

Forty years of transforming a 'sixties bodge'

by Clive Fawcins

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When Dick and Sue Francis saw the run-down cottage advertised in the window of a local estate agent in December 1975 - price £18,500 - they walked in and offered the asking price on the spot. The viewing followed later.

'We had explored the local area so thoroughly for a cottage of character in an attractive village, that we immediately recognised the property, which we knew had a large garden,

and decided it was almost exactly what we were looking for,' said Dick.

It turned out to be a good decision. Though ivy-covered and down-at-heel, the cottage was basically sound. It had been extended to provide a new kitchen and downstairs bathroom in the early 1960s, when there was also extensive renovation work designed to make it 'saleable'. As it was believed to date from the first half of the 17th century or earlier, it certainly satisfied the Francis's desire for a historic property. The half-acre south facing plot clinched the deal.

Dick said: 'I had been working as an electrical engineer at the Harwell laboratory 10 miles

away in this corner of Oxfordshire, and knew the village would be a good place in which to bring up a family.' He was proved correct.

Forty years on, the house has been extended again and the garden has been transformed from the tangled jungle of couch grass and other weeds that Dick and Sue inherited. A son and daughter have grown up, gone away and produced four children of their own. Much of what the couple call 'the sixties bodesges' remain.

'There are many elements of the house that were hastily renovated in the sixties that it

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Above left:
The 1960s extension
can be seen where the
timber windbraces end



Above right:
An old photograph
showing Mr Charles
Lovegrove, the parish
clerk with his niece,
Miss Edith Legge,
outside the cottage
around 1900. Census
returns show that
both were living in the
cottage at this time



A view showing the
1960s extension on
the left, and the 1982
extension on the right

would do more harm than good to alter,' Sue said. 'We accept that. Our aim has been to put some of the character back into the house, at the same time as turning it into a lovely family home.'

A lot of the major work was carried out before the house was listed Grade II in 1986. This included the removal of what Dick calls a 1950s 'tombstone' fireplace in the dining room to reveal a really beautiful inglenook fireplace of local downland chalkstone, for which they managed to find a massive piece of reclaimed oak to replace the missing bressumer beam. Dick and Sue also worked hard at getting rid of the woodworm they found in the roof, and

applied remedial treatments to the inevitable patches of damp associated with an old building that had been empty for 12 months.

'Apart from that, the first six years were spent getting to know the village and producing two children,' Sue said. 'We also spent many hours reclaiming and redesigning the garden, which is surrounded by a 200 foot-long high stone wall. I also busied myself looking into the history of the house and we now have deeds dating back to 1922 and know of all the inhabitants back to 1871.'

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Dick, not one for undertaking large DIY jobs, sought out the best local tradesmen, including stone specialists. 'If you take on a listed property with a large plot and high walls it is easy to forget that they too are listed, as they are part of the curtilage of the property,' he said. 'Over the years we have patched, strengthened and in places rebuilt sections of the walls, aided for the past two years by our lime pointing and stone restoration specialist son-in-law, Tom Viggars.'

Fitting a family of four into a cottage that had originally been a two-up-two-down with no large rooms was becoming a tight squeeze by 1982. So, they used a local builder to construct an extension to the south, adding a new kitchen with a guest bedroom above. The design also gave them an upstairs WC and bathroom for the first time, and also provided a downstairs utility room and shower, and new east-facing entrance. Central heating was installed at the same time.

Dick and Sue thought long and hard about extending further to the east, adding a bay that would provide – somehow – a fourth bedroom upstairs. They certainly had the land,

but they lacked the funds at the time and thought that to have gone out further in that direction would have removed some of the attractiveness of the property. 'We decided it would have entailed growing the house in a way that we found unacceptable,' said Dick.

'We have found the three bedroom format suits us well. Our children and four granddaughters live locally, so they rarely all need to stay overnight. With old houses you often have to make hard decisions. One of our friends, who is both a craftsman and a builder, had some good advice: if you want a modern house, buy one, but don't buy an old one and remove so much of the character that you turn it into a modern property!'

Their shock at some of the "improvements" that were made in the 1960s were compounded when Sue went on a weekend SPAB course and learned all about lime, 'breathing' buildings, traditional materials, renovation remedies and maintenance programmes for listed houses.

Part of the sixties work involved lining the beamed dining room and sitting room with



The dining room inglenook after repair. When Dick and Sue originally exposed the inglenook they found the main bressumer beam missing. The replacement, pictured here, came from a source in the village

lightweight blockwork and plastering the internal walls in what Dick calls 'a suspiciously flat, square way'. It helped keep the building standing but was alien to the nature of the old building and removed a lot of the internal character. Dick and Sue's response to this was to expose the inglenook in the dining room and make more of a feature of the beamed ceilings in both original downstairs rooms.

'Over the past 40 years we have come to realise that there are some things you can do and others that it is wise not to alter and just live with,' Dick said. 'If you have an old house like this, don't have unlimited funds to throw at it (not always a good thing in any case), wish to have a good family life, enjoy your spare

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Dick and Sue built the summerhouse, which has provided a welcome addition to the garden

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The marks are dated 1687 and pertain to leather tooling patterns. Dick and Sue think this piece of timber was possibly brought into the house for adornment

time and live to a decent old age you realise that not everything can be done at once. This has been our policy.'

'There are six panels of wattle and daub and 200 ft of early Victorian garden walls, all of which have needed attention and maintenance to survive, as well as other maintenance jobs such as pointing and underpinning. We have been very attentive to key areas of maintenance at all times.'

'Much of the exterior brickwork is again sixties 'bodging'. But the expert advice has been to leave it. We believe the work was probably done on a council improvement grant. It was certainly done on the cheap. The garden-facing wall of the house contains a mixture of cheap Flettons, even cheaper common bricks, and two types of engineering bricks. There is barely a trace of the heavy wire-cut bricks that were produced for many generations in a kiln down the road. The pointing is in a harsh water repellent cement mortar entirely out of keeping with the

nature of the cottage. Likewise, we have chosen to leave all the Crittall-style steel windows – they are listed anyway – and the concrete roof tiles (it was originally thatched but was probably tiled in 1947).'

'Mercifully the very attractive west end, alongside the road, retains much of its original timber framing and some interesting patterned brickwork – though this is undoubtedly not part of the original construction.'

The couple faced further problems ten years after the extension was complete when they found the weight of the roof was bearing down and the front and rear walls were showing signs of being pushed apart. A local builder was employed to insert tie-bars to pull the outer walls together:

'Over the years we have at times found ourselves frustrated by the lack of a large open plan family room,' said Sue. 'But the

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From top to bottom:
The master bedroom

The sitting room.
The Francis' used a local builder to strip the ceiling beams

Dick points out where the original two-up/ two-down cottage finished and the sixties extension began



Dick and Sue Francis



traditional cottage layout has a number of advantages. The main one is that you can both do different things in different rooms at the same time.'

Dick said: 'Nowadays we are doing very little day to day practical work on the building, but we are lucky to have the use of our son-in-law, Tom, who is an expert on period properties. His favourite four letter word is lime!'

'We both like to think that when our time in this world runs out we shall be regarded as having been good custodians of the house. One thing is for sure: after 40 years of caring for the old place we intend to stay here until we drop.' 🌸



Has your experience of living in a listed property been a labour of love? If you have an interesting story to tell, we would love to hear from you. We might even feature your story in Listed Heritage magazine. Send your stories to kirstie@poc.co.uk or call 01795 844939.

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