



# How loving care paid off: *sound advice from 'the man with two left hands'*

**M**artin and Eunice Robins have been the owners of a rambling old rubblestone Listed Grade 2 farmhouse in a rural corner of Wiltshire for 27 years. Overcoming the challenges posed by the building, especially in the early years, has been a story of constant tenacity, with a large dollop of common sense thrown in.

"There must be many other owners of old, listed houses who, like me, have no real practical skills, yet somehow manage to keep the property in good repair," Martin said.

"Fortunately these shortcomings are well compensated for by my wife, Eunice. We have also been lucky over the years to have built up a good network of local contacts in the building trade."

When Martin and Eunice bought the house in 1987 experts who looked at it compiled a 20 page dossier of faults.



The original house is the range at the front. The rear section is mainly a barn attached to the original farmhouse that was later extended

"My father, who worked for many years for a building company, said it would leak like water through a colander," said Martin, a retired accountant.

"He was correct. There were leaks in the roof, as well as the ceilings in most rooms. Really you could say the house was semi-derelict at that stage."

Despite this, they moved in, together with their three children. At this point, partly because Martin was extremely busy with his work, Eunice took over most of the project.

"Martin, as they say, has two left hands," Eunice said. "So I enlisted the help of my father, who was very practical, and my uncle, who was in the building trade. Then, with a little help from Martin, we managed to get things straight, including installing new windows throughout."

Martin continued: "We knew that throughout the 60 years of occupancy by a previous owner, who died in the 1970s, that the house, which was then a working farm and the oldest property in the village, had been maintained in excellent condition. But when we bought it the building had suffered from 20 years of neglect. Had it not been kept in pristine condition for so many years it would probably not be here now, which would be a great shame, as parts of it are believed to date from around 1580."

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So for the first 13 years they managed to keep the building dry and well-maintained, and the outbuildings safe. Then in 2000 Max Hayes, a joiner and estimator whom the Robinses had known for many years, retired from the building company where had worked for all his life.

“Since then we have been very fortunate to have the constant services of Max and have been very reliant on him to help us maintain the property and enjoy living in it so much,” Martin said.

“Until I retired nine years ago I was working as a director of a leading Cotswolds-based stone company, working for up to 14 hours a day all over the country. So I could see a lot of parts of our old stone building I would like to have had repaired and updated, but had very little time to do much about it.”

For most of that period it was a case of constant maintenance. “We had a yearly inspection by a surveyor, and I reckon that within a few years the dossier of faults was down to about one page,” Martin said.

“When anything needed doing I usually contacted Max, whom I worked with when I was an accountant for a large local building company 35 years ago, and he was able to

find help for us. Then since he retired, and especially during the last eight years, I have worked constantly with Max and his team. We created the swimming pool, rebuilt the double garage, largely in stone, redesigned the entrance to the driveway, built a courtyard wall, created the roof garden, and installed the balustrading and spiral staircase.”

Late in 2013 a crisis arose. “We had for some years been suffering from a lot of downstairs damp at the front of the house,” Martin continued. “I had thought it was rising damp and was not very worried, but in the very wet winter last year when it got very bad I asked Max to look into the roof. He found evidence of a great deal of wet getting in.”

Max continues the story: “The annual checks had failed to reveal that the damp was descending, coming through the roof tiles, which were at a shallow pitch over the wallplate and there was capillary action at the eaves, causing water to flow backwards and seep down the rubble infill between the two skins of the front wall.”

In the roof Max also noted the evidence of former purlins at the front of the building that had for some reason been removed, possibly at the same time as the installation of newer timbers that thrust outwards

⚡ This is the room from which Martin and Eunice descend for their many swims during most seasons of the year

The gap in the roof beam where there was previously a purlin gives rise to the theory that this was removed when the front of the house was remodelled – probably in the 18th century

Martin and Eunice were told by a previous inhabitant that the beam above was originally a ship’s timber

and were obviously designed to help take the weight of the roof as it descends at a shallower pitch towards the eaves.

The likelihood is that this work took place when the building, which the List Description describes as 17th century, but refronted in the 18th century, received its new, smarter facade.

Max was able to rectify the damp problem by replacing a great number of tiles, reconstructing the wall plate, and making new timber sprockets – wooden devices attached to the end of the rafters altering the roof to a shallower pitch – and ensuring there was a good roof overhang to enable the rainwater to clear the building.

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←←  
The hall



↑↑  
Martin with  
Max Hayes



↑↑  
The front  
of the house

By attaching the sprocket pieces to some of the newer purlins in the roof Max and his team were able to retain the slightly bowed character of the roof – the parts Martin calls the ‘wiggly bits’. This greatly helped preserve the character of the building.

All this activity has led to the theory that because of a rearrangement of the roof timbers at the front some time after the house was built, the handsome moulded stone windows of the facade with their impressive label-stops – several of them carefully conserved and repaired by Max and his team over the years – post-date the 1582 date seen over the front entrance. Looking at the coursing, which has been disturbed to insert the present windows, it seems quite likely that the window casements, which are too large for the 1582 date, belong to the 19th or even early 20th century.

“We knew that the barn at the rear had been converted to living accommodation and extended. But the idea that the front

windows could be much later came as a surprise to us,” Martin said. But then all old houses hold secrets, which is one of the great fascinations of living in them.”

One of the improvements made by Martin and Eunice is the roof garden they have created above the rebuilt garage.

They gain access to this simply by stepping out through the French windows in their bedroom. The garden has panoramic views over the surrounding countryside. Then it is down the spiral staircase and into the pool – often several times a day in most seasons.

Future projects for the house include opening a gable-end window in the roof that shows clearly both on the outside and inside, and possibly returning the building to thatch.

“It certainly has had a tiled roof for many years, but it would look lovely thatched again. Thatch was obviously the original roofing material when the house was built using

stone from a now-disused quarry 100 yards down the lane, and we have consent to return it to thatch,” Martin said.

“However that would be an expensive undertaking that we should have to think about very carefully.”

“Overall we have found that constant maintenance has been the key to a long and happy stay at Glebe Farm. If, like me, you are basically not very practical, my advice is – don’t be scared: just build up a support network of good tradesmen who can keep an eye in it for you. Then if you dislike modern houses and, like us, far prefer old ones, when the time finally comes to leave you will hopefully say goodbye to a building in far better condition than it was when you bought it.”

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