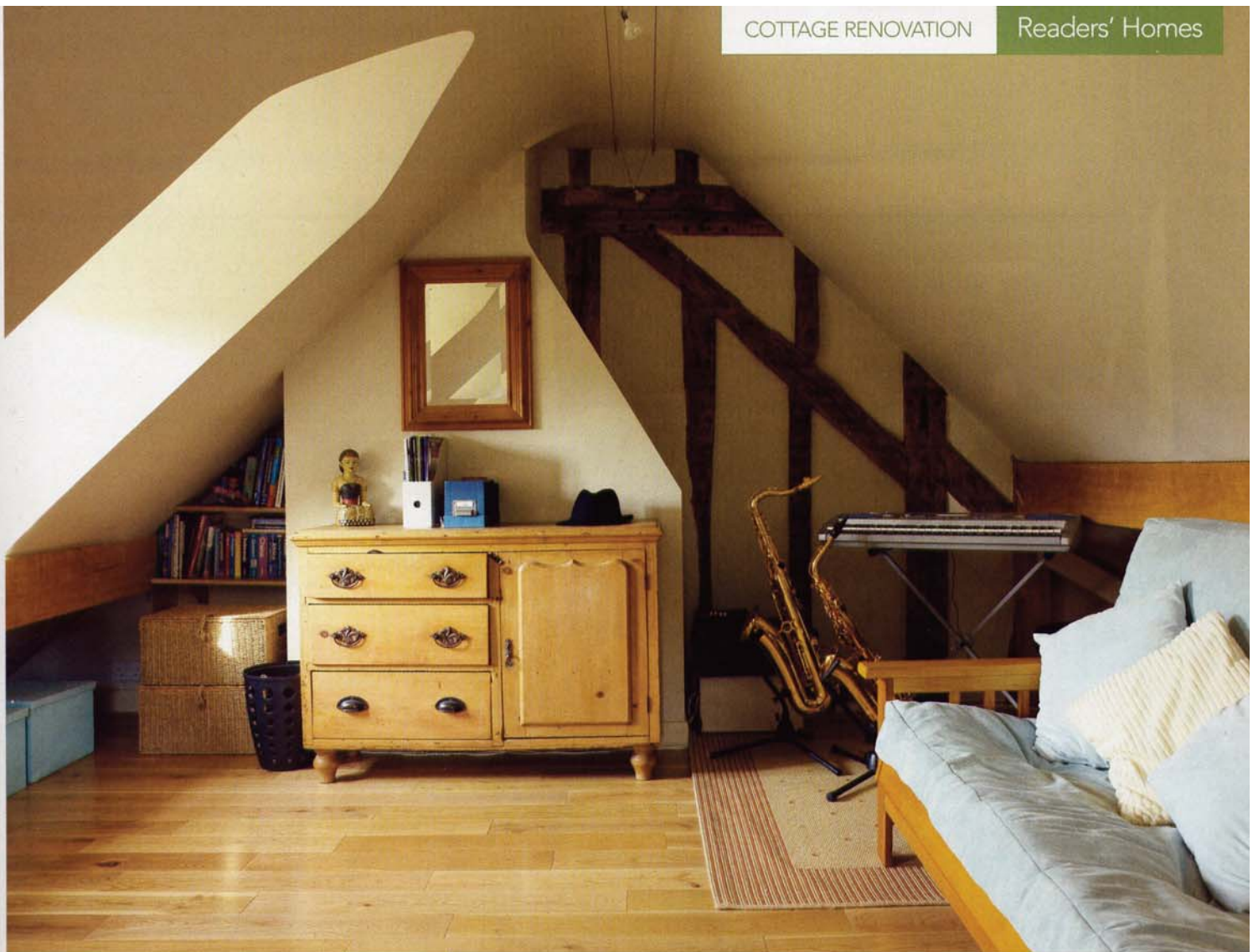
The main concerns with old beams are finding rot or a beetle infestation, which could cause problems structurally. A penknife can be used as a probe to determine the extent of any soft areas



without causing much damage. In hardwood joists it is common to find the sapwood extensively riddled with worm tracks but the surface can appear relatively intact apart from a few wormholes. Usually there is enough unaffected heartwood to maintain the joist's strength and the temptation to remove this worm-eaten layer,

known as defrassing, should be avoided. Any live infestations can have treatment easily applied — when dry, an impregnating hardener can be applied to the delicate surface. If the timbers are going to be stripped of paint, don't use sandblasting as it will create a 'driftwood effect'; it can be painstakingly removed by dry hand-scraping but the best method is to use a proprietary paint-stripping poultice.

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Traditional furnishings and a neutral colour palette showcase the original features beautifully, including the exposed wooden floorboards and restored staircase; A pretty Victorian-style iron bedstead sits happily underneath the exposed timbers which have been painstakingly restored; Both Steve and Sally were determined to cherish the heritage of this period property and retain as much original character as possible throughout the house during the renovation process



The 'upstairs/downstairs' area above the garage doubles up as a multi-use room and provides the extra living space which was needed by the whole family. The light and airy space is home to a playroom for daughters Anna and Lucy, a music room for Steve's saxophone playing and a guest room for when friends and family come to visit

was to add a floor to the upstairs of the flat-roofed garage attached to the south side of the house.

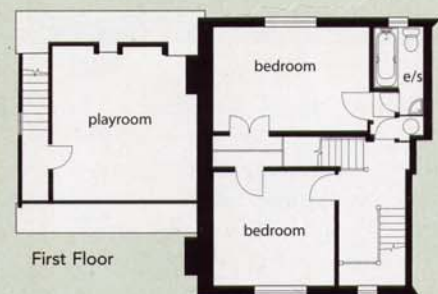
"The garage, with the front entrance to the side of it, had been built in the 1970s and we could see the potential in adding a first floor with a pitched roof," Steve says. "We could then remodel the downstairs to make it suit our lifestyle needs."

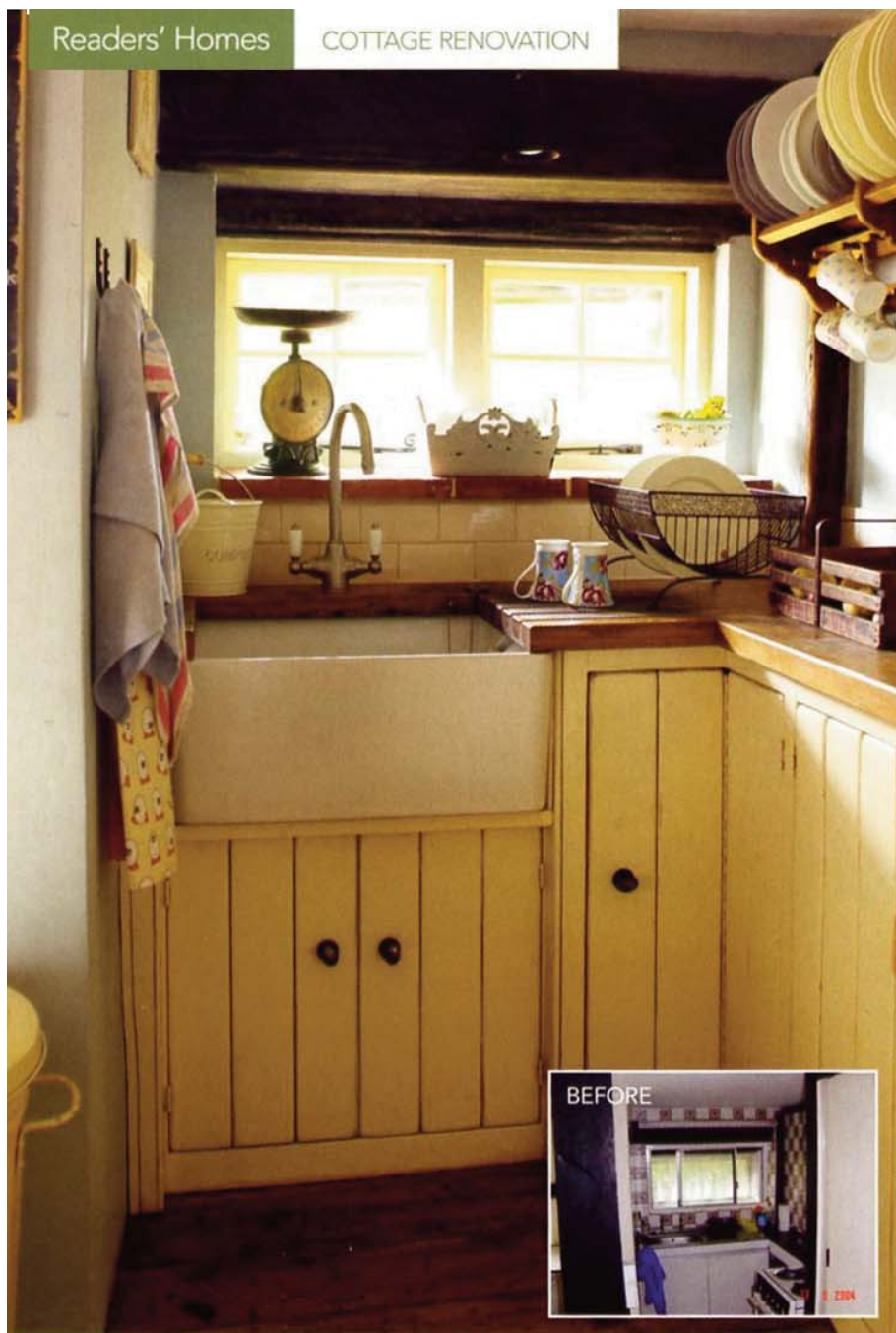
The key to this was that the garage extension had been built with sufficiently robust footings to permit it. A trial pit and a detailed look at the footings by their structural engineer and the building inspector confirmed this.

It was just the piece of luck they needed. They rapidly dropped the conservatory idea and planned their 'upstairs/downstairs' room. Gaining listed building consent proved to be straightforward. The only sticky area might have been if they had wanted to knock through the timber framed wall to gain access to the old side of the house, but this was not part of their scheme. Provided they kept the new ridge height subservient to the old, the listed building officer was happy.

Building On Up

On the ground floor, a large kitchen and living room dominate the floorplan; the Mitchells considered adding a conservatory to provide extra space, but have instead added on a first floor section above the garage which serves as a playroom/guest bedroom. The first floor also consists of two bedrooms. On the second floor, the space has been utilised as a large bedroom with en suite





The only major problem was expense. The couple had a budget of about £30,000 for the entire job, and a local builder quoted them £25,000 just to construct the new first floor and the roof. So, after lots of thought, they decided to do most of the work themselves.

Steve's father was a carpenter and he has the skill in his blood. However, when Steve and Sally bought the house nobody had ever envisaged carpentry as advanced as this. Nevertheless, Steve's father spent the summer months of 2006 converting a dauntingly huge pile of timber into a new roof, including two rear dormers and four huge oak purlins that have been left visible inside to add interest.

Every inch of space in the family kitchen has been utilised. Wooden worktops and a deep ceramic sink complement the cottage interior perfectly; the tired old windows have been replaced with pretty timber casements

FACT FILE

NAMES: Steve and Sally Mitchell

PROFESSIONS: Environmental consultant and nurse

AREA: West Sussex

HOUSE TYPE: Detached cottage

HOUSE SIZE: 150m² plus garage: 60m²

BUILD ROUTE: Self as main contractor

FINANCE: Sale of previous house

CONSTRUCTION: Traditional oak frame with brick cladding (garage: brick and block)

BUILD TIME: Aug '04 – June '07

HOUSE COST: £320,000

BUILD COST: £80,000

TOTAL COST: £400,000

VALUE ON COMPLETION: £520,000

COST/m²: £533

**23%
COST
SAVING**

COST BREAKDOWN

Structural work	£5,000
Central heating	£7,000
Bathrooms	£6,000
Kitchen	£7,000
Chimney reconstruction and wood stoves	£10,000
Timber and other building materials	£7,000
Staircase	£1,000
Flooring	£3,000
Electrics	£1,000
Windows and doors	£7,000
Roofing	£9,000
Plastering	£6,000
Fees	£5,000
Miscellaneous	£6,000

The room is used as a playroom and homework room for daughters, Anna and Lucy, and also as a music practice room for Steve, who plays the saxophone. When the need arises, the space also doubles as a spare bedroom for guests.

Downstairs was almost more complicated because, acutely aware of space, Steve and Sally realised they could halve the length of the garage to create an expanded utility room and also space for a staircase to the new upper room. Fast-forward to today and the outcome is clear to see. The house functions extremely well as a home for the family and they are delighted with the finished result.

"Now that all the hard work is all over I am convinced we did the correct thing in omitting the conservatory and adding the second floor above the garage instead," Sally says. "As a family, we like to think we are quite environmentally aware and that we have used the space we have very effectively. Nowadays people seem to want bigger houses all the time, without thinking about all the various options available, but we believe that there is always a very strong case for using what you already have to hand."

USEFUL CONTACTS: Architect Peter Searle: 01444 459911 Structural engineers Hemsley Consulting: 01273 891738 Plumbing and central heating Mitchell Heating & Plumbing: 01323 419999 Chimney specialists ECAP: 01403 791808 Kitchen Real Wood Kitchens: 01444 457770 Roofer R Funnell Roofing: 01444 457699 Plasterer John Bachelor: 07803 545 020 Conversion rooflights The Rooflight Company: 01993 833108 Conservation advice SPAB: 020 7377 1644