



A five year labour of love

Above:
The cottage
and garden



All too often the owners of listed properties complain about the restrictions that listed status brings with it. But for David and Ann Stubbington the reverse was the case.

When they contemplated buying a two-bedroomed thatched listed cottage in Oxfordshire early in 2003 they found the restrictions placed by the local authority on any possible extension meant that families interested in buying the cottage promptly withdrew.

"The problem was that Nightingale Cottage was in a lovely secluded position, with a large garden

surrounding it, a shed, a workshop and a double garage, but it could only be extended in one direction and the extension had to be a single storey," explained David, a major in the regular Army.

"This immediately meant that families wishing to buy it and extend were put off, as the extension would not add a bedroom - just reorganise, or probably replace, the small very old-fashioned kitchen."

As the Stubbingtons are just two this presented no problem at all. "In fact it worked entirely our way," said David, "Because as soon as we saw the interior we realised the major

task was to replace the kitchen and tidy up that end - the north end - of the cottage."

This is just what they did, creating a beautiful large, light modern kitchen with a vaulted ceiling that extends right up into the roof. A splendid tour de force, and a dream kitchen to be envied by anyone who has lived for many years with a cramped dark kitchen carved out of an odd corner of an ancient cottage.

It was the other work to the cottage that in many ways presented the greatest challenge - and that led to the entire project taking five years and not the two that David and Ann



had anticipated at the outset.

A six month tour of duty in 2004 maintaining Army vehicles in Iraq (David is a REME man) did not help, as Ann, who was living in a rented property 16 miles away had to supervise all the work on the extension.

“Fortunately that part of the renovation took place without any major hiccups,” Ann said.

However the absence of the ever-practical Dave and the fact that the building was uninhabitable during the extension phase set the project back several months.

Another cause for delay was the

unfolding nature of the task they faced.

When the woodstove expert arrived to give advice on what sort of appliances to install on either side of the massive stone chimney stack that forms the core of the building he spotted something interesting. The brick wall behind the sitting room inglenook, which had been straightened out and tiled in typical 1960s regimented fashion, probably concealed a void. It might be worth taking a look.

Dave decided to explore. The result was an extra 20 or so day’s labour - it was mainly at weekends

Top:
Ann and David
Stubbington

Bottom:
The cottage and
garden showing the
extension. Louis the
standard poodle is
in the foreground

as they were both in full-time employment - for the two of them. It has brought about a total transformation.

The other large task they had not anticipated concerned the windows. There was some evidence - enlarged by the theories of neighbours - that there had at some stage been a fire in the south end of the cottage.

It may have been at the time of the fire - if there was one - or it may have been for some other reason, but it was probably in the early 1950s, when building materials were scarce, that the cottage had had a major makeover. ➡



The result is that most of the windows do not match - and many of them are metal-framed. Some are of the Crittall type, and others are wooden framed with leaded light inserts.

It all adds to the charm - and the quirkiness - of the cottage. But it did not make the task of the Stubbingtons any easier.

“We might have gained listed building permission to replace the windows in a more uniform pattern, but we felt they added to the character, and in any case were not in such poor condition that they needed replacing,” said David.

He had anticipated that he would be able to repair the windows himself. However the couple ended up using a firm of window specialists, who repaired and refurbished six of the windows on site, and removed and reinstated the others.

All this was a task - and an expense - that they had not anticipated. However, at the end of the project they are convinced they took the right course. The windows are a key part of the charm of the cottage.

The Stubbingtons have taken a similar approach throughout the

house, only replacing things - like the outmoded sitting room stove in its tiled recess - that could clearly be improved by suitable replacements.

They have kept the vertical and horizontal boarding that separates most of the upstairs rooms, removed the half-height wainscoting for damp proofing purposes in several downstairs rooms, then replaced it, and made sure all the new plasterwork has been lime-based, and decorated with breathable paints. In addition they removed all the upstairs carpets and sanded the floors throughout - a massive task

All this has taken time because so much of it was just not visible beneath the many modern layers that had been added over the years. Dave refers to ‘mission creep’. What he means is that all the time they uncovered interesting features that could have been covered up again, but would, if left uncovered and treated sympathetically, add to the overall character of the building.

Dave said: “Apart from the obvious fact that we wanted to create a really lovely home that we plan to live in for many years it made sense to do things like add TV and phone sockets in the bedrooms while much



Main image: The completed inglenook. David and Ann reckon it took them 20 days labour to reveal and restore it.

Insets: The stove in the sitting room inglenook when the Stubbingtons arrived at Nightingale Cottage

Work on the inglenook in progress!

of the structure was exposed. It was far better to do this at the time, rather than retro-fit these things at a later date.”

Dave and Ann joined SPAB (the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings) at the onset of the project and decided to follow the society’s mantra of following a policy of sympathetic repair, replacing only when really necessary. They are now great believers in another expression much favoured by SPAB lecturers - ‘poverty protects’.

“For all sorts of reasons - not least the fact that we needed a complete rethatch - we were on a tight budget throughout,” Dave said. “So we thought long and hard before replacing things for the sake of it.”

So while the masterstroke has been reinstating the sitting room



The completed kitchen

inglenook, the many little features that have been uncovered and accentuated during the course of the work have all added to the charm. The enduring image (I have to confess to knowing the property before the Stubbingtons arrived) is of the splendid single storey extension that has added an up-to-the-minute kitchen, while the rest has been sympathetically renovated and gently repaired to make a relaxing and comfortable cottage home

The other reason why it all took more than twice the anticipated time was that the Stubbingtons decided to invest a lot of time and funds in the garden during the summer months.

“Others may take a different approach, but the garden is most important to us,” Ann said, “We regard it as almost a part of the house- certainly a part of our home. It’s a key part of our lifestyle, our

wellbeing, and also that of Louis the standard poodle and Raffles the Burmese cat.

“The other thing we decided, once the extension was complete, we had moved in, and the frantic phase was over, was that if there were any further difficult decisions to make, we should hold back until we felt we had got it right. We followed that policy and we think that, on the whole, it has worked.”

Dave added: “If you are able to undertake a lot of the work yourself in a major house renovation project we both believe you gain far more satisfaction in the long-term. There is more of you in it, and this cannot be calculated in terms of pounds and pence. I don’t think you get the same experience with a new self-build: with a renovation there are far more unknowns.

“To us Nightingale Cottage feels far more like a home than any of the

new properties we have lived in during the past 25 years. It’s the effort, and the time, and the sweat and the labour - and the interesting and often difficult choices you constantly have to make. On the whole we both found this fascinating. But we have become convinced of one thing: if you see this sort of project as a chore you don’t want to tackle: don’t buy the house in the first place!”

After such a long project, into which they have injected so much of themselves, it will be time soon to get out the paint brushes again and go round the parts that are beginning to look slightly jaded. But before that there is one major task: the Stubbingtons know virtually nothing about the history of the house - even the century in which the central chimney stack was originally built. Now there’s a fresh challenge to apply themselves to!