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The house viewed from the hillside at the rear

Me and my listed house

Sally Woodgate, farmer and widow, talks to **Clive Fewins**

Staying on...

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I sometimes hear the most eerie and strange of noises – usually a sort of cracking and creaking. Ghosts? No, it is just what I call ‘Creak and Uncreak’

My husband John and I bought the farmhouse plus 280 acres in 1985. We were aged 46 and 44 and came with our younger daughter, then aged 19.

It took us 10 years of hard work to get the house fully up to 20th century standards. John had started his working life aged 16 at the Atomic Energy Authority laboratories at Harwell, Oxfordshire, where he had gone through the apprentice scheme. By the time

we came here he was a director of Oxford Instruments, nowadays a world leader in providing high technology tools and systems for research and industry.

We loved farming and we loved the farmhouse. We saw it as our lifelong home. So when John died of lymphoma in 1999 there was no question of my leaving Barcote: it was far too special.

It is only half a mile up a farm drive from a busy trunk road. Yet it is extremely quiet, and a haven to wildlife.

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The garden frontage



A view of the garden



The house probably has a number of blocked-up flues, as these large chimneys indicate. The stone ledges are not an indication of the existence of a previous roofline, but serve as a means of throwing rainwater away from the structure



The fireplace in the garden room that Sally and John created. The original plan was to install a modern stone fireplace. However, when the stonemason the Woodgates employed took out the modern fireplace to replace it with a new stone one the old inglenook came to light. The plan was changed and the original restored



The house is Grade II listed and is basically built of the local course shelly limestone, probably dug from the hillside at the rear:

According to the list description it dates from the early 17th but we know there was a house here before, probably on the same site.

It has some amazing features – especially the north-facing garden frontage with its splendid array of leaded light windows, which are thought to have been added in the 18th century.

It also has a stone slate roof and two much earlier 17th century windows in the east wall section, where there is evidence of an original square-headed doorway.

But what appeals to me above all is the view towards the Cotswold hills, and the peace of the place. These are the main reasons why I have continued to live here alone since John died.

Although Barcote stands alone and is quite remote, that is a major part of its attraction.



I often say I could never feel lonely with that view, and friends nearby. When people come here for the first time they are gobsmacked.

It is a big house, and maybe I ought to downsize one day. But my two married daughters live quite close, and one of my granddaughters lives in a property in the farmyard.

The interior of the rambling old farmhouse has great appeal. This is partly because you can quite easily spot the late medieval bits, but also because most of the rest of it tells a story of the ways in which the previous occupants altered it to suit their lifestyle. There have been more than 20 of them since the owner mentioned in the Domesday Book - one 'Alfsi of Faringdon.'

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←←
The drawing room

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These steps plus different heights of the doorways possibly indicate that the present east side was at some stage a different structure that was later joined to the main house

When we bought the house it had been empty for eighteen months. There were bulging walls caused by the damp, leaky pipes everywhere and a lot of damage to the skirting boards and plaster, caused by dogs. In addition there was power in only one part of the house. It was a real mess and making it liveable was a big challenge.

Some local experts think this was the site of the original manor. We have a very interesting period fireplace at the west end of the house, where we think there was possibly a structure that predated the present house.

When we incorporated this fireplace in the garden room we built there we employed a stonemason to remove the modern fireplace that was in the room that was there at the time and replace it with one in stone.

When he took out the modern fireplace the old inglenook came to light. We accepted his suggestion that he should try to restore it to its original look rather than fit a new stone fire surround. It has been very successful.

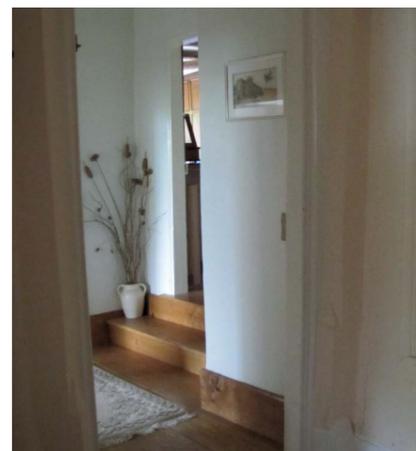
On the other side of the house –the east– there are some very odd sections of solid impenetrable masonry, which conceals all manner of things, including disappearing

chimney flues! There are also some very curious windows in the end wall on the ground floor, where there is evidence of an earlier door with a flat stone lintel.

The house is also rather extraordinary because in 30 years here I have yet to find anyone who has been able to really work out its building history. Parts appear a lot earlier than the seventeenth century, so often referred to in the List Description. Other parts, such as the eau de nil bathroom which I love so much, were smartened up in the 1950s. We found very few signs of medieval work upstairs and changed very little. I prefer to keep it that way.

But downstairs all is very different. There is a theory that that the original house and the land to the west was probably the principal building in what was a very small manor. It was, according to one of my neighbours who has done some research on this, a very small unit, only two fields wide. Like adjacent estates however it probably originally had land stretching right down to that great thoroughfare the River Thames, from which it doubtless benefited greatly.

Nor was it ever grand. But it was only after the medieval period that it became subsidiary



to the main house on the manor, which was built at that stage. So what we see today is a hotch-potch – quirky and intriguing!

The east side of the house also has a much older feel to it – especially in the downstairs room I use as my office. I am told it was always used as the farm office. I still run the farm (no animals now- we grow rape and corn) but whilst I used to feed the pigs and wean the calves I am in my seventies now and am physically a passenger.

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The interior of Sally's office. There is evidence of the use of recycled materials at some stage – the massive beam pictured has clearly been used to give added support to the floor above. This is yet another of the mysteries the house conceals. The panelling was made by a local carpenter and installed by Sally and John



Bottom:
Sally Woodgate



This east side of the house is quite mysterious because the shape of the roof at the rear gives the impression that it was at one time a separate building. This is confirmed by looking at the upper part of the original stone end wall that can be seen in the far attic.

What seems very likely is that this 'working end' was extended to the north and made part of the main house – the sitting room now occupies the downstairs on that side – in the late 17th or early in the 18th century.

One can reasonably deduce from this that the occupants had become more prosperous. Perhaps they owned both sections of the property and wished to turn them into one house and make it look rather grander. Perhaps it was a matter of adding a 'Polite' facade to counter the 'Vernacular' label that really best describes the property.

Upstairs you can see quite clearly that there were two buildings. There is an old doorway with a step that illustrates this, and also some odd steps between other rooms.

While we can't, without further investigation, be sure which came first, it is pretty obvious

that the 'house' to the east was at some stage extended forwards, and the garden facade built. This is underlined by the timber lintels on the facade at that side, and also some very subtle changes in stonework.

But it is still a mystery as to why this took place at all – and when. One can only speculate.

I could go on. But I prefer to muse about the land and the farm and my lovely garden.

I love the old house at all times of the year. It is very damp because it is situated where the sand of a Corallian ridge meets the clay of the Thames valley. There are springs everywhere.

Traditionally this meant there was water for animals and humans. Today it is good for the garden – you can grow virtually anything – but not for the house!

In spring and early summer I love the wild flowers, especially the cowslips along the long farm drive leading to the main road. The masonry bees and the green and greater spotted woodpeckers are also active.



And then in summer the buzzards and kites use the thermals that rise from the valley to soar and hunt. We also have several kinds of deer in abundance.

In autumn the mists rise from the valley below and add an air of mystery.

And winter? Well, despite the damp, it can be fun. Often the wind whistles constantly and the skies appear permanently black. I sometimes hear the most eerie and strange of noises – usually a sort of cracking and creaking. Ghosts? No, it is just what I call 'Creak and Uncreak' – the expansion and contraction of different materials. I like to think it is the idiosyncratic old house talking! ❁

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