

Crazy, eccentric and ...wonderful!

BY CLIVE FEWINS



The main roof section is bent like a brontosaurus's back.



When you approach Marc and Tia Swan's Listed Grade 2 house in a remote spot just inside England near Presteigne you wonder at first how it stands up.

From the outside the building looks almost hopelessly tumbledown, with crazily angled gable ends and a swathe of corrugated iron covering a large section of the roof.

However, if ever a rambling old farm cottage looked to have been faithfully restored this is it, right down to the leaded light windows and the carefully matched mortar in the new areas of stonework.

It is hardly surprising that when Marc bought the building in 1976 he renamed it the Crooked House.

But most surprising of all is the fact that rather than trying to

correct some of the odd angles he chose to add to them!

Despite the fact that some of the wildly out-of-true walls date back to the building's origins in the 16th century the most crazily-angled part of all - the western gable end - was built by Marc in 1986.

The heavily-angled window is built from pieces acquired by Marc over many years and contains non-matching panes of leaded lights

made by Tia. The heavy lean of the left-hand wall 'caused' by the enormous structural crack beneath the window vies for the title of the most bizarre feature in the house. The dovecote above followed two years later.

When Marc discovered the building the roof was falling in and sheep were grazing in the ground floor. "It had see-through walls, but I just had to buy it," says Mark. "I

didn't really have the £7,000 that it cost, together with the seven acres of rough grassland that go with it, but somehow I managed to find the money."

"My view is - if a building has a roof, don't pull it down. It might be worth more in four or five years' time. A builder by trade (after art college he first became an antique dealer) he undertook the restoration between other building contracts. It

The house from the front

was 14 years before the house was completely inhabitable. During this time Marc and Tia had to live without mains water, carrying all their water over from a tap in an outbuilding and heating on the range or an old boiler. They used the outside earth privy in the garden and visited friends when in need of a bath. They finally installed piped water and a Rayburn to provide hot water in 1990. ➡



Above: This room is the parlour. Here Tia generally served breakfast to B&B and other guests

Opposite page left: One room that is largely unchanged is the 18th-century kitchen. Nowadays Marc and Tia light the fire and relax in front of it when they have family gatherings or are entertaining guests.

Over the years - he is now in his mid-sixties - Marc has developed passionately held views on restoration. "Basically, I don't believe in over-restoration," he says. "My main interest is structural collapse. 'You could say that Crooked House has been not so much restored as organically re-grown. 'People have bought wonderful old timber-framed houses round here and immediately tried every possible means of straightening them up,' he says. "And even if some new owners prove a little more sensitive than this, planners and builders alike are keen to slot in uniform reproduction windows and raise door lintels to rule-book

heights. The result is that our historic building stock is being impoverished in the name of restoration."

From both inside and out it is almost impossible to believe the crazily-angled rear wing is not as old as the rest of the house, particularly because it is joined seamlessly to the 16th century core of the building. Downstairs the dairy, its ceiling of reused beams festooned with bunches of onions, herbs and garlic, is where Tia brews her large numbers of demijohns of wine and Marc keep his cider press.

Upstairs is what Marc and Tia call the 'pink sitting room', part of their private upstairs domain where

they spend some of their evenings in summer. Marc strides purposefully over to the wall opposite the fireplace and opens an apparently empty cupboard. He pulls on a cord and it opens a door that reveals a hinged flight of steps that descends, drawbridge-style, straight down into the garden.

On the same principle, in the dairy beneath, a trap door over the larder shelf provides direct access to the laying box of the chicken house. A pulley system operated from the same spot brings down the door of the chicken house and locks the birds in for the night.

These are just two of the many quirky features devised by Marc,



all supported by his able and willing wife. But perhaps the funniest involves no ropes and pulleys - just a set of hinges. The first time I walked through the present-day kitchen to the dairy I found I could not get back. I could hear Marc and Tia talking as she prepared tea and cake, but I tried both doors and found they led to cupboards.

Eventually I had to call out. The answer came back: "Look at the shelves!" The half-height shelf unit, which contains a variety of old tins that have been 'doctored' in order to stay in position - has a cunningly concealed latch beneath one of the shelves. The sides of the unit hide the edges of the door, and somehow

you don't think to look below, where a tea towel is casually draped to add to the disguise!

From every angle the exterior of the building is equally quirky, with the main roof section bent like a brontosaurus's back. Two downstairs windows at the southern 17th century end are so twisted sideways that they resemble rhombuses rather than rectangles. It is hardly an exaggeration to say there are no verticals or horizontals anywhere in the house.

Marc says he is constantly 'horrified' by the lack of imagination of builders who claim to be specialists in working on historic buildings. "The problem is that most



Top right: The door between the kitchen to the dairy. Guests do not always recognise it as a door - and have even greater difficulty finding out to open it!

Bottom right: The range here dates from the 19th century, but in fact this is the oldest fireplace in the house as it is in the section that was originally an open hall. Experts think this section of the house dates from about 1550

of these tradesmen are dominated by the spirit level," he says. "Old plaster panels are very rarely flat, but a modern plasterer will always seemingly want to produce a perfectly flat panel.

"Money has proved the ruination of far too many old houses. If you restore them too fast you can't get any bargains. Besides, if you take your time you always get a far better job in the end. I have always been short of money, and I have been working on this house, on and off, for over 30 years."

For the past 20 years Tia has helped Mark fill the house with what they like to call 'wonderful objects'. Some of the pieces of



Above the dairy is the pink sitting room. If they wish at any time to descent directly into the garden Mark opens an apparently empty cupboard. He pulls on a cord and it opens a door that reveals a hinged flight of steps that descends, drawbridge-style, straight down into the garden.



furniture are breathtaking. They have picked them up - often for a song - in a huge variety of different places, but they were rarely destined for a particular position in the house and often stored in one of the outbuildings until a place was found for them as the house gradually became fully habitable.

"I always believe in buying things you don't need," says Marc. "It usually turns out much cheaper that way."

Marc's latest project has been to build an annexe - a formerly derelict cowshed - which accommodates three, and is a self-catering holiday let. Details are given below.

Tia also does bed and breakfast from, time to time. It is advisable to contact her well in advance for details as he life is crowded. She who works regularly as a milliner, theatrical costumier, stained glass artist, and graphic designer. She describes herself as regularly "up to the gibles."

"We don't oversell our B&B services because we do it when it is convenient," Marc explains, with a wicked grin. "It's not everyone's cup of tea. Despite the fact that Tia provides wonderful feather beds when people come down to breakfast I sometimes ask them: 'Have you had a rotten night?'"

Left:
This is the green pantry - still used to the full, as the photo shows

Top right:
Marc designed this 'blue plaque' fixed to the front of The Granary holiday let

Bottom right:
Tia and Marc

If you decide you would like to go, it is also, of course, necessary to find the house. The track down to it is barely passable to an ordinary car in winter. I got lost en route - three times!

Contact details:

The Crooked House,
Brierley Hill, Willey, Presteigne LD8 2NA.
For B&B details please write.

For details of
The Granary holiday let visit
www.crookedhousegranary.co.uk