

Rescuing an ancient treasure – a 12 year DIY marathon

by Clive Fewins



A view of the downstairs from the front, showing the large inglenook in the reception hall, that presented the greatest crisis to Bill and Helen during the renovation project.

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Dr Bill Gaskins slaps his hand against the huge oak beam that forms the lintel over the large inglenook in the reception hall and recalls the day the massive fireplace nearly collapsed and threatened to bring the entire central chimney stack of the ancient Herefordshire farmhouse down with it.

He and his wife Helen were two years into the 12 year restoration of their Listed Grade 2 oak-framed former hall house in a village a few miles from the Welsh border when the entire project nearly came to an abrupt end.

“I had been taking out an old range cooker in the inglenook, and realised almost too late that the previous oak beam had been cut through in two places when the range had been installed in the late 1940s, and many

tons of chimney masonry had only been held in place by very little,” he said. “It was really just the infill that had been placed in the chimney when the inglenook had been filled in.”

Fortunately Bill’s many years of saving old houses (three previous renovations) alerted him to the crisis. He had a set of props to hand and within a few minutes the opening was soundly supported by steel supports that remained in position until he replaced the previous ineffective beam with a huge new piece of oak.

“The chimney stack was built largely of pebbles and rubble without mortar, and I could hear stones beginning to fall,” said Bill, a retired academic. “You can still look up and see where the structure had started to come adrift.”

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The inglenook now boasts a massive new beam of oak, and also a regular open fire of large logs from trees felled on the Gaskins' land. The oak for the beam came from one of thirteen oak trees that came down in the gales of 1997, and were supplied by Bill's late brother, who took over their late father's Cheltenham-based tree felling business when he retired. All were used up in the project.

The list description dates the oldest parts of the house as 15th century, but says little more of note. Bill and Helen have been able to date several stages of building and at some point in the future hope to increase their knowledge of it by having dendrological cores taken.

Two pairs of crucks remain from the original three bay building. But the main sitting room is part of a later barn – probably 17th century – built alongside the house, and the rear of the house to the north is of stone and timber frame construction, and also probably 17th century.

The kitchen, which lies to the west, was originally a stone walled lean-to which served as a pantry. It was the last section to be taken into the house and probably dates from the 18th century.

Bill and Helen bought the three acre site in 1993 for £73,000, but it was eight years before they lived on the site – in the annexe they have created from three former loose boxes. The reason for this was simple: both were still working, Bill as Dean of Art and Design at Swansea University, and Helen as a special needs teacher.



Top: The house as it is today

Bottom: A view of the house from the east before work began, showing remains of the medieval pond, now fully restored by Bill and Helen

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The roof was the biggest task that faced Bill and Helen and a huge challenge. Bill did all the carpentry

The main landing as it is today. The giant cruck in the distance was one of two that survived. The original pair in the south-facing front elevation had disappeared by the time the Gaskins bought the house

The annexe – it was a six year task to turn it into living accommodation – became their home for 12 years when the house restoration started in earnest. Although they are living in the main house now, the job is still incomplete: two bedrooms remain to be finished.

It has been a massive task – especially because Bill and Helen have done most of the work themselves. “Basically the house had been uninhabited for 50 years,” Bill said. “The previous owners had bought the house 12 months before and given up when they had realised the enormity of the task. Sections of the roof were falling in. The first floor, inserted at the time of the massive central chimney when it ceased to be a hall house, was also non-existent in most places.”

When they bought the site the only service installed was the telephone line. Before they could start converting the annexe as a temporary home they had to construct a proper access road and bring power, water and lpg gas to the site. The conversion work involved reinforcing and lining the walls, and constructing an upper storey for their bedroom and bathroom. Then they had to rebuild the roof.

It proved a good trial run before they moved onto the main house. Bill built a complete cruck frame with some of the oak from his brother, and also did all the roof carpentry himself. All this set him in good stead for much of what was to come.

At that stage neither of them realised that the entire roof of the main house needed to be replaced.

“We hadn't really grasped that the roof was so bad,” Bill said. “If we had not sourced all the stone roof slates, ourselves, done all the carpentry, and assisted the roofing team by cleaning and redrilling the slates on the ground, the six-week job would have cost about £65,000 and meant the entire restoration would have cost in excess of £1m.

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The kitchen was originally a stone walled lean-to which served as a pantry. Bill believes it dates from the 18th century.

"Clearly this would not have been viable to a commercial operator. I believe the house has been lucky because it was not listed at the time we bought it. Had it been purchased by a builder he would probably have realised that with labour costs today, it would not have been viable to restore it (mainly because of the stone slate roof) and decided to bulldoze it and build a new house on the site. It seems to me that the only way to do up old houses like this nowadays is basically to do the work yourself." The eventual cost of the roof was £16,000 .

Work on the house began in earnest in 2000, when Bill retired. Helen retired the following year:

Early on during the work on the annexe and main house the Gaskinses established a key tenet of their policy towards the project. This was to try to enjoy the task as much as possible, and once a year to spend several months in Australia, where they lived four years when Bill had a post at a university in Perth.

They also decided to continue their journeyings in southern France, where they were eventually to purchase an equally derelict four-bedroomed farmhouse in the Lot, which has been restored under their supervision using contract labour and is now complete.

"We felt it vital that as the Hereford house was a retirement project - and a huge one - we should take a relaxed approach and at any stage be able to lock up and walk away for longish periods at any stage," Helen explained. "We have always adhered to this."

It is hardly surprising that the task has taken two years more than the 10 years they originally anticipated.

Bill has done roofing, plumbing, plastering, insulation, studwork, underfloor heating, and also electrics (the work was completed before the change in the regulations meant only approved contractors could do the work). He even put in the sewage system and the lpg gas installation.

Helen's role has been cleaning, decorating, furnishing, sourcing cleaning and preparing materials and furniture, and helping Bill find lost tools!

By far the trickiest task after the near disaster in the main inglenook was the roof. It took nearly six years to find the local sandstone roofing needed, plus the flagstones they have laid on all the downstairs floors.

Apart from the inglenook drama they had a few other near- disasters. The infamous floods of July 07 came close to scuppering them. "The house lies in a saucer-shaped basin. The drainage was traditionally by means of the pond, which the owners before us filled in," said Bill. "We reinstated the pond, and installed an overflow drain which led to a lower point in the valley.

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The house as it is today



A view from the front before restoration

Bill and Helen: an intrepid couple

"But somehow in the 2007 downpour the system managed to work in reverse and caused a blockage. Water poured downhill towards the house in huge quantities and we were unaware of this because we had driven off to visit friends in Derbyshire. Fortunately the weather was so terrible that we were turned back by a police road block 20 miles from here and returned. The water was within four inches of entering the house. I was able to get hold of a large pump very fast, and that saved us. The water never entered the house or outbuildings. After this we installed a deep modern drain."

Tales of their pest problems – including the families of squirrels and jackdaws, who both managed to wreak havoc to the materials of the new roof as it was being constructed – were legion. Woodpeckers, too took their toll, virtually wrecking a new set of leaded windows.

Constructing and installing the main staircase was also a major headache. There had been a staircase there before, but in order to gain height beneath a wall plate that could not be disturbed, and gain access to two bedrooms through doors of a height that conformed

to building regulations, they had to make drastic changes. This involved reversing the direction of the staircase and building a split level landing and several difficult turns.

Now the job is almost complete. Bill and Helen have a large collection of tales to tell.

"In reality we could write a book," Helen said. "There has been plenty of drama but no real low point. It has all been very rewarding, and we feel we have saved an absolute gem of an old house." 🌿

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