



TV expert brings an old timber-framed gem back to life

BY:
CLIVE FEWINS
JOURNALIST



Marianne Suhr is not only a well-known face to thousands, as co-presenter of three series of BBC2's Restoration Series and the Discovery TV series Project Restoration on Discovery Channel, but also a seasoned renovator of period houses who is prepared to put her money where her mouth is.

Together with her partner Richard, Marianne is just completing her second full renovation of a period house. It has been two years of hard slog, but it is in many ways a demonstration project of how to repair an old house that was in very poor condition in sympathy with its age and style. It is an object lesson

in what Marianne regards as the Golden Rule of old house repair - do as little as possible and no more than is necessary.

Or, to follow the advice of SPAB - the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, for whom Marianne worked for seven years as a course organiser - always keep as much of the original as possible and conserve rather than restore, repair rather than replace.

Marianne, a chartered building surveyor, has also been productive in other ways. For she has also given birth to her first child - Max, now six months old, and she has co-authored *The Old House Handbook* - a practical guide to

care and repair, which has been published in association with SPAB.

The house that Marianne and Richard bought in 2006 is a listed Grade II house in a village south of Oxford, parts of which date from the mid sixteenth century.

Before settling in it Marianne and Richard looked around 30 other cottages. "There were several that I'd have loved to live in if they hadn't been renovated in the last decade, and all their internal character destroyed," she says. "So often people just do not realise how long it takes an old building to acquire its character - those subtle qualities of age and beauty that mark it out from other old houses - and



just how rapidly all this can be destroyed by thoughtless and over-rapid work in the name of 'restoration'

"If only we'd known before we started' is something I hear all too often when I lecture on SPAB courses. People are so often reluctant to outlay a quite small amount of money going on a day course outlining the details of sympathetic repair, and then realise a year or two further on that if they had adopted a more, respectful, restrained approach to their labour on their old house they could have done a much better job and probably saved thousands of pounds.

"The basic message of the book is the same as that of SPAB - old houses can be repaired and adapted for the world of today without sacrificing those fragile, individual qualities that characterise our rich variety of historic buildings. Whether your period house is large or small, ancient or more recent, it

should be possible to achieve this and hand on to future generations a building that will live on, and not have its life cut short by the use of inappropriate materials and repair methods."

It is only possible to do this, the book explains, if you avoid the common mistakes that are often costly, and inevitably damaging to the building itself.

"What we've tried to do with this house is retain its historic integrity without ripping everything out," Marianne said. "But where we have put in new, we've made it very modern, which is part of our ethos. If you add something, add something new that complements the old."

There has been a lot to retain. Like any old houses the building, which is basically oak-framed, has seen many changes. The oldest part dates from about 1550 and comprises two bays. In the early 1600s the house, which fronts a road

Page 12:
The exterior
from the front

Above left:
Marianne painting
the completed east
end. The 'crinkled'
windows at the
front of what is now
the library can be
seen to the right

Above right:
Marianne applying
Hemcrete hemp
and lime mix at the
jettied east end

running east-west, was extended to the east, and then in the mid 18th century was extended west with a lower roofline, when a further chimney stack was added.

For many years up until the middle of the last century the eastern end of the road-facing frontage served as a draper's shop. The original shelves now serve as bookshelves in the library. The large square-paned Georgian windows in this part of the front are a great novelty because they bulge out at an amazing angle, meeting at a point. It makes for an unusual and much talked-about feature from the road outside.

Unlike the deliberately unusually-shaped 'shop front windows' that many people mistake them for, this was the result of drastic movement in the timber frame when the door that is still there was inserted to turn that end of the building into a shop. Rather than attempt to use modern methods and materials to



Above:
Marianne at the
extended rear with
baby Max

Left:
The hemp and lime
team sprayed the
hemcrete mix
between the
shuttering over
substrate of timber

correct this curious feature Marianne and Richard have left it, soundly supported by vertical cast iron bars at the rear that they believe were inserted to support the floor above in the 1920s. To combat traffic noise and add insulation they have added large-pane secondary double glazing.

The 'conservation' approach has been used in most other areas of the house, using many of the techniques Marianne used in her previous house rescue in Leicestershire.

In addition for the first time she

has used a material called Hemcrete. This is a form of in situ hemp/lime walling. It comprises a blend of small pieces of processed hemp and a special lime-based binder.

Together they form what is known as a bio-composite building material, which is claimed helps to reverse the damaging effects of green house gases. Marianne has used it to add insulation to some of the old lime-based solid walls in the house and has also used it for the walls of the extension at the rear of the house.

Because it is 'breathable' Hemcrete, which in new walls is applied between shuttering, is in many ways the modern answer to wattle and daub.

"People are realising that buildings must breathe," explained Marianne. "The principal of this is incredibly simple. Before the days of cavity walls structures had 'solid' walls, built of breathable materials. Where bricks and stones were used, they were often coated with a lime render, which was limewashed so the structure was able to 'breathe'. When it rained moisture was absorbed a few millimetres into the external surface but was able to evaporate as soon as the rain stopped, helped by the drying effects of the sun and wind.

"Traditional lime plasters and renders allow walls to breathe and absorb excess humidity. Lime is warmer to the touch than gypsum and therefore condensation is reduced. Most important of all, it looks right for an old house."

To assist the eventual external 'new look' of the house Marianne and Richard were very fortunate in



Above: Marianne at the jettied eastern end. Marianne and Richard were fortunate in having an unaltered painted section of the original jettying from this part of the house in quite good condition. It had been inside the point at which the timber garage had been attached to the building, and so was protected quite well. From this detail they were able to find the original external ochre paint colour and match it.

Right: Painting the front of what was the shop - see text

having an unaltered painted section of the original jettying from the 1600 part of the building in quite good condition. It had been inside the point at which the timber garage had been attached to the eastern end of the house, and so was protected quite well. From this detail they were able to find the original external ochre paint colour and match it.

"I think local people were quite surprised when they saw us scrubbing off the black coating on the external timbers, exposing the timber and then coating them again with coloured limewash," Marianne said. "But we pointed out that this was probably how the exterior was finished when that end of the house was built."

"Externally lime render and roughcast provide the ideal breathable coating for a solid-walled structure. Finished with limewash, this has an aesthetic which is a million miles away from modern cement and plastics paints."



Inside Marianne and Richard found reed matting invaluable when an ancient plaster ceiling proved too fragile to repair and sections had to be removed and replaced.

"If you are lucky enough to have historic lime plaster in your house, cherish it," Marianne said. "In recent decades old houses have frequently been replastered using a modern gypsum plaster or even in a hard sand and cement finish, in a misguided attempt to hold back damp. Historic ceilings are all too often removed and replaced with

plasterboard: this is tragic when they could so easily have been patched and repaired and the character retained."

When they had to replace sections of old undulating plaster walls Marianne and Richard used reed board, as it adds insulation and is excellent to plaster onto

Even the extension at the rear - it sits on the footprint of a previous extension - has been built with breathable walls using Hemcrete sprayed onto timber formwork between shuttering



"Hemcrete walls like this conform with modern insulation standards and provide an ecological and warm single skin walling system," Marianne says.

It has all cost a great deal of money and Marianne is convinced, that in the present market conditions she and Richard would have problems getting their money back were they to place the house on the market.

"In fact over the years I have realised that there is no money to be made in buying an old building, doing it up properly and selling it," she says. "It is always hugely expensive when you add up the hours spent."

This is usually my answer when I am asked - as I often am - 'How much money did you make?'

The main reason for this is that old houses fetch premium prices: in other words, they are overpriced.

"I really believe that if your main

motive for purchasing, sympathetically repairing, and living in a lovely old house is profit, you should think again. It was, after all, William Morris, founder of SPAB, who said that those of us who live in old houses are only trustees for those that come after us.

"At the same time it is worth remembering that an old house that has been carefully repaired in sympathy with its age and style is always more likely to appeal to future purchasers than one that has been modernised at the expense of its history."

The Old House Handbook - a practical guide to care and repair by Roger Hunt and Marianne Suhr: Frances Lincoln £25

*For details of Hemcrete try www.limetechology.co.uk. Tel.0845 6031143



Above:
The kitchen extension goes up. It is on the footprint of a previous extension.

Inset:
Inside the completed library - the 'shop' end