

A Gentle Process of Improvement

BY CLIVE FEWINS



Ever since he was a child Steve Mackinder had wanted to live in the old farmhouse on the green in the Norfolk village where he was brought up.

The house is long and low, and one room deep, and always looked as if it had grown out of the adjacent fen. It dates in part from the late fifteenth century, when it is believed it was a three-bay timber-framed open hall with wall panels of wattle and daub.

So when the house, with its three chimney stacks and high brick gable ends came on the market Steve and his wife Jane fought hard and succeeded in buying it.

The appeal of the Grade II listed house was enormous. "It was the atmosphere and the feel of it – the one acre plot, the commons to the front and one side, the proximity to the fen, the skies, the trees, the

ponds, the deer and other wildlife," said Steve. "And perhaps above all the feeling that it was a house that needed to be loved, as well as repaired very sensitively."

The major disadvantage was that, being low-lying it had absorbed a great deal of damp. The previous owner had lived in one room, and the house had lain empty for six months.

"Most of the windows fitted badly, and several of the doors had holes in them," Steve said. "However this was to our advantage because a good throughput of air helped ventilate the building and prevent further decay."

Before Steve and Jane and their two teenage daughters were able to move in Steve came over daily from their home in a nearby village every morning and evening to open and close the windows to ventilate the building.

Left:
The large south-facing rear garden

Above:
This lovely fireplace is in the dining room, which once served as a kitchen. The cooker was cast in Downham Market, just one mile away, and has probably always been in the house. The bread oven to the right is known locally as a 'stick oven'

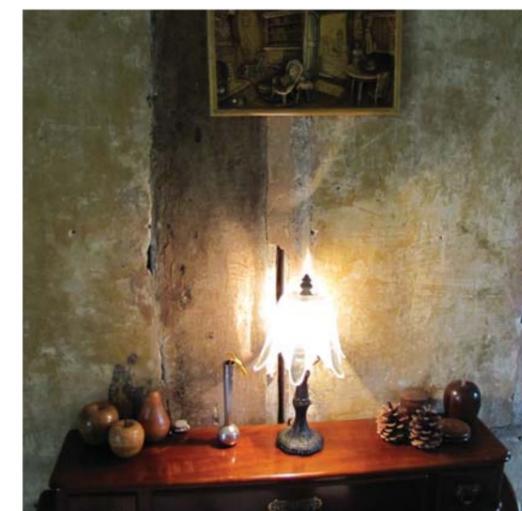
He spent his weekends digging a channel a spade's width all round the house to keep the walls clear of the soil that in some places was as much as 20 inches above the level of the floors inside. The channel enabled the damp that had been lodged in the walls to evaporate and escape.

"When we eventually moved in our first winter was miserable," Steve said. "It was very damp and cold because the house was still drying out. Our only heating was a log burner in the sitting room inglenook."

Although the girls might have taken a different view, Steve and Jane were pleased that they had decided to move into the house before taking any major decisions

on how to go about the renovation

"We believe that in a house like this it is vital to live in it for a while to get the feel of it before taking any



The north-facing front garden has been entirely created by Steve and Jane. It was a wilderness when they arrived

major decisions that might alter the character of the building inexorably," Steve said.

One of the key things that first winter was to remove all the rugs and foam-backed carpets that had previously covered the brick and tile floors, laid on bare earth.

In the drawing room the hardboard and foam-backed carpet had encouraged weeds to grow through the floor tiles.

They found that by just leaving the old brick and tile floors exposed to the atmosphere and allowing them to breathe again they eventually dried out.

Basically, Steve explained, the house was very run-down and neglected, but structurally quite sound.

"Apart from one area of roof that had to be replaced because it had spread and was beginning to push

the upper walls out the work comprised mainly conservation and stabilisation - all a very gentle process of improvement."

One of the earliest decisions was to rule out underfloor heating. "To take up the lovely old floors, then relay them would have destroyed the patina that had built up over several hundred years," Steve said. "It would also have removed another feature we love - the dips and undulations caused by many generations of feet walking over them. You can still almost see the footsteps of the people who lived here before. To have disturbed all this to install underfloor heating would have been vandalism

The only floor that had to be completely replaced was the entrance hall, where concrete slabs had been laid on a damp proof course. They replaced them with reclaimed Norfolk pammets (square clay floor

tiles) laid on a bed of sand and lime.

A small section of historic brick floor also had to be removed and reinstated in the small rear hall at the point where the soil pipe serving the new upstairs and downstairs wcs left the building to join the main sewer.

Outside Steve and Jane were advised to leave a lot of the inappropriate cement render that had been added in the 1960s.

"This is not uncommon on old timber-framed buildings of this sort," Steve said. "It is often best to leave it: there is no point in taking it off and causing more damage."

However he advises: "Always try to concentrate on the bottom of the walls. It is important here to remove all cement renders, and also tar when it has been used. This keeps the rain away and stops damp getting trapped where it does the maximum damage"

For this and many other major

decisions they took during their ten years of work on the house the Mackinders have to thank SPAB - the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. Early on Steve attended a SPAB Homeowners Weekend, where he had learned all about the society's policy of 'minimal intervention' when tackling problems of damp and decay in sensitive old houses like theirs.

"Of course this house has been greatly altered over the centuries," said Steve. "At some stage a complete outer face of ragstone, picked off the surface of the fields, was added to the south side. We learned from experts that nearly all old timber-framed buildings fail on the south side. It is usually caused by the heating and cooling caused by the effect of the sun, and the result is rot."

Because the house was on the Norfolk 'Buildings at Risk' register

the Mackinders were able to obtain two grants that enabled them to rebuild a section of roof that had spread.

All the windows needed replacement. Fortunately they were able to gain permission to vary the window styles to make the house appear more interesting and retain the very true feel of pastiche - an organic building that had been broken up into separate units and used for a variety of different purposes over hundreds of years

They also gained listed building consent for the two dormers that were inserted into the roof at the rear of the building, where they have made use of the roof void as a spare double bedroom and storeroom.

Once the builders had completed all this major work Steve and Jane took over. They carefully recreated the farmhouse kitchen. It had been

Top: These original stairs date from the 16th century. They rise from the first floor landing to the attic. The Mackinders only discovered them when they clambered into the attic from another staircase and found them leading up. The staircase was completely boarded in. Steve and Jane removed the boarding and gave them a scrub. They then left them as you see them here.

Bottom: The Mackinders have left some patches of the downstairs walls undecorated in order to retain the feel of the interior as it was when they bought the house.

used as a storeroom for many years - probably dating from the years when the house was divided into several different dwellings. They painstakingly peeled off layers of modern vinyl-based emulsion paint. Only then could they apply the breathable limewashes and casein distempers they have used throughout.

"We were both adamant that we did not want a fitted kitchen," said Steve. "Fitted kitchens just don't look right in a house like this."

The butchers' blocks on either side of the sink came from the village butcher when he retired.

The old Rayburn Regent, now converted to oil, was found in a skip. The ancient electric cooker was second hand when they married in 1980, and the 1946 English Electric fridge came from Jane's grandmother.

The early 1930s-style larder



The parlour is the middle living room on the ground floor. Jane and Steve use it mainly as a summer day room as it has light coming in from windows north and south



The 'Red Room', with its magnificent inglenook, is on the ground floor at the east end of the building. The Mackinders use it as a day-to-day living room

Steve Mackinder in the rear garden

cupboard (it's the 'kitchen-in-a-cupboard' design) with its slide-out galvanised metal work surface could have come from a wartime prefab. In fact it was made in the 1940s for Jane's mother when she married. The Mackinders' elder daughter covets it for her house.

Steve and Jane peeled off many layers of wallpaper in the medieval heart of the house upstairs. And in some parts of the downstairs they have just left the walls undecorated.

"Some of our friends and neighbours think this is a bit weird, but the areas we have left would, if replastered, have resulted in the feel of the interior being lost, so we have left them. I called it a means of conserving part of what I call the house's 'ragged atmosphere'" Steve said.

They installed oil central heating using reclaimed cast iron radiators. Almost all the pipework is surface-mounted because they did not wish to chop into much of the historic plaster.

The restoration has been so gentle and so caring that it is hard to tell that for the better part of ten years it has been subject to a gradual process of repair and conservation.

Not only has their restoration earned the Mackinders an award from Norfolk SPAB, but the national headquarters of that organisation sometimes sends scholars there to view the repairs carried out by Steve and Jane. And every few weeks the house is used as the meeting place for the Fenland and Wash branch of SPAB.

"We have made a few sacrifices, but we feel we have really done justice to the house,"

Steve said. It has been a great joy living in it for 12 years. To us it is an exotic, and wonderful home.

"But maintaining it is constant hard work. If we won the lottery we'd stay here forever. However we are getting older and there are now just two of us occupying quite a large space. In short, the house has outgrown us. We have saved it from

the developers and are now ready to face fresh challenges.

"So we have decided to put the house on the market in the hope that it will eventually be bought by someone equally sympathetic to wonderful old houses like this."

Steve and Jane can be contacted on 01366 387752. Steve's email address is: spmackinder@hotmail.com

SPAB: 020 7377 1644
www.spab.org.uk