



Me and my listed house

A NEW OCCASIONAL SERIES

Anne Shone,
village veteran talks to
Clive Fewins

Anne Shone, widow and village veteran, tells Clive Fewins why it is worth battling on alone to enjoy the quality of life provided by her late 16th century listed farmhouse.

'The house is in a ghastly state', my mother-in-law concluded as she stared out of an upstairs window across two acres of virgin field, 'though it has potential and Michael will have a wonderful time creating a garden.' In late 1961, after nine months of builders, my husband Michael and I moved with our one year old son to White's Farm House, a late 16th century Grade II listed, three bedroom farmhouse, perched on the side of a hill

overlooking cress beds in this glorious part of the world, which was once Berkshire and now is Oxfordshire.

Michael, a plant physiologist, had taken a job with the Agricultural Research Council at the Letcombe Laboratory in an adjoining village. When we bought the house it had been empty for a year and we had to undertake a lot of work to make it habitable. It is an

extremely complex house that has, over the years, confounded the experts, with many hidden spaces. In the 1960s we found a priest hole at the top of the stairs in which lay a serviceable Latin primer dated 1631, paradoxically described by the Bodleian Library as 'rare but not uncommon'. If you enter the house by the front door you come

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Perched on the side of a hill overlooking cress beds in this glorious part of the world



White's Farm House, Nr Wantage, Oxfordshire. North face of the grade two listed house
Images © Lauren-Alice Photography



Dining room with original spit hook and bread oven

East Walk with herbaceous borders

Sitting room with 17 century panelling

upon a fascinating entrance lobby with a very large chimney stack built from local Downland chalkstone. It is thought to date from about 1570. The curve of the wall as you enter has puzzled experts over the years, behind which is a large, unexplored void. Somehow, we never found the courage to do a proper job on this rather unusual feature. There are a number of jobs that, quite frankly, the two of us simply never got round to. But I don't think this matters much - it is a wonderful house and I love it dearly. Although it is fun to uncover treasures in an old listed property it is not always necessary to go through the building with a toothcomb, altering everything. Some features are just better left alone, or for the next generation to explore.

It is thought that the original timber-framed house was of three bays with a chimney at the centre. A fourth was added to the eastern end in 1670 and used as a kitchen. At the end of this there is a large fireplace beneath an intriguing looking spit hook and bread oven in what is now the dining room.

Today, the walls of the farmhouse are of brick, flint and chalk stone. It is a wonderfully romantic property with a marvellous undulating stone roof which dates from the 18th century. It is thought this rebuilt roof resulted from some form of catastrophe - probably a fire. The house is oriented NE-SW, with two wings later added to the long four bay block. The north eastern block was probably built in the 19th century. A stair tower between the northern wing and the main block may have been an 18th century improvement and we added the NW wing in the 1960s which was designed by an architect friend, Hugh Creighton. This replaced a barn on staddle stones where, for several years, we had a Montessori nursery, which two of our children attended. We were able to incorporate a music room with a bedroom above in this extension, in keeping with the house (the more so now since the bricks have mellowed), but I still feel guilty that we removed the barn.

At 86, with some of the limitations that age brings, I now use a mobility scooter for shopping and visiting friends and a stair lift with a Rolator parked up and downstairs. Every two years when some of the gardens in the village are open, I am still glad that ours is included. On a beautiful summer's day it is just



as wonderful as when Michael and I arrived here in our 30s.

My daughter Frances, who lives a few miles away and comes in most days, says the house is in a sixties time warp. The kitchen still functions as well as it did 55 years ago with the Rayburn babbling away quietly throughout the year and what was then a newly designed built-in Tricity eye level oven and electric grill that has its original elements intact today. Originally it was a brewhouse open from floor to roof with a copper and a well which is still there.

When Michael died I felt it was natural that White's should still be my home. This was made possible when my daughter Frances suggested she would be my carer and she copes with the support of her two married brothers and my six grandchildren. Tatiana, my au pair from Slovakia, is also a great help.

The house has lost none of its attraction. I still enjoy being here and having friends to stay. The garden, its 'borrowed views' and my friends all provide comfort and inspiration.

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And then there are the memories. When we moved here, we were welcomed by the village and since then I have always enjoyed village life. I was a partner in the Letcombe Watercress business, which we reopened and ran as a going concern for 16 years and a founder member of the village community shop, which was open for 20 years. I served as church warden for a few years and as a member of the old rural district council.

It is unlikely that any of my three children will take over the house, its two barns and outbuildings, so after I depart this life some enterprising individual will have a treat in store, rediscovering this wonderful old building and perhaps revealing some more of its secrets. In the meantime, with a lot of help, I manage to keep it watertight and in reasonably good condition. I regard this as hugely important.

The garden, which gives me great joy, is of course a never-ending task but we manage to keep it going and in places make improvements. It was originally laid out, shortly

after we moved, by Col John Codrington: soldier; diplomat, spy and garden designer. Melanie Lane, who worked on the garden with Michael for many years, has a natural touch and knows a lot of the unusual plants introduced by him. Without Melanie and Ralph Cornish, the garden today would be a jungle.

18 years after Michael's death, parts of the interior of the house are looking a little sad, but at this stage of one's life when one's memories are so important, a rather careworn house is like a wonderful old gardening jacket or a much-loved chair. So it pleases me to keep many of the familiar surroundings that I love just as they have been for more than 50 years. As the family always say when they come, the old house has a 'lived-in feel'.

With our view to the Downs from upstairs and our position above the cress beds with its animal and bird life – especially the kingfishers – living here is just as inspirational to me as it was when I first moved in 55 years ago. 🌿



18th century Barn and farmyard

Exposed downland chalk internal wall

Original timber and window now a feature with looking glass

Images were taken by Lauren-Alice Photographry, a young photographer who received no payment for her time.
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Mrs Michael Shone

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