

When a plan comes good...

by Clive Fewins



Before the work
May Tree Cottage
ahead of the
extension to
the property



Delighted with
their new home
Bernard and Joyce
Martin

When Bernard and Joyce Martin approached their planning authority for permission to extend their 17th century Oxfordshire cottage, they were advised to avoid anything too grand. Instead, they achieved a fitting blend of old and new and are delighted with the end result...

The chances of Bernard Martin being able to extend the listed thatched cottage in Oxfordshire where he was brought up in the 1960s initially looked slim. When he consulted his local authority in the Vale of White Horse about the possibility of an extension to make it more accessible for his father – then aged 89 and living with Bernard and his wife Joyce in the cottage – he was told: “Don’t be too ambitious.”

When Bernard and his wife, Joyce, found a local architect with experience of extending cottages of this sort, the couple realised the form of extension most likely to be acceptable to the planners would be almost exactly the sort of building they had in mind.

The concept was for an extension at the rear built in a contemporary style, with the new and the old joined by a short single-storey passage.

“The planners wanted a contrast rather than a mix and match,” says Bernard, “and that suited us perfectly. That sort of scheme ticked all the boxes. We could use the land at the rear of the cottage far more effectively by building on it.

“At the same time as building the extension we could undertake a radical update of the old cottage and, perhaps most importantly of all, we could pull in a great deal of light. As the orientation of the new section is south/south-west this means most of it catches the sun from late morning to evening. This is a huge plus factor.

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▲
 Rooms with a view
 The property's
 delightful orchard

➡➡
 Space in which to
 relax The snug in
 May Tree Cottage

"The old cottage was proving very difficult for my father as his eyes were degenerating and he had trouble sleeping upstairs where there was no bathroom or WC. He was also finding all the door thresholds – the house was originally two farm labourer's cottages – increasingly difficult. A modern extension with a ground floor bedroom for my father was a perfect solution.

"It was a scheme that also suited the local planners because it meant minimal disturbance to the historic structure of the existing cottage, which was originally two and bears a datestone of 1677. It also meant that if the roof of the new-build were kept low – a key requirement – the extension would be virtually invisible from the front.

"A really contemporary look to the extension also appealed to Joyce and I, although the fact that the roofline had to be slightly lower than that of the original cottage gave architect Alan Drury a difficult job in gaining headroom for an en suite upstairs bedroom. In the end, however, the extension proved to be slightly larger than the cottage!"

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DESIGN CHALLENGES

Reusing the original kitchen and bathroom space – both were in a single-story rear section beneath a catslide roof – also produced a few design headaches. The overall challenge was to produce something visually exciting that contrasted totally with the original, yet at the same time formed a cohesive whole and stuck to the overriding principal of leaving the listed cottage unaltered.

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So inviting
The sitting room
in the original
cottage

The thatched cottage
was originally two and
has a datestone of
1677



Sadly Bernard's father died within a few months of the completion of the project in spring 2009.

Nevertheless in those few months he had time enough to enjoy sitting out on the patio in summer and also the additional light when indoors in the new addition. He also enjoyed the luxury of a downstairs bedroom and WC and not having to negotiate steps at the age of 92. "Joyce and I are quite convinced that the policy of extending in a contemporary style while retaining original listed property unaltered is a good one," Bernard adds. "We have gained the best of both worlds. We regard the new section as our 'summer' quarters while in winter, when there is so much less light around, we can retreat to the warmth of the snug and the stove."

Joyce says: "The extension did not have to have quite such a contemporary look as we have ended up with, but this was the style favoured by the architect and we happily went with it. It suited our requirements very well!"

While the building work was going on the Martins used the opportunity to strip out the inglenook fireplace in the snug and install a stove. At the same time they extended the height of the two chimneys to conform to required height of 1.8m height above the ridge. Bernard also carried out repairs and updates to the old building.

They had passive solar heating installed in the roof of the new section. Even in a poor summer like the one just past this provided all the hot water needed for two full months.

It fell to Bernard, a very capable handyman, to do much of the finishing-

off work. This included all the tiling and also carpentry work on the stairs and windowsills in the extension. Throughout the project Joyce continued to work running a subscription agency for online academic resources.

They enjoyed enormous good luck in that they had a house in nearby Abingdon in which they could live and look after Bernard's father during the build. The entire project took two years, double the time anticipated.

Because they were not living in the house, however, it meant that Bernard had quality time with his father who was in last years. "Father would not have been able to live in the cottage while all that was going on," Bernard says. "As it was, as a retired woodwork and handcraft teacher he was able to take an interest in the project and I often took him with me when I visited the site."

"The builders found the project quite demanding. Fortunately, I had given up work in 2007 so I could be on hand – and learning – much of the time. Being retired, I was also able to look after my father while Joyce continued to work."

"I am conscious that we shall at some stage become too old to live here and I would like to think I could mastermind any other future building project in my later years. I am in a far better position to do that now. For a start I built the garage largely myself. It is fully kitted out and has a useful storeroom upstairs. This is very handy because the style of the extension means there is very little storage space in the house."

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Period feature

One of the two original staircases in May Tree Cottage

Delightful space

Bernard and Joyce's new master bedroom



"I believe that if you are undertaking a project of this sort it helps to have a practical bent. Even if you don't have the time to do much of the work yourself you can learn. I really believe you get a better job if you supervise yourself. But that needs a certain amount of knowledge and confidence!

"In our case self-supervision was vital. We had a strict budget of £200,000 and had no choice but to accept the cheapest quote for the build. We could not have afforded to pay someone to supervise. Supervising yourself also means you get really immersed in the project. This way you are constantly mindful of small improvements that help to 'make' the job.

"A good example in our case was the use of reclaimed materials. I used elm I bought at a reclamation yard for the upstairs windowsills, and slate from our old bath for the outside windowsills

"We find the accommodation here very flexible. For example, any future owner could use the end room that was my father's bedroom and is now our study as a storeroom or – as originally intended – an additional bedroom."

Bernard and Joyce have also overcome any apprehensions about joining the old and new sections with a flat-roofed passage. "It is so short and cleverly-designed that people simply don't notice it," says Joyce.

Bernard adds: "Really it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. We had a lot of good fortune carrying out the project. We picked a very helpful architect and the project has doubled the size of our home. It is a course we very much recommend for people who find themselves in the position we were in at the time." 

