



# ‘Safely anchored here for a few hundred more years’

by Clive Fewins

*How a determined couple won through with their long-awaited extension project*

**S**ixteen years after gaining planning permission to add a kitchen and dining extension to the Grade II listed 15th-century thatched cottage she bought in 2000, Pauline Cakebread has just completed the task.

She is well satisfied – as is her retired engineer partner, Richard Goodier. ‘I managed to find this lovely timber-framed cottage – part of a former farm complex – just where I wanted to be’, said Pauline, a management consultant. ‘The key thing was there were four bedrooms – enough for my three teenage children when they came home.’

‘It is in a glorious corner of a village here in South Oxfordshire famed for its timber-framed houses – just what I was looking for after my marriage broke up 18 years ago.’

‘At no stage did I feel I could go for a modern house. With my husband Stuart I had undertaken three major projects on our former house, one of which, the oak-framed kitchen, had won an award. So I felt I had the confidence to take on a project of this sort.’

The property was in need of a good overhaul, and Pauline had to spend a lot of money using an established (and very expensive) historic buildings specialist to turn it into the sort of lovely interior she has today.



The new entrance  
The door was made by  
Finn Syme and his team

It was a success. But she had a nagging doubt that what the architect she employed had planned for the new kitchen at the rear had somehow not got it entirely right. She decided to wait a while, so things came to a halt. ‘Basically I shut the back door on the job and decided to make do with the little rabbit warren in that part of the house for a little longer’, she said.

At that stage life changed dramatically. Richard came on the scene, and Pauline found she was spending a great deal of time in Yorkshire, where he lived at the time. She was also extremely busy setting up a business in Oxfordshire.

‘I also became chairman of the governors of a local independent girls’ school which also took up a huge amount of time’, she said. ‘Then in 2006 my mother died and there was much to do sorting out her estate. We also

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The house  
from the front

  
The finished  
extension seen  
from the side

  
The finished extension:  
Pauline and Richard are  
delighted that it has  
taken away very little  
land from the garden





Left: The framing team begins work on site

Right: The oak frame is assembled



The kitchen ceiling showing the carved beam, crown post and collars

had a complete rethatch, and that July there was a major flood in the village, from which we did not escape. The ramifications of all that went on for two years, and then in 2009 tragedy struck when my oldest child, Edward aged 24, died in a skiing accident. It was a long time until I felt in any way 'normal' again.'

By the time the financial crisis had levelled out and the consultancy company she now runs, based a mile away, was once again prospering, another couple of years had elapsed.

Ever since 2006, Pauline and Richard had found it hard to suppress the urge to get cracking again and do something about the rear of the house by turning the maze of small rooms, including the tiniest of kitchens, into one large kitchen/diner. But it needed to be right. And although they were happy with the original overall concept they were very anxious that the finished extension should not look like a conservatory just added onto the back. 'Really we always knew that it would be blending the new with the old that would prove the greatest challenge,' Pauline said.

The breakthrough came in 2014, when they met timber framer Finn Syme at a social gathering in the village. 'Finn is based in Bristol but was brought up in this village and he knew the house,' Pauline said. 'When he saw the drawings he agreed with us that the impression they gave was of a conservatory-style building that would not necessarily fit in well with the existing cottage, particularly because phase one had been a high quality job that produced a really lovely interior. We wanted phase two to be of the same standard, but to be a blend of traditional and modern materials used in an imaginative way.'

'It didn't take Finn long to convince Richard and myself that timber frame was the best solution for the new rear of the house. I was brought up in historic timber frame country in Cheshire, and, like many of the old houses in this village, the rest of this house is constructed in this way, notably the jettied frontage which dates from about 1450.'

'So timber frame it was. Finn came up with a solution to the main problem: getting rid of a

pillar in the middle of the new kitchen, which was apparently the only means of holding up the otherwise unsupported rear of the original house. He also explained how the oak framing, the way he proposed to do it, would perform this function and support the entire top section of the house.'

'All this meant, to our huge relief, that we could stick to the original plan and footprint and thus avoid having to apply for completely new planning permission and listed building consent.'

All Pauline and Richard needed to do now was check that they had enough money and agree with the conservation officer on the materials to be used. They also needed drawings from the structural engineer. The materials were considered entirely appropriate to both the house and the surroundings, and were approved.

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By the end of 2015 things were falling nicely into place, but disaster struck again. In January 2016 Richard had a stroke. He had not been too badly affected, but he was forced to retire from the consultancy company he had been running and was not well enough to project manage the rear extension work.

'I have good days and bad days,' he said. 'At first I thought I was OK but sometimes I just do not feel sufficiently 'on the ball''. Pauline, who stepped into the gap as project manager, said: 'It has been quite an achievement that Richard has been able to deal with so much disruption at all while recovering from a stroke.'

In 2017 they decided to go ahead and work started in July last year. The extension was completed this March 2018.

The steel supporting beams have been carefully concealed and the eye turns to the glorious oak frame – especially the crown post supporting the roof of handmade clay tiles and the hand-carved double ovolo main tie-beam, of which Finn is very proud. He and his small team worked well with local builder Keith O'Connor, who did all the structural work and the plumbing.

'On reflection the long time gap proved to be a good thing really,' Pauline said. 'It gave us time to think, plan and see other similar projects.'



The hall was remodelled 16 years ago. The solid curving rear staircase in the background was installed by previous owners in the 1940s



The sitting room. It was remodelled in the first phase of the work after Pauline bought the cottage

The master bedroom. It is in the oldest part of the house, which has been dated as mid-15th century



'Then there were the acts of serendipity, such as the visit of an old friend who is trained in design and very much into historic houses.

Over a cup of coffee she immediately agreed with our instinctive reluctance, despite previous advice to remove the chimney to provide more space for the new kitchen. She suggested we simply position the utility room the other side of it. This both gave us a more interesting shape for the kitchen and saved a lot of trouble and expense removing the chimney opening, which now forms a nice feature'

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The completed kitchen showing the carved oak main beam that supports the concealed steelwork beneath the floor of the bedroom above



The dining room inglenook Pauline and Richard



'The extension is certainly more spacious than we imagined it would be. It has opened up a huge space out of a warren of rooms, and taken up very little of the garden: we love it. Integrating the new with the old and producing something that is very individual and well-designed and features high quality craft-based work has proved a fascinating exercise.

'Of course there have been frustrating moments, like the late delivery of materials, having to dig far deeper under the kitchen floor than we had thought to install the underfloor heating, installing new foundations where there were none, and having just one living room for three months, with just a Baby Belling to cook over.

'It's been difficult at times, but we all have to play the hand we've been dealt in this life. Overall, there is something very reassuring about knowing that you have done a good

job on a building that has been around for nearly 600 years using mainly traditional materials. It gives us a great sense of satisfaction to know it is now safely anchored here for a few hundred more years.

'We are going to have some great family feasts in here! 🍷



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