



Getting Stuck in

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The house as it is today:
Picture by Bernard Mattimore



Imagine a house that needs constant maintenance. That's the thing people seem to want to avoid nowadays. Most people seem to like their homes to be almost self-maintaining.

It's a thought that brings a wry smile to the lips of anyone that owns a listed property, not least retired meteorologist Peter Cockrell.

Peter has been working on his listed thatched house in the south of Oxfordshire more or less constantly since he and his wife Josephine bought it in 1994. And since he retired in 2000 has expanded his skills and added an oak-framed garage with wattle and daub infill to replace an ugly old

concrete and asbestos building.

When the Cockrells bought the house, parts of which date from the 16th century, in the attractive village of Blewbury, they had no idea of what they had let themselves in for.

"We had always lived in comparatively modern houses, but saw this as a challenge," Peter says. "We were quite confident we could maintain the thatch, and also that I could cope with repair work, as I have always been practical, and woodwork and carpentry has been a passion all my life."

Although the house did not appear in poor condition when they moved in, when Peter and Josephine took a detailed look at their beautiful

and characterful home they realised that it needed a great deal of work on it.

In particular the heavy coating of modern thermoplastic masonry paint over the exterior of the entire structure worried Peter.

"It was concealing, and in many cases actually supporting, crumbling wattle and daub panels both inside and outside the house," he says.

"Damp and flaking lime plaster was everywhere, with the associated insect and fungal life well in evidence. The wall plate had rotted in several places, and in one case a vertical post was just hanging."

Peter enthusiastically immersed himself in learning all about earth



buildings, especially the chalk cob found in the walls of many historic buildings in the south of Oxfordshire. He then tried his hand at replacing some of the daub in the panels of his house using a mix he learned from an old hand shortly after they moved in.

"I soon learned that it really is simple," he says. "And there's nothing quite as satisfying as repairing your house with the materials from which it was built - timber, mud, dung, straw and a little lime - especially when those materials were available locally, mainly free of charge, and very friendly to the environment."

The mix he uses has changed

little. It contains approximately 35 per cent local subsoil, 35 per cent sharp sand, 10 per cent dried cow or horse dung, and 10 per cent chopped straw, with the final 10 per cent non-hydraulic lime - lime that never sets hard.

A few years after moving in, Peter and Josephine employed builders to construct a thatched extension that blended with the house and contained an extended kitchen and new upstairs bathroom and guest bedroom.

It was built from rendered blockwork and joined together the two old sections of the building. It was at this stage that Peter decided that if any further work was needed

Top:
The two-storey workshop with oak frame and infill panels of wattle and daub that Peter built after he retired in 2000

Bottom:
Mixing and applying the annual coat of limewash to the wattle and daub panels of the workshop.

Where necessary Peter replaces the framework of the panels, using riven oak staves, around which he wraps hazel wands

on repairing and restoring the old house he would like to do it all himself.

"I had become completely bitten by the earth building bug," he says. "I had also realised that there was no builder I knew of that was prepared, or even able, to repair or replace the wattle and daub, so I decided to seek listed building permission and systematically repair all the wattle and daub panels in the house.

"Several things were clear. For a start the panels were not all in the same state. Some were fine, while others, particularly ones near the ground, were falling out. One actually did fall out while the ➡



Left:
Sitting room
fireplace

Right top:
For his daub Peter
uses a mix of 35 per
cent local subsoil,
35 per cent sharp
sand, 10 per cent
dried cow or horse
dung and 10 per
cent chopped straw.
He also adds a small
amount of hydraulic
lime.

Bottom:
Peter and Josephine
outside the house

plumber working on the central heating was attempting to drill through it.”

After he retired in January 2000 Peter decided to replace the old tumbledown garage in the garden with a new two-storey building - a workshop beneath and storage area above - with an oak frame and infill panels of wattle and daub.

The walling material came from the foundations, which proved ideal, as most of the old houses for which Blewbury is famous have walls made from the sticky chalky subsoil found there. Peter designed the oak frame, which was then made for him by a specialist company in Hampshire.

In the panels inside the oak frame he inserted riven oak staves, and around these he wove hazels that had been cut in winter and kept ‘green’ by being wrapped in plastic and standing in water.

Since then he has carried out many repairs to the walls of the

house using this method, which he has gradually perfected as he has gone along. Wherever possible he has remixed the old daub. He has tried to use as little completely new material as possible. The finishing layer comprises a very thin lime plaster/render comprising one part sand to three parts lime putty, to which he adds finely-chopped donkey hair. The finishing touch is provided by a limewash that he makes himself from lime putty.

“I confess I am now hopelessly in love with these old techniques,” Peter says. “After all, people lived in these old properties for many years and running repairs were the order of the day. They were high maintenance houses in those days just as much as they are today!”

“After nearly 16 years I reckon I have repaired or replaced most of the panels in the house. It is satisfying work and can be carried out by anyone who is enthusiastic and willing to learn.

“One of the good things about being able to repair your house in this way is that you can tackle one or two sections at a time. So it is work that can be undertaken at your own pace if you are short of time or at work during the week.

“One or two other people living in historic houses in the village have decided to follow my example and carry out their own wattle and daub and cob repairs, and they all seem, like me, to enjoy the work. My advice to them, after so many years doing it myself, is to avoid using Portland cement, and ‘go with the flow’ - accept the house for what it is. Above all, live with it rather than against it. People who try to turn these old cottages into modern houses shouldn’t, in my view, be living in them in the first place.”