



The old timber-framed building stood alone under its tin roof in a corner of a field on the boundary of the farm, ancient, unloved and occupied only by chickens

In the 19th century it had served as two cottages, housing some of the army of workers who toiled away in the fertile pastures on the banks of the Wye - only a few fields away.

Phil Williams, whose family have farmed in this part of Herefordshire since the mid 17th century, had agonised about the building for many years

He felt powerless from the vantage point of his farm in South Island, New Zealand, but on his regular visits to the UK to visit his elderly mother and other members of the family, he thought constantly about what to do with the building. Finally a plan emerged: Phil decided to sell off an adjoining cottage and use the proceeds to renovate the old building.

"Initially it was just a case of stripping off a few layers and investigating to see what we would find," said Phil, who worked after leaving school as a cabinet maker and builder. "I had always had a fascination for the old timber-framed brick and sandstone buildings of my native Herefordshire, and after emigrating at the age of 24 often had the feeling that I should return home at some stage.

"However, by the time I had married and become the father of four young New Zealanders I began to realise that this was highly unlikely."

So Phil, who is now in his mid-fifties, decided he would return to Herefordshire once a year, for several months if possible, to work on restoring the old building.

"Initially I decided to restore the building purely as a labour of love, and just take things as they came," he said. "But I ruled out selling from the outset."

It was not until Phil had appointed an architect to oversee the project that the age and original status of the building became apparent. When architect Jacqui Demaus called in her husband Robert, a building historian and timber frame specialist, to advise, he was able to confirm that the house had originally been an open hall house of the cruck frame type. Crucks are matching pairs of curved main timbers joined at the top to form an

Main image:
A view of the completed exterior

Inset:
The building as it was before the restoration



A labour of love - from afar

BY CLIVE FEWINS



Above:
When he was over
from New Zealand
Phil worked on
most of the new
wattle and daub
infill panels

A-shape. The greatest concentration in England is in the Midlands and Welsh Borderlands, where they are quite common in houses and agricultural buildings built before about 1550.

Experts were also able to put a date on the three surviving crucks as being late 1400s to early 1500s, and from the smoke-blackened roof timbers they could confirm that the building had been an open hall, in all probability lived in by a family and their retainers - almost certainly local yeomen farmers.

Phil was enraptured. He felt vindicated that the view he had always held that this was a 'special'

building had been proved correct.

All this was some 20 years ago, and it took several years before work started in earnest. Having decided that he definitely wanted to keep the building as his own as a link with his Herefordshire childhood, Phil decided that the best solution was to put the building to use as a holiday let.

"That way the building, once restored, would be enjoyed and appreciated by many," he said. "In addition I would be able to stay in it on my trips back home."

Once the restoration project got going all those involved, including the local conservation officer, thought the building ought to be moved. The

reason for this was the fact that the building no longer stood in the centre of its plot but on the boundary. This was because, at some stage - probably in the nineteenth century after the house ceased to be used for human habitation - the plot was reduced in size. The result was that, unless the building was moved it would be impossible to rebuild one of the three bays, and so recreate the hall.

"It really did seem to make a lot of sense to move the house about 70 metres towards the centre of the plot in order to do justice to what was planned as a very high spec restoration job in which all the remaining cruck timbers and historic ➡



The upstairs
bedroom as it is
now. The thatch
has been left
exposed as it
would have been in
the early 16th
century



Top: When the timber frame had been strengthened and stabilised it was placed on a steel chassis and dragged by an old truck across the levelled ground to its new position

Bottom left: The gallery in the end of the building that has been rebuilt.

Bottom right: The stove and relaxation area taken from the stairs

infilling material would be retained," Phil said.

Robert Demaus, who had worked on moving buildings when working at the The Weald and Downland Museum near Chichester, could see no reason why it could not be moved such a short distance using techniques he had employed while working at the museum.

However there was a strong feeling that if it were moved to a different position it would be difficult to gain planning permission for the building to be used as a house.

It was therefore decided to apply for the building to be listed. Then they knew there would be a good argument for saving it and putting

it to domestic use. As a listed building it would also be exempt from having to comply with all the latest thermal insulation requirements when the detailed restoration work took place.

Once the building was listed Jacqui Demaus prepared a strong case for moving the building, and a detailed specification for repairs to the three crucks (there were originally four) and the remaining sections of the house.

The plan was also to build anew at the end where they were sure there had been a third bay.

The case they put out to the planning authority was supported by its own conservation officer and the local

English Heritage inspector.

The debate then entered a new phase: was it best to dismantle the building and reassemble the crucks and other remains of the timber frame, or to follow some other course?

Eventually it was decided that, because of later accretions and early infill panels that might collapse into dust if the frame was taken apart, it would be better to repair the frame in situ as far as possible before the move.

This was done, the ground the building would have to be dragged across was levelled, and the new foundations prepared, including the 'skirts' of local sandstone.



a local thatcher created a roof of water reed.

Inside, the thatch is exposed, as it would have been in the early 16th century, and the incomplete rafters left as found at the point where the smoke from the fire in the central hearth is believed to have passed through a louvre in the roof.

There is no complete second storey. Instead, using the crucks both for division and support purposes, a downstairs bedroom and bathroom have been created in the original 'solar' end - the end where five hundred years ago the family would have had their private quarters - and a second double bedroom created above.

This very much follows the original layout, as has the partial plank and muntin screen recreated in oak at the far end, which has been rebuilt to what is believed to be the original plan using modern materials. The gallery at this end, which people renting the property will be able to use as a rest and relaxation area, is, as Phil admits, conjecture.

Phil is delighted. After nearly 20 years the old building is a house again, and ready to start its new life as a holiday rental.

As Phil says: "I think this is a [good] solution. I could not bear to part with the house, and other people will now gain pleasure from the house and its beautiful peaceful surroundings and also, by the fees they pay, help to ensure the building does not come so near to oblivion again. Now, after more than 500 years, it has an exciting new life ahead of it. It's taken a long time - but it's also been a minor miracle after the near disastrous state the building had fallen into. And it also gives me a good reason to look forward to my visits to this wonderful corner of England."

The frame was skillfully repaired, then jacked up. A steel chassis was created with the assistance of Phil's two cousins, and in 1995 an old Army winch truck slowly dragged the frame across the plot to its new position.

Once secured to its skirt, work could begin in earnest on turning the frame into a home again.

"After every spell away I'd muse on my childhood playing in and around the building, re-enter it and each time be overwhelmed by the atmosphere of the place," Phil said. "Even in its unrestored state it had an amazingly friendly feel to it. All I wanted to do was to find the money and the time to give the old

building a new lease of life."

It has taken another 15 years to come to fruition - mainly because Phil wanted to do the maximum amount of work himself and was only able to come over for an extended stay once a year - but the work is now complete.

As well as Phil's own labour in undertaking all the internal woodwork and making the new infill panels from wattle and daub and also experimenting with some modern highly-energy retentive materials, a local builder has restored and repaired the cruck blades. He also built a sturdy chimney of local stone. Phil also worked on the windows and other sections of the frame, and

Above: An end-on view of work in progress

Further information

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