

Barn battle with a happy ending

BY
CLIVE FEWINS



Main image:
The downstairs
showing the
unusual staircase
in twin flights

Above:
The landing
gallery



Andy and Mandy Mount had stripped out much of the interior of the 140 sq metre listed Suffolk barn and were living amongst piles of rubble when the man from the council planning department arrived.

He pointed out that, although the building had been converted into a children's nursery and been used for that purpose for nearly two years, this was the first time it had been proposed to use it as a house.

He explained that St Edmundsbury District Council had rigorous policies in place, and permission to convert the building to residential use was not the same as the outline planning permission with which they had bought the barn. ➡



He also pointed out that the council's barn conversion policy stipulated that there should be the maximum possible internal visibility for the historic frame. When he explained this, the Mounts had a sudden vision of losing all the opportunity to have a lovely open plan ground floor. Instead they feared the ground floor might be largely taken up with bedrooms.

"Basically we were told that the council would prefer to see a single-storey property open to the roof, so that as much as possible of the timber frame could be seen," Andy explained, "It soon became apparent that we would be allowed one upstairs bedroom, but the planners were pressing for at least 33 per cent of the space in the barn to be left as void."

It took a superhuman effort by their designer, Chris Nall, to persuade the planners to allow two bedrooms - and this was one less than they had been hoping for - upstairs.

The bedrooms were to be

positioned one at each end of the building and connected by a long galleried landing. It would be accessed by an unusual staircase with twin flights, one of which ducks cleverly beneath a major tie beam to give access to the bedroom at the front of the building.

The result is exciting and imaginative. The interior is a forest of wonderful oak, and the staircase and walkway together form a dramatic feature.

"The finished conversion looks wonderful," said Mandy. "We love it. We also love the surroundings: the barn is in a beautiful tranquil rural location with an abundance of birdlife, squirrels and deer."

However, there were further planning complications. The council's barns policy also worked against them when it came to creating new openings in the building.

The two big windows that were in place at the front (south) end when the building served as a nursery have become four smaller

Main image:
The exterior of the barn as it is today

Above:
The kitchen area

ones - two on each floor - but they have been permitted only two additional window openings, and have had to close one previous one to compensate for this.

In addition they were allowed no rooflights - they would have liked one on each pitch of the roof - and the ensuite bedroom at the north end has had to fit in with a large tie beam that restricts its size. Andy and Mandy had been hoping that access to the large loft would be from an adjoining bedroom, but as this was not permitted their only means of reaching it is via a retractable ladder from their bedroom.

"I have to admit that when we bought it I thought we'd have a much freer rein than was in fact the case," Andy says. The actual proportion of the void space in the building is around 50 per cent."

"We found this rigid adherence to the barns policy all the more surprising as the children's nursery lasted less than two years," said Mandy. "It was almost laughable really because when the barn served



The master bedroom

The sitting room area

The upstairs bathroom

Andy and Mandy Mount

as a nursery many of the lovely old timbers had been covered with mdf boarding and others had been coated with a most unsympathetic varnish. The barn was a listed building before all this was done to it, and all we wanted to do was, basically, to revert to the original fabric. As we saw it we were making huge improvements to the building."

The Mounts also had problems over the driveway, which was just grass when they arrived. "We had to show that we did not wish to make it look too urban," Andy explained. "Although this approach was fine with us, it still proved a huge fight."

Would they have undertaken the project had they realised all the problems and heartache that the

conversion of a listed, timber framed historic barn would entail?

"Oh, yes!" said Mandy. "It's like having a baby - hugely painful at the time, but you soon forget."

Nevertheless, the experience has made them quite circumspect about undertaking a similar operation.

"It would be lovely to find another house with more garden," Andy said. "But it would have to be old - and one thing we have learned the hard way is that old houses inevitably provide challenges."

"We have learned so much that we feel we are in a position to give a lot of advice to people who find themselves in a similar situation."

"Firstly, prepare for a fight with

the planners over most things.

Secondly try to be more successful than us and better at getting them on your side. Thirdly, be prepared to put in a tremendous amount of effort to get it right. And finally, do your homework a bit more thoroughly than we did before purchasing."

Now it is all finished Andy and Mandy love the oak frame, with its beautiful timbers, soaring interior and welcoming open plan ground floor.

The downstairs layout was altered several times during the lengthy planning process. The horseshoe-shaped kitchen has a window - one of the two new openings they have been allowed - over the sink facing

into the garden, and a separate breakfast bar.

The original idea of a separate room beside the kitchen to be used as a study was dropped, and the area now forms a snug that merges into the dining area and relaxation space.

"We love the feel of the interior, and it is also a great house to return to after a hard day's work," said Mandy. "It was worth the fight to get a ground floor like this. It's so adaptable, both for entertaining people for dinner and for parties. The kitchen is extremely handy and we can easily move the dining table to create more space."

Andy said: "It was a hard slog and we worked hard on all the finishing off - painting, tiling and, waxing all

the beams. But it looks wonderful now and I find it perfect for the two of us. However I am not sure if I would be so keen on open plan if the junior members of the family had not left home!"

To me much of the joy of the house is in its surroundings. It's on the edge of a fen, with farmland on all sides. I just love the tranquillity and the views, plus the areas of woodland dotted about, and the large east Anglian skies.

"When I sit out on a warm summer evening and hear the little owls and the barn owl and the deer barking I think to myself: 'This is just heaven. It was worth all the effort.'"

