

Dedham Vale Society

Article: Living in a *Listing* Building

When my husband and I first viewed our home in April 1995 we knew very little about Listed Properties except that they tended to look very attractive and seemed to carry a premium with Estate Agents. Nearly nine years of Listed Building ownership later, however, we have become extremely well acquainted with the stringent rules and regulations laid down by the Planning Authorities.



The house pre-war

Five minutes after crossing the threshold on our very first viewing we decided we wanted to buy the house. We loved the majestic oak frame, inglenook fireplaces, uneven floors and sense of history - somehow the modern windows, concrete tiles, pebble-dashed walls, downstairs bathroom and walk-through bedrooms did not deter us. We both felt that these minor detractions could easily be overcome once we had saved up enough hard-earned cash. How naive we were!



The house in 1997 – concrete tiles and 'cottage' windows

One of the major attractions of the property was the farm buildings, constructed of clay lump, which we wanted to renovate and convert into offices for our business. Despite being within the “Curtilage of a Listed Building” our plans were approved by the Local Authority who were very keen to find alternative uses for redundant farm buildings. In addition we were careful to ensure that any changes were minor and the renovations were sympathetic. Windows and doorways, for example, remained roughly the same in both size and location, the brick plinth was re-pointed with lime mortar and the building was not extended.

Work was completed in spring 1996 and the following year we applied for permission to erect a double-storey building encompassing a garage with a first floor room for storage purposes. In keeping with traditional farm buildings the roof was pantiled, the exterior walls covered in weatherboard (cut to the appropriate thickness and painted “Sikkens” Black) and the staircase was located on the outside. Again the Planning Authorities offered no objections and this project was completed in autumn 1997. Meanwhile the house was starting to demand some attention. We wanted to improve the appearance of the property by careful restoration and the reintroducing of elements such as thatch, lime-rendering, mullioned windows, oak doors, oak floors, the odd sole plate and the restoration of the principle chimney and inglenooks to their former (no concrete and modern bricks) glory. There were also practical issues to take into consideration. The heating was inefficient due to an antiquated boiler and lack of any form of insulation, the bathroom was extremely damp and was situated downstairs, the bedrooms were all linked together, the floors in both the dining and sitting room were starting to crack, the windows were rotting ...the list went on and on.

We approached Rodney Black (of Geary and Black) and discussed our plan to both renovate the house and construct an extension to include upstairs bathrooms, bedrooms and a kitchen. Rodney produced an impressive plan which was in accordance with PPG15; paragraph C7 which states “modern extensions should not dominate the existing building in either scale, material or situation”. He designed an extension which, when coupled with the renovated house, produced a building where it was impossible to determine old from new. Unfortunately when we liaised with the Conservation Officer he was not at all impressed with our ideas due to the scale of the proposal, the fact that it linked the existing house on two storeys and that it did not appear to be a clearly defined modern addition to the property. New plans were then prepared which based the appearance of the extension on Victorian designs with brick walls, appropriate windows and a separate front door but with the new and the old unified under a single thatched roof. Despite the Parish Council approving the scheme the Conservation Officer recommended refusal stating (amongst other objections) PPG15, 3.3 “Listed Buildings ... can be robbed of their special interest by unsuitable alteration”. Most unusually the Planning Committee made a site visit but decided to follow the Conservation Officer’s guidance and rejected the plans. To be fair the Conservation Officer did confirm that he would be “sympathetic to the replacement of tiles by thatch and would consider the change of windows indicated in the proposal”.



Green oak, the extension under construction

So it was back to the drawing board once more as we were determined to build a two-storey extension. Meanwhile the Conservation Officer produced a sketch of a design which he would recommend for approval and this consisted of a ground floor corridor linking house to the extension. Bizarrely, as it seemed to us, the extension should be deliberately constructed to appear different to the main house. It was suggested that we cover the exterior in weatherboards, modern windows were acceptable and the roof should be either pantiles or peg tiles. As admirers of traditional construction and design we felt the overall result aesthetically ugly. A glimmer of hope came from the Chairperson of the Planning Committee who suggested an extension to the rear. An obvious choice except that a 15-foot wide field ditch was situated within 5 feet of the back wall. Undeterred Rodney produced a new three-storey timber frame construction (i.e. green oak). The design was stunning and we felt optimistic when we proceeded with the Planning Application. The Parish Council offered no objections, the Conservation Officer recommended refusal but the Planning Committee approved. Champagne followed!.

Construction of the extension began in spring 2000 and was completed by summer 2001. The renovation to the original house began in spring 2003 and should be completed by spring 2004. The construction has been fairly straightforward but we discovered a practical problem with the two door-ways linking the extension and house on the second floor. We were not permitted to cut through the tie-beam so the doorways were restricted in height to below four feet. It became apparent that as the children grew older they would either suffer brain damage from repeatedly hitting the tie-beam or severe back problems from bending under it. We consulted a Structural Engineer who suggested how we might cut through part of the tie-beam to produce a doorway of an acceptable height and not damage the fabric of the building. Consequently Rodney produced a plan of a green oak structure bearing the stresses of the building whilst encompassing a door frame of normal height. The Conservation Officer recommended this for refusal but we went before the Planning Committee who approved (my back is extremely grateful).



The extension now completed across the field-ditch and to the rear of the old house

Only in autumn 2003 did we have our last issue with the Planning Authority in respect of the chimney which stood to the side of the original house and had probably been built in Victorian times when the lean-to had been constructed. It was of a utilitarian design and built of cheap red bricks which had crumbled in many places. We had discussed our desire to remove and rebuild the stack with a more ornate design (to be constructed of Bulmer bricks and lime mortar) with the Conservation Officer in 2001. However he was of the opinion that the chimney was an evolutionary feature of the house and was therefore of some importance and recommended the plans for refusal. Meanwhile we had obtained a Structural Engineer's report in 2002 which confirmed two things. Firstly the chimney was very badly eroded to the extent that it was possible to push a six inch pencil completely into the stack in many places which indicated that it was necessary to rebuild the chimney to achieve long term structural stability. Secondly, according to modern building regulations, it was significantly too high for its slender shape i.e. the design was inherently unsafe. We were even advised by our builders that the whole stack moved when leaned on! Eventually the Planning Authorities agreed and this final part of the building project was completed just before Christmas.



The main and older part of the house - almost complete

A thought about extensions.

It seems absurd that modern extensions are often not approved if they look like the original or are linked on two floors. Some of our most interesting and historic buildings from the past would not appear as they do today if this had been the case in the past. We are convinced that we were right in pressing for a construction which would stand for at least as many years as the old house itself which is why we favoured a green oak frame in keeping with the vernacular.

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