

*This project has run quite smoothly, mainly due to the sensitive approach taken by Louise and Julian. It has also taken a relatively short time to come to fruition. This has not been the case with The Merchants House in Shepton Mallet, which was purchased by Jon Maine in 1994, and has taken over ten years of hard work to come to near completion.*

### **The Merchants House, Shepton Mallet by Jon Maine**

Last inhabited by a family in 1954 the Grade II listed Merchants House was then used for a while as a storeroom. The building was not in good condition then, and continued to deteriorate. I paid £19,000 for the property in January 1994 at the age of 27, with support from English Heritage who grant aided some temporary repairs. We had a specification prepared by our architects, Caroe and Partners, and I also bought the building next door, my present home.

Our archaeologist Jerry Samson found a rare painted fireplace (we have also discovered a series of painted fireplaces in the building and a fresco on one of the walls) and we applied to have the listing upgraded to Grade II\* which would mean we were able to access the Section 3a grant regime from English Heritage. Listed building consent was granted in 1999 for the works we planned, and Mendip District Council were very supportive. In 2002 they and English Heritage jointly grant aided the erection of protection scaffolding incorporating a full tin roof and clad sides which stayed up for 42 months.



*Before (above) and after (right)*



*Part of the newly discovered wallpainting*

In 2003 we received a grant offer of £70,000. We were pleased, but the pleasure was short lived when we considered the reality for us. We would have to pay back the whole amount if we sold within 10 years, allow public access on at least two or three days a year as an obligation due to receiving public money, and more delays would occur whilst officials met to make decisions, some of which would have been out of my hands. Also we would have been forced to have full architectural service at 12% of the contract value; I did not feel we needed this, as I had a huge amount of experience, and preferred to use an architect on an 'as needed' hourly basis. I would however strongly recommend the early involvement of a good conservation architect to anyone who knows little about old buildings. We turned down the offer, as English Heritage would not renegotiate the onerous terms.

After 10 years' study I was finally ready to start work in February 2004. We spent several weeks just removing rubble from blocked up windows, fireplaces and anywhere else! We removed about 80 tons in the first two months alone. In March Barry Mulford, the conservation carpenter, started work. His first task was to overhaul the roof structure. The roof had subsided many years ago when half the principle rafters had rotted and dropped, some entirely out of the wall. The Victorians had built a softwood structure over the top. We removed the softwood and Barry started to repair the oak frame. We originally considered 50% replacement of rafters. After about four months Barry had conserved the original framework saving over 85% of it - far exceeding our estimate. Chimneys were overhauled and reinstated with over ten tons of masonry going into one stack alone. Also two dormer windows were reinstated.

The walls were then entirely repointed. Unfortunately 90% of the oak lintels had to be replaced. Our stonemason started working his way around the 42 stone windows and all the other carved stone details. The glazier followed on installing 70 leaded lights and 27 iron casements. The repair of the floors and installation of the roof followed, and was completed by the spring of 2005.

The cellar vaults in the south wing have been conserved and rebuilt where necessary with the structural defects engineered out by architectural specialist Bill Harvey. This took three months alone! The entire ground floor was re-laid with under-floor heating and a flagstone floor. Eventually, in June 2005, we had a topping out ceremony and the scaffolding came down. Since June we have been involved in major ground works to dig a 2.7metre culvert around the building through solid bedrock to prevent the water running through the cellars.

During November the BBC came to film us for the final program of the 'Restored to Glory' series. This was screened in December and contained quotes like "a perfect example of a restoration project with all the right tradesmen" and "the perfect philosophy of conservation." This has been a great vindication of our methods; had we not closely examined the old plaster and lime wash we would not have found the amazing fresco and painted fireplaces, and we have tried to conserve as much original fabric as possible.

Even now we are not quite finished. We are installing a ground source heat pump heating system that will reduce heating costs to about a third and make the building carbon neutral, and we have to fit out and plaster the interior. However, we hope that in six months our teenage children will eventually have the rooms they started to plan years ago! My advice to anyone considering a project of this kind is to be prepared for an expensive, long, hard slog, a strain on relationships and finances. This job has been a job of a lifetime and I would thoroughly recommend doing this type of thing to hardworking, committed tenacious people. You will have to deal with many problems and stay on track.

*The story of the Merchants House is testament to the passion which Jon feels for his building, but offers a warning to prospective purchasers of listed buildings! Sometimes it is difficult to take into account all the variables, but things may go wrong, or just not as expected. It is important to have a realistic idea of the time and cost the restoration could incur.*

*From large and ancient town house to Victorian cottage: Gervase Webb purchased Heolas Fawr in June 2004, and like Jon Maine appeared in the programme 'Restored to Glory'. Here he recounts his experiences...*

### **Heolas Fawr by Gervase Webb**

Heolas Fawr is a typical Cardiganshire farmhouse, maybe a bit chunkier than many, but similar to the hundreds that once dotted the landscape of West Wales – thick stone walls, slightly asymmetrical, with a steeply pitched roof and a huge 'simne fawr' or corbelled stone chimney canopy in the kitchen. It was built in its current form in the middle of the 19th century – on one of the roof trusses is the inscription 'Frederick Williams – February 1851' – but the house probably predates that considerably. It looks as though, when the owners came into some money in the 1840s, they decided to gentrify an existing Welsh long house, building upwards and outwards from a single-storey building. One of the interior walls is as massive as the outside walls, but only goes up to the top of the ground floor, hinting that this was maybe once an original wall. The house may have been gentrified in the middle of the 19th century, but its history in more recent years has been far from grand. For most of its life it was a working farmhouse, the hub of a mixed holding of a couple of hundred acres. As such, like most such houses in West Wales, it had fallen victim to the twin scourges of cement and modern windows; the one exacerbating an existing damp problem, and the other simply an eyesore.



*Heolas Fawr on the road to recovery; the above picture shows the removal of corrugated iron cladding*