



It's 'back to school' for seasoned renovators

by Clive Fewins

What possesses a couple in their early 70s to up sticks after 21 years from their beautifully comfortable oak-framed listed cottage dating from the late 15th century to take on a rescue project of major proportions in a nearby village? 'The answer, simply, is the love of old houses,' said Jeremy Plummer. He and his wife Tessa will hopefully move into the Grade II* listed Old Grammar School in Webley, Herefordshire, before the end of this year.

'It will be the fifth – and almost certainly the last – old house (and the fourth listed one) we have lived in during our 50 year marriage, and it is certainly proving the most challenging,' Jeremy added.

When friends and neighbours-to-be view the size and scale of the project the word that most commonly comes up is 'brave'. 'We don't see it that way,' said Jeremy. 'We regard ourselves as fortunate. The building had been lived in since 1955 by an elderly single lady and the fabric had not been touched for 20 years. Another five or six years and it would have been too much for us to take on.'

This time round Jeremy, 73, is doing little of the work himself. He is contenting himself with sourcing reclaimed materials, minor demolition, and quite menial tasks, while Tessa is acting as project manager. The pair have employed an architect, Peter Enticknapp, who is passionate about old houses, and a team of tradesmen led by Martin Bufon, whom they have used extensively in the past on their present house.



Jeremy pointing across the lawn to the oldest part of their present house, Old Hall, which is late 15th century

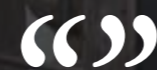
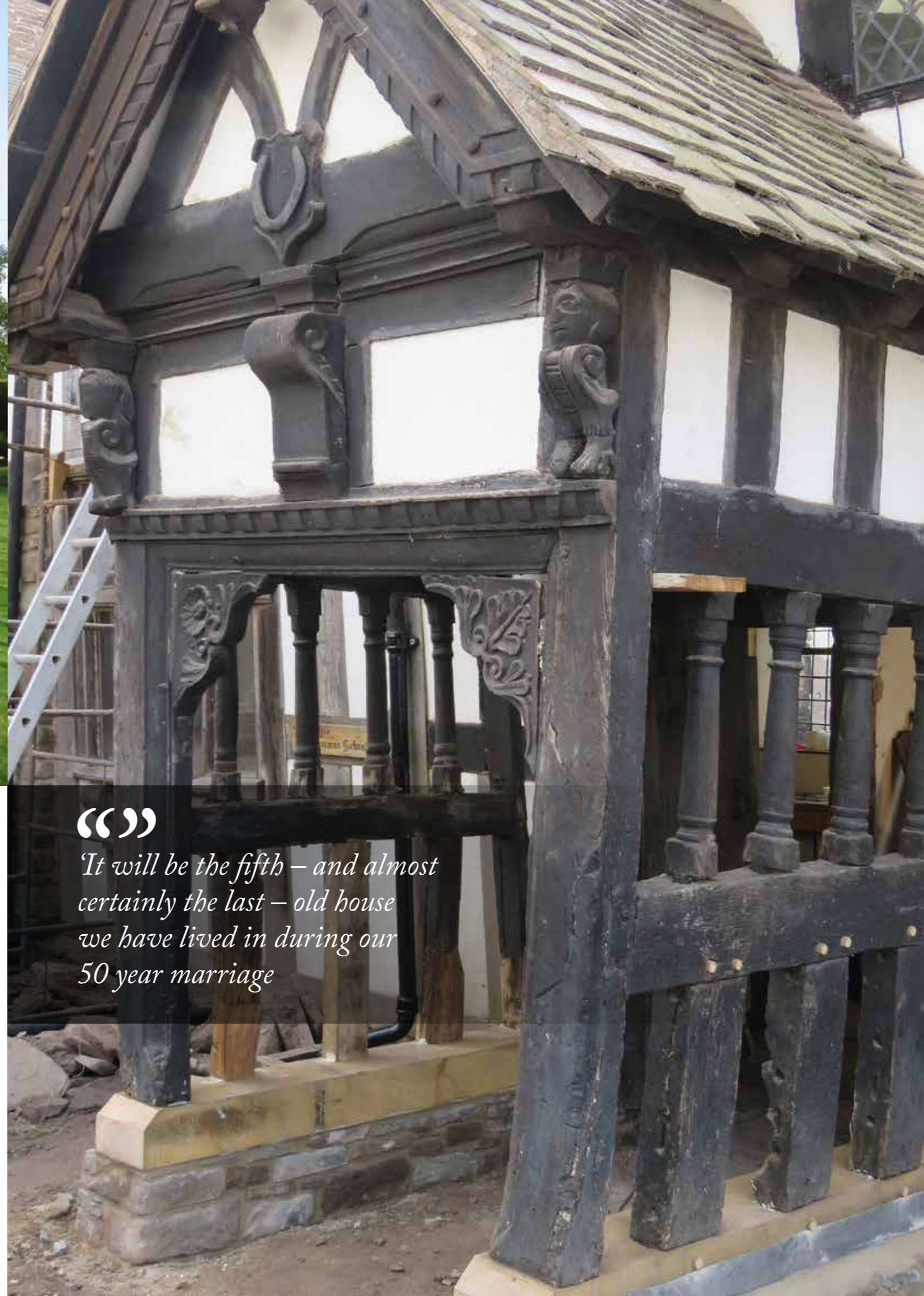


The porch at the Old Grammar School is a great gem and thought to be the main link with John Abell, 'The King's Carpenter'

Because of the status of the Old Grammar School built in 1660/1 by, it is thought, the famous John Abell of nearby Sarnesfield (dubbed 'The King's Carpenter' in the reign of Charles I), they have regular visits from an Historic England Inspector as well as the local conservation officer. So far, all is going well.

'We really have had extraordinary good fortune because we have been interested in the Old Grammar School for ten years,' Jeremy said. 'Once we had finished the major work on our present house – it is called Oak Hall – including moving a complete historic

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←← The rear of the Old Grammar School undergoing restoration



This graffiti shows the names of some of the 17th century pupils carved in timbers in the downstairs schoolroom



oak-framed barn which we dismantled and re-erected as an annexe to house Tessa's late mother; we began to realise that the 2½ acres of land and huge garden here would be too much for the two of us to maintain.'

Tessa continued: 'We first knocked on the door of the Old Grammar School eight years ago when the lady who lived there, whom we knew from the village history society, was 88.

'She died aged 94 in September 2014. We explained that we should be interested in living there should it come up for sale. It stands on a far smaller plot than our present house and we could see scope for building an oak-framed garage to the north. We have already completed this and use it as a store for building materials.' Jeremy, who has sourced reclaimed materials of all kinds over the years for the four previous houses they have worked on, is particularly proud of some



oak panelling he has stored in there. It came from a reclamation yard in Abergavenny and is to be used to line the sitting room walls.

After the previous owner died, the Plummers at first thought the Old Grammar School would be auctioned, with a separate building plot next to it, where the new garage stands. If this had been the case they would almost certainly have not been able to afford to buy the property. However, there were objections to this idea and they were eventually able to buy the Old Grammar School privately from the executors for £335,000.

The first major task was repairing and recovering the roof with hand-made clay tiles. After this was complete Jeremy and Tessa commissioned carpenter Stephen Ingram to make a new cupola, together with a bell they are able to ring. It exactly replicates the original, shown in a drawing they have of the school when it was built.



Left: The hallway at Oak Hall

Right: Upstairs at the Old Grammar School showing the room with brick fireplace that served as the schoolmaster's bedroom/study. It is to be Jeremy and Tessa's bedroom

'Many of the old houses in Weobley, which is regarded as one of the great gems of Herefordshire, are well documented,' explained building historian Duncan James, who has written a detailed report on old buildings in the village and carried out some dendrochronology on some of the old timber framed buildings.

'The Old Grammar School is particularly interesting because of the elaborate carving

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on the porch, which is a great gem, and thought to provide the main link with John Abell. In particular there is a carved escutcheon – a blank shield – on the front of the porch and two rather crude carvings of a man and a woman, probably Adam and Eve, on either side of the porch. These carvings bear great resemblance to known work by Abell.

'In addition on either side of the front dormer windows are bunches of grapes, with acanthus leaves over the top on either side. These probably symbolise the blood of Christ and resemble other work by Abell, who was a well-known Catholic recusant.'

The building also has some fine stained glass, currently being restored in a studio a few miles away.

The school was built using a bequest from William Crowther, who died in 1653 and was a member of Cromwell's Long Parliament. The money was to provide a schoolroom and a dormitory for 17 boys, and a bedroom for the master. The building continued to be used as a school until 1888. Four years after this, H. Thornhill Timmins in his Nooks and Corner of Herefordshire wrote: 'The building, with its projecting porch with carved spandrels, and doorway, hedged across by trailing sprays of neglected rosebushes, recalls in its humble way the palace of the Sleeping Beauty. It is devoutly to be hoped that this characteristic remembrance of old Weobley may be preserved from untimely destruction.'

Jeremy and Tessa have permission to extend the building to the rear, where they are planning to add a small snug with a lean-to roof. To the north, a previously demolished outbuilding will be replaced by a conservatory



room with a larger footprint. The rest of the downstairs will comprise the sitting room, dining room, kitchen, and snug at the rear. Upstairs there will be three bedrooms and a bathroom.

Jeremy recalls how they discovered their present house of 21 years in the village of Woonton, four miles from Weobley.

'When we first came upon it in 1992 it was as B&B guests. We were living in Southampton, where for 26 years I was an officer in the fire service and Tessa was a senior night sister at Southampton General Hospital.

'After we bought the house we continued the B&B business for the 18 years, and eventually renamed it Oak Hall (previously Rose Cottage) when we became certain that the oldest part of the house had originally been an open hall.

'We have always shared a passion for old buildings. Many years ago we came into a



The present dining room at Oak Hall would have been the downstairs section of the small open hall that is the oldest part of the house, dating from around 1480



This picture shows work in progress on the north side of the old grammar school, where there was previously an outbuilding with a lean-to roof. This has been demolished and will be replaced by a conservatory room with a larger footprint



Jeremy and Tessa Plummer



number of legacies that meant we could afford to do this sort of work. We decided that it was much more fun to invest our cash in saving and preserving old houses than in more conventional ways. At least when we come to pop our clogs we feel the money will have done something useful.'

Tessa said: 'Sadly, we were unable to have children and our lives have really been devoted to old buildings. We have been fortunate in being able to share Oak Hall with our B&B guests. If we have 5-10 years at the Old Grammar School we shall be very happy. When it comes to old buildings we humans are, after all, just caretakers.' 🌿

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