

Precious memories – and a cosy home to retire to

by Clive Fewins



The rear of the cottage as it is now, complete with kitchen extension



The traditional main entrance at the front of the cottage is rather inconveniently sited because it leads directly into the sitting room. By extending the porch at the west end the Tuckers have been able to use the door at that end as the normal entrance rather than the old front door



After a six month search for a new home after they had both retired, the penny finally dropped for Mike and Louise Tucker on Good Friday 2014.

It was a beautiful sunny spring morning and Mike was standing near a small ruined barn. The barn was at the top of the garden at the rear of Louise's late mother's 16th century Grade II listed thatched cottage in a village near Chichester. The view was of open Sussex downland.

Having finally been persuaded by his wife that they should move out of Brighton,

where they had lived in the same house for 30 years, Mike was in pensive mood. They needed a retirement home and the search was not going well.

"I looked out over the glorious countryside, and suddenly realised that we already owned the very thing we had been searching for," said Mike, who before he retired was Professor of Poetics at the University of Brighton.

His wife refers to this as Mike's Damascene conversion.

"It was always my mother's wish that we should eventually live here," said Louise, who was an information services manager in the

same university. "My mother died in 2011 at the age of 101, and left the cottage to me. I just could not bring myself to sell it, and it had stood like a fly in amber for two years. It was deeply in need of some TLC, including new thatch, and had undergone some less than satisfactory repair work at times. But it was a home that I had lived in and loved, and which held very precious memories, it was just that we had always thought it too small to provide a home for us both in our retirement.

"I was delighted when Mike appeared keen to think again. Nevertheless, when we sold our three-storey 1920s terraced house in Brighton and moved to the cottage, I felt I was living in two different time zones.

"So in March 2015 we set about the challenge of working out how we could overcome the drawbacks, such as the lack of a study for Mike where he could store his books, do his art and jazz writing work and pursue his painting. Top of my list was to extend the tiny galley kitchen at the rear:

"An architect friend suggested a few possibilities, but warned that as the cottage was listed and in the area covered by the South Downs National Park Authority, any developments would have to respect the architectural integrity of the original. The addition of a single storey L-shaped extension

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A brick and flint replacement garden building that serves as Mike's study/studio has been built on the site of the dilapidated thatched barn that had served for many years as a storage and garden shed



at the rear would provide a dining area next to an extended kitchen. An upstairs bathroom was also desirable since the existing one was small, and tucked away under the stairs. Another essential was the study/studio for Mike. The fact that there was already the barn at the top of the garden raised the possibility of building a replacement."

"He came up with a rather large costing to build this and do all the other work needed to bring the cottage back to life and make it suit our life," said Mike. "It was more than we really wanted to spend."

"Then we had the good fortune to discover Chichester surveyor Derek Bowerman. He felt that the two planning authorities we had to deal with – Chichester District Council and the South Downs NPA – might not permit the L-shaped extension."

However Derek did say that he thought they would gain permission for the extended porch over the side door at the west end. They were keen to build this because the front faces south and the little-used door on that side opens inconveniently into the sitting room.

Derek was also hopeful that they would gain consent to extend the small kitchen at the rear to create the space they both wanted.

"This left the problem of my office/studio," Mike added. "However, when Derek took a look at the remains of the thatched barn

at the top of the garden – it had served for many years as a storage and garden shed – he felt there was a good chance we could get permission to rebuild."

When the planners eventually came to a site meeting they were generally sympathetic, and indicated there was a reasonable chance the Tuckers would be able to build a brick and flint replacement garden building on the footprint of the dilapidated barn.

They also confirmed that, while there would be no chance of gaining permission for an L-shaped extension, an extension in line with the original thrust of the building would be fine.

Louise and Mike were heartened, particularly when Derek introduced them to local builder Albert Jones of Nutbourne Construction, winners of numerous awards for conservation projects. Albert was widely experienced in working in vernacular buildings in the area and quoted an acceptable price.

Louise and Mike also decided there was no need for a project manager, given Albert's expertise and the mutual trust that had been built up early on. This saved an appreciable sum, better spent on high quality details such as the oak internal doors and limestone hearths.

When the Tuckers invited building historian Dr Annabelle Hughes from The Wealden Buildings Study Group* to survey the cottage,



▲ The rear as it is now. Some 20 lorry loads of earth were removed at the rear of the cottage for the building – the site of the kitchen extension and the paved area and terraced garden beds.

Both Louise and Mike were very keen to extend the tiny galley kitchen, pictured here while the work at the rear was going on

it was confirmed that some of the fabric – at the east end – was probably 16th century, or even a little older.

When Dr Hughes climbed into the roof space and found some timbers at one end that showed signs of smoke blackening, she thought the cottage might originally have been a small open hall house.

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Top: The dining room. A whole section of old ceiling beams was exposed almost by chance. When the builders laid a floor screed that made the room too low it was decided not only to reduce the depth of the screed but to remove the ceiling covering as well. The result? A taller room and some rather lovely old ceiling beams revealed

Bottom: The sitting room. It now has much of the original fireplace on view



“My mother had done some initial research when we first moved here in the mid-1960s, and was told that the cottage did indeed have ancient origins,” Louise said. “After Albert’s team had removed the 1950s sitting room fireplace to reveal a large inglenook the room was transformed. Watching this done was most exciting.

“Annabelle also confirmed something I had been told – that there is a ‘lost’ end at the east of the cottage, now fronted by adjoining 19th century cottages. This extra bay is rumoured to have collapsed or burned down and it is an ongoing piece of detective work to discover the truth.”

The project proved demanding. Some 20 lorry-loads of earth were removed at the rear of the cottage – the site of the kitchen extension and the paved area and terraced beds. What was meant to be a month’s stay away from the house for Mike and Louise during the messiest period became three. However, for most of this time they were able to stay in a rental just across the road. This proved extremely useful.



Mike said: “If I were to offer advice to other people in this situation I would say: do the same. Being able to visit every day meant we were on hand to help the builders iron out the inevitable glitches.

“It’s also very important to get the planners on site as soon as possible to have an indication of what might and might not be acceptable.”

His other piece of advice to people in a similar position is the importance of using an experienced local builder with a proven track record.

“We were extremely fortunate here,” said Louise. “Derek Bowerman was a star, who drew up all the plans and gained us our planning permission. And Albert was equally wonderful, sensitive to our concerns and extremely thorough. He became really engaged with the project, suggesting many creative solutions.”

“Being on hand and able to pop in most days we found that the cottage had the potential to give us things that we didn’t realise were there.

“We have not carried out any structural alteration to the original cottage. But we have uncovered some lovely original features, for instance the 16th century fireplace in the upper room which was blocked in and undiscovered until the plasterer revealed it when replacing shot plaster. It felt like a gift and confirmed our sense that we truly belonged here. Latterly we have both been working hard to restore the garden, which was inevitably flattened by all the building work.”

Mike said: “Perhaps at some stage in the future we may feel sufficiently adventurous to take a look behind the blocked fireplace in the far room – Louise’s study – which is very deep. Certainly what the builders managed to reveal in the fireplaces in the upper bedroom and the sitting room was really exciting for us.”

In the meantime they are both delighted they took the decision they did. “There are all sorts of odd alignments we still can’t understand,” Mike said. “We feel there must be other secrets awaiting revelation. The history of this cottage – possibly the oldest house in the village – is endlessly fascinating.”



Mike and Louise Tucker

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