



To Buy or Not to Buy?

STORY: Sue Rawle

Nestled deep in the countryside, amongst the soft greenery of fern and meadow, the winding track drops down to a cobbled courtyard where a rose covered arch invites you to step into a delightful cottage garden. There in front of you is your dream home, a thatched cottage built of cob. You step through the ancient oak door that has welcomed generations onto cool flagstones and then the nightmare begins.....



ABOVE: A dream come true after a lot of hard work.

RIGHT: Modern paint on stonework waiting to be removed.

MThe interior walls are damp and crumbling, large patches of cob laid bare, lintels are rotten, windows almost falling out, and around the rear of the property, the end wall has a huge split in it and is beginning to part company with the rest of the building.

I expect you're thinking this is a far fetched story, yet it's so often too close to the truth as to make uncomfortable reading if you are currently thinking about buying an older property.

Please don't think we are trying to put you off from buying what could potentially be your dream home. What we are trying to say though is go in with your eyes wide open. Take along a traditional builder; don't be tempted to use one who only works in new build- working on cob and lime properties is a specialist subject best left to the people who know and work in the industry. Always, always get a survey done by a chartered surveyor with experience of historic property. You will also need to check whether the property is Listed, as this will have a bearing on what work can be done.

You can help yourself as well, to a certain

extent. Start by looking at the outside- has it been rendered in cement or lime mortar? The latter is good, the first needs remedying. Let's assume the worst and that the property has been rendered with cement, so there may be cracks, allowing water to get in, as well as hollow patches where the render has moved away from the cob.

Inside, it's likely there are going to be damp patches on the walls because cement, unlike lime mortar, tends to trap moisture in the wall. However, don't despair. The situation can be remedied by digging off all the cement render, repairing any structural damage to the cob, and then re-rendering with lime mortar.

If the interior walls have been plastered with pink plaster, painted with modern emulsions, or wallpapered, (a favourite in many old houses as it hides a multitude of sins), there will probably be obvious signs of mildew or damp. The wallpaper may have come away from the wall, the paintwork peeling or flaking, but by removing the offending 'modern' materials and re-plastering with lime mortar, the problem can be overcome.

Lintels above doors and windows are



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ABOVE: Beams may need replacing.



ABOVE: Note mildew on wall-stonework has been painted with modern paint.

often affected by walls being covered in the wrong type of render, causing them to rot out. The same goes for beams, so don't be afraid to really look as closely as possible for any potential problems. Whilst you are looking upwards, venture into the attic, check out the roof trusses and the state of the roof itself- missing slates or thatch will have allowed water into the property and will need to be sorted before any restoration work begins. Same rules apply to the floor of course; keep an eye out for rotten timber-often a damp, earthy smell is an indication that there could be wood rot, dry rot or wet rot. This is where it can be very helpful to have an expert on hand to talk through the problems and take advice on the best way to remedy the situation.

In case you are thinking that these issues only arise in cottages and houses that have been neglected for many years, here is a story that demonstrates the pitfalls of buying a modern barn conversion.

Only a few years ago, before the downward spiral of house prices, it seemed that any crumbling stone barn was ripe for conversion, in order to meet the demands of a marketplace that was gobbling up everything and anything it could get its hands on. Corners were cut as speed was of the essence. Yet the barn conversion I am



referring to appeared on the surface to be different. Tastefully done, with attention to detail, it looked very inviting. Yet here we are, a few years down the road, and it's suffering from a major defect best described as severe lateral failure. Why? because all the stonework was pointed with cement render and the interior walls were rendered with cement and pink plaster. The end wall is parting company with the main building and it is now the subject of a huge emergency restoration project before it goes beyond the point of no return and falls down.

ABOVE:
These doors have been handmade by our carpenter to replace the old doors which had seen better days.

BELOW:
The end result of using the right materials is worth the effort.

There is a solution but it's going to be time consuming and carry a considerable cost. Apart from major building work involving steel girders to hold the frame of the house together, all the cement has to be dug out from the stonework and re-pointed with lime mortar. Inside, the same applies to any stonework used as a feature, as well as all the cement and plaster having to be dug off and replaced with lime mortar, before being painted with breathable limewash. The end result will be worth waiting for because once remedied, there is no reason why a barn conversion like this won't still be standing in four hundred years time.

Leaky drainpipes and the inappropriate use of modern materials do more to damage a building than any other factor, so it's worth taking the time and doing the job properly. If your DIY skills only extend to the odd weekend, then you may want to think long and hard before taking on an older property and trying to do the work yourself. How to plaster with lime mortar can be learnt in a day, but the knowledge that goes with it takes years to accumulate.

So many of us dream about owning a traditional cottage in the country, but whether the story has a happy ending will be down to you, and how you attempt to restore the property. Our advice is to hold the dream but leave the rose tinted glasses at the door.

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ABOVE:

Undertaking renovation of a barn is not for the feint hearted.

CENTRE:

Renovating a barn roof.

BELOW:

Barn conversion undertaken with correct materials of lime mortar



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