



Vernacular vs. Polite

GETTING TRADITIONAL STYLE RIGHT

– Part One –

In the first of a major two-part series **Clive Fewins** investigates how a rich tapestry of vernacular building has evolved across the UK, and reveals the secrets to the sensitive restoration of an old, vernacular property, and building a new home in cottage style



Vernacular Buildings

Clockwise from top:

Gold Hill in Shaftesbury is a patchwork of homes built since the Medieval ages — and now an iconic slice of British vernacular made famous by the 1973 *Hovis* ad filmed here; The Cotswolds is famed for its ‘chocolate-box’ stone-built villages; A stone side extension to this Lake District cottage reveals the changes which have taken place over the years; These Suffolk timber framed homes feature jetties; Cob and thatch are traditional old Devonian homes

IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK

If you travel round this country at a leisurely pace with your eyes on the landscape it is impossible to deny that traditional vernacular buildings contribute massively to the overall scene in a village or small town, and provide enormous — if sometimes subconscious — pleasure to thousands.

But what is a ‘vernacular building’ or, more specifically, a vernacular house? The simple answer is, it’s a house built with what was available in terms of local materials and manpower. Such buildings were usually simple, practical and often rugged.

What therefore is a house that is not vernacular? The answer to this is ‘polite’ — a house designed in a ‘conscious’ style that could be built, quite probably using local materials, in any part of the country.

An excellent example of this polite style is Georgian. Queen Anne revival, high Victorian Gothic, or even Arts & Crafts also fall within this category. The latter, though harking back to an earlier vernacular style, is in fact ‘polite’ because it is deliberately designed to be this way.

The point about all this is that before the mid 17th century all domestic architecture was generally vernacular. It was ‘of the region’ because architecture in the modern sense of the word did not exist. No architect designed the historic cottages that provide so much character to the villages of Britain. You look at them as buildings and not as pieces of architecture. The difference here is

important. Architecture involves deliberate design with an element of aesthetic choice. Vernacular buildings, traditionally, do not — they were simply built using the materials that were local and to hand.

Because vernacular houses are basically undesignated in the modern sense of the word, this brings immediate problems for the self-builder attempting to build a home in a vernacular style. The reason is obvious — if you don’t submit plans for your ‘vernacular’ house, then there is no way you will get planning permission to build it. It has to be designed.

So in that sense it is impossible to build a vernacular house or cottage today in the truest sense of the word — but you can build in vernacular *style*.

Architecture involves deliberate design... vernacular buildings were simply built using materials to hand



IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK



IMAGES: 2 X SHUTTERSTOCK; 1 X KNIGHT FRANK; 1 X JEREMY PHILLIPS; 1 X DAVE BURTON



Organic Evolution

A series of side extensions reveals how this house has been adapted to suit different occupants over the centuries – the result is a unique and characterful aesthetic. A change in roofing materials – between thatch and clay roof tiles here – and slight variation in roof pitch is often an indicator

If you speak to someone familiar with our landscape but originating from a country without a widespread and long tradition of vernacular building, they will often refer to the sheer visual pleasure of these old houses. It results from the organic way in which they have been adapted to suit the living patterns of succeeding generations.

More than anything it is this passage of time that makes any vernacular building special – and precious. A vernacular house can never be rebuilt to look exactly as it did when first constructed. The effect of time has been to hone and mature it. Whether a home started life as a hall house or hovel, a barn that was later converted, a farmhouse or outbuilding, or a redundant building of another kind, the vernacular houses of this country are the literal building blocks of the appearance of traditional villages and small towns throughout the country. Many enthusiasts make it their hobby to view, enjoy and study these buildings. Many readers of this magazine hanker after converting, extending or restoring one of them.

So, why is all this important to a homeowner who is masterminding the restoration of an old house? Why is it also important to the self-builder who is deliberately trying to build in a vernacular style?

It matters for a number of reasons. First and foremost because you really ought to know as much as possible about the type of house you are attempting to build or restore before you so much as handle a tool or appoint a contractor.

It also matters because many renovation enthusiasts find themselves restoring ‘cottages’ (a difficult term – see RIGHT) that have been added to during different periods, including well into the 19th century. A good restoration, based on a ‘like for like’ principle, will attempt to be true to all those periods.

If you fall into this category you should also bear in mind that your vernacular house (or more likely cottage) will undoubtedly contain a variety of materials that will be hard to match today. Many of those materials will have been sourced very locally. It is quite likely that the sand that has been used in the wattle and daub or in mortars will have been dug no more than a few hundred yards away. Therefore, if you are restoring or extending you have an immediate problem in matching colour and consistency.

So, lesson number one as you approach the task of repairing/restoring/updating a vernacular property of any kind is – as far as possible – keep it local. Turn overleaf for more of our golden rules. ▶

Consider keeping later additions if they add character to a room

COTTAGE STYLE

Most surviving cottages from the 17th century or earlier are one-and-a-half storeys high (TOP LEFT) and just one room deep. They are characterised by low ceilings, small windows (ABOVE), steep roof pitches and low eaves. If they had upstairs windows they were inevitably dormers, except in the gable ends.

Being narrow – usually less than 18-feet wide – and having small windows, they were frequently dark. This may be inconvenient to the modern sensibility, but it is a key part of the cottage style. With few exceptions this format – although plans vary greatly – applies to most parts of the country. It is a million miles away from the ‘boxy’ form of modern, four-bed, estate-style houses.

All this makes building a new home in cottage style extremely challenging – and perhaps more expensive too. It is however a style that never fails to charm.



Tips for Renovating a Vernacular Home

TAKING ON AN OLD HOUSE WITH LOCAL CHARM? DO YOUR RESEARCH

STUDY VERNACULAR BUILDINGS

Since the 1950s we have been living in an age of comparative prosperity. By and large people have had money for restoration, so vernacular houses have been going through a good phase, with much good repair and renovation work done. It should be possible to meet and talk to others who have undertaken similar restorations and to learn from their successes and failures.

If your work is to fit in with the vernacular it is important to study the older houses in the locality — the materials, the textures and any features that might appear to be unique to the area. Also read and study; there is plenty of material about nowadays. Don't start work until you are thoroughly mindful of the local style.

DON'T THROW MONEY AT A PROJECT

SPAB (Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings: spab.org.uk) has a well-known phrase — 'Poverty Protects'. This simple piece of advice means that you should ponder and consider before spending large amounts of money on repairing and restoring a vernacular building. It may be that major work, involving much replacement of materials, is not needed. Sensitive repair may be all that is necessary. Often renovators with comparatively low budgets achieve better results than those with a lot of money and a penchant for unnecessary demolition.

DON'T RUSH INTO MAJOR WORK

Live with the house for 12 months before making big decisions. You will be amazed how many times you change your mind as you learn to live with the house during different seasons. With an attractive vernacular property you should bear in mind that the planners will always regard what is there already as far more important than what you are proposing to add.

DON'T TACKLE THE WHOLE HOUSE AT ONCE

Renovating one small area at a time makes the whole project more manageable, and means you learn skills as you go along. It may take three carpenters or blacksmiths before you find the one that works for your project. Employing tradespeople on smaller projects gives you chance to try them out before you are committed to a large outlay.

DON'T EXTEND BY MORE THAN 25%

If you really need that much more space then consider moving home. A cottage with a huge conservatory and granny annexe is no longer a cottage!

ADAPT YOUR LIFESTYLE TO SUIT

Don't expect every room to be constantly warm and dry. Cottage life was a hard life. With old cottages too many owners try to make the building fit their needs rather than adapting their lifestyle to suit the building. This means that you will have to make sacrifices. A little damp — providing it's not likely to cause serious damage to the building or harm to your health — will do nobody any harm. It has probably been there for generations and the rush to eliminate it may well do more harm than good. Don't seal up rooms too tightly. Old properties with porous 'breathing' walls need to breathe from the inside as well as the exterior.

HOLD ON TO LATER ADDITIONS

Don't feel that you have to strip every room back to expose original details. Consider keeping later additions if they add to the history of the room. A 1920s fireplace retained in what was originally a Victorian chimney breast is a lot more 'honest' than a reproduction Victorian grate. Cottages evolved over time and we should recognise this.

PAY GREAT ATTENTION TO THE WINDOWS

Windows are key to the external appearance of vernacular buildings. All too often modern windows that do not match are fitted to cottages during restoration work. If you have attractive old timber windows it may be possible to undertake sensitive repairs rather than wholesale replacement.

YOU'RE THE HOUSE'S GUARDIAN

It may be legally yours, but if you are a conscientious owner, and especially if your house is listed, you have a responsibility to ensure that it remains in good condition for the use and enjoyment of future generations. It was William Morris, the founder of SPAB, who first pointed out that owners of old houses with fabric that is virtually irreplaceable are only really their guardians. ▶

Sensitive Repair

Formerly four small workers' cottages, the homeowners took the decision to remove render added by previous occupants, exposing the original blue Lias limestone beneath. A characterful porch has been built to match the existing stonework (but with a thatch roof to suggest that its a later addition) which visually unites the four homes together as one



IMAGE: JEREMY PHILLIPS

Building a New Vernacular-Style Home

IT IS POSSIBLE – JUST – TO DO IT WELL FROM SCRATCH. HERE ARE OUR RULES

New Cottage?

While a large cottage at 240m², specifying materials common to the local vernacular (such as thatch) and attention to detail, such as the Flemish bond brickwork, has allowed the homeowners to achieve a home which looks to have been built for centuries

How can you achieve the look and feel that only comes with the passing of many years if you choose to build a vernacular-style house from scratch? Only the patina of time and later additions and alterations will provide the organic feel possessed by old vernacular properties — you are in some ways attempting the impossible. However, there are certain things you can do to achieve a vernacular-style home, and material choice and design go a long way in giving a new home an aged aesthetic.

MATERIALS

One of the first is avoiding, where possible, the use of the wrong materials. The use of brick, for example, should respect the local surroundings. If you are building in the south avoid using smooth, dark bricks common to the Midlands. Likewise stone cladding should resemble that used in old stone houses in the area.

Generally, traditional materials will weather faster and produce more interesting finishes. The best example of this is render. If you intend to use render, use lime. It keeps the elements out just as well as cement, it is more pliable than cement and — most important of all — it's what would have been used traditionally in the past.

Another means of achieving the aesthetic of age is to use reclaimed materials. Be careful here. Few self-builders creating a vernacular-type house in traditional style would either wish or be able to use exclusively

reclaimed materials on the exterior. The challenge is to use a combination of new and reclaimed materials tastefully to produce the effect you desire.

Many self-builders wish and need to build rapidly, but with a new cottage there is always the danger that the build schedule will allow far too little time for the hunt for materials that look consistent with local vernacular properties. In addition, some natural materials require time to install. Take lime again — it's not a material to be used hastily. Unlike Portland cement it never really sets hard. It certainly shouldn't be used externally during heavy frost, so your schedule needs to reflect this.

So there are areas of conflict here and there will be an element of compromise. After all, few people nowadays could reasonably be expected to build using aggregates obtained a few hundred yards away, and lime obtained locally and slaked outside the back-door-to-be. When writers state that all vernacular buildings were built using entirely local materials they usually fail to mention 19th century properties were roofed in slate that came from Wales and the glass used for the windows was probably brought in from some distance away.

There is usually some level of 'fakery' too when it comes to construction. Modern standards of comfort achieved by cavity walls or perhaps a system such as SIPs (structural insulated panels) will make this inevitable — not to mention complying with Building Regulations. ▶

Don't start work until you are thoroughly mindful of the local style

Vernacular Design

1 X NIGEL RIGDEN; 1 X ROB JUDGES; 1 X DARREN CHUNG; 1 X JEREMY PHILLIPS



VERNACULAR-STYLE DESIGN

If you want a house that has the look and feel of a traditional cottage and that truly respects the character of the local surroundings, then you won't automatically be able to enjoy all the benefits of modern living (i.e. there's no place for expansive glazing in a cottage-style home, particularly not on the front elevation). That is not to say all this is impossible. The key lies in the design — and in having someone to mastermind the project who understands precisely what you are trying to achieve. If it is to look authentic your home should, within a few years of completion, look as if it has always been there. Quite a challenge!

Most people want maximum size, but this is often not consistent with the style and proportions of a traditional cottage. The key thing about cottage style is that to be in any way authentic the building must be narrow, otherwise it will reach a height that is out of proportion with the genre. The classic example is room widths. Most historic cottages are one-room deep, simply because of the problem of span. Few builders of these traditional homes were able to put their hands on a beam that would span a room more than around 18 feet.

This won't suit all self-builders — and ultimately some will be more at home in houses rather than cottages. Some also often want height (and room height) that's inconsistent with the traditional one-and-a-half storey design.

Most historic cottages have evolved however. More often than not they have had wings added — and this

could be a means of gaining additional space. If you therefore adopt a design that has several joined sections, all slightly different, and all with traditional roof pitches of say, 48-55°, and also stick to traditional proportions, the house will begin to look 'right'.

One thing that is apparent from all this is that such attention to detail is perhaps going to cost more than a more conventional new build. The reasons for this are pretty obvious — more design input, more work by hand, more roof, less standardisation, and (hopefully) more searching for interesting 'traditional' materials.

In addition, you will have to pay much attention to the myriad of traditional details such as roof pitch, window and door openings, and overhangs and verges. These will stand out a mile if they are not just right. Details such as this do not necessarily cost a great deal more, but it is perfectly true that the devil is in the detail. It is the cumulative effect of all these details that makes all the difference. ■

New Homes, Old Character

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: This SIPs (structural insulated panels) and oak frame home from Border Oak provides a cottage aesthetic without compromising on energy efficiency. Handmade roof tiles, an oak framed porch, timber weatherboarding and lime render all help give instant antiquity; Thoughtful design sees an 'extension' built in stone — suggesting the rendered cottage has been added to over time — on this new build;

A traditional one-room deep, L-shaped design in addition to materials such as lime putty-based render, timber framed windows and reclaimed items age this self-build; It's difficult to believe this property is actually a new build, not a barn conversion; this Cambridgeshire home, designed by Mole Architects, also features materials local to the vernacular such as dark weatherboarding

*Next month:
Part Two —
Getting
Vernacular
Details Right
in Your Area*