



Stuart commissioned local artist and murals specialist Peter Edwards to create a number of wallpaintings in odd corners of the house. He thought they would complement the irregular old plaster walls, which he has been keen to preserve

Me and my listed house

A NEW OCCASIONAL SERIES

Stuart Cakebread,
barrister, 60 talks to
Clive Fewins

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It really was a case of love at first sight. When you walk into the house it seems to cuddle you.

“**W**inston Churchill is reputed to have said that a day away from Chartwell was a day wasted.”

I often feel like that about this house. It is a complete fascination for me. After 29 years here I can't really contemplate living anywhere else.

We were living in London and when our son Edward was born we started scouting around in the home counties.

Eventually we settled on the Wantage area, which we had come to like.

We wanted an old property in a village, with as much of the original fabric in it as possible.

It also had to be a property we could put our stamp on, that we could live with and decorate – as we have done with colour washes and wallpaintings – in a manner that suits the building.

When we saw Manor Cottage in February 1986 we both knew immediately that it was what we were looking for. We loved it.

The historic buildings surveyor we employed was cautious. Although giving it the thumbs up structurally he said he thought we should be able to find something with more original fabric because Manor Cottage, which is listed Grade 2, had had some of the wallplates replaced.

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The hallway:
booklined and
atmospheric



What does that matter in a timber framed building, parts of which date from around 1500?

Despite its rather dilapidated appearance, unsatisfactory kitchen extension at the rear, and general draughtiness, we decided it offered all we needed. Twenty-nine years on I believe this to have been a good decision.

Why do I still love it so much? Let's start with the sitting room.

With its wonderful beamed ceiling and flaky old plastered walls, this room is so draughty that even the heat from the central heating system goes straight up the chimney.

All the advice we took indicated that unless we were to take drastic action using modern materials that would wreck the building, nothing could be done about this. We already knew all about the dangers of sealing up

rooms too tightly in old houses built from porous materials that need to breathe from the inside as well as the exterior.

Sadly about this time – the 1980s – many old houses were still unlisted and people often did just this. The result has been wide scale ruination of many lovely old buildings. This house was also unlisted at that time.

Perhaps in years to come much of this damage will be reversible when the properties fall into more enlightened ownership.

Anyway, neither the walls nor the roof at Manor Cottage have been ruined by excessive layers of modern insulation materials. My remedy, as it was with my wife in those days, remains the same: light a fire. It will help keep you warm, and assist the house to function in the way it was designed to.

Nowadays I do this in all but the summer

 **Parts of the timber framed building are believed to date from around 1500**

months. It works, and I love it. So much so that if the children (now grown up) are here we often have a fire in the beamed dining room at the other end of the house at the same time. If there is no fire when my son Peter, 26, comes to stay, the first thing he does if the weather is at all cold is to light a fire.

Early on we also replaced the concrete floors in the hall and dining room with clay tiles. I think they still look pretty good. But not half as good as the original bricks in the sitting room, which sit on earth and have been there for hundreds of years! They look as if they have been well worn by many generations of feet walking over them. To have disturbed them would have been vandalism.

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Stuart enthuses about the beams in the downstairs rooms – especially the sitting room



The sitting room: Stuart loves this room for its flaky old walls and uneven tiled floor

Once we had established that the building had never been an open hall we opened up the roof to give us a sleeping platform for the twins that followed and an extra bedroom, where I could work if necessary.

But the most important alteration was to remove the wholly inadequate rear lean-to kitchen, which you had to step down into, and add a glazed dining/family room and a kitchen to the rear of that.

It has worked brilliantly. It has meant that when I have returned, often late, from court or my chambers in London, there has always been a warm space – even before I can light a fire!

I really believe that old timber framed houses like this work best if there is a well-designed fully insulated modern addition at the rear. Then, like me, you have the best of both worlds.

It would have been very foolish to try to carve out a modern kitchen from the old part of the house.

I just loved the beamed hall with its step-over threshold. And it would have lacked soul if we had attempted to create a kitchen by dividing either of the other downstairs rooms – the dining room or sitting room.

So we looked at what others in the same position had done, took the advice of the professionals and demolished the old lean-to kitchen and replaced it with what we have now. That was 1989/90.

We also installed a gas-fired Aga in the kitchen. That was 25 years ago and the occasions when it has let us down have been so few that I can remember them very well!

I really think it has been the rear addition that has made the house work so well, both in the days when the family was growing up, and now.

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Owl wallpainting by Peter Edwards

A view from the rear. Stuart says the rear extension both complements and contrasts with the old section of the house



The dining room: Together with the sitting room this is one of Stuart's favourites

The rear extension earned us an award from the Vale of White Horse District Council. It also provides a point of entry to the garden, where for 15 years I have been installing my narrow gauge steam garden railway.

With the sun beaming in at the rear (we face east) the room fulfils the role of conservatory, garden room, relaxing room, and also, occasionally, workspace for me. Because it is so light you are drawn into it in the summer, while in winter you are drawn into the warm womb old heart of the house – the sitting room and the dining room, both with their fires. In short, the rear extension both complements and contrasts with the old section of the house.

It is also rather useful that it enables the kitchen to have a direct point of access to the dining room, making the ground floor very convenient to live in.

When we carried out the major work I think that, on the whole, we got it right. Apart from the bookshelves which line the hall walls we have replaced very little internally. There are one or two things we got wrong, including the windows. They are all going to need replacing before long.

We were also made to have a steel beam inserted beneath a rooflight when we created one of the upstairs rooms. I think this was unnecessary and it still wrinkles with me. This is because it is irreversible, unlike all the other changes that have been carried out while I have lived here.

For me the surroundings in which I have to live and function have always been very important. Being a great lover of old houses

I have, over the years, looked at others near here, with an eye to moving to another house of the same age and style, but perhaps a little bigger:

But I have never come near seeing anything that would drag me away from Manor Cottage. It is an exceptional house in an exceptional village. It can be bracing at times in the winter, but I am extremely fond of the surroundings and gain huge enjoyment from living in it.

For me the house really was a case of love at first sight. When you walk into it it seems to cuddle you. Wonderful! 🌸

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