

The ultimate Wendy house?

BY CLIVE FEWINS



As soon as she saw the rambling, much extended, run-down old listed cottage, with its tatty tiles and down-at-heel thatch in the centre of a picture postcard village in the Berkshire Downs Wendy Aynsley knew it was exactly what she was looking for.

It was in such a bad way that even an amateur like herself could not come to much harm restoring it. At least those were the thoughts of this self-taught have-a-go-at anything lady restorer.

"When I started this job 12 years ago I was a young woman. Now I am of a certain age," says Wendy, never one to mind a joke at her own expense.

"My long-suffering husband Graham said it would keep me out of trouble for a good few years. It has done. When people ask me how many more years to go, I say I shall either fall off a roof and that will be the end of me, or I shall be drawing my pension by the time it's finished!"

The price of the property - parts of which are believed to date from

To the left was the cobblers workshop and house. The thatched end to the right is the older building, thought by some to have originally been an open hall. It is attached to what was the forge

the late 14th or early 15th century - was just over 200,000. It was 1998, but still a very good price for a four-bedroomed property with a large garden. Wendy and her husband Graham made a rapid decision to buy.

"The price was low because it was so neglected," Wendy said. "It was also jumbled. It had been two cottages for many years and before we bought it had at some stage been a wheelwright and blacksmiths workshop at one end and a cobblers shop at the other.

We were also drawn to it because of the village legend that in the late 17th century King Charles 11 stayed under the roof when on his travels because his horse was lame and had to be shod.

"If this was the case it lends credence to the discovery by the surveyor I use, Richard Cain, that before being divided up the house was of relatively high status.

Richard has discovered two sets of sawn-off crucks in the southern end, which he believes to have been the earlier end and quite possibly



Wendy removed a complete modern fireplace to reveal the brick inglenook. She repointed, and in some instances replaced, bricks. One whole pillar had to be rebuilt, using back fill the she found at the rear of the fireplace

an open hall. That is why he has put such an early date on it.

“Our policy from the onset was that Graham would be happy as long as I did the work,” Wendy adds. “So we struck a deal. I would look after our then four year-old daughter and he would commute to London and earn the money to pay the mortgage and building costs. I would be in charge of all the renovations and - as far as possible - do the lion’s share of the labour.”

Twelve years later Wendy reckons the job is half complete. In the meantime she has acquired a small

army of workmates and even more skills. Oh - and her pretty daughter Georgia, now 16 - shows no sign of tiring of living in a building site.

Nor - oddly enough - does Graham. “He doesn’t really want to get involved with all the work. He prefers to stagger home and collapse, play golf and chop wood,” says Wendy.

“Except for time we had a partial collapse of the bedroom ceiling (fortunately it was over his side of the bed) he is - amazingly - still happy to leave it all to me.”

Strangely enough, apart from the

day she managed to empty nine radiators of their contents on the lounge floor there have been very few ‘episodes’ over the years. Perhaps that is because whenever there has been a really big structural job Wendy has been happy to call in the professionals.

“There is a wonderful long-suffering builder called Dave in the neighbouring village who has been out here at odd times of the day and night to attend to the odd self-inflicted crisis,” said Wendy. “But this is a rarity nowadays and I have managed to extend my skills to

This is not part of the original house, but an outbuilding that probably dates from the mid 19th century. When Wendy and Graham moved in it was a bathroom and a separate WC. With the help of Gill Wendy removed the partitions and they both worked on restyling and redecorating the new-look bathroom



Landing window. One of Wendy’s favourite corners of the house



cover carpentry, roofing, lime plastering, bricklaying and plumbing when I have to.”

So every weekday - apart from the odd foray across the adjoining fields astride a friend’s horse - Wendy works on the house.

For every minor disaster there have been many successes. Perhaps the greatest was the day she called in a historic buildings specialist after taking advice from the builder she had used in her previous house in Surrey to ask about an ugly-looking bulge in the north end wall.

The builder told her it would cost £22,000 to put right. The expert said leave it.

She took the expert advice. Eleven years later, despite totally reinstating and partially rebuilding a large inglenook lower down on the other side, it looks exactly the same. There has been no movement.

In a sense this epitomises Wendy’s approach to the long-term project. If it does not need fixing, leave well alone. If it does need attention, then try to stick as far as possible to the original

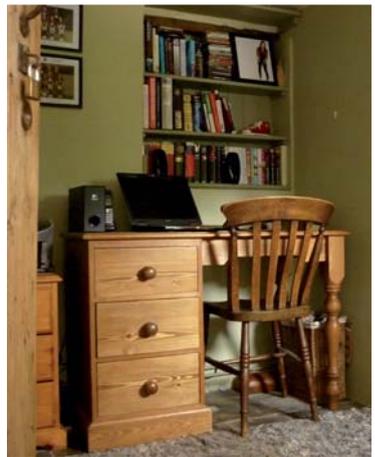
This is what she did with the sitting room floor. The lovely old floor bricks originally just laid on the bare ground, had been covered with a thick shiny varnish. Wendy spent almost four months scraping at them virtually every day, suffering terrible housemaid’s knee in the process. Once the job was complete she simply fed them with boiled linseed oil. They look lovely and truly display the patina of time.

Turn round and you face the staircase, where Wendy, with help from a carpenter, replaced the old pine stairs with a new flight made of oak.

“I’m afraid I am a bit gung-ho at times-and not only with carpentry,” says Wendy. If by this she means learning from her mistakes and she knows people who will bale her out when she sends out an SOS, what’s wrong with that?

Even the radiator disaster wasn’t. By a quirk of fate the floor sloped into the corner and she managed to mop it up with the aid of all the towels in the linen press at the time.

Another of the skills she has acquired along the way has been demolition work. Several small partitions have gone in order to create larger rooms. One of the



Above:
The barn end, originally stabling and now one of two workshops. The other workshop will become the new kitchen

Right:
Wendy stripped off layers of black stain and old carpet and spliced in some elm boarding where repairs were needed.

The former coalhole: now Georgia's study

most successful of these was in the bathroom. This is not part of the original house, but an outbuilding that probably dates from the mid 19th century. Wendy was helped with this by a kindred spirit in the village, Gill Hall.

They met when Gill was just starting her self-build. Her husband Ian was working away a lot, so much of the job fell to Gill.

"We found we get on really well and agreed on a policy of division of labour," Wendy said. "Our collaboration has worked really well, and we also find we have complementary skills. For example Gill is really good at bricklaying, while I think she would agree that I am better at lime plastering than she is.

"I admit there are very few people I can work with. But with Gill - well, we empathise, and seem to anticipate each other's views and reactions. While working we often have very long silences - but they are never awkward ones!"

Wendy is the expert on all matters to do with lime. She helped Gill

with the straw bale plastering on her new self-build. "I first learned about breathing buildings and the importance of using lime on repairs to old buildings many years ago. It is basic knowledge that stands you in good stead and everyone with an old property needs to know how it works."

However, the first time she employed a professional plasterer she let him persuade her that gypsum would do the job

"I sold myself out on cost grounds - gypsum usually works out far cheaper," Wendy said. "But now we have terrible damp problems on the landing and it will have to be redone using lime. With lime the damp enters - and exits again. But with gypsum it comes and stays. And that's when the damp and mould starts."

"In old cottages like this you can use gypsum (if you can get a finish you feel is 'correct') on internal walls, but not on exterior ones, otherwise you are in great danger of impeding their breathability. Wherever possible I like to use like-

with like. That means that on internal walls if lime exists already I like to be sympathetic - that is, stick to it rather than remove it."

The latest phase of the ongoing job is to use Richard Cain to help her tie together the end section of the barn, which used to contain the smithy, and turn it into a kitchen. His scheme is totally reversible.

It is a formidable task but Richard has come up with a scheme, which is currently with local planners. If it gains approval the first task will be to strip the roof with Gill and strengthen up a four-inch lean in the exterior wall.

"One of the great joys of a rambling old house like this that has seen several different incarnations are the challenges that it constantly throws up," Wendy said. "It's a great joy to be constantly peeling back the layers and gradually bringing different parts of the old building back to life and ensuring it is in really good condition for future generations to enjoy."