



Walnut Tree Cottage

by Clive Fewins



The cottage from outside



The deep relief name plaque by the front door is one of Terry's creations. It is adorned by a series of animals and trees.

Terry and Joyce Doughty live in a listed thatched cottage with hardly a vertical wall in it. The house, parts of which are said to date from 1560, lies on the edge of orchards in a tucked-away corner of an Oxfordshire village renowned for its medieval buildings.

They have lived at Walnut Tree Cottage since 1977, and although they are now in their late sixties they have no intention of leaving until they are carried out. "It has been our life in many ways," says Joyce. "It had taken all our money and all our effort."

"When we moved here there was a massive amount to do, our friends were extremely sceptical and my father thought us very stupid," said Terry. "But it was what we had hankered over. As an artist I had always wanted an old house with character. Fortunately Joyce agreed."

"I had cut my teeth on two other properties – both modern ones – to provide the funds needed to restore an old property, so I knew I proved myself and had the confidence to tackle a really old building."

So in August 1977 they moved into the property together with son Mark, then aged three.

They thought they had a ten year slog ahead of them. It has turned out to be 35 years.

"In reality there is always something to do," says Terry, now largely retired from his business as a potter specialising in commemorative pieces.

"But if we didn't love it we wouldn't be here – which brings me to the first point about living in old houses: only buy one if you really love them."

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The post in the middle is not as wobbly as it looks. Part of the original walnut tree, it does a vital support job and was there when Terry and Joyce arrived. The tree was long gone, one but they planted another and it survives



The bathroom



The space-saving table, designed by Terry, folds away against the wall. Over the years Terry and Joyce have found many clever ways of both saving and gaining space.



For Terry and Joyce it has been an ongoing love affair – but one that has been constant hard work, and quite often financially challenging.

"As neither of us have been on large incomes it has often been a case of 'must needs', and doing the vast majority of the work ourselves," Terry said. "There is an awful lot of us in this house."

Terry and Joyce's years of effort to find the right materials for the various phases of the repairs and extensions have led to many interesting finds. For the bricks at the rear of the inglenook fireplace that Terry rebuilt they only had to walk a few yards – to a brick cottage that was being renovated. The stone for the same job came from some old piles found in the garden when they arrived at Walnut Tree Cottage.

Their ingenuity is attested by the number of times they have had to cope with getting bulky items upstairs using the the spiral staircase they installed in 1978.

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The ceiling above it is in need of some careful plaster repairs as it is extensively pitted as a result of the latest piece of furniture - a wardrobe - to be hauled up through the space. On one occasion when this method failed they took out the window in their bedroom so they could get a bed and bath in.

However this is as nothing compared with their struggles to find storage space.

The two original bedrooms - turned into three in 1978 by Terry's carpentry skills when their second son Miles was born - extend right up into the roof space, and have the tiniest of lofts above.

There is a small loft in the two storey extension at the rear they built in 1982. This extension gave them an upstairs bathroom and a rear dining room downstairs. But over the years it has always been a battle to find further ingenious means of gaining storage space. Terry and Joyce admit this has stretched them at times, as the house has had to expand to take their growing family (two sons) contract when the boys left home, and now expand again as they have two grandchildren, aged four and six, who come to stay with their parents from time to time.

Fortunately they are able to store larger items in the garage and outbuildings on the large plot. Another clever storage idea is a large cupboard in the bathroom housed in the 1982 extension that makes use of roof

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void in the original property. In the number two bedroom there is also a sleeping platform for the grandchildren cunningly created from what was roof space at the far end of the room.

Even in the new kitchen (when they arrived it was a single storey extension housing both kitchen and bathroom) they have an ingenious flapped table designed by Terry that folds flat against the wall and takes two purpose-made stools underneath.

When they arrived in 1977 one of the first tasks was to remove a gigantic buttress of solid clay created against the earth wall at the rear of the house and put there in order to add extra support because some of the timber frame had failed. Its presence has caused quite a damp problem and the earth wall was in a poor state. Removing this buttress freed up about ten feet between the rear of the building and the boundary and meant that the Doughtys were able to build the much-needed extension. But it was

a tricky job and involved the use of props as the ceiling joists were in danger of collapsing at the rear

It was 1982 and the building was yet to be listed, so Terry was at liberty to remove the damp earth wall. It was a busy year as he even put in the mains drainage himself while all this was going on.

"When we look back after so many years I suppose you could say the house was neglected and run-down as it had been a rental," Terry says. "But, as they say in the world of thatching, it had a good hat and good boots."

At one stage they did use a hired injector to install a damp course at the point where the lower lounge steps up to the adjoining upper lounge, us. But basically they bought a sound building. Nevertheless, a heavy cement render had pulled away many of the wattle and daub panels on the outside and Terry had to go



Terry and Joyce did a lot of work on this room. Terry rebuilt the inglenook fireplace with bricks he obtained from a cottage nearby that was being renovated.

round the entire building with a mix of plaster with small polystyrene balls mixed in with it to improve insulation.

He used generous helpings of pva adhesive when adhesion proved a problem, and to make the outside weatherproof used a breathable masonry paint.

Using this method he replaced all the square panels within the timber frame and at the same time raised the height of the front door, which was only chin height!

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The spiral staircase was one of the first fixtures Terry and Joyce installed after they came to Walnut Tree Cottage in 1977. It last had to be removed in order to get large items of furniture upstairs about three years ago.

"We never found out why it was so low," Terry said. "I managed to raise it simply by positioning the lintel higher between the vertical posts that formed part of the frame."

At the same time he created the very attractive deep relief plaque that bears the name of the cottage adorned by a series of animals and trees.

They found the new front door going begging at a cottage a few doors away, but it took a lot of Terry's labour to cut it down in height and width to fit the new opening.

The same self-help approach was adopted when Terry assisted the builder who added their rear extension in 1982. It was agreed from the outset that Terry should do all the groundwork.

"It's all been a lot of effort but worth it," Terry said. "I think we have really come to the view that the key with adapting old cottages to suit your lifestyle is to work with the building and not against it. This is what we have always tried to do.

"You should always put the building first - go with it. And be prepared to make sacrifices. Too many people alter cottages to suit their needs and at the end of the process it finally dawns on them that they have destroyed a lot of the historic features that attracted them to the building in the first place!"

"I really believe one of the best ways of getting it right is to do as much as possible of the work yourself - which is what we have done - relying on professionals for just the essentials. Finding people with the right skills can be difficult, but it is important to know where they are in case you need them. Fortunately Joyce and I have rarely needed to call on them.

"We should like to think that when our tenure finally comes to an end that Walnut Tree Cottage will be in sufficiently good condition to give pleasure to many for several more hundred years." 