

An eye for the vernacular

BY CLIVE FEWINS

The completed side view of the house



When David Cox realised he was to be made redundant from his job as a farm manager he took a bold step.

Together with his wife Maureen he bought a listed four-bedroomed detached brick village property dating from the mid-seventeenth century and resolved to spend two years converting it into a family home.

It was a brave decision, because David had little idea of what he would do for a living at the end of the two years, and because he was unsure of how much of the work he would be capable of tackling himself.

The building, originally a timber-framed cottage, was in a sorry state. The front wall was falling away, the

entire building was covered with virginia creeper, and ivy had penetrated one wall and was growing on the inside in what is now the kitchen.

The entire house, which is situated in a village beneath the Berkshire Downs near Wantage, had been empty for three years and was saturated with rising damp.

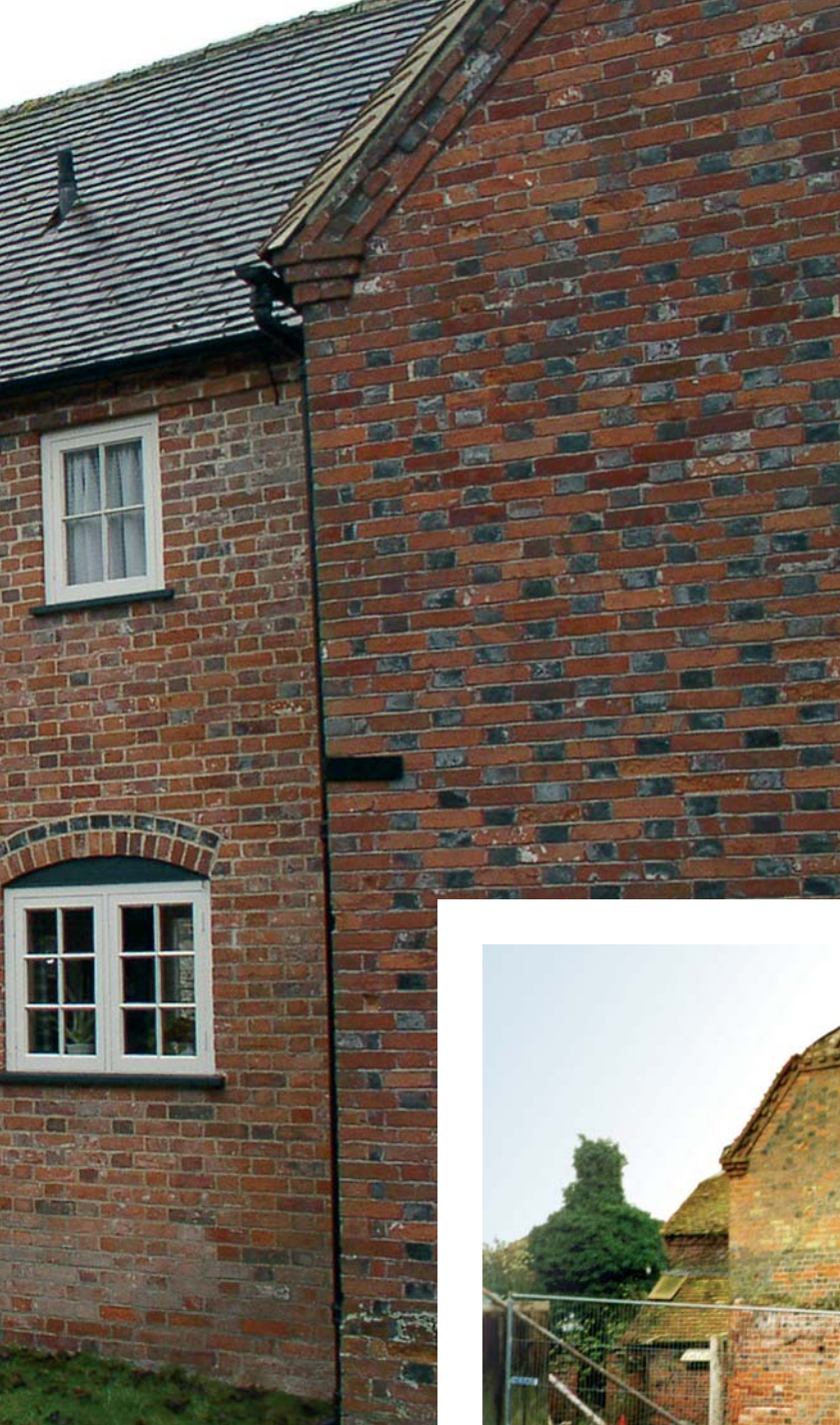
And yet the Coxes were prepared to pay the asking price of £270,000 because it was on a good-sized plot and has several outbuildings at the rear, including one that had previously housed the village bakery.

"I reckoned that while I was working away I would have plenty of time to decide about my future," said David, 58. "I had in mind

something like a fencing business, or possibly restoring antiques in the workshop I planned in the outbuildings at the rear of the house.

"I had more than a hunch that, with my farming background and an engineering training I had the skills to run a full-time property restoration business. That became apparent when a number of people saw what I was doing and approached me to see if I could do something similar for them.

At the onset David took himself on a weekend course run by SPAB - the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. There he was able to test the ideas he had already learned about the use of lime and other breathable materials. He also



learned all about how old buildings 'work', and gained the confidence to understand the cause of much of the damp at the rear.

Maureen was hardly overjoyed at the prospect, but 12 months into the project - it was September 2002 - the contract on their tenanted farmhouse came to an end and they were obliged to move into the house. It was far from ideal. There was a bedroom, bathroom and utility room, but still no kitchen. At least they had a staircase: it had been fitted two days before.

"It was extremely stressful at times," David said. "But Maureen was out at work a great deal of the time and our son Andrew was away in the Navy. However, I knew deep



down that this was the sort of project I really enjoyed, and all the time I was gaining the confidence to start out on my own.

"At all stages we were keen to be true to the spirit of the house. We didn't want to introduce anything too modern that jarred. However, at the same time, after three years without an occupier the house was hugely in need of being brought up to date.

"Our basic approach was to stick to the SPAB principles of sympathetic conservation work,

The side wall of David's house at the time of converting the bakery at the rear into a new bedroom and bathroom with kitchen beneath

reusing the original materials and fabric as far as possible and only replacing with like materials when there was no alternative."

Once they had moved in things began to improve rapidly, although, as David recalls, the project seemed to throw up a fresh challenge every day.

One of the trickiest tasks was tying in the front wall. David did this by a combination of S- and X-shaped wall plates that he made himself from old pieces of agricultural grade wrought iron. ➔



Above: This thatched listed cottage in the Vale of White Horse has recently undergone major repairs by David the picture above shows the front after completion. David removed a large bulge which had threatened the stability of the façade. He then worked very hard to give an authentic look to the brick, flint, and sarsen stone frontage. As with his own house he has tried to stick to the SPAB principles of sympathetic conservation work, reusing the original materials and fabric as far as possible.

Right: David is seen here last summer working at the front.

These were attached to steel plates that run right through the building. He bought in some help to assist with positioning a solid oak beam all along the front of the house at first floor level and tied this into the original timber frame by means of dovetail joints.

Moving the staircase also proved a major headache. This was necessary in order to be able to pass from one half of the building to the other at ground floor level because the original staircase was in the way of the new rear entrance.

Another major task was converting the bakery, which had fallen into disuse after the First World War and was then used as a wash house. It now houses the kitchen and, upstairs, the bathroom and ensuite master bedroom.

"I had realised by this stage that house restoration was the way I wanted to go, and that my main area of interest was getting

immersed in the natural materials that feature so strongly in the traditional buildings of the Vale of White Horse, where we live," David said.

"The local vernacular round here - the brick and flint and sarsen stones used in traditional buildings - throws up some wonderful patterns and surfaces. I have seen some really shoddy restoration over the years and I reckoned that there would be the need for a really good renovation specialist with a good eye and the determination to match materials precisely and so produce a seamless restoration work."

This is what David has achieved on his own house, (in the end the job took three years and not two) and since then on several others.

"Quite often these traditional materials - wonderful though they are - fail," he said. "This is largely due to the use of inappropriate and modern materials during previous

attempts at restoration. I also attempt to return houses - particularly the facades - to their original beauty using precisely the same materials that they were built from."

"Any modern materials have to be concealed - and they also have to be the correct ones. For example, any blocks used should be lightweight ones so as not to disturb the balance of the building.

"I have often found myself mixing up daub, using chalky subsoil and cow manure. I also love building with chalk blocks and also clunch - the harder chalk blocks from the lower layers of the chalk strata. It is a rich palette of traditional materials round here. And it needs to be respected."

Although he hails from Kent and loves all truly vernacular buildings David has, over the years, acquired a deep love of the building materials of the Vale of White Horse - lime ➔



and clay-based renders, mature coloured brick, thatch, and creamy-coloured chalk stone.

At all stages lime plays a major part in this. "People just will not realize that cement and gypsum-based materials just do not really have a part in old cottages," David said. "Most of these materials are incompatible with most old houses. Modern buildings depend on a system of barriers to keep water out, whereas old buildings tend to rely on their porous nature - their 'breathability' - to allow water absorbed by the fabric to evaporate out.

"Most of these old rural homes were built using materials readily to hand, and this meant mortars and renders made from locally-slaked lime. Cement had not been invented when most of these cottages were built, and people should remember that an old building has a delicate equilibrium that is upset if you introduce modern materials that are

not appropriate to its method of construction.

"Impervious Portland cement mortars used in place of traditional lime ones restrict evaporation and accelerate deterioration. They should be avoided at all times.

"I hate to see buildings where people that have used wrong or inappropriate materials, or altered interiors beyond recognition. If it is an old house - keep it that way. Don't make it appear something different. If you want a modern house, buy one: don't buy an old one and attempt to turn it into a modern property. A cottage with a huge new conservatory and granny-annexe is no longer a cottage!

"People often think they are doing the correct thing; but the result far too often is yet another lovely old building that has lost all semblance of being an old house inside. Over-restoration can mean the death of a truly traditional building. Television programmes sometimes do not help."

Top left:
The rear yard at the Cox's house before David started work, and right as it now.

Bottom left:
David outside his own house. He had to tie in much of the front wall using a combination of S and X-shaped wall plates that he made himself from old pieces of wrought iron.

Despite the countless books on house restoration and the rise of conservation societies and lobbying groups, David sometimes thinks the overall standard of restoration of old houses is getting worse rather than better.

"Owners of period properties need to be on their guard more than ever," he says. "But I have to say quite often they have only themselves to blame. Far too often they just throw themselves into the purchase before asking themselves if they are really suited to owning an old house and all that is entailed if it is to be maintained correctly and for posterity.

"However I do believe that on the whole a lot more people nowadays are really interested in doing it the correct way. And there are far more suppliers of traditional materials around than there were 20 years ago."