



Me and my listed house

Inconvenience? Dust? Dirt?
It's all part of the joy of living
in a jumbled old manor house.

Auctioneer Hugo Marsh and his wife Miranda – who bought their listed home in 1987, sold it in 2005 then bought it back again in 2011 – tell **Clive Fewins** why they do not intend to leave.

'When we bought this old listed property in 1987 the walled garden was a ruin, ceilings were falling in, cracked lino lined the floors, the landing was lined with blue nylon carpet, black paint had been spread liberally over many of the historic timbers, and there was a pervasive air of dilapidation, damp and decay.

Sometimes, when we have large piles of furniture belonging to our five grown-up children when they are between flats or otherwise in transit, we feel as though little has changed! However, when we look back 30 years and survey the five bedrooms we

coaxed out of a jungle of ancient buildings, some dating back to the 1450s, we sometimes like to think we have done rather well!

Friends may think the house dusty and unkempt in places, but we appreciated it from the time we first saw it for what it is – a wonderful old vernacular building that could very easily be ruined by over-restoration. We all love it, and that is why the two of us always say we shall eventually be carted out of here in our boxes if we have any say in the matter!

We often think that people who love old houses can be divided into those who are prepared to live with history and those who are not. And it is our belief that it takes a specific sort of person to want to live with that originality. Most people who claim to like old houses prefer to live in an imitation of one, or a new house.

[Continued >>](#)



←← The garden is largely Miranda's province. She has put a great deal of work into it since the family returned to the house in 2011

↑ The house from the road that runs past



An eye for detail: Hugo points at some of the Arts and Crafts style long wrought iron brackets specially made for them to support the guttering that starts at the point where the thatched Long Barn joins a tiled section of roof



The Marshes created a kitchen where previously there had been just a rather rough eating area, and a single tap



The old garden pump, which was used until the 1939-45 war. It supplied a large cistern which was used for watering flowers, fruit and other produce in the former walled garden

Certainly to derive the full pleasure from living in an old house you need a firm belief that the joys and excitement of living in one amply counteract all the additional labour (it comes in many forms) that is involved. In our case much of it was physical. We had to create a kitchen where previously there had been just a rather rough eating area, and a new two-storey dining room out of a semi-open space where carts had once stood to unload the apple harvest.

It is a good job that we both had some idea of the skills connected with carpentry, plumbing, electrics and plastering after each spending some years working on our respective rot-riddled Victorian houses in South London when we married in our late 20s.

The search for our first married home in

the countryside not too many miles from the capital led to this rambling Grade II listed former farmhouse in a Berkshire Downland village in September 1986.

Part 14th century hall house, part agricultural store and service rooms and part 17th century extension, it had been bought in 1952 by an elderly gentleman and lived in by him until his recent move to a care home. His family had made the mistake of emptying the house. It looked and smelt awful. The asking price was £200,000 and we said no.

We had just had our bid turned down for another house in a village 20 miles away when this property came back on the market at £175,000 in December of the same year.

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The main entrance to the house nowadays is through the double gates that lead directly to the garden. This is the view on entering



Left: More of the timber framing of the Long Barn show behind a panel in the hallway

Right: Some of the vertical posts in the original cruck-framed 15th century section of the house occur in the oddest of places!



We looked again at the huge potential, including the walled garden, and offered £168,000. It was accepted.

Our wonderful local builder, Rod Snelling, and his brilliant colleague Alf (then well into his 60s) were here on and off for three years and really carried out the structural rescue of the house. They brought about its rescue using the beautifully crafted drawings of my late father, an architect (no CAD user, here).

They undertook such transformations as turning an untouched 18th century apple store into a bedroom and constructing a full-size internal staircase to replace an exterior one. It is made from newel posts and balusters from my father's carefully-nurtured hoard and spindles from a reclamation yard in Oxford. The landing is made from discarded Lambeth Council doors, again obtained through my father. It still does the job admirably, but the filled-in letterbox on the underside will baffle future house historians!

We took a similar approach with the kitchen. It was really just a space with tatty cupboards, an old dresser and a solid fuel Triplex stove. When we opened the stove door we found a screwed-up newspaper dating from 1953 with a report stating that Prince Charles would be attending the Coronation but that Princess Anne was considered too young! We created the new kitchen almost entirely from bits and pieces found in a large reclamation yard about three miles from here, with cupboard doors cut from the doors of large storage cupboards that came from the Natural History Museum in South Kensington. They had been deposited in a skip at the rear of the firm where Hugo, an auctioneer, worked at the time.

The kitchen has enjoyed a few coats of paint in-between times, but is still largely the same and has served not only our entire family extremely well but also the lovely family that bought the house from us in 2005 and the next people, who subsequently bought it and sold it back to us in 2011.

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The two-storey dining room was created from an area of the Long Barn where apple carts used to be stored. In the background is the staircase, created by Hugo and his father to replace an exterior one to access the room upstairs. It is almost entirely made from reclaimed timber



Hugo and Miranda



Leaving the house in 2005 was a tremendous wrench for us all. But all were very brave about it. We were faced with school fees for our large family. We needed more money than an auctioneer's salary could provide, so we needed to raise some capital. We had reluctantly sold off our walled garden, saddened that in the years since we moved in 15 houses had been built around us, removing a lot of privacy and our rural views – although providing us with some wonderful friends.

We found a large 18th century brick house in a village three miles away and worked hard on it for the six years we were there, replacing some of the ugly 1980s uPVC windows and cement-based renders that were causing structural damage and damp.

By the time we got the chance to buy Maltravers Manor back in 2011 part of it had been reroofed, and we had more capital. We also managed to turn the part of the house beyond the screens passage into a separate unit and that is now let.

It was so good to be back. The two of us walked together into the large walled garden formed by the two ranges of the house set at right angles and the outbuildings and old walls. It was even more of a joy to return than to buy it in the first place – and that feeling has only grown since.

The other thing it was wonderful to have back in our possession was the AGA given to us by a great aunt as a wedding present.

Nowadays, somewhat miraculously, some of the 15 houses built round the old manor house between 1987 and 2005 seemed to have mellowed. Now we are back here for good we find we see little of them for much of the year.

As the children have gradually left home one by one we have been able to carry out more major tasks, including the complete redesign of the garden. We have also been able to find out far more about the house. We have learned about the Maltravers family that came over with William the Conqueror and had land holdings in a number of parts of this country, and we have been able to find out about the community of priests who lived on this site and the will of Agnes de Maltravers in 1383 that employed the services of chantry priests in the church at Lychett Maltravers in Dorset to sing masses for the souls of members of the family.

We have found out that Belgian refugees lived in this house during the First World War, and have even found an ancestor on the Marsh side who married into the Maltravers family in the 15th century.

In the course of all of this we have found plenty of tubs (usually of lime putty!) to thump on behalf of old houses, notably that engineering solutions to vernacular building problems (plastic windows are a classic case in point) are anathema to old buildings. One major uPVC window manufacturer recently had the temerity to boast that its new windows were now replacing the ones they had installed 25 years ago. Most of our fully-functional wrought iron window casements with leaded lights date from the 18th century, and one dates back to circa 1600!

We have adhered firmly to the "repair rather than replace" philosophy, and dropped the word "immaculate" from our household vocabulary many years ago. If that should make the house appear rugged, and lived-in rather than pristine, then we make no apologies.

We have at all times used lime-based rather than hard cementitious materials and have stuck to the principle that old houses built with porous materials should be encouraged to "breathe."

If our visitors occasionally complain of draughts we point out that that people may not like being ventilated but old houses love it. No modern respiratory ailments caused by stuffy houses here! 🌿

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