

Evicting the Spiders



Richard Barr on what to do with a derelict barn



For many years it was a den for the children who had created an upstairs room by spreading planks over the ancient joists in the roof. They accessed it via a rickety ladder – and would disappear there for hours.

Beneath them it was a repository for the things past their usefulness but which you do not (yet) want to throw out – at least not until the dampness has caused them to decay into pulp so that the only way to go is into the skip.

It is a long low thatched flint barn and was part of the house and land acquired in the early 90s for a member of the family who is disabled. She was a child when it was bought. Now she is in her 20s. When the bankers started to do silly things with worthless securities and her trust fund started to wobble, the trustees authorised the conversion of the barn – into holiday accommodation.

It seemed a daunting task. The outside was riddled with cracks. A gable end wall looked as though it was going to collapse. The thatch looked sad. Plants flourished INSIDE the building. It was difficult to visualise it as somewhere comfortable for people to stay. The previous owner had made a start but abandoned it.

A local draftsman prepared some plans – which we then changed – then changed some more. Originally the intention was to have split accommodation – at one end for a carer's flatlet and at the other, space to let to holiday makers. But even though the barn appears to be large (dimensions 70 feet by 25 feet) its walls are not very high, which means that all upstairs rooms are in the roof space. With the original plan,

everything would have been cramped. In the end we settled for spaciousness and comfort and just three bedrooms – two upstairs and one downstairs.

Then one day it started to happen. The builders (a local family firm) arrived in force with plant and machinery and set to work. Everything had to be in a set order – drains and services going in first, then the ground work inside: many tons of concrete were poured in to create the floor. Next came the downstairs walls – all made of concrete blocks. The original joists had to be strengthened upstairs and the builders developed strong muscles as they manhandled (I should say 'people handled' as one of them was a woman) huge girders into position.

Foundations were laid for the only new building work – a large porch/sun room. As the walls went up, a large hole had to be cut in the roof to make way for roof to the extension.

At the gable end of the building a rusting metal beam had to be dug out of the wall, then careful stitching had to be done to strengthen it. The cracks started to disappear.

At about this time our good friend Richard the thatcher arrived. I say 'good friend' because years earlier he had re-thatched the main house – a process that took many months, partly because he had to help replace some timbers that had been chomped

away by our not so friendly death watch beetles. We got to know him pretty well – and he even came to our wedding.

Thatching is a fascinating craft. Thatchers transform what look like stooks of reed into solid waterproof roof coverings and at the same time create ornate ridges and patterns. Gradually Richard worked his magic, to achieve a fine finish.

Back inside there was that delicious smell of cut pine as the partitions went up for the first floor accommodation and the stairs went in. A large number of angry spiders had to be evicted in the process.

Slowly it all came together – first the plasterers, then the decorators, then the floor covering and finally the finished fully furnished building.

Because of our own involvement with mobility problems we made the barn as disabled friendly as possible, with a ramp from the patio to the front door and no steps anywhere on the ground floor. The bedroom downstairs has an adjustable bed and an ensuite wet room with handrails and supports. Even the stove in the living room has a remote control.

There were the inevitable setbacks and disasters. One day there was an almighty bang and a digger had gone through a mains electricity cable. Fortunately no one was hurt but it

set us back several hundred pounds and many cups of tea for the large team the electricity company sent out to join up the wires again. We also miscalculated the kitchen units, and had to install a very thin dishwasher because there was no room for a big one. We have also had a couple of floods – from leaking pipes.

The worst disaster came last year when we had guests in the barn. The electrical consumer unit caught fire, setting light to a built in wardrobe and the guests' clothes. It turned out that a batch of circuit breakers was defective – and known to cause fires. Unknown to us or our builders there had been a product recall. A word to the wise: if you have had electrical work done in the last three years, make sure that your circuit breakers are safe.

Despite all these things, the venture has proved a big success and already this year we are fully booked until autumn. Running a holiday business is a challenge. Life seems to be full of them. You have to be well organised. We also have to have a good system of keeping track of bookings. I suspect that two families arriving for the same week might not necessarily want to double up!

If I am not being asked to be a model, or a shepherd, or a ghost hunter (see past Places&Faces®) I am now having to be a Mr Mop who has a weekly battle with duvets and the spiders which insist that it is their barn not ours. But don't tell our guests. I don't want to bring on an attack of arachnophobia.

For a slide show of the renovation progress log on to: <http://theapplehousenorfolk.co.uk/#/slide-show/4546845410>