

Saved by Seventies squatters

Gorgeous colours are restored to a silk weaver's London home. By **Jane Hughes**

HOUSE OF THE WEEK

You can still make out a little piece of graffiti at 5 Elder Street, a Grade II listed house in Spitalfields, East London.

Etched into the leaded glass of an upstairs window is the scrawl of a Huguenot silk weaver: a moment from the mid-18th century frozen in time. Such vivid remnants of the taste and lifestyle of the weavers who once inhabited this Georgian terraced house are preserved throughout its uneven rooms.

It is these treasures and idiosyncrasies, together with the knowledge of how near it all came to being lost, which make the house so precious to its owners, Robin and Christine Whaite.

No 5 is one of only two in London (the other is next door at No 7) still identifiable as having been designed for Huguenot silk weavers: the French Protestants who fled religious persecution on the Continent.

When it was built in 1725, the main weaving chamber occupied the second floor, with space for another loom in the garret above.

"Nothing is exactly straight," says Christine Whaite. "The slope in the floor means that when we have parties, all the guests end up in one corner — particularly after a few drinks."

Her husband points out the curved glass in the door of the china cabinet, which is recessed into the dining room wall: "The glass was cut from a bell shape, blown in the days before flat panes."

"Even the original shutters are here but each one is different. Some have ventilation holes for candle smoke while others have small sections that can be folded back to let in light."

The house has just come on to the market at £550,000 as the Whitites prepare to move to a slightly bigger property just down the road. But their fondness for No 5 is sharpened by knowing how perilously close it came to being demolished.

In 1977, demolition men had knocked a great hole through the roof before they were stopped in their tracks by a band of radical protesters who were squatting in the house.

This group of architects, writers and artists, including *One Foot in the Past* presenter Dan Cruickshank, were the founders of the Spitalfields Historic Buildings Trust. The group's direct action bought them enough time to acquire No 5 and No 7, ending the wave of demolition that had already destroyed many of the area's listed buildings.

When the trust began conservation work, its members were amazed to discover the original

leaded weaving window which had been boarded up on the second floor of No 5. Some of the tiny panes of glass were still intact and a few of them were etched with illegible words cut by the weavers themselves.

During its reconstruction, the house — which had initially consisted of a single room on each storey — was extended on the ground and first floors.

From the rear garden, there is a wonderful cascade of stepped roofs over the separate rooms spreading downwards and outwards from the tiny garret perched on the top of the house.

Robin Whaite bought the house from the trust in 1980 for £60,000. Once it had been made structurally sound, he then got to work on the interior.

The broad wooden floorboards and the staircase, which spirals from basement to garret at the side of the house, were sanded to a smooth finish.

The windows in the thick basement walls were unbricked and the room was turned into a spacious kitchen with solid maple Woodstock units and terracotta floor tiles. An Aga replaced the crumbling Victorian stove in the fireplace and the adjacent utility room became a large storage area.

Much of the original pine paneling in the living rooms was intact and, together with Christine, who joined him in the house in 1984, Robin set about decorating in a style that he hoped would be sympathetic to the strong tones favoured by the Huguenots.

The ground-floor dining room, with its crimson window seats and candelabrum above the table, was painted dark green. When the Whitites discovered tiny bits of gold leaf as they stripped the cornicing, they decided to extend the pattern round the room.

"This was quite probably what the Huguenots did to highlight the cornicing and it catches the candlelight really beautifully," says Christine.

Since the Huguenots did not have mantelpieces, the Whitites painted the fireplace surround to give a simple marbled effect. Indeed, their success in recreating the feel of the period made the room a suitable setting for scenes from the BBC period drama, *A Respectable Trade*, about slavery.

A pair of double doors leads into the piano room, painted sage green, which has an angled fireplace in one corner and looks out over the paved east-facing garden. This is shared with the neighbours



The view past the stairs through to the East-facing garden

JULIAN HARRAP



No. 5's demolition in 1977 was halted by conservationists

at No 7. Dominated by a mulberry tree, its high walls are draped in roses, clematis and wistaria.

The Whitites chose a vibrant duck-egg blue for the first-floor sitting room and were astounded when they stripped the panelled walls and found that this was almost identical to the original Huguenot colour.

The room is decorated with framed antique Spitalfields silks which could conceivably have been woven in the house itself but had, ironically, found their way across the Atlantic and were picked up by a friend in a Manhattan market.

The rear room is now a bedroom, as are the two quiet and plainly furnished weaving chambers above. There is a small bathroom

on the second floor and a cloakroom on the first.

Today Spitalfields, only a few minutes' walk from Liverpool Street station and with a trendy Sunday market, is a sought-after location. But when Robin moved in, the area around Elder Street was little more than a ghost town, dominated by the noise and lights from the old fruit and vegetable market, which moved to Stratford in 1991.

"Hardly anybody lived here and my family and friends thought I was mad," he says. "Yet the house felt instantly warm and welcoming and, despite appearances, the area was quite safe."

Developed by Huguenot settlers, who were operating an estimated



The Whitites discovered the gold leaf when stripping the cornicing

'The sloping floor means guests all end up in a corner after a few drinks'

12,000 silk looms by the end of the 18th century, Spitalfields declined with the demise of hand-weaving, although it retained links with the textile and garment trade.

Sometimes its densely packed streets can seem claustrophobic. However, Christine, who is a trustee of the Friends of Christ Church Spitalfields Restoration Trust, says that new tree-planting schemes and restoration work on the local church are helping to gentrify the area.

"We even have our own wren in the garden," she says.

● 5 Elder Street, with three/four bedrooms, is on the market for £550,000 freehold through Currell Residential (Islington) on 020-7226 4200

