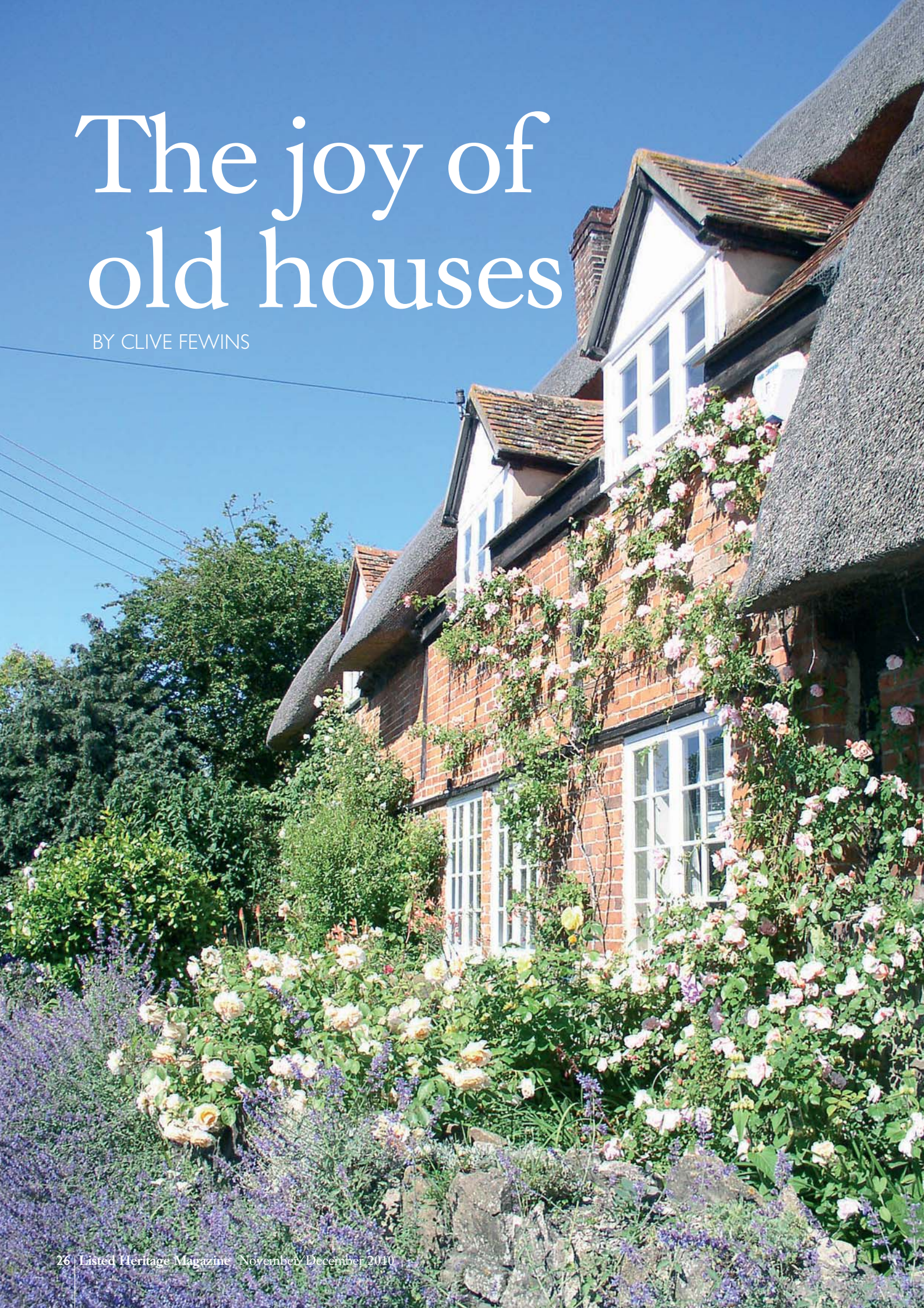


# The joy of old houses

BY CLIVE FEWINS





## OH! THE JOY OF OLD HOUSES!

Something that has constantly puzzled me after 33 years of living in a listed 17th century thatched cottage is: how can one achieve a good standard of restoration work if one is not practically inclined oneself?

It seems to me that it is very difficult, if not impossible. Even if you are prepared to pay a very high figure for good tradesmen, basically they do not have the empathy that comes with being the owner of the property. Especially if one has lived and breathed that old house for the past 33 years...

The point was driven graphically home to my wife Ann and myself after an extensive internal renovation of two rooms earlier this year.

What was to have been a five week job ended up taking nine - and it would have taken a great deal longer had I not at times taken the bull by the horns and used skills that I had never before realised I

possessed in order to move things along.

I wrote in Listed Heritage Issue 71 (July/August 2010) about one aspect of the job: how we installed hemp and lime insulation at the north-facing rear of our draughty timber-framed dining room. I finished up doing a great deal of this work myself.

I was not to know, however, that five weeks into the project the trusty decorator we had known and used for 11 years was to be struck down with a mystery illness, that, had Ann and I not grabbed the paintbrushes ourselves, would have caused a major setback.

Fortunately he was able to return after three weeks, but in the meantime, despite many attempts, we had managed to secure only half a day's labour from another seasoned professional decorator.

The other realisation, once we had ripped away large sections of inappropriate gypsum plaster from the stone skirt that serves to support

**Main image, left:** The front elevation of the cottage, which faces south

**Above left:** The writer stripping the horizontal beam in the bedroom

**Top right:** The blue colour of the bedroom was taken from a patch of old painted plaster found beneath a section of wallpaper we removed from beneath the horizontal beam

**Bottom right:** The bookshelves and desk have been repositioned, repaired and painted

and protect the ancient timber frame, was that if you live in an old listed property the more you can get to know about how it works, the better.

Above all, you need to understand that by interfering with an old listed property too much, and not using traditional materials in restoration work, it is possible to do a great deal of harm.

And of course it is also useful to have enough practical knowledge to be able to make it plain to plasterers, carpenters, electricians and decorators that you know what you are talking about.

Fortunately Ann and I had learned a great deal about all this over our many years at Lilac Cottage. That is not to say, however, that we had not made mistakes soon after we arrived. The gypsum plaster that had caused dampness in a section of the stone skirt had in part been caused by a tradesman who had applied the wrong sort of plaster to the walls back in 1977. ➤



**Above:**  
The bedroom on completion

**Top right:**  
One of the challenges in the dining room was rerouting and concealing much unsightly wiring. Some was electrical and some telephone wiring. Here Clive uses a lime mortar to point above the inglenook fireplace to conceal rerouted telephone wiring

**Bottom right:**  
Pinkie at work on the new dining room door

If he had applied a lime plaster and a soft coating, like a limewash or a distemper, then the walls would have been able to ‘breathe’- the warm moist air would be able to pass gently from inside the house and condense at some point within the walls.

Because gypsum-based plaster had been used instead, in winter when we warmed up the room, the warm damp air trying to escape condensed in the inside. The result was that the emulsion paint that had been applied to the hard gypsum surface condensed and promptly peeled off.

It was not a large area of wall that had been adversely affected. But as we were planning to renovate and update the entire dining room we had decided it was best to remove the gypsum plaster from all the skirts.

We were far more knowledgeable about what to replace it with this

time round. Some 30 years and several SPAB\* courses later, we had learned all about the use of inappropriate materials in old timber-framed buildings. We had also, in the meantime, discovered Frank. Frank is a septuagenarian, skilled and wonderfully experienced plasterer. He is capable of achieving all sorts of different finishes, including the slightly raised abraded surface we chose to have on the lime plaster he applied throughout the room.

The basic philosophy of ‘breathability’ in old single skin walls is simple. If you have a cottage with solid walls - be it wattle and daub, brick, stone or earth - then it needs to remain vapour permeable. If you seal the walls with modern impermeable mortars, renders or polymer-based paints then when you wash and dry clothes, breathe or perspire, the moisture within the

wall will rise and be unable to evaporate. The result is damp and decay within the wall.

I explained in the article earlier this year about how the hemp and lime insulation we introduced to the rear dining room wall helped to deal with this problem.

We tackled the rest of the room by replastering the ceiling between the beams, stripping (by hand) the main beam, and painting the others in a colour that matched the casein distemper paint we had used on the walls.

Upstairs we used Frank to replaster damaged and cracked areas of the walls, and again replace gypsum with lime when appropriate. I stripped the long horizontal beam, and undertook most of the carpentry, including rebuilding an ancient set of bookshelves in an alcove beside the chimney stack..

It was then that we discovered ➡



Pinkie. Pinkie is a 62 year-old wizard, who can turn his hand to anything, Apart from encouraging us to strip the downstairs main ceiling beam, when we were seriously considering leaving it painted black, he proved his worth many times over in other ways. Not least was stripping most of the massive beam himself.

After just one day of using him we rapidly realised the sense in seeking out and using the skills and experience of a good tradesman. Perhaps we had thought we were capable of doing more than was realistic ourselves.

Another thought we had had was of replacing the two rather inappropriate pine main doors to both dining room and bedroom . They really were rather heavy and did not match the original doors that remained in both rooms that led to other parts of the house. Another mistake soon after we arrived all

those years ago...

All we had to do was to find two new doors in a reclamation yard and fit them. Easy!

It proved a major undertaking. First we had to find old doors of the right size, then we had to have them stripped and delivered, then we had to make them fit the openings.

Finally there was the question of finding and fitting appropriate door furniture, preparing their surfaces for a final treatment and choosing and applying that all-important finish.

Pinkie again proved indispensable. It was quite apparent that the carpentry skills involved in making the doors fit the openings were way beyond my capabilities. Working at speed, it still took Pinkie more than half a day to cut down and rehang each door. Fortunately, finished off with the beeswax polish we made ourselves, they add a finishing touch to both rooms. We are delighted,

#### The completed dining room

as we are with the rest of the two completed rooms.

During all this work we failed to take heed of one of the golden rules of period house repair and restoration - when you undertake a job on an old house you create at least two more. In our case this involved, amongst many other things, repairing many defective patches of plaster we had not spotted before, additional painting that we had not anticipated, and the major task of replastering and repainting the stairwell leading upstairs from the dining room. We decided on this as it had to be stripped out and the removeable stairs taken out in order to fit the new dining room carpet.

We had experienced all this sort of thing this many times during our long ownership of Lilac Cottage. Why on earth did we not anticipate this on this occasion? ►

**Left:**

We had been advised that hand stripping was the only really practical method of bringing back the dining room beams to their original colour. After a great deal of thought we decided to concentrate on the main ceiling beam and to paint the others (which were black like the main beam) in the 'string' colour we had chosen for the walls. Here Pinkie gets to work stripping the main beam. It took two-and-a-half days



**Top right:**

The stairs leading from the dining room to the bedrooms above had been designed to be removed for easy access for beds and other large items of furniture. When we removed them so that the new dining room carpet could be laid we realised that the landing needed replastering. And, of course, painting...



**Bottom right:**

Pinkie preparing to rehang one of the stripped and renovated pine doors



So my advice on completion of the project is: try not to overestimate your capabilities, your energy levels, and the time it will all take you

I am more convinced than ever that with a major project of this nature on a old listed house you must be prepared to get really stuck in yourself. In our case would a carpenter/builder/ main contractor have been able to find the doors we wanted? And would he have been able to find them at the first port of call? And succeeded in having them stripped and delivered within days?

I come back to the point about your own knowledge, and capabilities. Despite the enormous amount of advice and information available on the Internet and through magazines, TV programmes, books on house restoration and the rise of conservation societies and lobbying groups you won't get a really good job that is exactly what you were seeking unless you are prepared to get really involved yourself.

A key element in this is taking the

time and trouble to employ good tradespeople. We knew three - our electrician, decorator and plasterer. We found Pinkie the carpenter (and beam stripper!) by good fortune.

If you are really going to care for and maintain - and hopefully improve for posterity - an old house you will not only need genuine sympathy for the building, but also relevant knowledge. It could be argued that these two factors are almost more important than having sufficient funds to complete the work.

It is all too easy to just throw money at an old property and do

it no real good. Over-restoration and failing to use traditional materials can have disastrous effects. Even in these recessionary times it seems that we have never had more money with which to ruin our lovely old houses by treating them inappropriately.

At SPAB, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, they have a favourite phrase - 'Poverty Protects'. I think it is very true.

*\*The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings organises regular courses for homeowners in different parts. For details visit [www.spab.org.uk](http://www.spab.org.uk)*