

You've found the lovely old house of your dreams, but rushing in to recreate the past

By Jane Hughes

Sunday morning and we are peering into a bucket trying to get to grips with the mysteries of making limewash. With Delia-like simplicity, conservationist Alan Gardner adds a dollop of lime putty to water, mixes it to the consistency of single cream and finishes with a sprinkling of earth pigment for colour. Because limewash allows old walls to breathe, he tells us, it is still the best protective finish for historic houses.

I'm on a weekend course run by the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) to help homeowners repair the old house of their dreams. If you do this course in the countryside, you get to dash around in protective goggles splashing limewash over rustic old walls. But because we're in a sedate Georgian square in Central London, our own efforts are more restricted.

In fact, most of the action takes place in the lecture room of the Art Workers Guild, where portraits of past master craftsmen look down on us as we learn that rushing into an old house and trying to recreate the past is not a good idea.

The SPAB recommends doing what you have to do but no more. This isn't about living by candlelight, insists secretary Philip Venning, but sometimes people spend too much money on the wrong thing. Far better to stave off decay by 'daily' care - making sure your guttering is cleaned out and there are no plants in your downpipes.

'Old houses are supposed to be baggy and saggy

Restoration without the drama

and uneven,' he says. 'Start interfering with the structure and you change the stresses of the building and risk destabilising it. A sandblaster can destroy subtle signs of ageing in minutes. And, after all, weren't the quirks and foibles what attracted you to the house in the first place?'

William Morris, who founded the SPAB in 1877,

certainly thought so. Alarmed at the way Victorians were trying to over-restore buildings, he wanted to promote an approach of repair rather than replace. And the consensus among SPAB experts is 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it - you could be doing more harm than good'.

Those on the course - doctors and architects, travel agents, even an archaeologist - have come with stories of horrors inflicted by previous owners and lots of questions about how to care for their properties now.

Typical are Andrea and Alex Kent, who wanted to know whether the modern masonry paint on their 17th Century thatched cottage near Hungerford was causing the walls to crumble. 'We've got damp problems and, from what people here say, it sounds like the impervious paint on the walls is trapping water,' says Andrea, 30, an IT worker. 'We need to learn what is best for our house rather than have modern builders and damp-proofers tell us what to do.'

Self-declared 'novices' Gerry and Joyce Acher have brought photographs of the Jacobean timber-frame town house with Queen Anne wing they have just bought in Cobham, Surrey. 'There's a lot of damp, but we were very excited to discover a 15th Century chimney flue in the Seventies kitchen we're about to take out,' says Joyce.

Meanwhile, I have already been amazed at how the SPAB policy of gentle repair can transform a building, having visited the Norfolk farmhouse of Steve and Jane Mackinder, which they have nurtured back from a damp, dark building to a picture of glowing vitality.

I'm one of several on the course who doesn't yet live in an ancient building, but I'm still picking up helpful hints about my late Victorian flat that will help me hold my own with the builders.

Structural engineer Robert Bowles, for instance, tells us how important it is to look for evidence of recent change, and also to think through the consequences of any change you want to make. Better to live in your house and understand how it works before you start hacking through structural beams.

This is music to the ears of Joseph Highham, a 29-year-old computer consultant who moved into a mid-17th Century house in Saffron Walden, Essex, with his wife Catherine and baby daughter, Olive, six months ago.

'My wife has been very influenced by television programmes like Home Front



STIR CRAZY: Alan Gardner shows Jane Hughes how to mix the perfect limewash on a SPAB course

and wants to get on and do everything straight away, but I now feel reassured that it's better to take our time,' he says.

For people like Joseph and the Kents, understanding the differences between old and modern buildings is crucial if they are to avoid wasting money on inappropriate or harmful work.

Old houses, we learn, were designed to breathe, hence the importance of lime-based mortars and finishes which allow moisture to pass through them.

Try patching up an old building with a material like concrete, which can trap water, and you could be heading for trouble.

Trapped moisture also migrates towards timber, so the message is: solve your water problem first. (After hearing this, the Achers traced the damp that had rotted their Queen Anne panelling back to a gutter that had been leaking for years.)

By the end of the course, many people are displaying an almost crusader like zeal to go out and protect all old buildings from the pitfalls of modern life.

And, while I know the SPAB would hate me to panic, I am gripped by a sudden urgency to sort out my sinking patio and leaky guttering before the rot sets in.

● For more information contact the SPAB on 020 7377 1644, or at www.spab.org.uk. A free technical advice line is open on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday mornings on 020 7456 0916.

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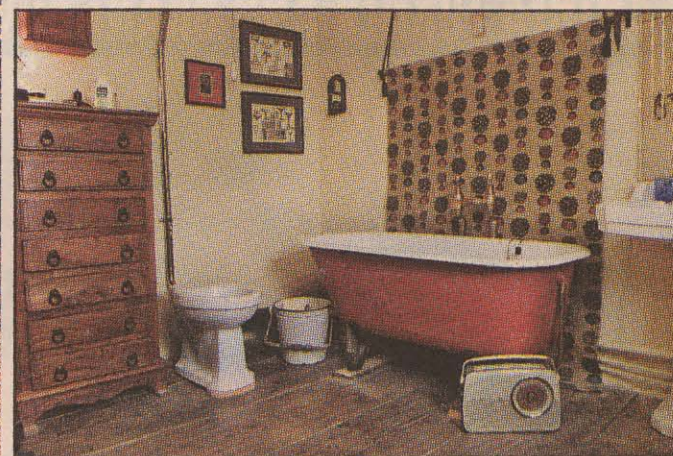
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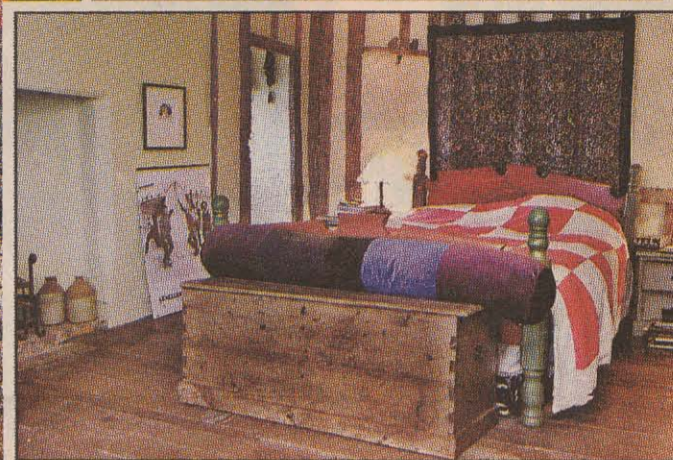
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REASON HOMES

with modern techniques might do your ancient building more harm than good...



PAST PERFECT: Steve and Jane Mackinder, left, with daughter Sarah, restored their crumbling listed building to a comfortable home full of character



GENTLY DID IT WITH A FARMHOUSE

Steve and Jane Mackinder were delighted when they won a sealed bid to buy the run-down 16th Century Norfolk farmhouse, in the village of Denver, that Steve had coveted since boyhood.

'I grew up nearby and had always liked this house,' says Steve, an agricultural sales manager. 'But it was very neglected - the weight of the roof was pushing the walls outwards, it was mottled with damp and we could hear deathwatch beetles in the timber.'

The Mackinders bought the Grade II listed building, which was on the local authority at risk register, outright. Yet lenders refused them a mortgage for repair work unless it was tied to

modern techniques like damp-proofing and chemical timber treatment. Having been on a SPAB course, Steve, 44, was convinced this was a waste of money and could make things worse in the long term.

Eventually, the Mackinders found a sympathetic lender in the Midland Bank. Five years later, their cosy home is a successful embodiment of the SPAB's policy of gentle repair. The house is now free of damp, the timber infestations which thrived in the moist air have gone - and so has Steve's asthma. 'We worked hard to make the house more airy because ventilation is the key to getting rid of damp,' says Steve.

'On the SPAB course I learnt how few major changes we needed to make. It has saved us an awful lot of money and helped us protect the house for a long time to come.'

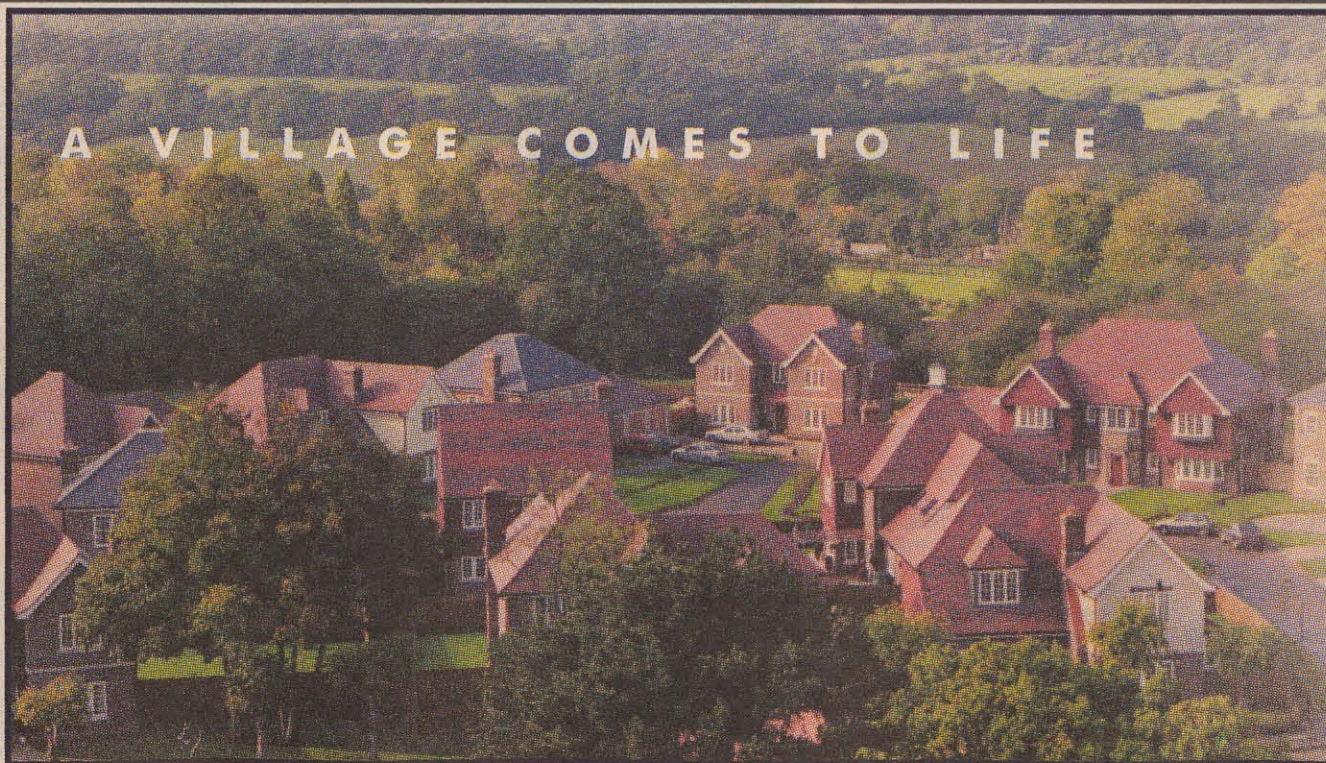
An early job was to replace the archaic and dangerous wiring and introduce modern plumbing. The broken timbers in the pantile roof have also been levered back into position and stabilised with metal fish plates.

When the Mackinders unblocked the rafters they discovered a Jacobean oak staircase and also uncovered a huge hearth in the living room. 'It's a peaceful and comfortable house to live in,' says Jane, 'and there's always something new for us to do.'



TREASURE STOVE: Steve and Jane uncovered a huge hearth in the living room, above, and a Jacobean staircase behind rafters

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