



“We Converted Four Period Cottages into One Home on a DIY basis”

After two years of incredibly hard work, Lesley and Steve Baker have lovingly turned four run-down 18th century peat cutters' cottages into one charming property



Words: Clive Fewins
Photography: Jeremy Phillips



With glorious views across Somerset apple orchards towards the rolling Mendip hills beyond, the three-acre plot that surrounds the home of six-time renovators Lesley and Steve Baker forms a bucolic scene. However, it could not have been more different when the couple first viewed the property in May 2006: the orchard was overgrown, while the house, four small former peat cutters' cottages built in the mid-18th century from local stone, was so dark from tasteless light-stealing extensions that the pine-boarded interior presented a sorry sight.

In addition, the outside was covered in a heavy eye-offending render; but by far the most unpleasant sight was the ugly timber conservatory that extended all along the east-facing front façade. "It completely obliterated all the character of the cottages, which were extremely narrow one-up one-downs, so typical of this area 260 years ago," says Lesley, an interior designer.

"We wanted to restore light and life to the tired old building," says Steve, an electrician. "The far end had been converted into a holiday let and was a very strange arrangement. By the time we stripped it all out – along with much of the rest of the building – we started work with little more than four walls and a roof."

There was one main difference between this project and the six previous renovation projects the Bakers had carried out, backed up by their architect colleague John Blake, over the 12 years they lived in their former house near Bristol — this property was old. "John had worked on old buildings before, but we had not," says Lesley. "However, we felt we were ready to take on a period project like this — only this time, to make it our home."

"We had been looking for a suitable old house or building to convert in a quiet location for at least two years when we found this. The price was about right and the size of the plot was perfect. In addition, this village, which is near Glastonbury, gives us good access to Bristol and other parts of the West Country," she says.

However, though in love with the property, it was already under offer. It wasn't until the prospective purchasers were unable to find the funds immediately, and Lesley and Steve came in with an improved offer and a pledge to confirm the deal within four weeks, that they were able to secure the property.

"The house gave us the opportunity to undertake just about as much as we knew we could take on," says Steve. It was a massive task. However, they both had plenty of experience, and as well as being a qualified electrician

OPPOSITE: Lesley and Steve with labrador collie George
 ABOVE: The house today. To the right is the single storey kitchen, converted from several workrooms that served the smallholding business previously run from the house. Though linked to the main section, it has its own porch. In contrast to the rear of the property, the front of the two storey section remains clad in blue Lias stone, where the original render has been stripped back; differing window styles add to the cottage charm
 INSET: The old conservatory that previously covered the entire rendered frontage. "It completely obliterated all the character of the cottages," recalls Lesley

FACT FILE

NAMES: Steve and Lesley Baker

PROFESSIONS: Electrician and interior designer

AREA: Somerset

HOUSE TYPE: Four bedroom detached

HOUSE SIZE: 285m²

BUILD ROUTE: Self-managed

FINANCE: Solid walls of local blue Lias limestone

CONSTRUCTION: Private plus £100,000
Halifax loan

BUILD TIME: April 2006 – April 2008

HOUSE COST: £388,000

BUILD COST: £280,000

TOTAL COST: £672,000

VALUE ON COMPLETION: £800,000

COST/m²: £982

**16%
COST
SAVING**

COST BREAKDOWN

Fees	£23,000
Main building contract	£160,000
Drainage and pumping station	£10,000
Conservatory	£21,000
Plumbing and heating	£14,000
Windows	£20,000
Thatch	£2,200
Cast-iron radiators	£1,300
Kitchen units	£2,600
Sanitaryware	£4,500
Waste removal	£2,000
Miscellaneous	£19,400

Steve is also a very competent plasterer and a reasonably skilled carpenter. He gave up two years to the project, and Lesley the same.

Two years proved to be a very sensible time to allow. The couple went to great lengths to find a local building company, Boley and Skuse, who gave them a fixed price of £160,000 for the main demolition and building works, including repairs to the roof and chimney stacks, installing drainage, supplying and fitting the new staircase, insulating beneath the flagstone floors and building the new double garage.

It was a long list, but then there was a crisis in the company: a director became ill and had to retire, so the project fell behind. The bad summer of 2007 turned into winter and Steve and Lesley found themselves sleeping in the upstairs of the cottage nearest what was to be the new kitchen, and descending in their bathrobes to take a

RIGHT: The reclaimed pine floor in the country-style kitchen gives the impression that the original floor has been restored; kitchen units from The Old Creamery, a huge Aga, Belfast sink and ledge and brace doors complete the cottage look







Four Become One

Lesley and Steve faced the challenge of drawing light into the extremely narrow building and turning what had been four small terraced cottages into one unified house. They solved these problems by creating carefully calculated openings in the rear wall, so that light floods in through the conservatory, and tying in the single storey outbuilding (now the kitchen) into the main building and tidying up the south end, which had previously been a holiday let. To allow access to the four bedrooms (previously five) without passing through others, they built a two storey rear extension. This has provided an upstairs bathroom, which serves three of the bedrooms. Downstairs, the extension has helped create a hallway, which is accessed from the new front doorway and porch.





bedrooms. The new main staircase has also enabled the creation of a front hall and the removal of a staircase in the third and fourth cottages, formerly the holiday let.

To the right of the staircase up a small step is the largest bedroom, which Lesley and Steve may ultimately let as a bed and breakfast. The other three bedrooms all run off from the top of the new stairs. The masterstroke is a completely new large opening on the first floor at the rear (BOTTOM LEFT, P.46) which brings in masses of light to the landing and also acts as a balcony that overlooks the new conservatory, helping to tie it in to the rest of the house.

During the project, John had several anxious moments, including the couple's decision to remove the front render and leave the blue Lias limestone bare. "We have repointed it all and because the house faces east – most of the weather here comes from the west – I don't think much rain will penetrate," John says. ►



USEFUL CONTACTS: Finance Sage Independent Advisors: 01934 647888 Architect John Blake: 01179 328232 Building surveyors Sheldon & Company: 01934 751228 Structural engineer Adrian Brown Associates: 01761 435377 Building contractors Boley & Skuse: 01278 782171 Electrics and underfloor heating 1st Choice Electrical: 01458 860500 Heating and plumbing John Cullin (recently retired) Timber and damp-proof treatment Brunel Preservations: 01179 535383 Drainage and new pumping station MTM Drains & Maintenance: 01227 772019 Flagstone sandblasting Avon Blast Cleaning: 01275 855194 Tiling PDS: 01179 390254 Thatching RJ Wright: 01458 272130 Conservatory manufacturer David Salisbury: 01278 764400 Conservatory installer Bradford & Bath Windows: 01225 767722 Windows manufacturer Ullcombe Joinery: 01404 861421 Windows glazing and installation Bright View: 011793 776779 Interior design Poppy Green's: 01458 860750 Oak flooring Hackworth Sawmill: 01507 526428 Hardwood doors Kershaws: 01274 604488 Tiles floors and walls Tons of Tiles: 01752 509162 Marble Gecko Warehouse: 0844 884 3303 Kitchen units The Old Creamery: 01935 410500 Wood burners Harridge Stoves: 01749 347272 Cast-iron radiators Beaumont: 01788 899100 Aga Spillers of Chard: 01460 67878 Rainwater and soil systems Brett Martin: 01246 280000 Reclamation specialists Glastonbury Reclamation: 01458 831122; Wells Reclamation: 01749 677087



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The L-shaped dining area acts as a connector between the house's two sections, adjoining the conservatory and kitchen; The view from the hall – which centres around the imposing original chimney – into the drawing room; The morning room with a spiral stair that leads up to Lesley and Steve's bedroom; The original flagstone floors in the hallway relaxation area were removed, thoroughly cleaned, and replaced, with insulation beneath. Woodburners have been placed in several rooms



"By using the internet to source products we reckon we saved ourselves about £140,000"

To ensure the inner faces of the walls were well sealed, Steve did the waterproofing and much of the interior plastering himself. "In the end there was very little Lesley and I didn't do," Steve says. "We took two years over it all, but then we had carefully calculated how much we could afford to spend on buying in labour. By cutting back on the amount of work we had originally employed the main builders to do, and undertaking much of it ourselves, we kept within our budget."

"By using the internet to source products – through eBay we obtained a brand new stone shower tray for £1 – we reckon we saved ourselves about £140,000. That's a sum which would have added £490 to the cost per square metre. Add in the value of our labour and you can easily see what the full price might have been to convert this rambling old property to such a high specification." 🏡

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Lesley and Steve are considering using the guest room, with en suite bathroom, as a letting room; A downstairs cloakroom that leads off the hall at the rear; An original beam in one of the bedrooms; A window seat in the dining area, with its characterful crooked walls; Upstairs in the rear extension, the stairwell and landing are flooded with natural light via a large rooflight