

Genius AT Work

Stephen Mattick – one of the UK’s finest house designers – has spent his working life designing traditional houses that are often mistaken for having occupied their plots for centuries. **Clive Fewins** spends a day at Mattick’s own carefully crafted home to discover what makes him tick

Stephen Mattick looks upon the houses he has designed rather like a painter or a musician — they are his ‘works’. Indeed, the award-winning architectural designer likes his compositions to be performed well, with the interiors successfully and tastefully orchestrated too.

He has designed the interiors of only two of ‘his’ houses. The total number of new houses he has designed and have been built in this country numbers only around 20. But he regards each – all designed without the aid of a computer – as his legacy. They are unmistakably ‘Mattick houses’. And Stephen, now 70, and choosing ever more carefully the commissions he undertakes, has a proprietorial zeal that means he follows the fortunes of each and every one.

Over the past 25 years writers and critics have described Mattick houses as traditional, perfect on delicate detail, and – perhaps above all – looking as though they have evolved over several centuries.

A typical Mattick house might look, therefore, as though it originated as a 15th century open hall house with two wings executed in differing architectural styles to suggest they were built on at different stages, and then a porch added later. Windows in odd places only serve to add to the feel that the house was built and then added to over several centuries.

In the simplest terms they are the sum of all their details, which include, to name but a few: beautiful bay windows, creative crow-stepped gables, dormers to die for, exciting entasis, fabulous flintwork, gorgeous gables, judicious jetties, marvellous mansards, purposeful parterres, practical porches, rare, reclaimed roof tiles, tremendous timber framing, wonderful weatherboarding and wafer-thin sliding sash windows. And all this

Mattick's Works

Three Mattick-designed self-builds have been awarded ‘Best Traditional Home’ in The Daily Telegraph Homebuilding & Renovating Awards over the years. The accolade was most recently bestowed in 2011 to a self-built farmhouse in Essex (TOP, FAR RIGHT), and in 2005 to a new home in south Oxfordshire with a Georgian-style frontage (BOTTOM LEFT)

is not to forget Stephen’s renowned ‘wobbly roofs’ and constant references to the vernacular.

One of several Mattick-designed homes which has been featured in *Homebuilding & Renovating* over the years is in Clare, Suffolk and was so liked by the self-builder who commissioned it that he named it ‘Matticks’. This owner has now passed away, but the house retains the name.

One of Stephen’s most unusual projects in the late 1990s was a mid-Georgian-style house near Berkhamstead that he designed to suit the huge quantity of reclaimed materials – including a set of eight six-over-six mid-Georgian vertical sliding sash windows – presented to him by the client. The client already owned the main house on the site, a 1920s ‘mini-mansion’, but wanted the Mattick house to form an adjacent wing to serve as the new frontage. When a leading architectural critic visited, he mistook the ‘mid-18th century’ addition for the original house, and thought the 1920s section the work of Stephen!

Another highly unusual Mattick house that has never been written about – because the owner, an immensely wealthy pop musician, has never permitted it – is a £7 million concatenation of features of many styles ranging from basic vernacular to Arts & Crafts to rural New England.

My list of dislikes is long and high on it are greedy, arrogant clients...



PHOTOGRAPHY: DARREN CHUNG; HOUSES (OPPOSITE): 1 X JEREMY PHILLIPS; 1 X TIM SOAR



A Fine Restoration
The elegant curving Georgian staircase, which dates from 1820, has been restored – stripped down, repaired and repainted – and now sets the tone for the rest of the interior, which is filled with characterful touches. Exposed beams hint at the house's ancient timber frame core. In the resplendent dining room Stephen installed an old fireplace from the drawing room; it's now a focal point. The walls also feature pieces from Stephen's collection of military memorabilia, in what has become one of his favourite rooms

Georgian Makeover

The core of Stephen and Rosanne's home dates back to 1550, but the house has been added to over the years. It was subject to its own late-Georgian makeover with the original timber frame covered externally by cream-coloured stucco. Mattick's period home, which has evolved over the centuries, is certainly inspiration enough for the self-builders he's designed to emulate such progression in time

All this makes Stephen's longest and most demanding project – his own home – very different because it is not a self-build but a renovation. It is by no means his first renovation, but it is his favourite, not least because the house, in a village near Cambridge, lies in extensive grounds but also that it has taken 12 years to complete to his satisfaction.

"I like large houses, and in particular the rambling nature of this old farmhouse," Stephen says. "I think it's all linked up with my love of designing new houses that look as if they were built over several hundred years."

Apart from a brick extension to the east, built in the Victorian era to house yet more farmworkers, the Grade II listed property is largely timber frame and has a core dating from about 1550.

Around 1820 it was given an extensive late-Georgian makeover. A striking south front was built to face what was probably by then an established formal garden, and much of the old timber frame and wealth of beams was covered by a mass of stucco outside and plaster inside.

In October 2002 Stephen and his wife, Rosanne, were just beginning to make progress on the house – although living in some discomfort in just five rooms with their daughters – when the River Granta some 65ft away rose by over 5ft after excessive rains. It was all due to a problem with the sluice gates. But the entire ground floor was flooded to a depth of 4ft.

The oldest part of the house – the former dairy at the rear – was worst affected because the floor level was below ground. The family lost a large number of valued personal belongings, and Stephen in particular lost much of his collection of military memorabilia as well

as part of his portfolio of old photographs and cameras.

Today the dairy is one of the loveliest rooms in the house. It alternates with the snug as a family relaxation area. It is also the room which has undergone the most transformation. When the Matticks arrived at the house, a Second World War brick air-raid shelter – which had been unused since 1945 – stood in the middle of the room. It had to be removed using a jackhammer.

The beautiful fireplace of clunch – a form of soft chalk – which Stephen believes to be part of the original 1550 building, also used to be 4ft up the wall. "We really can't understand this," he says. "Although the original floor level was another 4ft below the present floor, the fireplace was still high up the wall, so we lowered it. I don't think we shall ever solve that one, but I think the answer must lie in a previous floor level, now long gone."

The original exterior door has been blocked up and plastered over on the inside. But Stephen has retained the original detailing on the outside. "We didn't need the opening, but I like these 'ghost doors' as a feature – they suit the house," he says.

However, Stephen's favourite space is the dining room. "I just love the feel of it," he continues. "It was a lovely

Stephen's longest and most demanding project has been his own home



Outbuildings

“Outbuildings are often much neglected,” says Stephen of the opportunities missed to design such buildings to complement the houses with which they sit. One of his own all-time favourite designs is a flint and timber-clad store (RIGHT and BELOW), built in 2004



room to start with and I believe we did a really good job on it. The fireplace in there came from the drawing room and the drawing room fireplace was a find on eBay.”

Stephen and Rosanne’s bedroom on the first floor is accessed by the striking main staircase which dates from the late 1820s. It curves elegantly, and has a lovely set of late-Georgian square balusters. “I still get a buzz when I walk down the main staircase every morning,” says Stephen. “It was worth all the work stripping it down, repairing and repainting it.”

Outbuildings are another of Stephen’s passions. The two main garden buildings in his grounds look as if they have been there for ever, but were in fact built in 2004.

The flint and weatherboarded equipment store at the rear of the house ranks high on his list of favourites amongst all the buildings he has created, both in the UK and overseas. It is entirely functional — containing an open-fronted log store, a central area for the storage of tools and paint and a third section, a projection with a raised door that gives access to the oil tank that serves the house and office. You’d never guess that all this resides behind the ancient-looking façade. The walls are clad with flint and lime-washed rough-sawn weatherboarding. The windows are a master stroke: a set of old Victorian small-pane cast iron workshop windows that Stephen found at a reclamation yard. The whole is covered by an eye-catching roof of gorgeous flecked-cream gault clay ribbed tiles — another tremendous secondhand find. Practical, vernacular and lovely in its simplicity — but desperately difficult to achieve.

“Outbuildings are often much neglected,” says Stephen. “Far too many clients are prepared to commission expensive and beautifully built new houses then fail to have garages and other outbuildings to match.”

With his insistence on getting period architectural detailing correct it is little wonder that Stephen has been dubbed as ‘dog-Mattick’ by some that know him. “It is true that I know what I like and I often say so,” says Stephen. “My list of dislikes is long, and high on it are greedy, arrogant clients, ignorant and barely house-trained builders, and the many pompous people in architectural circles who are perpetually over-pleased with themselves.”

In short, if there is an easy way out of a problem, count Mattick out. Sometimes that means Stephen — slightly stooped nowadays, thick-set, shuffling and ever tousled-haired — loses some jobs. When you suggest this to him he shrugs his shoulders. “If this happens they are usually jobs I don’t really want,” he says. “As far as possible nowadays I do what pleases me.”

One thing that does please him is the recollection that he was praised by one architectural critic for having ‘a sleight of hand that would do credit to a stage set designer.’ True words indeed.

Stephen Mattick is a man who likes to surprise his clients, viewers, and also interviewers. “I am not able to tell you why I do things, or when. It’s just what I feel is appropriate,” he says. And this is about the nearest this interviewer’s probing is likely to get to the key to the man. Honest, blunt, warm, passionate about his work, but somehow unable — rather than unwilling — to give away too much of himself. He is, at heart, an artist. ■