

Me and my listed house

‘I just couldn’t face living in a little concrete bungalow in the village up the hill’

Veteran actress and animal conservationist Daphne Neville has lived in the converted Grade II listed stone-built mill in a steep tree-lined valley in Gloucestershire for 53 years and has every intention of staying there until she dies. Daphne, who trained at RADA in the 1950s, has also had a career as a television presenter. Since the 80s she has been a leading campaigner for otters in this country.

She has been in numerous theatre dramas, was Norah the barmaid in the Archers for a while, and in recent years had a small part in ITV’s hit 2013-17 drama ‘Broadchurch’. In November she will appear in the BBC lunchtime soap, ‘Doctors.’ Daphne talks here to *Clive Fewins*.

“Since my husband Martin died three-and-a-half years ago I have naturally thought about moving, especially since my 80th birthday in 2017. But I just couldn’t face living in a little concrete bungalow in the village up the hill.

This is a beautiful place and I am utterly in love with the valley. I have 30 acres plus a large lake and the wildlife pond Martin and I created. I am not dead yet, so I plod on.

I have a lot of support, plus the companionship of Rudi the otter. He had been abandoned and I acquired him when he was three weeks old so he is very much a pet. He and I teach children and older people about the importance of otters to our ecology in this country. He lives in a special enclosure with a stream running through it on the hillside at the rear of the mill and I feed him every two hours with frozen reject chicks from a hatchery, and also fish.



The lake from a distance

The two mills from the front



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We bought it all for £10,500 from a chap who had run out of money



Previously we had been in a run-down cottage in Clent, Worcestershire, and Martin and I moved in here in 1965. We had three small daughters aged 4½, 22 months and the third a baby at the breast.

In spite of our spending many many hours and a huge amount of money on it, parts of the mill are still somewhat dilapidated. It is, in fact two mills. The one we live in ceased to be a mill in the 17th century when the adjoining mill was built. That building is now a rental.

The older building is my home. It is quite small really and it was rather a squash when we had three daughters at home and later a younger adopted daughter. So quite often we used the other mill, once we had done a complete conversion job on it, as overspill and guest accommodation.

We bought it all for £10,500 from a chap who had run out of money. He lived here and wanted to convert it into a pub. He had built a large extension and had bought 300 tonnes of stone that filled the front garden. This was in anticipation of getting permission to build a second massive extension onto the front. It might well have been a very successful pub but it would have completely wrecked a beautiful building that is part of the industrial history of this amazing valley.

We managed to carve out three bedrooms and make it into a rugged but comfortable home for our daughters. But I would never describe it as 'comfortable' in winter: it is always so cold.

The girls grew up to love it. It is right in the valley bottom, quirky and remote, and access is down a narrow, steep wiggly lane. The old dried up Thames/Severn canal runs along the valley side and the property came with a mile-long stretch of it, which I still own. To reach the village up the hill you have to pass beneath the arches of the railway that runs from Swindon to Stroud and carries mainly local passenger traffic.

When we moved in during 1965 the only 'furniture' was a suit of armour by the fireplace in the living room. By the time we arrived here all the machinery had gone. Martin adored the place from the beginning. His new job was managing a factory just down the valley, so he was able to come home for lunch, which he loved.

Nobody seems to know how old the house is, but the adjacent mill that took over from it was built in the mid-17th century and served most of its time as a silk mill. We like to think

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The rented bedroom in the newer mill



The picture shows the 1960s extension and also the lean-to where Daphne likes to sit and work in the summer



The stone-tiled garden shelter

A view of the garden and valley side beyond



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This lovely beamed room in the original mill combines the roles of dining and sitting room. It is in a slight state of disarray because of recent treatment for ant infestation



that we saved the buildings. The two mills are part of the industrial history of this glorious valley, much of which used to be a hive of industry.

After all these years I am still captivated by the haunting magic of the surroundings in all the varying seasons. My bedroom is the most wonderful room in the world. It's like Nelsons cabin, with windows on three sides. Waking early on a glorious summer's morning and hearing the jays, the tree creeper and the woodpeckers is just magic. I also rather like hearing the passenger trains progressing down the valley. I feel they keep me in touch with reality. We also have the odd steam excursion going out of Worcester.

But I won't let anyone photograph upstairs: nowadays it's just full of junk.

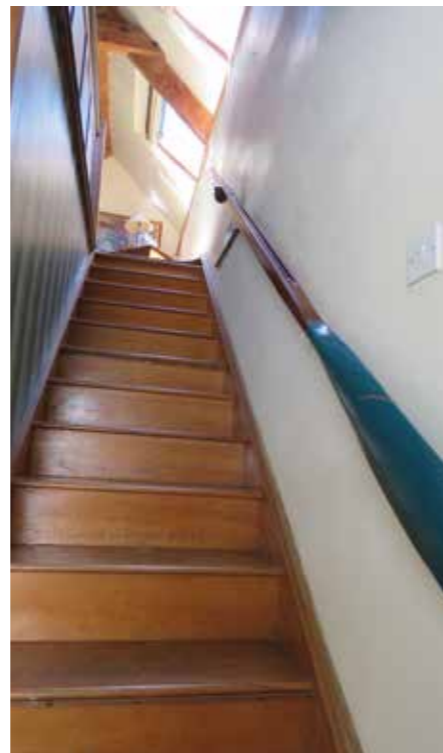
I only manage to carry on with a little help. I have a gardener who mows the lawns and keeps it tidy as far as possible. The flowers are all self-setters, they always were. The gardener

also tends to the sluices that keep the water flowing through the millrace. That is most important.

I spend a lot of time attending to Rudi and also taking him to promotional events for the two otter organisations I support. I am a patron of the Devon-based Wild Otter Trust and also work with the International Otter Survival Fund. At some of the summer shows I attend I sleep in a tent. Generally there is a special enclosure created for Rudi. Over the years I have had ten otters. They are gentle, loving, adorable creatures and the oldest aquatic mammal known to man. They are a litmus paper for clean rivers and if there is anything I care passionately about it is clean water and clean air.

It all started in 1980 when Martin and I – we were always animal lovers – were horrified by the government report that indicated that our rivers in this country were so polluted

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The mill Daphne lives in from the front. Part of the newer mill can just be seen on the left. The higher pitched section belongs to the 1960s extension



The staircase in the rented mill has a novel feature. Martin's oar from when he rowed when he was a student at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst has been converted into a handrail



Daphne displays this sign at the entrance to the mill at weekends in order to attract walkers so she can explain about her otter conservation work



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Daphne keeps some of her treasures in rather odd places. This set of antique plates occupies a corner of the space she calls 'the animal room'



A simple device that Daphne sells. It is fitted inside the front of a car and develops a special sound which warns off animals at speeds of upwards of 60km/h



that the native otters were just dying out. It resulted in the law being changed in 1991 and things have improved very greatly for the English otter since then. Even so 2,000 otters are killed on our roads every year. This usually happens at night when the two year-old otters have left mother and are seeking new territory. To find water they usually have to cross roads and that is when they get killed by vehicles.

I am currently promoting a small inexpensive device that develops a special sound which warns off animals at speeds of upwards of 60km/h and can be fitted easily to any make of car. It costs just a few pounds. I sent one to Michael Gove the other day.

So in recent years I have carried on with the otter work and taken the odd acting job. The house was also used quite a lot in the 1990s as a location, often for TV advertisements. Nowadays I am only really cast in drama parts for my wrinkles; but I am still open to offers!

The acting has often had to take second place to the family except when I worked in Wales. When I was in my early thirties I had a two year contract with Harlech Television. It was a twice weekly magazine programme



Daphne adopted Rudi at the age of three weeks. He is now 12



which I fronted together with my old friend Jan Leeming. When Jan took that over on her own I presented a daily childrens' programme called 'It's Time for me'. I used to read a story, showed animals and had a 'how to make' spot. My parents came here to look after the girls while this went on. But really Martin was always the breadwinner.

Maintaining the building has been more of a problem since Martin died. He was an immensely practical man – getting rid of the 300 tonnes of stone in the front garden when we came was entirely his job – and he knew how to get things fixed even if he was unable to do the fixing himself in the years before he died at the age of 86.

After his death from pancreatic cancer in April 2015 we kept his body here until he was buried. We put him in the shed in his coffin in his best gardening clothes surrounded by blossoms and kept cool by ice blocks and the stream running underneath. Fortunately it was very cold weather. We had his memorial stone cut by a leading Cotswold stone carver. It bore his family crest. We had mine cut at the same time, only missing out the last two digits!

I am hoping to have exactly the same treatment when I pop my clogs and to be buried beside him in the graveyard of the little church in the village up the hill. We were married 57 years." ❁

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