

The old house doctor

by Clive Fewins



This summer photograph clearly shows the difference in colour between the wings – Victorian additions – and the centre rear extension, built 100 years earlier

Retired GP Dr Dick Squires can't remember the first day he saw an old vernacular house and fell for it. However he had a good apprenticeship

When as a boy he played in the river valley at the bottom of his garden it was usually with Paul Betjemán, the son of Sir John, Poet Laureate, aesthete and doyen of lovers of traditional vernacular buildings.

At prep school he was schooled in the ways of traditional carpentry, so at home

in the holidays in Wantage, then in Berkshire, he found himself mending the Betjemans' chicken shed or garden furniture using the traditional joints he had learned in woodwork classes at school.

When he got married in 1965 at the age of 28 he and his wife Kirsty lived in a tumbledown old thatched medieval cottage surrounded by fields that until they worked on it had no electricity and no plumbing. The water supply was, as Dick puts it, "a squirt from a stopcock".

They gained much of their joint expertise working on old buildings at that stage,

although Dick has masterminded the renovation of several large historic buildings in public use over the years since.

On honeymoon in France they fell for a ruined old vernacular farmhouse in the Dordogne. "It had a roof, but no doors or windows," Dick said.

Several times a year they spent three weeks working on it, especially after Dick retired in 1986 aged 50. Although it is now let for most of the year, they still own it.

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Right: The path from the rear of the house to the garden. Kirsty is the gardener-in-chief

Opposite page - top: Together with the sitting room, this elegant room was a mid 19th century addition

bottom: The sitting room: like the dining room it was a mid 19th century addition



However, Dick's all-time favourite is the house he was born in and lives in now. It is a large brick town house in Wantage, (now in Oxfordshire), with a huge rambling garden that goes down to the stream that divides the property from the house the Betjemans used to live in. He and Kirsty moved into it in 1981 after Dick's widowed mother moved to a smaller property.

The three-storey detached listed town house, which has seemingly never-ending attics, was built about 1670/80. Then in about 1750 the roof was somehow jacked up and the whole of the front was updated by the addition of a smart facade of locally-produced salmon pink bricks. They were laid in Flemish bond – stretchers and headers alternately in each course. Though often used in houses being built today this represented the height of fashion at the time. The newly-introduced pale brick colours were considered an advanced on traditional red bricks, which were deemed to belong more to the outmoded and more humble brick dwellings of the past. The large Georgian multi-paned windows that were inserted also represented the height of fashion

"Clearly the owners at the time wanted to make it a more sophisticated, elegant building that was more in tune with the times," Dick said. "They must have decided that the rough old beamed frontage was decidedly non-u."

At about the same time the house gained a rear extension with views over the garden. The attics were also added at this time. Most of the traditional buildings in Wantage were timber-framed, so it is fair to assume that originally Dick's house was likewise before the brick facade was added and all the later alterations took place. Further evidence for this can be seen above the fireplace in what is now the hallway, where one of the original beams remains. The building was also almost certainly thatched: the main evidence for this is the continuing existence of a half-hip at one end of the roof. They also believe that at some stage the house was owned by the Church (though it was never the Vicarage) and also that around 1810 a doctor lived in the house. It continued to be the home of the town's doctor, who used what is now the rear dining room as his surgery, patients using a side entrance, right through until the arrival

in Wantage in 1923 of Dick's father, Dr Vaughan Squires.

In the mid 19th century the Georgian sash windows which had gentrified the house a hundred years before were removed and the present gothic-influenced windows with wooden surrounds were inserted. This took place at the same time as the adjoining parish church was extended and it is believed the windows were inserted under the influence of the then Oxford diocesan architect, the renowned disciple of Ruskin and Morris, G. E. Street.

"They are beautiful windows and undoubtedly represented the height of fashion at the time," said Dick. "You can just tell that they are inserts if you look carefully at the sides of the openings. On one side there are Flemish bond half-headers, but on the other side they are not there: The brickwork has been chopped to create a larger opening for the new windows."

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The summerhouse is a charming traditional feature in the large garden, which is used for entertaining parties and groups of visitors in the summer months



One of the more bizarre of Dick's large collection of vintage objects concerned with the building trade is the large circular saw that came from an old local sawmill



Dick believes it was probably at the same time that the house was 'squared up' at the rear to add the elegant entertaining rooms – now the dining room and the sitting room at the rear ground floor. The older central room above became a ladies' drawing room (it is now the main spare bedroom) with its attractive cast iron balcony overlooking the garden. "We assume the balcony was also added at the same time," Dick said.

Further gentrification of the interior included the addition of all the large downstairs doors with their broken pediments.

"To get the most out of any old house – especially if you are undertaking repairs or a restoration – you have to think beyond the box," Dick said. "This includes learning about architectural styles and also taking a keen interest in other historic house in the vicinity. Try to think what your house used to be like, and decide which period of its life you wish to get the majority of it back to.

"It may be that, like this house, it belongs to several different periods and so is a glorious hotch-potch. In that case, keep it in good repair; but, basically, leave it and enjoy it for what it is, a mixture of different styles that

developed over several hundred years. That is what we have done."

"The danger in restoring any old building is that in the rush to make it convenient to live in you cover up all the interesting bits," Dick continued. "I particularly hate the practice of painting buildings to look like something they are not. In this area a number of fine brick facades have been wrecked by the application of modern non-breathable polymer-based coverings.

"I also hate waste. If this house is a little untidy in places it is because nothing is wasted. So I always keep everything – whether it came out of this house, another building I have helped restore, or a skip. My advice to renovators of period houses is 'keep all old bits and pieces – you never know when they might come in useful.'

"I also think that people tend to 'overdo' period houses. I sometimes wish that, like us when we started, they lacked money. If you don't have money to throw at projects you usually take longer over the work and it ends up as a far more considered project – and all the better for it.

"There is also the point that if you do too much to your house, and the work is partly or wholly inappropriate, then the property becomes devalued.

"But my first piece of advice to people contemplating a renovation job on a period house is observe – especially the treatment that has been given to similar old properties in the area. I also advise newcomers to period house restoration to read. There is lots of very readable material available on restoring and repairing old and listed houses in books, magazines, and on the Internet. Personally I always recommend that The pattern of English building by Alec Clifton-Taylor, published in 1972. It is an amazing book because it greatly increases the pleasure of travelling round this country looking at buildings. It also shows brilliantly the relationship between underlying geology and the traditional building materials used, the result being a stunning mix. It is a book that in my view has never been surpassed and I believe every owner of a period house should have it on their bookshelves." ❁

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