

Old beams in new places

Peter Barker's collection of ancient reclaimed oak is finding a global customer base, says Clive Fewins

Peter Barker was on a skiing holiday in Vail, Colorado when he received word from his headquarters in Surrey that a leading US antiques dealer needed his help. He looked out of his hotel window and realised that the store in question, Vail Village Antiques, was just across the road. So he visited the owner, Sally Johnson, the next day and quickly sold her several wooden beams to go over inglenook fireplaces in two new houses her clients were building at the resort.

The deal was no doubt helped along by Barker's in-person service. But trans-Atlantic transactions are, increasingly, all in a day's work for the Dunsfold-based businessman.

Barker buys and sells frames of old buildings and claims to have the largest collection of ancient reclaimed oak beams in the UK. With one-time clients such as Paul McCartney and the late Paolo Gucci, he is not so much an upmarket reclamation dealer as an architectural and planning consultant who specialises in restoring and relocating traditional rural structures.

And in recent years, his

company, Antique Buildings of Dunsfold, has been attracting a more global customer base.

Many actually make the trip to his 18-acre complex, where he keeps not just wooden beams but also com-

pleted buildings to serve as examples of his work.

Of the seven structures on site, the oldest is Hunterswood Farmhouse, which dates back to about 1580. Barker and his wife Margarete found it, stand-

ing in the way of a road widening scheme in Hertfordshire, open to the weather, leaning badly and rapidly deteriorating, in 1977 and bought the whole frame for £20,000. They stored it cocooned in heavy duty poly-

thene on old railway sleepers before re-erecting it two years later, and it now serves as their home.

A nearby cattle byre, rescued from a field in a nearby village a few years ago, is now a guest wing

and meeting room for onsite clients.

Another building – an ancient barn from Berkshire – has an even more remarkable survival story. It was left nearly destroyed by a run-in with a farmer's tractor. But Barker thought it could be rescued so bought it in 1975 for £70. Visitors, particularly those from overseas, take inspiration from the buildings, Barker says.

A few years ago a coach full of Japanese businessmen and their wives came in search of materials to create traditional British interiors, and a "brisk" exporting business ensued. Some Americans and Australians have purchased enough reclaimed materials to build a complete inglenook. "Once [they] pay me a visit they generally purchase," Barker explains. However, he adds, "it is very often components and materials rather than a complete frame."

"I don't go out of my way to export frames because they are far rarer nowadays than when I started in the late 1970s and 1980s," he explains. Also, "they now command such a huge premium that it is more economic to repair them on site. I feel it is often far better if

they can be lovingly restored and creatively rebuilt on the same site where they have stood for generations."

That said, Barker recently sold an entire barn to an

country once a year," Barker says. And Robert Hefner, the son of Playboy founder Hugh, also bought a barn frame, this one with Welsh borders, for £95,000.

Prices on complete frames typically range from £1,850 to £85,000, and Barker usually has about 20 in stock. He finds most of them through conservation officers who call him directly when traditional buildings are in threat of being razed to make way for a new development, although supply has diminished in recent years.

Consultancy may therefore be the way forward. One wealthy American who had built an English-style oak framed home near Denver with materials sourced in the US called on Barker because none of his chimneys worked. The Briton extended another of his skiing holidays to solve his problem. "There was quite a lot of rebuilding involved to make the chimneys work, [but] it was a wonderful job," says Barker. Plus, "the fee I was paid almost covered my holiday".

Antique Buildings of Dunsfold. tel: +44 (0)1483 200477. www.antiquebuildings.com

A MIX OF MEDIEVAL AND MODERN

If you consider timber-framing too rustic and old-fashioned to use in a modern-day new-build, extension or remodelling job, think again.

Homeowners in both the US and Europe are using the medieval technique not only for exposed beam barn conversions but also for some surprisingly contemporary residences.

The British company Carpenter Oak reports that non-traditional designs accounted for about 15 per cent of the more than 140 building projects it had earlier this year.

"Everyone starts out with the concept of a barn-style building but when I take them through the palette of options they end up with a modern interpretation," says Roderick James, the Carpenter Oak chairman who also runs his own architectural practice.

Timber-framing has several advantages over other home-building methods. Oak is a naturally durable, ecologically sound material that doesn't need preservative treatment. It's easy to insulate and can be clad in weatherboarding, stone, brick, slate, tiles or thatch to blend with the local environment.

This is a craft product for an increasingly mass-produced age. At Carpenter Oak, for

example, each timber beam, joint, brace and truss is hand-cut just as they would have been in Shakespeare's time; frames are built using traditional oak pegged joints to accommodate movement; and the tradesmen are well-versed in conservation work, having built both the new "medieval" kitchen roof at Windsor Castle after the fire and a new hammer-beam roof at Stirling Castle.



'Loft style' living topped by an oak curved roof

James is currently working on a Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired house in Los Angeles that combines traditional carpentry techniques with a masonry backdrop. The five-bedroom house has floor-to-ceiling ground-floor windows and bedrooms and bathrooms that open out on to balconies.

"One reason why we find old buildings charming is because of their idiosyncrasies – the gaps, joints, odd corners and spaces," James says. "These days we're so conditioned to expect a smooth, almost sterile building that we barely question whether it's what we actually want."

www.carpenteroak.com;
www.roderickjames-architects.com

Nicole Swengley



Peter Barker: 'brisk' business

American judge who re-erected it in the grounds of his country home near Seattle to use as an annexe for visitors. "He had British relatives and used to visit this