



# The enterprising upcyclers

by Clive Fewins

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*Main image:* This view clearly shows the indent in the stone where the old shop had its window. Inside here is now the dining room

*Bottom left:* This view shows the state of the entrance area when Lynda and Paul bought the property

*Bottom right:* The house in 1915



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**L** ynda and Paul Woodrow were not even looking for a new house when they happened upon The Old Shop in a village close to the M40 south of Oxford.

They were seasoned house restorers, having spent seven years restoring a 300 year-old stone and brick semi-detached cottage in a nearby village, so felt they had the confidence to take on an old stone building that is thought to date from the sixteenth century. It was in such a dilapidated state that one of the outer walls was falling away and vegetation and rats were beginning to penetrate the building.

The Grade II listed property had not been lived in for two years, and before that a single lady had lived in it alone since the 1940s. However, it had its charms: many of them. It lay in the centre of a pretty stone village and had served as the village shop until the 1940s. This gave it a curious layout that had both advantages and disadvantages for Lynda and Paul. Whilst having been a shop it had a curious interior that made turning it into a satisfactory home a difficult task, this fact in itself meant it had frightened off many potential buyers less intrepid than themselves. The Woodrows, an imaginative pair if ever there was one, could see the possibilities and welcomed the challenge.

The state of the building meant that it had a price tag of around £300,000 (the figure they eventually paid for it) that, bearing in mind the size of the plot and its position, appealed to them. As it turned out, this was also the figure that they gained for their previous house.

“I think we were lucky because the building was so bad that a builder could not have turned profit on it as it was listed, so it would not be possible to demolish it and restart,” Paul said.

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He and Lynda felt they both had the ability and the experience to take on such a major task, particularly because they both have a variety of skills. Paul is a carpenter and joiner, but he can also plaster, and even proved himself capable of installing three cunningly concealed tie rods that pull the two side walls of the house in together. Lynda, a specialist interior decorator, is pretty useful at tiling and also made a splendid job of repointing the front exterior wall.

There were others areas of appeal. "The plot had space for a modern extension at the rear and room for a paint workshop which I need for experimenting on all sorts of finishes I use in my work," Lynda said.

It was on pub work that she perfected a woodgraining technique she uses on many old timber ceiling joists that have been painted and prove too difficult to strip.

The secret formula she has devised produces a finish that looks like old timber and is water-based, so meets the approval of local conservation officers and specialist conservation bodies because it does not fill in historic markings that may have been there for hundreds of years.

"It can actually help reveal ancient markings and graffiti that would not have been noticed

on the black beams that people usually inherit in old houses of this sort," Lynda said.

In the Woodrow's house Lynda's work adorns the beams in all the rooms. "Now they are all the same wood-grained finish. Previously they were black, white or mint-coloured!" she added.

"It is an incredibly effective technique, and saves hours of stripping. I have done it in pubs, restaurants, hotels and private houses all over the south of the country."

Paul said: "When we bought the house it was not so bad that we were unable to live in it, but every room needed major attention. It would have been very different if we had children and would have probably have involved moving out for a while.

"For seven years the dining room – the room that served as the shop – was our store for building materials. This was because we knew it could be dispensed with for a few years while we worked on the three bedrooms and kitchen."

When they eventually tackled the dining room the work was radical. The walls had been rendered with concrete because of a damp problem and the specialist

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**Top:** The inglenook in the dining room. When this room served as the shop this feature lay unused and bricked in. Lynda and Paul worked hard to remove two previous fireplaces and bring it back into use.

**Inset:** The dining room in the course of repair and renovation. The pile of stone fills the inglenook

**Above:** Inside the completed garden room today



This photo shows a cunningly created little corner where Lynda and Paul grow herbs and clean their vegetables before bringing it in through the adjoining rear door

conservation architect who worked with them and liaised with their local planning office advised them not to strip off the render for fear the structure might become unstable and even collapse in places.

Instead they were advised to tank this room and all the other downstairs rooms. "The process involved using a hard resin that we mixed in disposable boxes and slopped on," Paul said. "It was a very mucky process but we were told there was no other way of coping with the problem."

This meant an awful lot of cunning concealment work afterwards.

Despite the use of such an intrusive method on an old building a lot of original features, such as the top of a possible cruck blade at ground floor ceiling height in Paul's office, can still be seen. This is one of the reasons why some experts believe parts of the house date from the 1500s.

When they bought the house it was in such poor condition inside that many of the original timber features that dated from the shop days had to be scrapped. However there is one piece on show in the new garden room. It is a section of shelving from the shop – the only piece of remaining original shop fitting.



The kitchen as it is today. It lies beneath a catslide roof. Previously it was a storeroom for the shop before being used as a sitting room by the elderly lady who lived there for sixty years before the Woodrows bought the property. The floor of reclaimed quarry tiles was installed by Paul and Lynda

During the 11 years of the project the Woodrows have acquired all manner of reclaimed items, many of which have been cunningly altered to fulfil a new role in their home.

They also acquired many pieces from friends and a number of useful fixtures and fittings came from skips.

"We both encounter a lot of skips in building sites in the course of our work," Paul said. "I found the lovely mirror we have used in our new rear garden room about to be thrown into a skip. I realised immediately that it would suit the French look of the room perfectly.



When they arrived at the house Lynda and Paul found ash trees and ivy had penetrated the structure and set root inside. This photo shows work in progress on the room that was to become the kitchen

"Our other amazing find was the entire old quarry tile floor of our kitchen. The room is situated beneath the catslide and used to be a storeroom for the shop before being used as a sitting room by the elderly lady who lived here.

"Lynda spotted the tiles piled up outside an old shop that was undergoing refurbishment in a Downland village where she was working on a pub job. They had been cast out and were in need of a new home.

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The master bedroom. Paul made the bed and repaired the floor, which was very worm-eaten. It is now painted with a shellac primer and coated with an oil-based eggshell



Lynda and Paul outside their home

"We bought about five hundred of them at £1 each. They look entirely authentic in the new kitchen."

Lynda continued the story: "We put them down as we feel they would have looked originally, with very narrow gaps, and we used the most worn ones in places where the floor catches the heaviest traffic to try and give an authentic look. People say it looks as if they have always been there but in fact the room has only been functioning as a kitchen for seven years."

What is now the pantry sports a wire fronted food cupboard that came from a customer's home where it was about to be cast away. Needless to say they created just the right size of space to take it.

Their scullery/utility room was created from the original kitchen at the rear, and is also home to a number of reclaimed and upcycled items.

Upstairs the spare bedroom has enormous elm floorboards that the Woodrows have managed to keep, with a lot of repair work from Paul, while in the master bedroom the floorboards, which are pine and probably

19th century, have been painted with a shellac primer and then coated with an oil-based eggshell.

Probably the piece de resistance of the whole enterprise is the beautiful garden room that was finished two years ago. It is very French in style, tall windows with small recessed timber panels at the bottom and no massive timber beams supporting the roof.

"We call it 'Boulangier style', explained Lynda. "It is a much lighter timber construction than the many oak-framed garden buildings you find in this country. This has meant some very carefully concealed steelwork within the timber to achieve the required strength and steel rods, instead of oak beams, to brace the roof."

Lynda and Paul have a house in western France they bought two years before The Old Shop and it has inspired Paul to make shutters for all the rooms.

"In our bedroom when we open the shutters first thing on a winter's day we often find frost on the inside of the glass, so that proves to me that the heat we are using to keep the room warm is not escaping," Paul said. "We

find it an effective and traditional means of insulating the room as we are not allowed double glazing because the house is listed!"

The eleven year renovation is now nearly complete, with painting in progress on the spare bedroom. Bedroom three is Lynda's sewing room.

"It has all been a huge challenge but very satisfying, especially as we reckon we have done about 80 per cent of the work ourselves," Lynda said. 🌿

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