



Timber-framing brought to book

A woman who spent six years restoring a 16th century farmhouse has now written a book to help others. Clive Fewins reports.



Plastered panels
Paula did both these with the normal mix she uses for daub - local chalky clay, straw and water. She did the one with the Prince of Wales' feathers last year to mark an award of £1,000 towards further learning about traditional restoration techniques from Prince Charles' Craft Scholarship Scheme

Paula Harber was so captivated by six years of restoring a 16th century timber-framed thatched Suffolk farmhouse that she eventually decided to write a book about her experiences. The result is *You've Been Timber-Framed* by Paula Sunshine (her maiden name), a lively, 75-page paperback illustrated with masses of colour photographs and packed with good advice.

Soon after Paula and her husband, Barry, moved to the house in 1997 they established the Suffolk Timber Framers Group, a forum for owners of timber-framed houses. To their astonishment, it attracted 80 people and the group became a useful forum through which members swapped experiences and held more formal meetings to which they invited experts of various sorts to address them.

After several more hard years of work on the house, following carefully the restoration principles laid down by SPAB, Paula became a teacher herself. She now runs bi-monthly courses for owners of timber framed houses under the name of 'House Mouse'. People that come on them are able to see all she

and Barry have achieved at Hills Farm and learn about the techniques they have used.

In 2002 Paula was one of the first to receive a £1,000 award from the Prince of Wales' Craft Scholarship Scheme, which was presented to her by His Royal Highness. The money was spent on learning more about lime plastering and daub work so she could develop the courses.

'Old thatched timber framed houses are wonderful, but they are fragile,' said Paula. 'In these affluent days owners often throw money at them so that over-renovation can become a serious problem. By sealing everything up with materials that were never intended for use in these old houses it is all too easy to accelerate the rate of decay and deterioration.'

This is exactly what had happened at the Harbers' house. The previous owners had carried out the sort of 'improvements' that had concealed whole areas of the historic fabric behind layers of plasterboard, gypsum and mastic.

When Paula and Barry arrived, the house, to all outward appearances, had been quite well maintained.



Kitchen floor, laid with a number of reclaimed local bricks

There was a wealth of massive internal posts and beams showing, and the combed wheat reed thatch needed little attention apart from a new ridge, by thatcher John James. So they had no reason to believe the cement render that covered all the outside walls had done anything but protect the historic frame.

The reality, of course, is that a render of this sort can cause so much damage that you can remove it and find the interior studs have completely rotted away.

Paula began a programme of meticulous stripping back, taking great care not to damage carpenters' marks and other historic markings.

Below: Filling the gaps
Paula and Barry have left all the historic daub in the inside walls and replaced it where necessary. Paula went on a two-day course organised by Essex County Council, and now teaches wattle and daub work through the Suffolk Timber Framers Group

Below right:
Paula and Barry's bedroom

Her advice for this process came from traditional building expert Philip Poels at nearby Anglia Limes in Sudbury and his colleague, Rory Summerling, who runs a sister company called Strippers.

The next stage was to find out how to fill all the gaps they had exposed. To help with this, Paula went on a two-day wattle and daub course organised by Essex County Council, and developed a passion for these historic materials that she is convinced will remain with her until her dying day. 'Wattle and daub is one of the oldest building materials known to man, and still one of the best, especially for the environment,' she said. 'It is so easy to make - I just use the local chalky clay soil, straw, and water.'

The next task was to have a good look under the kitchen floor, which seemed to be the cause of a lot of the smell, and remove the clay floor bricks that had been attached to a cement screed under-

neath. They were able to save enough to lay them in sand on top of the underfloor heating in the extension. Having removed the cement screed, they re-tiled the kitchen floor with reclaimed local floor bricks.

In this way Paula and Barry were able to get at the massive timber sole plates in the kitchen. They discovered there was a lot of rot, but the situation was not irredeemable: indeed, not all of them have been repaired to this day and parts of them are still drying out, having been covered up with an assortment of materials for many years.

When the time came to build a single-storey extension on the site of an old glazed timber porch at the rear Paula and Barry were determined to avoid cementitious materials. It has foundations of hydraulic lime and sand, an oak frame, inner walls of daub, and a roof of a hand-made clay tiles. Inside, the daub has a splendidly undulating surface and the straw is quite visible, as in the rest of the house.

The final part of the Harbers' programme will be to remove the pebbledashed cement render from the exterior. 'From preliminary investigations we are quite hopeful that we can save most of the historic timbers beneath,' said Barry. 'This is because whoever replaced the original lime render with cement in the Fifties or Sixties used the original battens. There is, therefore, a gap between the render and the frame, and, of course, we know that most of the studs on the inside are in reasonable condition. Again, we shall take our time over the task and do a little at a time.' ♦

You've Been Timber-Framed is available from House Mouse, Hills Farm, Bury Road, Lawshall, Bury St Edmunds IP29 4PJ. The price is £12.99, including postage and packing

John James, thatcher: 01284 827136
Anglia Limes: 01787 313974
Strippers: 01787 371524
Essex County Council Building Conservation courses: 01245 437672

