

Restoration diary

After an unsteady start, Phillip and Waddi are now the proud owners of a beautifully restored thatched cottage.

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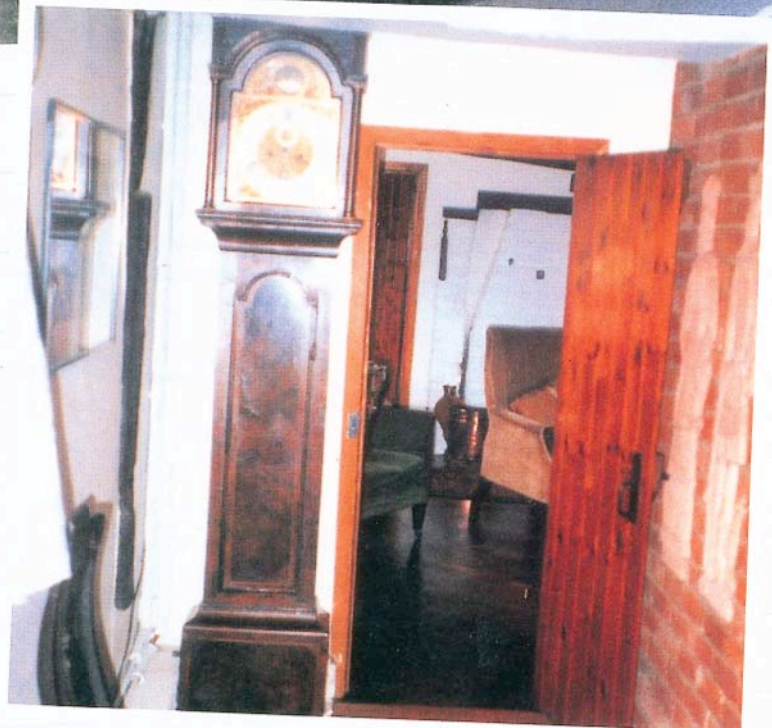
This late-15th century thatched cottage has a fascinating history, but most of it only came to light as a result of its meticulous restoration, which took two years and was full of drama.

Nine months into the project came the lowest ebb that Phillip and Waddi came up against. The specialist contractor that the couple were employing went bankrupt, leaving them living in rented accommodation 12 miles away with the stripped-down house left in limbo. Nevertheless, they came through the other end and the project has provided them with enormous satisfaction.

When the couple embarked upon the venture the cottage was a maze of tiny rooms that entirely concealed the original structure. Phillip and Waddi have found it immensely satisfying to have done a 'proper' job, using all the correct materials – lime plaster and render with masses of horsehair in it, split hazels and daub in the wall panels, and lots of repairs to the frame in green oak.

In 2002, when the run-down house with its shingled roof was stripped down to its frame, Phillip and Waddi called in building historian Beth Davis to produce a report. She concluded that the five-bay property dated from the late-15th – early-16th century and originally had an open hall at the centre with service rooms at each end. She speculated that the building, with its large two-storey window at the front, could have served as a point of refreshment for travellers on the well-worn route up the long hill that leads past the house into the village.

When the South Cambridgeshire conservation officer realised that the



TOP: Phillip and Waddi are pleased they could restore their 15th century cottage using traditional methods and materials.

MIDDLE: An exterior shot of the Medieval cottage before the two year restoration project began.

BELOW: The cottage was originally made up of a maze of tiny rooms which hid the original structure of the house.



building, as had long been suspected, was a late-Medieval gem, he demanded a full survey and decided to amend the planning permission to take account of the historic nature of the house. "The conservation staff were very kind to us, and did not insist that we stopped the work while the survey took place," Phillip says. "I think they realised we were trying hard to do a first rate job using the correct traditional materials."

Although the house had been very run-down – builders in the 1960s had used harsh cement renders and plasters which had attacked the original oak frame – in 1999, when Phillip was building the studio he works from at the south end of the building, the architect involved commented on a reused ancient cambered and painted oak timber that was serving as the beam over the fireplace in the adjacent parlour. Later, experts came to the conclusion that it was a painted beam from a dais or gallery, which helped to put a late-Medieval date on the house.

Phillip had also spotted the remains of some ancient jowl posts – the enlarged



heads of main posts that allow the tie beams, wall plates and post section of the frame to be jointed together – that he thought added weight to the theory that the building dated from well before the 17th century.

Now the project is complete the original five-bay structure has been revealed and the open hall in the two central bays reinstated. The three fireplaces and flues, as well as the huge central stack, have been completely restored and rebuilt in places and they are now all in working order. A new kitchen sporting a pitched roof

TOP: Most of the house restoration was carried out using traditional materials including lime plaster and render thickened with horsehair.

ABOVE: During the restoration the owners were able to date parts of the house back to late-Medieval times.

of cedar shingles has been built on the enlarged footprint of the flat-roofed kitchen at the rear. New dormers with traditional Yorkshire sliding sash windows have been constructed and the thatched roof rebuilt because the timbers were spreading and the whole structure was leaning backwards. Local thatcher Peter Gray undertook a complete rethatch in locally-grown long straw. Extensive underpinning was also needed beneath sections of the walls.

When their first builder went out of business, Phillip and Waddi were fortunately able to re-employ the key men in the team, two of whom were highly skilled, and Phillip took over as main contractor and site manager. "They proved to be a wonderful bunch and we have a lot to thank them for, particularly master carpenter Winston Bish, some of whose scarf joints where he replaced some of the ancient timbers have to be seen to be believed," Phillip smiles. He also replaced



TOP: Care was taken to re-use as many of the original beams as possible.

ABOVE: The two storey window at the front of the cottage is thought to have been used as a point of refreshment for travellers.

LEFT: Large sections of the original oak frame are exposed throughout the house.

the huge vertical post in the dining room at the point where the original two-storey open hall was revealed.

Now the project is complete, all remaining traces of the three cottages the building is believed to have become during the 19th century have disappeared and large sections of the original oak frame are on hand to be admired. Upstairs there are now four bedrooms, two accessed from a staircase at each end.

"Doing it all the 'authentic' way has been hugely satisfying, but has cost a great deal," says Phillip. His advice to others would be if you can't afford to do a house restoration properly, don't embark on such a huge task. He explains the actual work is hardly rocket science, but you need patience, sensitivity and a good eye.

RIGHT: New dormer windows with traditional Yorkshire sliding sash were added and allow the light to flood in.

BELOW: A local thatcher rebuilt the roof with locally-grown long straw.



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