

LABOUR *of* LOVE

When a run down 17th-century property caught the eye of Chloe and Ben Davidson, they knew some tender loving care could transform it, but getting permission to do so proved an uphill battle

PHOTOS OLIVER BEAMISH WORDS TRACEY WILLIAMS



The Davidsons' small Buckinghamshire town is so evocative of the quintessential English way of life that it's no surprise to learn it once had a starring role in ITV's *Midsomer Murders*. And nestled among the half-timbered and Georgian properties that snake along the curving high street, their house, built in 1620, is filled with character; from chunky wooden beams to inglenook fireplaces, not to mention the charm that various incarnations from pub to shop has brought it.

The property's last public service was as a bookshop, with the open-plan ground floor stacked with shelf upon shelf of books, a 1950s extension in one corner, and an upstairs area that comprised the living accommodation. Bought by a developer who partially revamped it, the house had retired into private ownership before Chloe and Ben set their sights on it. "Ben was working in the town and realized how easy the commute was from London," explains Chloe. "We didn't search for a house; this caught our attention because it looked so forlorn."

Describing it as 'screaming out for love and care', the couple were further enamoured as they found the house had been on the market for some time, resulting in the



Top tips

- ⊕ Look at where the light comes into the house and make the most of it
- ⊕ Use an architect. They know what's possible and how to work with listed building planning officers
- ⊕ Look at how external wood weathers to know what it'll look like down the line
- ⊕ Build up a good relationship with planning officers - negotiation goes further than ranting



Right: A large deck leading from the dining area outside allows the interior and exterior of the extension to be used as one

“We were one of the first listed properties in the town to be allowed an extension – planning and conservation officers have since allowed other extensions using ours as an example of sensitive contemporary design”

Location matters



With its close proximity to London and good transport, sites in Buckinghamshire command a premium, but there's still plenty on offer - www.plotsearch.co.uk lists 99* building opportunities

Facts and figures	
Cost of the case study property	£384,135
Current market value	£765,000
Plots currently available in region*	99*

*correct at time of press

See our plot listings on **page 155**

lower-than-expected asking price. “It was such good value that it meant we would be able to buy it and do the work it so desperately needed without having to take out loans or a crippling mortgage,” she continues.

It was a year before any work started, since the couple used six months to think about the changes they wanted and six more to plan, as Ben was doing the design and had strong ideas about their plans. As well as being grade II listed, the house is also sited within a conservation area, meaning that any normal planning restrictions would be even more stringent. But with the rear of the house in a poor state, the couple were optimistic that it wouldn't be too difficult to prove to the council that they could improve the appearance of the sorry-looking building.

Negotiation with the officers

Unfortunately their optimism was short lived, as it soon became apparent that achieving the balance of creating a family-orientated home with a set of plans that would be acceptable to the planning officers would be harder than normal. “Because of its listing, we had to have significant

negotiations with the conservation officer,” explains Ben. “The upshot was that we were eventually given permission to remove the old bay at the rear and replace it with a contemporary extension. Many of the properties in the town are listed and we were one of the first to be allowed to do this – planning and conservation officers have since allowed other extensions in the town using our house as an example of sensitive contemporary design.”

This recognition is testament to the couple's foresight and Ben's skills as an architect, but it was also the remodelling of the existing floor space as well as extending which was called into play. With virtually the entire ground floor open plan, it was up to Chloe and Ben to work out how best to use the space so that the finished

Favourite feature

Raising the garden up to the level of the house has united the two areas, seamlessly linking the interior and the outside area, with the decking now an extension of the house



This page: Using elements of the exposed brick walls as part of the extension cleverly unites the old with the new





Above and right: Exposed steel beams add to the modern feel of the extension

project worked seamlessly and sympathetically with both the existing house and the new extension.

Every inch of the floor space has been thought out to the tiniest detail, as they knew that they wanted to create a utility room and cloakroom along with the kitchen, as well as leaving enough space for a living and dining area. With the huge original inglenook fireplace taking up a vast proportion of wall towards the front of the house, it was obvious that it would have to take precedence when determining the layout. Placing it centrally in the front reception room dictated the amount of space left over for the adjacent galley style utility and kitchen, each divided by a stud wall. The clever design allows the kitchen to be virtually hidden from view, while the galley proportions of

the utility, sandwiched between kitchen and reception room, are further obscured from view by an innovatively designed hidden sliding door. With kitchen space at a premium but constant access to the utility necessary, Ben devised a stud wall that allows the door to slide back from view when in use while appearing as a wall when closed across.

Twenty-first century style

As agreed with the conservation officer, the extension took on more modern proportions. Exposed steel beams and a wealth of materials have added appeal to the house rather than diminish the beauty of its 17th-century character. The general idea was not only to provide a

family orientated space but also to link the interior with the garden, although circumstances dictated that, rather unusually, the landscaping was done first.

“As it’s a terraced house, we needed to have access to the rear of our property for the heavy machinery, but the only access point was exactly where our neighbours were going to build,” says Chloe. “Fortunately, time was on our side and we were able to get the foundations dug and the garden level raised for the decking before they started to build. Everything else came through the house.”

The garden was specifically designed to allow the interior and exterior to work as one. To achieve this, the couple brought the garden level up to the threshold of the house, allowing the decking to lead from the house and

spill over into the garden. The same principle has been followed with the build, using the exposed brick of the neighbours' wall to make up part of both the extension and garden wall, bringing elements of the property's period character into the new build.

Not only did Ben project manage the build himself, taking two months out from the office, but he also turned his hand to the more innovative and skilled areas. "I got very involved doing much of the general building and roofing before subbing out all those extra little jobs that make the house look nice," he says.

The roof, fitted with two rooflights, is an inspired combination of Alwitra single-ply membrane adhered to Cellotex Tuff-R roofing boards. "The beauty of these," Ben continues, "is that the whole thing totally complies with Building Regulations, and the roof doesn't have to be vented, cutting down costs. It creates a very simple but well-insulated roof." But it's the rooflights that are the piece de resistance, as Ben used a combination of powder-coated aluminium edging, glass and silicon mastic to create two made-to-measure windows himself. "We were being quoted prices in the region of £7,000-8,000 for

Below: Clever design ensured sufficient space for a comfortable kitchen. Right: Old floorboards were recycled to create striking cladding for the chimney breast



Budget issues



Ben and Chloe reused spare and leftover materials really well, with extra decking used to clad the external walls and old floorboards re-invented for cladding the fireplace and ceiling – both economical and green

bespoke rooflights, which was extortionate," he says. "I knew it was something I could do myself and it only cost around £1,500 – a huge difference."

Whether it is down to Ben's profession and his knowledge of what's available, or whether he and Chloe merely have a knack for sourcing the perfect alternative, their frugal approach has paid off in sourcing materials and fittings. Leftover decking has been used to clad the exterior wall, while the poorly fitted floorboards the couple inherited have been lifted and used to create the ceiling as well as frame the adjacent doors and windows.

Even the striking chimney breast with its minimal hole-in-the-wall fire has been clad, floor to ceiling, in the leftover boards to dramatic effect. "Being green wasn't what we set out to do, we had more of a frugal approach, and as such it always pays to recycle," says Chloe. "We look at what we've got and whether we can do anything imaginative and unusual with it."

Cool kitchen

The fitted Bulthaup kitchen was no exception, inspired by the iconic stainless steel workbench. "The Bulthaup workbench is a design classic," says Ben. "The client I was working for hated it and just passed it on to me." The workbench, along with other variously sourced secondhand Bulthaup units, has created a designer kitchen for next to nothing – purely through canny sourcing and an eye for a bargain. However, whereas most people have a kitchen designed to fit the room proportions, it was fitting the room to the already acquired kitchen which dictated the size of the Davidsons' discreetly positioned kitchen, and the stud walls were placed to allow the door and cabinetry to fit.

"We learnt that it's better never to do anything that doesn't suit the house. Instead, be sympathetic with what's already in situ and work with what you've got," advises Chloe. "The changes we've made allow it to work well as a family house and it's given us space that we otherwise wouldn't have had. Doing it ourselves made it so personal and also exciting as you could see all your ideas becoming a reality." ☺

Useful contacts

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