



# The perfect job – but at a price

BY CLIVE FEWINS



The walls of Harriet Skinner's beautifully restored listed Grade 11 cottage in South Oxfordshire are adorned throughout with glorious colours - French greys, gentle umbers, and glistening pale creams. All the colours, mixed by Harriet using a clay paint, embellish the softest of lime walls. In some parts, where they were in good condition, she has chosen to leave the wattle and daub panels gently repaired but uncoloured.

The interior of the 17th century building is also awash with light - partly due to orientation, but also to subtly-positioned windows, which have their origins in the three-year renovation project.

Five years ago, when Harriet and her husband Brian bought the house, every beam in the building was coated with gloss paint. It was awash with damp throughout, and there were large fungi growing out of some of the ground floor walls.

This situation had been caused mainly by an impervious render that had been applied to most of the interior.

About 40 years ago, when harsh plaster finishes and oil-based paints were being used willy-nilly on period properties, the building had endured a good 'going over'. Inglenook fireplaces had been filled in, inappropriate doors with glass panels fitted, and modern skirtings installed. It all hid any vestige of

The house is believed to date from the first half of the 17th century. Harriet and Brian bought it in 2007

Harriet believes conservatories rarely work with old houses, but she wanted a 'garden room' of sorts. The result was this glazed area at the rear of the kitchen, overlooking the rear garden



The dining table is French and belonged to Harriet's parents. Harriet and Brian bought the corner cupboard, which could have been made for the house. The lady in the painting is Russian and, says Harriet, "quite special"

the historic internal structure - and effectively prevented the house from breathing.

The result was near-fatal damage to many of the historic surfaces. It is the variety of these delectably uneven surfaces - experts often refer to this as 'the patina of time' - that constitutes so much of the appeal of old houses.

When Harriet and Brian arrived a substantial section of front wall was unsafe, due to the removal at some stage of large areas of the original timber frame and insertion of large-pane unsympathetic windows. In addition the former animal byre at the north end needed reroofing and a partial rebuild before it was fit to be turned into Harriet's new kitchen.

Three things have saved the

building. The passion and skill of surveyor Richard Cain, who died tragically last year at the age of 46, the use of lime-based materials to restore breathability to the building, and the tenacity of Harriet and Brian. Harriet gave up two days a week from the financial services company she runs to guide the project along.

"Richard was passionate about building conservation," Harriet said. "He was a vigorous proponent of the SPAB philosophy of minimal intervention, using 'like with like' with regard to historic materials."

Richard quickly managed to persuade Brian and Harriet that this was the course they should adopt. Brian, who is a civil servant, and engaged in work of a sensitive

nature, was unable to find much time to get involved, so Harriet took the lead role.

Richard was also very fond of a well-known SPAB phrase 'Poverty Protects'. What this really means is that if you have a tendency to throw money at a project - hold fire. You could well end up doing more harm than good.

"All too often I see renovated houses that could almost be new inside," Harriet said. "All the lovely wobbly old surfaces and out-of-plumb sections of wall have been straightened out by over-zealous and unsympathetic renovators. The result is so often an enormous loss of the original character. That was the last thing Brian and I wanted, and Richard could see that."





**Left:** The green oak porch was hugely expensive and built on site. It replaced a rather pedestrian porch built from painted softwood

**Top right:** Harriet and Brian decided to leave some panels of the original wattle and daub in the beautifully restored bathroom.

**Bottom right:** Where the former animal byre had to be rebuilt Harriet and Brian went to great lengths to use typical local materials and emulate vernacular styles

Harriet and Brian are far from poor, but they hate waste of all kinds, and Richard could see that their approach was not one of throwing money at the project. In any case the latter would have been very difficult because they realised that to complete the job would cost them about £170,000 - some £30,000 more than their allotted budget.

Apart from having to raise the additional money this also made them think about expense on all fronts.

"Basically our approach was - whenever possible, don't replace unless it is absolutely necessary," Harriet said.

The result of this approach is that the house is full of delightfully

tactile surfaces. In many parts they have avoided replastering, preferring to repair and patch, and so retain many of the original surfaces more or less intact. "We have thrown virtually nothing away, preferring to reuse old materials wherever possible," Harriet said. "We get a great kick out of the old building's imperfections."

When work started in 2006 the first set of builders Harriet and Brian employed were found to be not up to the task and after a month it was decided to part company.

"After that experience I decided to put together my own team of local tradesmen and managed to get an excellent group together," Harriet said.

One of the greatest challenges

was the front elevation. Much of this was sagging and needed reinforcing as a result of the removal of so much of the oak frame. Eventually it was decided to rebuild the front ground floor walls and also much of the rear ground floor. The building was propped up section by section as the work took place.

We chose a material called Hemcrete because it is a breathable material and looks wonderful finished with a lime plaster and limewash," Harriet said. "Richard used to say it is the modern version of wattle and daub, but with far better insulation qualities."

Hemcrete is a mixture of chopped hemp and lime that sets with a finish onto which it is quite easy to apply a lime plaster. When finished ➔



# When is a guarantee no guarantee at all?

**Quite simply, when the installing contractor is no longer around when a problem occurs with their "guaranteed" work**

**Of course they may just refuse to return to site - after all, they've been paid for the work, why should they care?**

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## All leadworkers are not the same



Properly formed crown capping, a complicated detail, neatly bossed and correctly clipped to prevent wind lift, with expansion gaps to allow natural thermal movement. Carried out by an LCA member, vetted and approved



Similar but less complex detail; neatly bossed and looks OK to the untrained eye, however...



...closer inspection shows the capping soldered to the rolls, probably intended to prevent wind lift but only succeeding in restricting the natural thermal movement of the sheet, which will ultimately cause failure and water penetration.

If you don't see the logo



You don't see the specialist



**Left:** When Harriet and Brian arrived the window at the top of the stairs was blocked and the walls covered in tongue and groove boarding. Adding skirting and bringing this feature to its present state proved a hard task

The garden to the rear is much-loved by Alfie the lurcher, pictured here, and also by his colleagues Dylan and Guinness, also both lurchers

it is impossible to tell the difference from wattle and daub. Hemcrete also 'breathes' in the same way as traditional wattle and daub.

Shuttering was used and Hemcrete poured in round a frame of softwood. One of the great joys of the material is that you can pour it round timber and leave it in situ. Because Hemcrete is highly alkaline it is dry, and so has the effect of preserving the timber. It is increasingly being used for new-build.

To finish it all off Harriet and Brian replaced the rather pedestrian painted wooden porch with a

deliciously curvy and far more appealing green oak design with diamond mullions. It was sawn and constructed on site by a local specialist. Although it cost what Harriet calls an 'extortionate' amount of money, they have no regrets because of the quality of the timber work and the finish.

The final major task was digging down about three feet at the rear and rather less at the front to install gravel soakaways, so that in future the building would not encounter any of the structural failure it had experienced in the past.

"At some stage in the 19th

century, all the internal floors were lowered, which left the ground floor below ground," Harriet said.

"Concrete had been poured round most of the oak posts and they had sweated and rotted at their bases."

This has meant that most of them have had to be strengthened in some way before remounting them on their original sarsen stone plinths.

"Today we have no damp at all and the house is dry and beautifully free from condensation throughout," Harriet says. "I put this down to the fact that it is a true breathing structure again.

"It was all a tremendous amount



**Above:** The Skinners have tried out to bring out the best features of the house - for example, the windbraces here in the spare bedroom

of work. Needless to say there were lots of ups and downs - some exhilarating moments and a fair proportion of the reverse. For eight months the two of us had to live in two little downstairs rooms in the single storey extension with three dogs. I did all the decorating myself. At times it was very tough, but we'd do it again. When we retire we may move further west - perhaps to rural Herefordshire where there still seem to be some interesting properties to restore."

**ADVICE FROM HARRIET AND BRIAN**

- Always try to live in a house you are renovating for several months before embarking on anything major. If possible also try to continue living in the house while the work takes place.
- Hire a good surveyor and good labour.
- You must LOVE old houses if you are to undertake a big project like Harriet and Brian's listed house.
- Put the maximum possible time you are able to into the project.

**Below top:** Originally an animal byre, this room was used as a storage area before the Skinners bought the cottage

**Below bottom:** This is in the kitchen. This shows the method devised by Harriet and Richard Cain to use used tiles to fill in gaps where original posts had rotted above their sarsen stone bases. Harriet calls this technique "One of the signatures of the house"



- Try to get most of the schedule of work agreed in advance. That makes it far easier for any builder to give you a fixed price. Then, if you realise you wish to economise as the work proceeds you can cut out or put on hold certain sections of the programme. Harriet and Brian did this with the single storey 19th century extension to the south, where work has yet to be completed.