

Unravelling the delights of a period gem

by Clive Fewins



When Claire and Nick Rogers, armed with estate agent's particulars, were trying to find their present house in the old heart of the Oxfordshire village where they have lived for eight years they had great difficulty in seeking it out.

"Eventually we recognised it by the chimneys," said Claire, "This was because we were driving along the road and the estate agents had photographed it from the rear."

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The house with
the completed
extension



The rear with its
previous extension
shortly after the
Rogers arrived



“On the advice of the conservation officer, who was helpful throughout, we decided to leave the front as it was,” Claire said. “It may not be beautiful but it tells some of the story of the house.”

The two elevations could not be more different. From the rear the building looks like the old rambling rubblestone and brick-clad farmhouse that it is, in a picturesque corner of what used to be Berkshire.

From the front it is dominated by a 1950s addition – a series of rather nondescript two-storeyed bay windows that the Rogers admit have little appeal to modern tastes.

“This is almost certainly why the estate agents went to great trouble to photograph the rear, and no image of the front appeared in the full colour brochure of the grade II listed house when we bought it,” explains Claire, who works in human relations.

Neither was there reference in the brochure to the fact that the house, which contains some high quality early 16th century timber framing and ceiling beams inside, almost certainly started life as an open hall.



The view from the front showing the array of two-storey bay windows that were added at some stage in the 20th century

Experts who have examined it have found traces of smoke-blackening in the roof void, a sure sign that the building would have originally been open to the roof.

To any lover of medieval houses however the tell-tale signs greet you from the road when you avert your eyes from the array of bay windows. The low, wide front door and rear door in a similar position clearly indicates a late medieval screens passage. When you take a look inside it becomes pretty clear that there must have been a central hall with a chamber at the west end and service rooms at the other.



A view of the screens passage from the door at the rear of the house



The new bedroom showing the balcony and views across the fields at the rear



The house had been superficially patched up over several years before the Rogers bought it and few of the really lovely late medieval interior features were evident. All Claire and Nick knew was that, in the need to turn it into a comfortable home for themselves and their two sons, now 14 and 17, they had no desire to alter the front to reveal the original structure. On the other hand they were both keen to reveal as much as possible of the beamed interior.

“The look of the building from the front would have dissuaded many would-be buyers but we decided to go ahead because we could see the house offered great potential as a family home,” said Claire

The size and scope of the garden and the rear views over open country, plus the three-roomed annexe, built shortly after the Second World War, all added to the appeal. The annexe currently serves as a rental, and brings in useful funds to assist with their ongoing work on the house.

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The lounge showing the inglenook and sandblasted beams



The Rogers have chosen to leave this original chalkstone wall in the cross passage unplastered and sealed



Some of the original unstripped beams in the snug

Soon after they moved in Claire and Nick became far more concerned about the rear of the property than the front. When a joiner examined the extension with a view to replacing the windows he found that the bays on both storeys were in danger of collapse

This gave them a further incentive to leave the front elevation intact and to concentrate on the challenge that lay in store at the rear.

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Once they had discovered the 20th century wing at the rear was in such a poor state they again received helpful advice from the conservation officer. He made it clear that he felt it made good sense to demolish the current extension and to rebuild. As there was plenty of garden he said that there would be no objection if they wished to build slightly larger if they could afford it.

When they were introduced to local architect Alan Drury they realised that this was not only feasible but also good advice.

"A double-storeyed extension of this size had not been in our minds when we arrived here," Nick said. "However, once we had discussed things with Alan we realised it made good sense to follow this course."

Claire said: "Another major factor in the decision to demolish and start again was the thought of a much-enlarged kitchen. The previous kitchen on the ground floor was really not large enough to service the entire house."

They also realised that upstairs there was the potential for a beautiful ensuite master bedroom with a balcony and views over the fields to the rear. This is precisely what has happened.

The kitchen/diner below is now a good size and opens up to the garden, thus fulfilling the role of a sunroom as well and avoiding the

need for an add-on conservatory, something that can often look odd when attached to an old listed house.

Constructing the rear extension did not present any major problems and they cooked in the kitchen in the annexe during the six months it took to be built.

Being an old house there were (of course) problems in store when they moved on to other areas.

They had always intended to reinstate the original staircase because doing this would reduce the corridor effect upstairs, which meant that one son could only get to his bedroom by passing through that of his brother.

It was the staircase project that, in the words of Claire: "caused more sucking of cheeks and grinding of teeth than any other."

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The bath is unusually positioned in one of the front dormers

At one stage it looked as though the only way was to move an entire wall, but eventually this proved unnecessary. "There were some really awkward angles," Claire said. "Fortunately there was a relaxation of building regulations during the course of the job, otherwise we would have had to seek permission to move the wall."

But by far the biggest trauma in the years they spent restoring the house to the lovely family home it is now concerned the flooding.

In the national floods of July 2007 their part of Oxfordshire – The Vale of White Horse – was particularly badly hit and much of their village was flooded.

The house was barely affected, but some of the water pumped away from other areas of the village and deposited on the fields at the rear of their house raised the water table so much that 12 months later one of

their parquet floors started to come up and damp marks began to appear on a number of the downstairs walls. When their insurance assessor visited and approved work that was expected to take six weeks the last thing they expected was a building team in residence for six months.

Many of the walls had to be sandblasted to remove the plaster that then all had to be replaced, and the Rogers used the opportunity to hire the sandblasting team while they were on site to do additional work not covered by their insurance and remove the black paint from many of the historic beams downstairs.

"In retrospect all this proved to be a blessing because frankly the walls were a shambles before, and because we were far better off having the parquet removed and replaced with a floating floor," Nick said.

"We now can see far more of the beautiful ground floor structure of our home than when we bought it. It is now a lot easier now for guests to appreciate what a period gem it is.

"It is all a great deal nicer now that we could have possibly have envisaged when we moved here. So much of what was brought back during the six month flood remedial work was just not apparent before.

"It has been a good example of how, with old houses you never quite know what is round the corner and of how triumph can often emerge from tragedy. Of course it can all happen the other way round, but – so far – not with this house!"

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