



Making the most of

history



People love a bit of antiquity in a holiday cottage, but not at the expense of modern creature comforts. Is it possible to provide the facilities customers expect while making the most of an old building and respecting its history?

Robert Hill of the Historic Building Advisory Service believes it is

You might not think of a 1930s seaside bungalow as an historical building, but it is: the term includes most structures built before about 1945. Until then, the basic form of building construction, both in materials and techniques, had not changed greatly for six or seven hundred years or more. Differences in the design or appearance of a building were due largely to the influences of location, materials and fashion.

Buildings were generally built to meet individual demands, such as being orientated to protect them from the prevailing weather, shaped to suit the employment of the occupier, forming part of an integrated working or defensive group, or simply to take advantage of a fine view. But sometimes developers also had a hand; in towns as varied as Bath and Newcastle they shaped terraces, streets or whole districts to satisfy a demand for housing that was fashionably stylish, but not necessarily well built.

Houses were used and considered in a very different way to how they are today. They were built without services that we now consider essential, such as central heating, electric lighting and power in all rooms, on-tap hot water, or even indoor sanitation. There was a clearly defined hierarchy in the form of house in which each strata or sector of society lived.

Old properties were not held in high regard. As people moved on and upwards their previous dwellings tended to go down in



user status, rather like second hand cars today.

Before the Second World War, if there was a demand for more housing it was met by building new houses. No-one saw a need to restore old properties, let alone convert a different type of building into a house. People lived in houses, farm buildings were used for agriculture and industrial buildings for making things.

Uncover the history in a holiday home

Knowledge may be power, but a little knowledge is also said to be a dangerous thing. How many people thinking about 'doing up' an old building really know enough about it to protect the historic property, and the built heritage, while enhancing its capital value and making the most of it as a good marketing tool?

Understanding the history of a property starts with knowing when it was built and what it was built for. Go on to ask: why was it built where it was? What is it built of? Who has owned it in the past? These may sound like the questions posed by a TV property

programme, but they are the elements that underpin real understanding.

This background historical information will often provide answers to questions such as:

- How much does its history enhance the property's value?
- Are there any planning or other constraints on the building?
- How can it be altered or adapted?
- How much work can be done to the property without spending more than it's worth?
- Will its value be devalued if certain work is undertaken?
- What style or theme of decoration is appropriate?
- What is the unique or best selling point for letting purposes?

Knowing the history of a property is usually an advantage, but it can become too much of a good thing if the site becomes a shrine to an idea of what it has been in the past. Then restoration can become pastiche, and devotion to detail can turn into obsession. This is often the result of having an incomplete and over-romanticised idea of what is being worked on. ➤

Opposite

uPVC windows and gates from a DIY store would not improve this house

Above

Where things like outside waste pipes are unavoidable, careful painting and decorative details like hanging baskets can minimise the impact



Holistic history

When exploring the history of a property, you need to look at the structure itself, not just documentary sources such as deeds and maps. A property is a complex integration of what it is now, what it has been, and all those who have had an involvement in its past.

Where the original deeds still exist, rather than the more modern synopsis form, they can sometimes show the entire lineage of the building's ownership. In the original deeds there may be maps showing the plot that is owned and how this may have changed over time.

Beyond this level of research, there are many places to go and people who can help. This can range from talking to previous owners, through local historical societies and groups, local library resource centres, to district and county archive offices.

An examination of the property itself can start with a careful visual inspection to reveal the order in which it was built and how its shape has been altered and adapted to suit the varying uses or requirements that the building has

had to fulfil. A well prepared scale plan of the building will usually be a big asset as it enables the development history of the structure to be traced.

When the evidence from the building itself is put together with historical research, it is often possible to see how changes have been made to the property. This could explain small details that appear in the documents for which there is otherwise no apparent evidence.

Harmony with the history

Knowing the history of a property can help when deciding what decoration and finishes to use within the building. The ideal is to stick to the form and type that would have been employed for that sort of building at a particular time. Unfortunately this often conflicts with modern ideas of what is an historical finish, where plaster is stripped from walls or extraneous 'beams' are added to suggest antiquity.

It was the use of a building that traditionally defined the internal and sometimes the external finishes as well. People have always tried to improve the status

of their homes to demonstrate their status within society. Often this led to attempts to ape the finishes of the houses of one's 'betters'.

Even in the smallest and most basic of cottages, walls without plaster would not have been countenanced as bare walls were only fit for the 'beasts of the field'. Wall plaster was as smooth as it could be, with no clumsy 'rustic finish', and with some form of skirting at the base. Floors were another marker of status, with the most important room having the best finish, such as timber boards in the 18th and 19th centuries. Ceilings in their turn developed with the fashions of the day, with unconcealed roof timbers becoming progressively less acceptable.

Industrial, agricultural and commercial buildings had their own forms and styles of internal finishes. Many of these were either dependent on or reflected the activities that were carried out within them. This could often result in a very distinctive form of decoration, although that was usually just the accepted finish, rather than planned decoration.

Above

Local materials and styles often allow buildings to fit harmoniously into their surroundings – this house is in Uffington in the Vale of the White Horse, Oxfordshire



Cottage Industry

Cottage Industry is our regular feature aimed at anyone who already rents out holiday cottages or villas, or is thinking of giving it a go. In coming issues we'll be aiming to give really useful information and advice, with profiles and case studies of successful ventures as well as explorations of common problems and mistakes.

External finishes have been equally fashion-dependent, with materials and styles coming and going. Substantial 17th century timber frame cottages sometimes had 19th century villa fronts in moulded stone applied, whilst 18th century houses were built of inferior materials such as cheap brick or rubble and then rendered and decorated to create the appearance of a building built of expensive dressed or decorative stone.

Historically, roof coverings have also been subject to changes in fashion and technology. Thatch gave way to long-lasting corrugated iron, while clay or stone tiles were replaced by Welsh slate.

By understanding the history and development of a building it is possible to finish and decorate so that the property reflects its developmental history. These are tangible aspects that can be brought out to enhance the real character, rather than one that is contrived and derived from imaginary images.

Changing history

Buildings have been changed and adapted by their owners and users throughout time to suit their changing requirements. It is that spontaneity and flexibility that created the wealth of the built heritage that we have around us today, and adaptation into holiday accommodation is just the latest link in that chain. Changes still have to be made to historical properties to keep them viable and vibrant in this time and beyond.

Modernising a property, with the installation of new services, such as internal sanitation, heating and so on, is in most cases an accepted piece of progress, much as installing a chimney in a 15th century house would have been. What needs to be considered is how it is done and the materials that are used. These should be appropriate for the age and type of building that is being worked on.

If more drastic changes are

made, such as adding an extension, then this should be undertaken in a good strong contemporary design and style that fits well with its parent property and surroundings. It should be something that reflects our current age, so that it will add to the lineal heritage of the property, rather than be a weak pastiche of an historical style.

Make history work for you

Successfully marketing a holiday home boils down to making it more appealing than the competition. One way of doing this is to make yours stand out with a real pedigree.

Over the last few years, various TV programmes have made a huge sector of the holidaying population aware of the built heritage. History has become an important tool when promoting a holiday home, rather than just an interesting afterthought. Stock phrases such as fisherman's cottage, old mill or 18th century rustic farmhouse are no longer enough.

By linking well researched and well presented history with a carefully considered conversion or restoration, where original finishes have been preserved or reinstated, it is possible to provide visitors with a glimpse of living within the historic environment. This turns an old property into a living heritage centre where intangible items, such as names and dates, become solid material that can be touched and appreciated.

Quality, as with all products, is the key to making this work successfully. Well-researched historical analysis of a site can save money by revealing what really is there and that can be brought out or developed rather than trying to create something that never existed.

Happy history ever after

As with all property development and investment, a little (good) initial background research can pay huge dividends.



An old building is not just a building. Get at least a basic understanding of:

- Its age
- Its former usage
- The form, type and style of construction.

When you do any work to the building, work with it and do not fight it. Remember you are dealing with part of the National Heritage and that you will be passing it on to the future. Be proud of what you have done to preserve the fabric of history, and tell people about it. Make effective use of the building's history as a marketing tool and by that means enhance its heritage status, if only in a minor way. HVC

Above

Even the satellite dish on this cottage in Whiteparish, near Salisbury, isn't too intrusive. A white one would have been a different story

Want to know more?

www.historicbuilding.co.uk is an e-based consultancy to assist and support anybody who lives, works in, owns or generally has an interest in a historic property and landscapes. It was formed by RICS Chartered Building Surveyor, Robert (Bob) Hill to provide comprehensive, independent advice about all aspects of the pre-1945 built heritage or environment, from Iron Age forts through to Art Deco flats. It is an all-encompassing advice service where all your questions will be answered, from building problems and techniques to the use of differing materials.

The consultancy covers the whole of the UK in terms of its web-based advice service, and England and Wales for legislative matters such as planning advice and building regulations. Primarily dealing with the British traditional built heritage, vernacular styles and historic buildings, the service also offers advice on conservation and restoration to areas where these have been taken, such as the Americas and Australasia. Annual subscription costs £55. For details on how to join, visit www.historicbuilding.co.uk