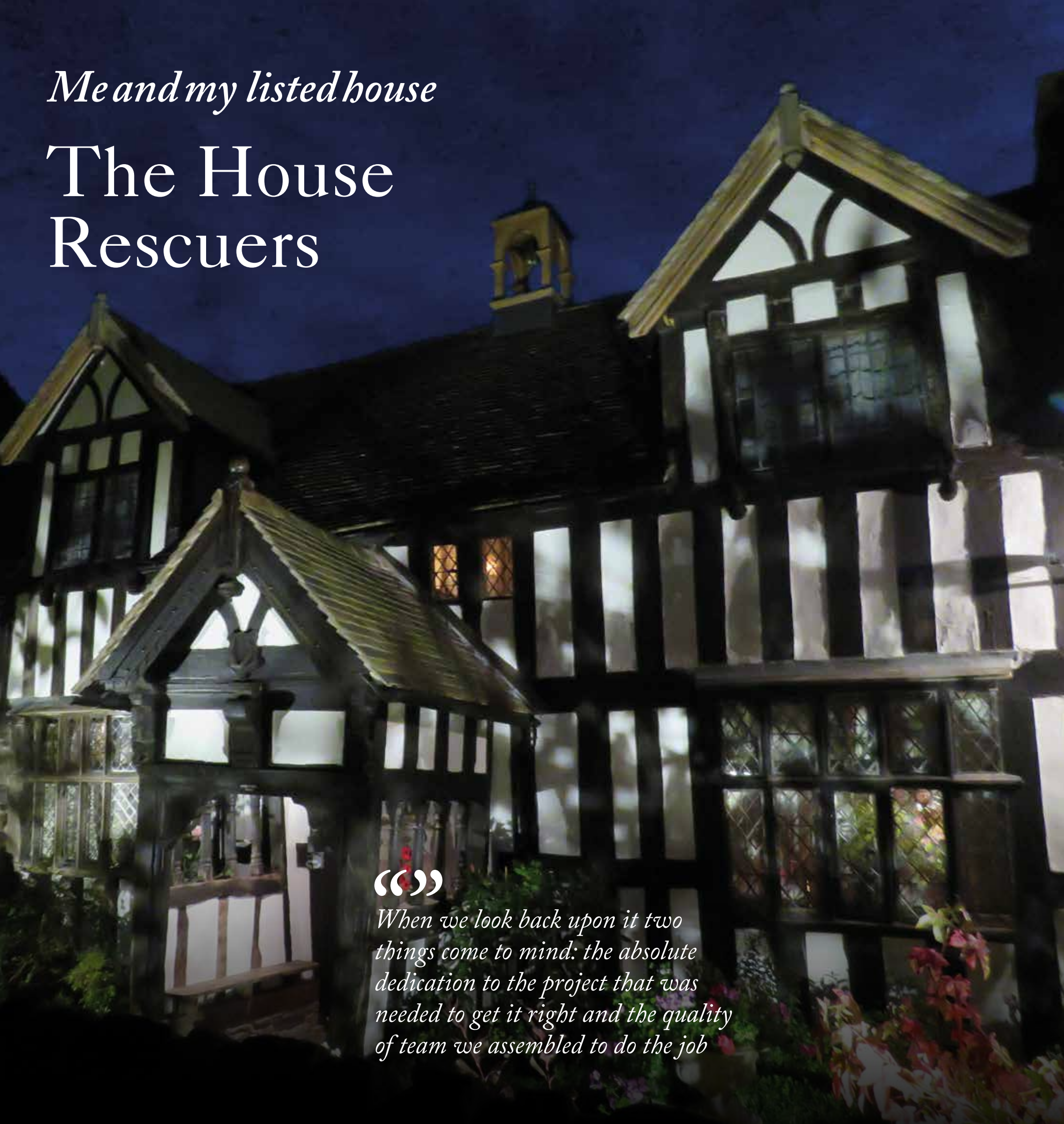


Me and my listed house

The House Rescuers



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When we look back upon it two things come to mind: the absolute dedication to the project that was needed to get it right and the quality of team we assembled to do the job



In winter the Plummers are fond of switching on the lights that illuminate the frontage of The Old Grammar School at night

In March 2017 we carried a feature on the new owners of the Listed Grade II* Old Grammar School in the Herefordshire village of Weobley, that dates from 1660. Since then Jeremy Plummer, 75, and his wife Tessa, 73, have completed the job and moved in. They recounted some of their experiences to **Clive Fewins**.

“It’s a pretty safe bet that this house will be our last. There have been quite a lot. This is our fourth listed one and it has been the most challenging and also the most enjoyable to work on. It is also the first Grade II* house we have undertaken. It has definitely been the most prestigious, particularly as it is in the renowned picturesque village of Weobley in the heart of Herefordshire black and white country.

“We always wanted to finish our house renovating ‘careers’ with something really special, and the Old Grammar School was the perfect candidate in the ideal location.

“The job took about eight months longer than we would have wished. We started in the spring of 2016 and finally moved in during July 2018. But apart from that it all went amazingly well and it was an altogether extraordinary experience.

“When we look back upon it two things come to mind: the absolute dedication to the project that was needed to get it right and the quality of team we assembled to do the job. They possessed almost as much commitment as we did and not one of them let us down in any way at any stage.

“The key decision really was that we decided not to appoint a firm of builders as main contractors but to hire our own labour and to do the project management ourselves. More precisely, Tessa became project manager.

“During the 27 months it took we had just one short holiday and worked on the building nearly every day, including weekends. It took a very long time to source the multitude of materials needed, from clay tiles to flagstones, granite sets and parquet flooring blocks.

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The exceptional porch is one of the main reasons why the Old Grammar School is listed Grade II*. This part of the building is thought to be the work of the renowned John Abell of nearby Sarnesfield, dubbed ‘The King’s Carpenter’ in the reign of Charles I



The downstairs scene in July 2106, when the concrete floor of the main area downstairs was being removed

“The tasks that faced us varied from pleading with suppliers to hit near impossible deadlines for things we needed for the next stage, to clearing up long after the building team had departed every day. There was always a mountain of problems to solve.

“Our aim was to achieve the highest possible standard. This was something we had set our minds on all along, as well as being necessary to meet the rigorous demands of Historic England, who sent an inspector out and had overall control of the project over and above our local conservation officer.

“The Old Grammar School was built around 1660. The founder was William Crowther (it is also known as Crowther’s Free School), a retired London haberdasher who lived locally. His annuity provided £20 annually towards the maintenance of an ‘honest and able man,’ well grounded in Latin and Greek, to be master to 15 boys, 10 from Weobley, three from Wormesley, and two from Wootton. Records show that it continued as a school until the late 1880s, when it became a private house.

“The entire downstairs space was the schoolroom. Upstairs was partitioned off. The larger room was a dormitory for the boys. The other side of the partition was the master’s private room, where it is believed he slept. Today it is our bedroom.

“The building is Grade II* listed because it has an exceptional frontage, with most of the original windows intact and a porch with unusual carving of extremely high quality. The porch and carving is thought to be the work of the renowned John Abell of nearby Sarnesfield, dubbed ‘The King’s Carpenter’ in the reign of Charles I.

“We had realised for several years that the Old Grammar School would be ideal as a last project, not least because it is far smaller than the nearby house we had been living in for 23 years, with a much smaller garden. It is also in a village with a regular bus service, shops, doctors, dentist, churches, pubs and restaurants.

“The previous owner, a lady of 94, had died in September 2014, having lived here alone for 60 years, so you can imagine how run-down the building was. We managed to purchase the building in a private sale from her executors. “All along we were aware of the challenges, one of the greatest of which was the slope of the old oak floorboards on the first floor. This was corrected with great skill by our



wonderful carpenter, Steve Ingram. Another major challenge was presented by the reclaimed parquet floor tiles – they came from a redundant church in Gloucestershire – that we bought on the day we completed the purchase of the building in September 2015.

“We decided on underfloor heating, which meant that all 3,542 parquet tiles had to have a slice taken off from the rear with a circular saw in order to remove the tar that previously fixed them down. Completing this was a huge task – so was digging up the concrete floor that had been laid sometime in the building’s past, to allow our team to install underfloor heating. Likewise preparing the ground floor for relaying.

“We could have wept when we saw a mini digger inside our beloved old school bashing away at the concrete floor. Today the parquet floor is the reason so many people say that the interior looks as if it has been unchanged for many years.

“At the north end a former external stone WC and washbasin attached to the house

▲ The main downstairs room today. Many people say that the interior looks as if it has been unchanged for many years. The entire downstairs space was originally the schoolroom

has been replaced by our garden room, which incorporates a study area and a cloakroom. The Historic England inspector was emphatic that this should be glazed in order to show the outside structure of the building, now enclosed by the garden room. So to keep ourselves as private as possible in this room and in our small garden we erected stone boundary walls and tall electric gates.

“Apart from the parquet floor we are particularly proud of the panelling that divides the kitchen from the rest of the ground floor, another excellent find early on in the project. It came from an old house in Wales and we found it in a reclamation yard near Abergavenny. It cost £2,200.

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The garden room at the north end occupies the space formerly occupied by an external stone WC and wash basin attached to the house. The room incorporates a study area and a cloakroom. The Historic England inspector was emphatic that this room should be glazed in order to show the outside structure of the building



A view of the rear soon after work began in Spring 2016



One of the two guest bedrooms

“We were especially fortunate that most of the lovely antique furniture we have acquired over the years since we renovated our first listed house – in Hampshire in the 1970s – looks so good in The Old Grammar School. “Our next house was also Listed Grade II. It was cruck-framed and much larger. We stayed 18 years and spent most of that time bringing it round to what we wanted. We then both retired – we worked respectively as a fire officer (Jeremy) and a senior night sister at Southampton General Hospital – and moved to a large listed oak framed house in a hamlet five miles from here.

“But The Old Grammar School is the gem of all our listed homes. It has the most original features, and a most interesting history. It is wonderful to muse over the boys who studied and slept and got into trouble here – and what happened to them!

“We think another reason the interior has settled in so well is the plasterwork. We were extremely lucky to get lime plaster expert George Hill to work on the project. He has a huge amount of experience in achieving the sort of rugged finish that the wattle and daub panels probably had on the inside, and avoiding the look of a standard modern smooth gypsum finish that can look so inappropriate in old listed houses.

“The other key member of the team was stonemason Martin Bufton, the senior and most experienced member of the team.



“There were other specialists who proved invaluable. Glass expert Jim Budd used a copper foiling technique to fuse together many of the cracked and broken small diamond-shaped panes of historic glass so that the maximum possible amount of it is still present in the leaded lights in the front elevation.

“Then we found two remarkable guys, Will Gardiner and Gareth Gwatkin, who made the extremely authentic-looking Jacobean style dark oak staircase, and electrician Terry Griffiths, who managed, with his assistant Ryan

Prosser, to conceal absolutely all the electric wiring: a major achievement.

“We really do believe they all loved working here. So did our old friend architect Peter Enticknap, who carried out all the liaison with Historic England and the local planning authority.

“We also had two friends – both former neighbours and extremely practical guys –

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who supported us throughout and were always sound shoulders to lean upon. We are really not sure we could have managed without Bill and Steve.

"We have had some amazing good fortune throughout. Projects like this are hugely expensive and of course we ran well above the £200,000 budget we had in mind for the job. It was also good fortune that we both managed to maintain the robust good health with which we have both been blessed for many years.

"After the staircase had gone in we realised that two large antique cupboards we were very keen to retain displayed a remarkable unwillingness to be transported upstairs. It was a case of either taking out a complete window frame or creating a large reusable opening in the kitchen ceiling. We chose the latter. It has been left so that it can be used again but we would rather not do so, as it goes up to the bathroom and it took four men to move the roll top cast iron bath that had just been installed above. Oops!

"Early on in the project our research turned up an old print that showed that on the roof there had been a decorative bell cupola that housed the school bell. So Steve Ingram got to work creating the best replica he possibly could. The bell has proved extremely useful as a means of announcing that food was served when everybody was working away at their own tasks.

"When we added up all the figures we reckoned our total outlay, including purchase, was about £630,000. We have no real idea of the value of the property now, but our intention was never to make money. For 53 years we have enjoyed ourselves owning and working on listed timber-framed houses and putting them back to what they should really look like as well as we possibly can.

"Sadly we were unable to have children so a great deal of our love has gone into our houses. It has been very worthwhile, and to us a far more enjoyable and rewarding way of investing our funds than in anything more conventional.

"Some of our friends doubtless think we are completely loopy to have undertaken a mammoth project like this at our ages, but at least when the time comes for us to depart this life we shall feel our money has achieved something useful. We like to think that we are only caretakers of these wonderful old properties and in the end hand them over to future generations to enjoy.

"We have given a splendid old building a new lease of life for many years to come." 🌸



Clockwise from top:
The dining area at the rear occupies the exterior space that was formerly the lean-to kitchen

Early on in the project the Plummers' research turned up an old print that showed that on the roof there had been a decorative bell cupola that housed the school bell. The replica bell is here rung by Tessa, as she did when food was awaiting members of the repair and restoration team working away

The landing: getting the stairs into the space available was a tricky business and involved a special dispensation from building regulations because of headroom. There was a staircase in the same place when the Plummers bought the house, but originally it is thought the access to the upper floor was in the area now occupied by the kitchen

The kitchen: it traverses the house and lies at the southern end of the building

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