



Charles Cottage from the road. The kitchen is the brick structure at the far end.
Photo, courtesy Pro Abode
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The job that was thought impossible

Most of her friends thought that converting a dilapidated down-at-heel former smithy and wheelwright's shop that had for years been used as a workshop and store into a characterful country kitchen was one challenge too many.

Not so intrepid house restorer Wendy Davenport, who bought her house in a pretty village in the Berkshire downs together with her then husband in 1998.

Those of you that read of Wendy's battle (she was then Wendy Aynsley) to convert the rest of her listed cottage – a jumble of buildings under one roof dating from a variety of periods – in Listed Heritage issue 75 in March 2011, will have realised that Wendy is an extremely able lady.

There are few practical skills she does not possess (although her favourite is working with lime plasters and renders) and, by summer 2011, after working on the house solidly during the intervening years, she felt she had gained enough confidence and experience to undertake the last lap. This was to turn the smithy into the kitchen and the existing kitchen into the new dining room.

It was a formidable task. I know, because I wrote the 2011 article. And at the time

I had no idea of how the connection could be made simply and cogently between kitchen and dining room. They were not only at two completely different levels – the house is built on a slope – but there was no natural means of connecting the two, particularly with the ease and swiftness of passage needed to convey food from the kitchen to guests at the table.

Wendy did it. And under the most difficult of circumstances. Because in December 2012 Graham, her husband, with whom she had been together for 25 years, decided to up sticks and leave.

There was to be no reconciliation. And once Wendy realised this she had many periods of despair.

Graham wanted to sell up immediately, but Wendy – the deal all along had been that she would mastermind all the house restoration

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...These included removing a large brick pier that stood in the middle of what was to be the kitchen floor.*



Before:

The brick pillar was in the middle of the room and dated from the days when it was a forge and blacksmith's shop. Removing it was a tricky operation.



The kitchen as it is now. The brick pillar in the 'before' shot stood approximately in the middle of where the table is now. The new entrance is beside the window on the left, where the steps in the lobby area can be seen. The door is in the position it always was, but nowadays leads to the new lobby. The old door (see pic on next page) is now mounted on the wall to the left of this shot.

Photo courtesy Pro Abode
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Before:
The corner of the room that now houses the Aga. The gap to the right of the saw table leads to the cellar.



After:
The same corner of the kitchen today.

Photo courtesy Pro Abode
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Top: The old kitchen door is seen here now mounted on the wall to your right as you enter the room.

Bottom: The house seen from the driveway into the garden

Photo courtesy Pro Abode

work while he provided the financial support – was determined to complete the project. In any case all the major structural work on the kitchen/dining room project was by then complete.

There was a second major blow. In the summer of 2011, shortly after submitting the plan he had drawn up for the kitchen/dining room job, surveyor Richard Cain died of cancer aged 46. Richard had for several years been Wendy's great support, and latterly he was the mastermind of the scheme to tie together the end section of the barn with the main building and convert the former smithy into the new kitchen.

Her other great supporter had been her friend of nine years, Gilly Hall. During Wendy's lowest ebb – the time when it finally dawned

that Graham was not coming back – Gilly looked after the team working on the kitchen while Wendy spent 12 days in Kent under the care of her sister.

Those of you that read the 2011 article will know that Gilly is an entirely kindred spirit and an accomplished house restorer in her own right.

"Gilly was always there as a prop, and as an occasional aid, but this time round I had to use a good deal of professional labour because of the major tasks involved," Wendy explained. "These included removing a large brick pier that stood in the middle of what was to be the kitchen floor; inserting a steel beam to do the work of supporting the floor above that had previously been performed by the pier; stripping and retiling the roof, and rebuilding

a section of the exterior stone wall in order to take out a four inch lean that was heading towards a collapse.

"Really the success of the job is a testament to Richard. He was dedicated to saving old buildings. It was his inspired idea to connect the new kitchen with the new dining room by a series of gentle steps housed in a new rear lobby extension with a new entrance door to that end of the house."

So as you approach Charles Cottage from the rear now (see photographs) you see a door housed in a timbered structure beneath a single pitched lean-to roof and containing a set of five low curving stone steps.

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There are five low steps leading up to the dining room (the old kitchen) in the oak-framed lobby that now connects that room with the kitchen.

Photo courtesy Pro Abode
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The entrance to the new single story lobby that connects the kitchen to the dining room on the upper level.

The new lobby entrance from another angle, showing the timber frame construction.

It is a natural and worthy introduction to the kitchen, which is characterised by its wealth of sanded oak beams and beautiful floor of reclaimed flagstones.

In the far corner is the refurbished Aga that Wendy bought for £2,000 20 years ago. She kept it in storage for all those years before having it renovated and fitted in her new kitchen. "It's marvellous to use, but it has been a steep learning curve," Wendy said.

In the centre of the kitchen is a large farmhouse table that partly occupies the spot that proved the most contentious. Wendy had some difficulty persuading the local conservation officer that a large brick pillar (probably dating from the 18th century) that stood on ground where the table is now centrally positioned should be removed.

With the aid of an expensive survey from a consultant archaeologist and a careful recording exercise the conservation officer accepted that the building would very likely have disintegrated without the removal of the pillar.

After it had gone, apart from heaving a huge sigh of relief, Wendy was free to have the flagstone floor laid and get on with the finishing off.

Throughout the project Wendy's main physical labour was in the two-part haired lime plaster finish on the walls, and the lining and insulating of the walls with Hemcrete.

Hemcrete comprises fibres of industrial hemp in a lime-based binder. In conservation work it is usually applied against old walls using

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The dining room
as it is now.
Photo courtesy Pro Abode
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A view of the dining
room when it served
as the kitchen. The
window to the right
now forms the
doorway to the new
dining room.



The Sitting room.
Work on this room
was part of Wendy's
previous labours on
the cottage.
Photo courtesy Pro Abode
www.proabode.co.uk



shuttering. In difficult areas such as around windows it is applied directly to the walls and then shaped when it is partially dry.

"Hemcrete is wonderful stuff because it has largely taken the place of wattle and daub when repairing old infill panels in timber framed buildings like this," Wendy said.

"However, this end of the building is stone and when applied to old walls like the stone ones in the smithy it insulates them brilliantly. In old buildings like this with solid walls it is ideal for insulation because of its vapour permeability. In other words the building 'breathes' as it was designed to do, and maintains a stable temperature and humidity."

In a kitchen Wendy has also found that a vapour-permeable finish such as hemcrete will absorb steam and other forms of condensation and help create a comfortable environment.

Wendy added: "Creating the new kitchen and dining room was the most difficult and demanding part of the entire house

restoration and took three years. There were times when I thought it would never be finished before the divorce became absolute, but in the end we managed it. The final stage of removing all the plaster from the beams was a huge and backbreaking job and I had to fortify myself with many a glass of wine."

In typical have-a-go fashion Wendy says: "There is virtually nothing that is insurmountable when it comes to repairing and restoring old houses. I suppose it is rising to these challenges that is one of the reasons I love working on old properties so much. Even if you have faulty foundations there is quite often a means of solving the problem."

Now it is all finished she often muses, as she stands in the kitchen cooking, on whether King Charles I, from whom the cottage takes its name, really did stand in the room while his horse was being shod by the local blacksmith.

It is well documented that in 1644 King Charles stayed in the village for several days while travelling between Oxford and Marlborough during the Civil War. During

his stay it is said that the King had his horse shod at the local blacksmiths, which was later named Charles Cottage to commemorate the event.

It is a lovely story, but probably fanciful, as Wendy points out, the loyalist troops staying in the village with the King would have had at least one farrier among their number.

"I shall miss the house terribly when I leave this year," she said. "I have to sell it and it is now on the market. But I have seen the project through. I am not happy about leaving, but I am happy I have completed the job after so many years"

Charles Cottage is for sale through Davis Tate: www.davistate.com/contact-us/wantage 🏡



Wendy –
a remarkably able lady

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