



# Cultivating an idyllic listed home

by Clive Fewins

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The dining room



**L**ouise Allen and Piers Newth's Listed Grade 11 17th century thatched cottage was suffering from being many years of a run-down rental when the two experienced horticulturalists moved in.

It had been an estate cottage, used mainly as the home of the local gamekeeper. The cottage across the green had been the butler's residence. Sixteen years later it is fully restored and the ideal base for their business, Garden and Wood, a collection of several hundred old and antique garden tools, furniture and

ephemera, which they restore and sell. Not only is the house well-suited as a base for the business, but the 1/3 acre garden is the ideal backdrop for their enterprise, which was the carefully-planned means by which they were both able to leave their jobs to lead the rather individual and sustainable lifestyle they desired.

Dreamers Cottage is in an absolutely idyllic situation. The village is little more than a gathering of thatched cottages scattered round a huge village green in South Oxfordshire. You could be forgiven for thinking you were in rural Suffolk.

"It is staggering to think that after the estate



You would hardly believe it but this part of Dreamers Cottage – originally an outshut – was demolished and rebuilt. It is now the ensuite guest room. The new roof was extremely difficult to design and construct.

was broken up the owners in the early 1970s considered demolishing this cottage and several others round the green," Louise said.

Today their garden, surrounded by hedges, is a delight. All was very different when they arrived.

"The cottage, although it looked fine from the outside, was really very much what a person living in London would have done to a cottage they were letting," Louise said. "The garden in particular was a wilderness as the house had not been lived in for 18 months."

The vendor was renowned actress Susan Hampshire, who had once owned four properties in the village. At one stage former hostage John McCarthy and his fiancée Jill Morrell were tenants. Their book, *Some Other Rainbow*, detailing the story of journalist McCarthy's incarceration in the squalor of a Beirut dungeon from April 1986 until August 1991, was largely written in Dreamer's Cottage.

In June each year Piers and Louise organise a number of tours of the garden for local organisations. Visitors can make the acquaintance of their five chickens as well as looking through their range of elderly but

trustworthy and functional renovated garden tools that form the basis of their business.

However, it was to the house rather than the dilapidated patch that was to become their beautiful garden to which they first had to address themselves when they moved in. "We felt we could not continue to live with a downstairs where you could sit on the loo and at the same time cook on the hotplate in the adjoining kitchen," Piers said. "To accomplish this, all you had to do was put your arm through the lavatory door. It was ghastly!"

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Creating an upstairs bathroom and WC was therefore the first major task, and this they achieved with no objection from the planners.

After refurbishing the kitchen using the space left by the relocated bathroom they moved on to the outside storeroom at the south-eastern end of the house. This had an attractive pitched tiled roof but access was from the outside, and to turn it into the single storey guest bedroom they badly needed they had to arrange for it to be accessed from the present dining room. In the end it was demolished and rebuilt.

"It was all very difficult," said Louise. "The planners would not let us have as big a room as we wanted, but the main problems were with the roof. In the end our architect came up with a good solution, but the roof was extremely difficult to construct. It was all rather painful but we think it looks fine now and it serves our purposes well, especially as it has an en suite bathroom, which means we have a downstairs loo.

While local builders were carrying out all this work Piers and Louise were living in the cottage and also building up the business.

Phase one, as they call it, also included building a garage/workshop. The latter was especially important as it would be essential for the work needed to clean up and if necessary repair most of the gardening items that were to become the basis of their business.

The Garden and Wood items, all priced, can be seen in the single-storey building nearby they call The Store.

"I like to use the word 'repatriated' for all the hundreds of items, many of them highly unusual, we handle, many of which nowadays just come to us," said Louise. "We like to think we are giving them a new home where they will be appreciated."

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**Dreamers Cottage from the front**

The rear terrace looks as if it has been a fixture for a very long time. In fact it was only constructed in the past few years – by Piers. It is entirely comprised of small stones that came from the vegetable garden

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*From the top:* The master bedroom. The entire room and ceiling was replastered. Louise particularly loves the ceiling, which retains much of the unevenness and 'dip' of the original. "Reconstructed but not straightened out and wrecked" is how she describes it

Originally an outshut, this room was the dining room when Piers and Louise arrived. They swapped the rooms over, in the course of the work removing the exterior door and replacing it with a window

The brick porch was rebuilt and Piers laboriously undertook the repair and refitting of the Crittall steel framed window on the one side

View from the remodelled kitchen into what is now the dining room



Piers is responsible for the repair and restoration and refurbishing of the products.

Once the business was firmly established Piers and Louise were hoping they might be able to take things a little easier.

However, late one night whilst they were dining at home with friends they watched a large diagonal crack start, proceed and establish itself as a permanent fixture on one of the downstairs walls near the fireplace.

"We found we could no longer close the door at the bottom of the stairs and genuinely thought the house was subsiding," Louise said. "Our insurers kindly sent out a surveyor and he reassured us that, fortunately, this was not the case.

"In fact it was caused by a buried electric cable that had been chased in. But the net effect was that we started in earnest to work on the inside again. Outside we had done a tremendous amount of work, which included paving and landscaping and constructing a rear terrace made from small stones that came from the vegetable garden."



The terrace, built entirely by Piers (usually for an hour every evening while Louise cooked), looks as if it has always been there. "We are rather proud of it," said Louise "because one of the keys to our approach has been to use what was on site or nearby as much as possible and to try and avoid bringing in new materials."

But it was time to move indoors again – particularly as by this time the two had paid off most of their mortgage and more money was to hand. This time all the old cement render and gypsum plaster in the middle room downstairs – now the dining room – came off, to be replaced by lime plaster. Every room upstairs was lime plastered and a total of five ceilings were taken down and replastered using lime.



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"Our plasterer, who proved to be absolutely the right man for the job, managed to salvage and reuse about 90 percent of the old laths," Louise said.

This meant that the renewed ceilings have all the character – the unevenness and in one case the dip – of the originals.

Louise is particularly proud of the ceiling in their bedroom. She calls it: "reconstructed but not straightened out and wrecked!"

"It has really been a process of going over all that had been done wrong in the past 50/60 years and doing the whole thing properly," she said. "It was a horrific mess for a long time but we knew that if we did not do it all at this stage there would be no going back.

"It works well. The sitting room is a pretty room that was previously an outhouse but was incorporated into the house many years ago. Of course this all led to yet more work but by this stage we were used to that sort of thing.

"Filling in the external door opening in this room and replacing it with a window turned out to be quite a large job."

In addition to this the brick porch was rebuilt and Piers laboriously carried out the repair and refitting of the Crittall steel-framed window situated on the one side.

"The work was only finally completed last year," Louise said, "and although we have used contractors for all the major jobs it has still been an awful lot of work. But it has been hugely stimulating. Likewise the business, which takes us to all sorts of interesting places, including France and Belgium, and also to Chelsea and other major shows. It's an interesting lifestyle that suits us well.

"It's a life of constant hard work, and we have certainly learned the hard way about the time it can take to renovate, repair and maintain an old house to a high standard." 🌿



The Store: all the items here are for sale

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Top: The stone trough and restored pump were imports, but beneath is the original village well. With the aid of an electric pump it supplies the garden with water

The garden in July, looking towards the garage/workshop. Piers and Louise see the garden as very much a backdrop for the business



Piers and Louise



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